The Shining School Upon the Hill: Teacher Subjectivity in a "Successful" Charter School

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THE SHINING SCHOOL UPON THE HILL: TEACHER SUBJECTIVITY IN A “SUCCESSFUL” CHARTER SCHOOL

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by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation adds to the growing body of literature on charter school reform. Through the use of double insight, this paper details the tensions between school structures and teacher experience at a “successful” urban charter school. How do teachers construct their subjectivities in relation to a charter school’s mission and guiding philosophy? What are the inter-actions between these teacher biographies and the school’s prominent structures? This paper problematizes common discourse on charters, often reduced to identifying schools as either “good” or “bad,” to contribute to a more nuanced discussion between charter advocates and opponents.

This research utilizes a theoretical framework (poststructuralism) and method (ethnography) often neglected in research on charter schools. My poststructural lens is particularly informed through Foucault’s notion of power and Deleuze’s notion of norming. By focusing on two teachers, Maria and Barbara, I constructed my research on a foundation of teacher voice. Furthermore, I coded and themed teacher interviews, observational fieldnotes, internal school reports, and state and federal policy documents.

Four structures support the charter’s mission as a technology-infused school preparing students for the modern workforce: democratization, continuous professional development, community building, and inter-disciplinary learning and teaching. These four structures interacted with Barbara and Maria’s subjectivities throughout my time at Pennsylvania High Charter School, resulting in three tensions: professional expectations, and individualization, and surveillance. These seven themes and two subjectivities created a network of relationships, useful for understanding how teachers navigate the expectations of a “successful” charter school in relation to their own understanding of “effective” curriculum and pedagogy.
Teacher subjectivity is central to this research project for two reasons. First, teacher voice has largely been omitted from previous research on charter schools. Second, teacher narratives can emphasize the disconnect between theory, such as formal school structures, and practice, or the lives and experiences of teachers in their classrooms. By focusing on this tension of praxis, a more nuanced discussion of charter schools is made possible.
CHAPTER 1. DOUBLE INSIGHT: NEGOTIATING TEACHER SUBJECTIVITY AT AN URBAN CHARTER SCHOOL

In a personal reflection of her first year teaching at Pennsylvania High Charter School (PHCS), Barbara Jones, a White 33 year old teacher from the Midwest with 11 years of teaching experience, conveyed a strong feeling of ambiguity towards the impact of her charter school.

Sure, students that attend our school truly get a meaningful, unique experience. But at what cost and who pays? Can we agree on how to answer that question? And how could we change in the wake of facing the answer? Yes, some students choose to leave. For some it is transportation/ extra responsibility issue. (We are year-around, so our vacations come in April, August and December.) There are opportunities that our students miss because of this. For some it’s a school focus issue. (We do not have sports teams, students play in their neighborhood school’s team). For some it’s a compliance issue. Yes, we have a strict dress code. Yes, we do not tolerate students saying curse words in our school. Yes, if you are in class you are working. These are simple non-negotiables that allow teachers to manage large class sizes while also delivering rich learning experiences.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, most charter schools are not for any student. They are niche schools. For some families, and for many reasons, our school is not a good fit. So then the question needs to be asked, is the school a net positive on the community it is meant to serve? Many people will have different answers to that question.

- Yes, because this is the only school I’ve ever been in that has a diverse, inclusive environment for a variety of races, socio-economic statuses, and learning needs.
- No, because it does not serve some of the neediest/hardest to reach children that walk through our door. (Some of these families choose to leave.)
- Yes, because it gives some students amazing opportunities to work with technology, develop in-the-field-training, and pursue a passion project.
- No, because the formula of how the school receives funding puts its neighboring districts at a disadvantage.
- Yes, because there is a sense of family, a sense of community, and focus on positive relationships. All faculty and stuff spend time discussing what they need to do to help students be successful now and in the future.

Do you make a school for a community? How do you decide what to value? What if the values of that community change? What purpose does one school serve? What are the effects of this one school on the larger community? Are they a net positive?

We could ask what are the positives/negatives of any school. How does that particular slice of the education system service its community? Who decides whether they are doing an adequate job? What assets/deficiencies do they have? Let’s be honest about the reality
of the situation. This school is good; we have found ourselves in a system that treats us favorably, especially compared to other schools within the same system. We are lucky. (Barbara Jones, PHCS teacher, personal reflection, original emphasis)

For Barbara, debating social justice and equity comes naturally. She is reflective about her positionality in larger debates on urban school reform, and is steadfast in her declaration that she alone does not hold the answers to such nuanced discussions.

Maria Sanchez, a former businesswoman from the West Coast, is a second career teacher in her 50s with expertise in technology, as a librarian, and in special education. Maria’s description of the purpose of education is emblematic of the school’s mission to prepare students for the 21st century workforce.

Whether we look at education through high school or a PhD program, ultimately it is about getting a job when you are done, hopefully one you want to do. Even though we emphasize critical thinking and collaboration in the core classes, this is also the result of business influences which needs workers who can work independently as well as work with others… For myself, I have only taught process classes. I have not had to deal with the added pressure of test preparation and can focus on educating my students to be 21st century citizens. Learning to effectively to use technology, handle personal finances, and critically evaluate digital content are not skills that are tested but I believe are a critical part of educating my students.

Maria’s quote introduces PHCS as a school with a nuanced approach. Students are prepared for the workforce but also to be critical, independent thinkers. PHCS was born in an era of accountability, and yet Maria is not constrained by student test scores and she focuses on process and product, not just content knowledge. These tensions disrupt simplistic descriptions of charter schools. Furthermore, they highlight the complexity in placing teacher subjectivity in such a dynamic space.
In my year spent alongside Barbara Jones and Maria Sanchez at PHCS beginning in the fall of 2016, nothing was more apparent than the notion that a teacher’s identity is both complex and ever evolving. Barbara, having entered the classroom directly out of college after completing a summer teaching fellowship program, has taught at three schools in two cities. She often considers her “five-year plan” and how she will balance working at a demanding school with having a family. In contrast, Maria became a teacher as a second career after years spent as an impromptu school aid for her son and has worked only at PHCS. She brings experience from numerous fields to her classroom, including business, library science, and computer science. These teachers’ stories are both distinct and representative of countless educators across the United States (US). However, it is how their lives and subjectivities interact with their school’s structures and systems that provide insights into the functioning of a charter school (Appendix A).

Their stories, particularly in relation to power structures (Foucault, 1982), present PHCS through a unique and often neglected medium: teacher voice. To date, research on charter schools has frequently been quantitative measures of their effectiveness, theoretical, policy analyses, or a combination of the three. In short, curriculum and pedagogy has largely been overlooked in research on charters (Sondel, 2016). Furthermore, in an era of accountability, research has been top-down, driven by the implementation of federal and state mandates. By concentrating on the daily actions and interactions of two individual classrooms, I present a view of one charter school from the ground-up, accentuating those unquantifiable yet vital
foundational components, including curriculum, pedagogy, classroom management, and discipline.

This chapter introduces PHCS and my time spent in the school. It begins with a brief discussion on teacher subjectivity and its applicability in charter school research. Next, I present my background as a former charter school teacher and graduate student. I then present the research site and introduce my two central participants, Barbara and Maria, along with my research questions. Finally, an overview of each chapter is provided.

**Teacher Subjectivity and the Shining School upon the Hill**

This dissertation relies heavily on the life stories, or narratives, of Barbara and Maria. For Britzman (2003), it is in the tension between biography and structures that produces “double insight”, or the ability to see subjectivity as dynamic and relational.

To understand the process whereby experience becomes meaningful requires that we situate ourselves in history and recognize as critical the relationships and intersections—both given and possible—of biography and social structure. Theorizing about such connections allows individuals a double insight into the meanings of their relationships to individuals, institutions, cultural values, and political events, and into how these relationships interpellate the individual’s identity, values, and ideological orientations. This kind of insight can help individuals participate in shaping and responding to the social forces that affect, impinge on, and construct how experience becomes lived (p. 232).

Double insight is one way to view discourses of subjectivity and power (Foucault, 1982) as circulating and complex. This dissertation gives insights into the inter-actions between one charter school’s social structures and systems and the daily human experience inside the classroom walls.
This research presents a view of one urban charter school in Pennsylvania through two teacher’s stories. By viewing teacher subjectivity as a relationship between individuals and their surrounding systems and structures, the formal and informal structures of the school are depicted, along with their consequences. I do not present this inter-action as a means to “represent” charter schools, but to problematize the discourse surrounding school choice and its promises.

Viewing teacher subjectivity through a poststructural lens often results in more questions than answers. This is purposeful, as poststructuralism is skeptical of what can be regarded as “truth” and how such “truths” can then be representative or generalizable. In regards to individuals, subjectivity is in flux, fluid, dynamic, and changing depending on the relationship to surrounding systems and structures (A. Y. Jackson, 2001). Furthermore, poststructuralism disrupts the traditional oppressor-oppressed binary by dismissing simplistic assumptions regarding power. In short, power is not a tangible object one must simply balance between groups or individuals to create harmony (Foucault, 1980), it is woven into our discourses and adapts to changes in how we consider topics of race, gender, and equity. Ellsworth (1989) summarizes the struggle to apply this theory in practice:

> Our actions had to make sense as interested interpretations and constant rewritings of ourselves in relation to shifting interpersonal and political contexts. Our interpretations had to be based on attention to history, to concrete experiences of oppression and to subjugated knowledges. (p. 320)

Charter school expansion has been perpetuated through a “crisis” in education, predicated on declining national rankings and test score data. These “failures” have largely been blamed on teachers, either through an attack on unions (Guggenheim, 2010) or teacher preparation (Green,
The proposed solution is to apply quantitative measures at every level of the education system, thus identifying the “good” and the “bad”, assessing students, teachers, lessons, schools, or districts. Lost in this moment are the “impossibly messy details of lived lives that differ along vast dimensions of what might constitute any understanding of curriculum as all that inhabits, permeates, and occurs both within and without any classroom context” (Miller, 2014, pp. 18-19).

Studying teacher subjectivity in a charter school through a historically contextualized web of power relations parallels the sentiment put forth by recent critical work on charter schools. Authors Saltman (2015), Buras (2011, 2014), Sondel (2015, 2016), and others have argued for a more politically involved approach to charter school research, arguing positivist research attempting to quantify their “effectiveness” strips the surrounding socio-political ramifications, including race and class struggles to control public schools, corporate influences, school funding, mandates over curriculum and testing, and other components. Barbara and Maria’s stories provide context to this debate.

**The Model Charter School for All to See**

The title of this work is in reference to the sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* by John Winthrop, which most likely took place onboard the Arbella. In the conclusion of the sermon, Winthrop references the “city upon a hill”, an image from Matthew 5:14 which states “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.” Prominent politicians, including John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan famously took up this image to promote American Exceptionalism in the 20th century. The image of a city upon a hill for all surrounding people to idolize is a useful metaphor for my time at PHCS.
Much like discourse on the origin and purpose of charter schools (Chapter 3), Winthrop’s sermon is clouded in ambiguity. “Curiously there is not a single contemporary reference to anyone’s having heard it delivered, and in fact the precise circumstances under which it was delivered are therefore unsure” (Hodgson, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, the sermon is often misunderstood. For example, whereas Reagan’s speeches were focused on a national ideal “The Arbella sermon is, in fact, considerably more focused on what was being fled than on what was being pursued” (Delbanco, 1989, p. 72).

A variety of aspects concerning charters have been debated, including their politics, merits, origins, and future place in school reform. These discussions are difficult to navigate when a clear depiction of where public schooling is headed is unclear. Put simply, the original ideal of charters as laboratories of innovation, started through grassroots and community activism, aimed at solving local issues for a select number of students (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; Shanker, 1988), is not currently being realized. Instead, they have often become large networks, referred to as education management organizations or charter management organizations, spread rapidly using a replicable model or ideal of “effective” teaching in an impoverished urban area. The original message of exploration and creativity has been lost or warped. Similarly, the message of Winthrop has been lost.

He was of course not preaching to Americans about the future of the United States of America. There were no Americans then, and the foundation of the United States was a century and a half in the future. Most historians would agree that there was no distinctively American consciousness for at least a century after Winthrop’s sermon (Hodgson, 2009, p. 2).
An ideal charter, constructed to be a model for urban schooling was always antithetical to the original promise of charters. However, that does not stop schools from striving for such an institution. The pursuit of such an ideal urban school is not inherently problematic but should be thoroughly researched and debated. By focusing on teacher subjectivity, this research explores the tension between the shining school upon the hill and its realization.

**Entering the Research Space**

To me it doesn’t seem a good method to take a particular science to work on just because it’s interesting or important or because its history might appear to have some exemplary value. If one wanted to do a correct, clean, conceptually aseptic kind of history, then that would be a good method. But if one is interested in doing historical work that has political meaning, utility and effectiveness, then this is possible only if one has some kind of involvement with the struggles taking place in the area in question (Foucault, 1980, p. 64).

As a former charter school teacher, I entered this space with knowledge and preconceived notions of how charters operate. In other words, I had “struggled” in and with charter schools. I left my former charter school in New Orleans and pursued two graduate degrees in education 90 miles outside the city, where I moved from charter insider to outsider. I then returned in an attempt to gain access and again become an insider to the charter culture.

**Prior Experience as a Charter School Teacher**

My experience teaching at a charter school in post-Katrina New Orleans as a 22-year old recent college graduate, from 2010 until 2012, revealed the deep divide between charter school education and education in White middle-class suburbs. Growing up in the northeast in the 1990s, the schools were not at-risk of closings, drastic education reform experiments, or mass-layoffs. When I enrolled in TeachNOLA, part of The New Teacher Project and a similar program
to the more widely discussed Teach For America, I was bombarded with information on the failures of inner-city schools. The perpetuated narrative was simple: urban public schools suffer from a shortage of “quality” educators, and new non-profits like TeachNOLA and Teach For America work to address these shortages. The school I was hired at was entirely staffed by teachers from these programs, with only one teacher holding a degree in education my first year at the school. The charter, in its fourth year when I began, strived to be a model to then be replicated in other parts of the city. By holding teachers accountable for their students’ learning, working outside of traditional bureaucratic systems, and increasing autonomy at every level, I was convinced the school would become an exemplar of new innovations in urban education reform (Guggenheim, 2010). However, my experience working inside a charter school quickly displayed a contrast with original intent and promise (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004).

During my time teaching in New Orleans, I found that teacher autonomy was not a serious priority for the school. Discipline was prioritized above all else, mainly through high suspension rates, extreme strictness in the classroom, and silent individualized teaching methods. The staff was young, inexperienced, and lacked formal education training. They were also from outside the New Orleans community and often knew little about the cultural history of the area, typically leaving teaching after two years.\(^1\) These characteristics were common at other charter schools I observed in the city. I do not claim to know what the school system in New Orleans or similar cities was like before charters, nor do I defend any wrongdoings or inefficiencies in the system. However, these structures of my former charter and comparable schools are in stark

\(^1\) Teacher retention rates are consistently found to be lower in charter schools, about 30% in charter schools and about 15% in traditional public schools (Miron & Applegate, 2007).
contrast to the successful (based on prestige, state test scores, school grade, graduation rates, college acceptance rates) k-12 public schools I attended before college. The skepticism I developed while teaching was solidified by my extensive reading of critical work on charter schools, causing doubt that the process of charter expansion is an effective model to be replicated and continued (Buras, 2014; Sondel, 2016).

While teaching, I was not overtly aware of the gap between my own education in public schools and the experiences we were providing. The staff, myself included, had strategies to mask this simple fact, including working extremely long hours and obsessing over our policies and practices outside of school. Upon reflection, the students were underserved. This statement will appear obvious to many with experience in similar charter schools. However, it is highly controversial, possibly blasphemous, to others. I do not know how representative my experience is when comparing charters across the country. Every teacher I worked with, more than 25 teachers, is no longer at the school. I have interviewed many of my former colleagues and found I was not alone in my concerns.

New Orleans post-Katrina was a unique time and place, dissimilar to the slower charter growth elsewhere. In comparison, other cities can now claim to have resisted corporate reforms and charter expansion, but only to a point. While New Orleans is essentially completely chartered with over 90 percent of students enrolled in charters, similar sized cities elsewhere are often closer to 10 percent. Ultimately, I was determined to study charter schools in a location dissimilar to New Orleans, which has become a hive of both urban education reform policies and
research assessing their impact. To date, little research has been conducted on Pennsylvania, particularly in areas outside of Philadelphia, where the vast majority of charters are located.

I continue to be troubled by my experience working in Central City New Orleans because the students at the school were not receiving the education they deserved. Many teachers in many regions of the country feel similarly. Perhaps no public school student in the United States receives the education “they deserve.” However, I do not subscribe to the narrative of the “crisis of public education” (Ravitch, 2013). I know my students did not receive adequate public schooling because I can loosely compare their experience to my own, having attended “successful” public schools in New Hampshire, California, and Virginia. I learned from veteran teachers with Master’s and Doctoral degrees, with roots in the community, who also taught my older sister and younger brother. I had none of these traits, but at the time, I did not think that it mattered because I was “willing to do what it takes” to address “the civil rights issue of our time” (Paige & Witty, 2010). Ultimately, my personal change in subjectivity in relation to charters is central to this research. I left college and began work with the hope that I would be empower to make a difference in a school lacking proficient teachers but found the school was not the model of success or the shining school upon the hill it attempted to be. Furthermore, the discourse around “failing” urban schools was largely mischaracterized and reductionist.

**Arriving at the Problem**

Research on charter schools has grown quickly. Nationally, charters only enroll about 5 to 7 percent of students or about 3 million students, and 43 school districts now have at least one in five students attending a charter (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). When
considering the characteristics of these 43 school districts, mostly urban, impoverished, historically underwhelming public schools, it is easy to justify such a research focus. As will become clear, I am concerned with the approach that is common in charter school research. As the topic has become increasingly political, so too has the research in the field. Critical work outright rejects privatization efforts, while proponents of charters put forth quantitative evidence of their successes. Remaining discourse falls somewhere in between, attempting to illustrate what exactly is taking place in and around charter schools. I do not claim to be apolitical on the subject, perhaps dissimilarly to other researchers in the field. However, I also am weary of a reliance on a grand narrative from either side of the spectrum. This is in part due to my reliance on poststructuralism as a theoretical framework. I assert that a broader and deeper body of literature on charter schools is necessary to better inform policymakers, parents, students, teachers, and community members of the intricacies of charters. For me, this means investigating who teaches at charters, why they are there, and how they teach.

Research critiquing the privatization of public education generally, and the expansion of charter schools in particular, address a variety of components (Lipman, 2015; Saltman, 2014; Slater, 2015). I am most concerned with the democratic processes of charter expansion, and how teachers fit into such structures (Waks, 2010). Who are charters accountable to? How transparent are their practices? How do local community members voice their concerns to the school if no elected school board members are available? While my theory and method should help to mitigate some of these biases, I no doubt was apprehensive to grandiose claims of achievement
and success at the start of this project. This skepticism and doubt was essential to my research approach.

**Research Questions**

1. How do two high school teachers construct their subjectivities in relation to a charter school’s mission and guiding structures and systems?

2. What are the inter-actions between these teacher narratives and the school’s prominent structures?

This research investigated the relationship between teacher subjectivity and curriculum and pedagogy at an urban charter high school in Pennsylvania. I did not approach teacher subjectivity with a purposeful goal, such as a means to address teacher attrition (Hochstetler, 2011) or to identify differences between novice and experienced teachers (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). This is a result of my use of poststructural theory which argues subjectivity is fluid and constructed through (unreliable) interpretation, thus working against traditional methods (Jackson, 2001). Instead, I focused on how teacher subjectivity was in-flux, changing, and dynamic. Secondarily, I was interested in how two teachers navigated the school structures of their charter school. The inter-actions between teacher stories and the dominant processes at the school creates a tension in teacher subjectivity.

Teacher subjectivity is in part influenced by early experiences with school and perceptions of the role of teachers in society (Sachs, 2000). As such, teacher background information and experiences in schools was collected. From there, aspects of teacher subjectivity could be viewed as influenced by systems and interactions inside or outside of the classroom. Outside the classroom, charter schools often have clear guiding principles for how they are
constructed and run. Do these core components of the charter school select particular teacher identities, or do teachers adapt their identities once they are indoctrinated in the culture of the school? In other words, how does teacher professional identity translate to a school with a clear identity and structure (Weiner & Chris Torres, 2016)? Inside classrooms, how does teacher subjectivity help us better understand the possibilities and limitations of instruction and culture at the charter? Do teacher subjectivities working closely together (i.e. grade-level teams or co-teaching) interact with a school’s guiding mission? For example, how are differences in teacher subjectivity used to promote diverse learning strategies and experiences for students? For these questions, I once again refer to Britzman’s double insight (2003), or the relationship between social structures, or school systems, and biography, or teacher narratives. This relationship brings into focus both the importance of the systems at the school and the everyday life experience of those living and working at the charter. The tension between the two highlights circulating discourses of power and how teachers construct their subjectivities in dynamic ways.

Secondarily, I was interested in the negotiation between the teacher’s subjectivity and the school’s formal structures. This created a tension between order and chaos at the charter school. For teachers, increased autonomy and freedom in the classroom created opportunities for innovation and exploration. Similarly, student-driven lessons and curriculum focused on process and product and not merely content memorization may decrease order and stability in the classroom. This “order” is problematic for a variety of reasons, including the development of “worker-learners” (Golann, 2015) while inhibiting creativity. Collaboration quickly emerged in

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2 Charters are often referred to as specialty schools and classified as college-prep, STEM or science focused, or utilizing project-based learning, among other classifications.
my time at PHCS as a key theme in my pursuit to understanding the order-chaos tension, especially in regards to teacher subjectivity.

**The Research Site: Pennsylvania High Charter School**

We are very thoughtful. Look, you are observing it, you will be the judge of whether or not we are thoughtful. We think things through, we are very academic, and we collect data. We really are a beta-site. Well the beta-site thing with all due respect, I learned, I’m an idiot, you can publish that, I was wrong. Nobody is interested. Nobody.

(PHCS school founder Dr. Williams, personal interview, 2.2.17)

PHCS has been operating for 15 years. It is located in an urban city in Pennsylvania and typically enrolls about 600 students. An independent charter school started by three local educators with 80 years of experience in public education, the school boasts a 98% graduation rate, one of the highest in the surrounding region. The school is about 50% Black or African American and 40% White, 70% economically disadvantaged, and 15% special education. During my research, I came to identify the school’s central mission by its four dominant structures: democratization, continuous professional development, community building, and interdisciplinary learning and teaching.

The staff at PHCS is divided into four grade level teams. Each grade level team has one administrator or principal who manages about 15 teachers and staff members. Each year, the grade level team and students are promoted, “looping” together for all four years. Core subjects are co-taught by two lead teachers and one assistant teacher, math with science, English with social studies. Furthermore, each year students enroll in core research and business courses, aimed at preparing students for internships at local business and presenting a senior capstone project.
By many measures, PHCS is an exceptional school. Every student uses a personal laptop, participates in a unique internship based on their interests, plans out a career trajectory while practicing skills such as resume writing and interviewing, and conducts independent research projects. The school is one of the highest rated in the area according to the Pennsylvania’s School Performance Profile. However, PHCS does not exist in a vacuum. The school is part of a larger debate on urban education reform, debate with staunch advocates and opponents. This research attempts to study two teachers’ subjectivities in relation to the school’s structures.

**Research Participants**

Barbara Jones is a veteran teacher of about ten years. She began her teaching career in Chicago, Illinois, directly after graduating from a small liberal arts college in the area. She applied and was accepted into the Chicago Teaching Fellows program after deciding to become a teacher towards the end of college. After the five-week training program, she was hired at a large public high school of about 1,400 students. After two years at the school, she moved to a charter school in the city, where she remained for four years, before relocating with her significant other to Pennsylvania, ultimately becoming hired at PHCS. Barbara has been at PHCS for about five years.

Maria Sanchez entered teaching as a second career after her son graduated high school and enrolled at a local state university. While working, she attended night classes and earned a Master’s degree, completing one semester of student teaching before being hired at PHCS. Maria has been at the school for about seven years, teaching a variety of subjects, including technology.

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3 All school performance data is available from the state’s website www.paschoolperformance.org but is not directly included to protect anonymity.
and research. Maria’s formal teaching experience has taken place solely at PHCS, although she had experience volunteering in schools and worked to integrate science and social studies curriculum into schools while she worked at a public library.

Together, Maria and Barbara’s stories highlight a variety of the schools central components. Furthermore, Maria and Barbara are part of different grade level teams and departments, allowing me to observe a wide range of students and curriculum.

Table 1.1. PHCS School Structures and Teacher Subjectivity

![Diagram showing School Structures and Systems, Teacher Subjectivity, Maria's Experiences, Barbara's Experiences, and Situating Research within a Neoliberal Agenda.]

Situating Research within a Neoliberal Agenda

Two initial points must be made before beginning the task of sculpting a current standing and history of charter schools in the US. First, there is no obvious starting point. Charter schools have roots dating back through school choice, neoliberalism and market theory, feminism, civil
rights, teacher demographics, and the philosophy of education. Second, current research on charter schools initially appears robust but is actually sorely lacking. For instance, although the term “charter school” appeared in 106 session titles at the 2016 American Education Research Association conference in Washington, D.C., published research on charter schools is quite restricted.

Charters are by definition unique and therefore research is difficult to generalize from one school or region to another. Further research should be conducted on independent charter schools, which are often overlooked perhaps due to the difficulties with transferability. Finally, some of the research is too narrow and is founded on conjecture. For example, an article published in 2016 in the Harvard Education Review analyzed charter school policy and largely circumvented issues of race and class (Jabbar, 2016), while a literature review on charter schools made assumptions that charter schools were expanding because of parental activism, a claim that is largely unfounded and not supported in the cited literature (Gawlik, 2016).

A lack of quality research is not the only reason charter schools specifically and market based reforms broadly have become my area of focus, as there are numerous research topics lacking comprehensive research in education. It often seems as though research on charter schools has grown too quickly. However, New Orleans, Louisiana, the state’s largest and most historic city, is now entirely chartered, and the number of alternatively-certified teachers produced each year is almost at the same level as the traditional teacher preparation route, about 2,800 to 3,300 in 2012, the smallest difference in the country (US Department of Education, 2015). It appears some regions of the country can no longer choose to avoid questions of market-
based education reform on K-12 schooling, and along with my own implicitness in this movement, it is here I find my purpose.

**History**

Are market-based reforms inherent in education? Only 13 years ago, Wells, a prominent researcher of school choice, stated:

> I speculate that charter school reform is a late-20th-century, laissez-faire reform that will die of its own weight some time early in the 21st century…It is fairly clear to anyone who spends a great deal of time in charter schools that this is not a public policy that will transform the public educational system into a more effective, efficient, or academically accountable system (Wells, 2002, p. 2).

During the time of Wells’ bold and presently mistaken prediction, charter school expansion had slowed from the high rates of the middle 1990s. Wells’ prediction was founded on the policymakers’ lack of understanding of the difficulties of running an effective charter school. Instead, the opposite occurred, the number of charter schools has tripled since the turn of the century, from about 2,000 to 6,000 (Schools, 2014a). I assert market-based reforms, particularly charter school expansion, have become inevitable in poor and working class areas of the U.S.

These reforms will not reach the wealthy suburbs where I was raised, home to prestigious magnet schools, high college acceptance rates, and parents with doctoral degrees travelling across the country for college visits. This is perhaps the most integral component of my research, of my last six years, teaching, attending graduate school, and conducting research: if it was not good enough for *me*, why is it the solution for *them*?
Neoliberal Education Agenda

Charter schools exist in an era of neoliberalism. In fact, the former has been used as a quintessential example of the latter (Convertino, 2015). Briefly summarized, neoliberalism focuses on “government deregulation, withdrawal of government support for a plethora of social services, in the name of privatization, celebration for the autonomous self-interested individual” (D. G. Smith, 2014) and argues for a better and stronger society through competition in all facets of life (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberal philosophy has played out in a variety of ways in education. Competition among workers and schools, merit-based pay and accountability for employees, school choice through the expansion of charter schools, and for-profit schools are a few examples of neoliberalism’s influence on education. These policies are often traced back to the economic philosophy of Friedman and his work at the University of Chicago beginning in the 1960s.

Friedman’s policies of government deregulation, privatization of the public sphere including resources and services, and decreasing social services were resisted on a large scale in the US, particularly before the Reagan Administration. This was due in part to the nature of the American voting system. A large portion of the voters either relied on these services or did not stand to gain any immediate tangible benefit by a shift in policy. Those who did stand to benefit under laissez-faire free market policy, the leaders of private corporations where services and wealth would be distributed, were outnumbered. Instead of a gradual process towards these reforms, Friedman and his fellow economists experimented in South American countries where bypassing democratic processes was more feasible. For example, in Chile, General Pinochet
enacted a voucher system, charter schools, and privatized kindergartens. “Is neoliberalism an inherently violent ideology, and is there something about its goals that demands this cycle of brutal political cleansing, followed by human rights cleanup operations?” (Klein, 2007, p. 157). The experimentation of neoliberalism in South America was met with some resistance but those who spoke out against the new policies under the guise of fighting communism ‘disappeared’, an effort the US could overlook. In other words, resistance was quashed through deadly force. How then, in the most civilized and advanced nation on earth, did neoliberalism spread, when turning stadiums into torture halls was not an option?

In the US, charter schools are publicly funded, although they can also receive private funding from individuals, groups, and companies. Charter schools have school boards that are often not elected but instead appointed by the school or organizational leader of the charter. Charter schools align with neoliberal ideology because they are provided more freedom from government oversight and regulation; if they achieve the terms of their contracts with the state, their charters are renewed until the subsequent review, often in three to five year intervals. Typically, charter schools fall into one of two categories, either a takeover of an established school, whereby an organization uses existing resources to convert the community school to a charter, or a startup charter, whereby parents and students are recruited by choosing to enroll in the charter (Sulentic Dowell & Bickmore, 2015).

Charter school law and policy is often be traced back to a book by a teacher and professor of education, Ray Budde (1988), who developed the notion of a charter school throughout the 1970s and 1980s and presented the idea in Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts.
Budde’s work and subsequent disownment of the charter school movement has been used in opposition efforts to charter school reform. Budde expected teachers to collaboratively run charters to reach students struggling in the conventional school model. This is a stark contrast to the rapid expansion and replication through charter management organizations. However, Budde does advocate for increased accountability of teachers, the firing of “incompetent” teachers, and the demolition of undergraduate teacher programs in favor of field-based graduate work (Budde, 1988, p. 13). While not the Friedman rhetoric of vouchers and market competition, it is not difficult to see, nearly three decades later, how neoliberals could mold these “reforms” to fit their education policy objectives, beginning in the early 1990s and expanding greatly in the middle 2000s.

In 1991, Minnesota signed the first charter school law. By the fall of 2013, 42 states had passed similar legislation. During this time, charter schools have had proponents across the political spectrum. These proponents often worked on different assumptions about charter schools. Budde’s depiction of a social justice framework led by teachers to supplement public education was similar to the model put forth by Albert Shanker and the American Federation of Teachers throughout the 1980s. For Shanker and his colleagues, charters were an alternative to low-income populations in need of additional supports and intimate support systems (Fabricant & Fine, 2012a). These charter models differ from later models focused on choice and “failing” public schools. For liberals, the former model promised to give meaning and purpose to local communities, fighting against the notion that all classrooms should look and feel the same (Abowitz, 2001). For conservatives, the latter model encourages privatization and decreases
government bureaucracy and regulation (Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999). Furthermore, both proponents and opponents of charter schools claim to be working in the best interests of democracy. Proponents see a market-based monopoly run by teacher unions as ignoring the interests of parents and students. “With their emphasis on the consumer rather than the producer…they (neoliberal policies) constitute an offensive against teacher unions that are seen to be much too powerful and much too costly” (Apple, 2006, p. 33). Opponents see the reduction to human relationships as merely commodity transactions as undemocratic (Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002). The interpretation of charter school expansion as being democratic or undemocratic has since been further explored both on a large and small scale.

Literature before 2004 rarely approached charters from a critical standpoint, which is similar to the literature on charter schools since 2008. In large part, this is due to the amount of evidence researchers have had access to as charters have expanded throughout the country. Before 2004, much of the research was founded on arguments for and against further charter expansion and the notion of choice (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). Research has since shifted to historicizing the impact of charter school expansion, leading to a disparity between research advocating for charter school expansion before 2004 and what has actually taken place since then. Central to these differences in literature are two facets: the growth of Teach For America from an original size of about 400 annual core members to 4,100 and the complete charterization of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August 2005. These two factors, along with the growth of charter schools across the country, has shifted the literature from a niche education field with many scholars approaching the topic apolitically and without overt
enthusiasm to a mainstream topic with full time journalists and researchers covering a wide range of perspectives, including critical theory and extreme devotion to resisting further privatization, thereby mixing research and advocacy.

**The Construction of a Crisis in “Public” Education and Charter Schools**

Neoliberalism is not satisfied with the presence of a market, it also requires no alternatives to the market. For education, this means an elimination of public schooling, followed by a redefining of what is considered “public” and “private.” Narratives on the ‘crisis of public education’ typically begin in 1983, when Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell commissioned the National Commission on Excellence in Education, resulting in a report entitled *A Nation at Risk*. Ravitch (2013) summarizes the most important tenants of the report:

> Its basic claim was that the American standard of living was threatened by the loss of major manufacturing industries—such as automobiles, machine tools, and steel mills—to other nations, which the commission attributed to the mediocre quality of our public educational system; this claim shifted the blame from shortsighted corporate leadership to the public schools. The commission called for better curriculum standards, higher graduation requirements, better teacher training, higher teacher pay, and other customary improvements. The commission said very little about testing, accountability, and choice. (p. 11).

Together, a financial crisis in urban cities has developed alongside mainstream discourses of education crises, often through comparisons of tests scores of American students with other countries.

This crisis has created urgency for policy makers, requiring a quick fix for urban education, which is problematic for two reasons. First, the crisis is fictional and could be addressed by reallocation of funds from the wealthiest areas to the systems most in need, specifically through a change in tax policy (Lipman, 2015). Second, the nonfictional aspects of
failing schools are a result of the capitalist driven economy claiming to fix the crisis. White-flight, funding based on property values, and austerity measures have resulted in failing schools, and yet market based solutions are proposed to “fix” the problem (Buras, 2014). Philanthropic and nonprofit organizations can quickly gain prominence during these times of turmoil, including Teach For America and The New Teacher Project, organizations that are rarely questioned in part because of their seemingly inculpable intentions (Schneider, 2014a). Local communities are deemed inadequate based on their prior “performance”, negating any socio-cultural context for the discrepancies between “successful” wealthy suburban schools and “unsuccessful” urban schools (Buras, 2014).

New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina is emblematic of the privatization of the public sphere during chaotic events (N. Klein, 2007). Put simply, surviving such a tragedy is easier for the wealthy than the poor (Giroux, 2006). Upon returning to the city, locals found their school systems completely changed, in large part due to the suspension of democratic open-meeting laws (Buras, 2016) and the mass-firing of veteran Black teachers who made up a large portion of the Black working middle class in the city (Buras, 2016). These changes, and similar changes in other urban areas, are justified through discourse focused on the “crisis” in public education. This language of deficiency, that the local community lacks safety, work-ethic, structure, etc., is problematic because it implies that control of institutions such as education must be held by those from outside the community (Sondel, 2015). “When we locate the blame for academic ‘failure’ within students and families, we ultimately forgive the systemic realities that inform schooling outcomes” (A. Anderson, 2013, p. 33). Today, New Orleans is unique in that it is
effectively entirely chartered, with Detroit, Michigan following behind enrolling just over than half of its students in charter schools (55%) (Schools, 2014b). In comparison, Pennsylvania enrolls less than 10% of its students in charter schools, with half of the charters existing in Philadelphia, where about 30% of students are attending a charter school (Pennsylvania Department of the Auditor General, 2014). Furthermore, outside of Philadelphia, little to no research has been conducted on charter schools in the state. This is common in many states, as the majority of charters and subsequent research has taken place in a few major cities, particularly New Orleans, New York Los Angeles, Boston, and Washington, D.C.

**Pennsylvania**

On September 22, 2016, the Auditor General of Pennsylvania claimed the state “has the worst charter school law in the nation” (2014). DePasquale, a democrat who two years earlier had published the report “Pennsylvania Charter School Accountability and Transparency: Time for a Tune-Up”, was primarily referencing the mismanagement of funds by charter schools in Pennsylvania and made it a point to clarify that his criticism “should not be taken as an indictment of charter schools…in general.” While critiques of charters exist, they garner support from many democrats and most, if not all, republicans, making it one of the few bipartisan efforts in the state.

Similar to many states, Pennsylvania has seen a rapid expansion of the number of students enrolled in charter schools\(^4\) since the 1997 charter law\(^5\) was passed. By the end of the 2015 school year, 7.6% of Pennsylvania students attended a charter school, up from 4.5 percent

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\(^4\) For a list of useful definitions of “charter school”, see Definition of Terms.

in 2009 and just 2.3% in 2003. While 7.6% is still far lower than charter leaders Arizona (17.8%) and Colorado (10.9%), it is more than double neighboring New York (3.4%), Maryland (2.3%), New Jersey (2.4%) and West Virginia (0.0%) and similar to Ohio (7.0%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These numbers are expected to rise with Republican Legislative and Executive branches and a pro-choice Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos.

Pennsylvania is both representative of and unique regarding charter school reform. Philadelphia, the metropolis on the eastern side of the state, has seen a steady rise in charters resembling neighboring cities Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and New York City. Pittsburgh, on the opposite side of the state, has largely resisted charter expansion, unique compared to urban centers across the nation. Harrisburg, the state’s capital and location of the Pennsylvania Department of Education offices and much of the state’s political activity, currently has four charters and two cyber charters. To date, very little research has been conducted on charter schools in the state of Pennsylvania.

Two types of charter schools exist in Pennsylvania: brick and mortar charter schools, with physical buildings where students attend classes, and cyber charter schools, where the school provides a computer and internet and the student takes classes online from their homes. In 1997, the state passed Act 22, an amendment to the Public School Code of 1949, which essentially permitted charter schools. The state then passed Act 88 in 2002, permitting cyber

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6 The population of Pennsylvania in 2010 according to the US Census was 12,702,857 with 2016 estimate of 12,784,227 (US Census Bureau, 2016).
Out of the 176 charter schools, fourteen are cyber charter schools, enrolling 34,603 students. Of the fifteen dissertations conducted on public charter schools in Pennsylvania, ten were focused on cyber charter schools. Of the five dissertations conducted on brick and mortar charter schools, three were qualitative projects, two focused on school leaders and one focused on special education leaders. Teacher pedagogy, daily classroom processes, and holistic school analyses have been neglected.

This neglect is most likely a result of a combination of four factors. First, conducting long-term school studies whereby the researcher is physically present in the school is a demanding task. Second, charter schools are individual entities and may not wish to grant access to researchers. Third, cyber schools are a relatively recent phenomenon and greatly differ from traditional schools, perhaps making cyber charter research more desirable. Finally, the political nature of the topic may dissuade researchers from studying brick and mortar charter schools as they may be weary of running afoul of potential future employers.

Table 1.2. Pennsylvania Cyber Charter Schools with Enrollment Figures for 2015-2016 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21st Century Cyber CS</td>
<td>827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement House CS</td>
<td>553</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table cont’d.)

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According to Act 88, a cyber charter school is defined as “an independent public school established and operated under a charter from the Department of Education and in which the school uses technology in order to provide a significant portion of its curriculum and to deliver a significant portion of instruction to its students through the Internet or other electronic means. A cyber charter school must be organized as a public, nonprofit corporation. A charter may not be granted to a for-profit entity.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter School</th>
<th>Enrollments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT Academy Cyber CS</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agora Cyber CS</td>
<td>8,536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASPIRA Bilingual Cyber CS</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central PA Digital Learning Foundation CS</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Charter Academy CS</td>
<td>9034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperanza Cyber CS</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Cyber CS</td>
<td>9173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Distance Learning CS</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Leadership CS</td>
<td>2419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Virtual CS</td>
<td>2365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Plus Academy Cyber CS</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susq-Cyber CS</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34,603</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Currently, 87 of Pennsylvania’s 176 charter schools are in Philadelphia, where charters enroll about 30% of public school students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2017a).

Overall, half of Pennsylvania’s charter schools are located in urban areas. Pennsylvania has 500 school districts, resulting in metropolitan areas with numerous small districts making up a larger

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8 Education Plus Academy Cyber CS was closed in November 2015 after three and a half years. In August 2016, Reach Cyber School opened, keeping the number of cyber charters in operation at 14.

9 Out of a total 1,731,588 students enrolled in public schools in Pennsylvania for the 2015-2016 school year, or 2% of the student population.
county. This allows parents to move relatively easily between school districts but may limit choice to those incapable of moving due to the limited number of schools in each district (Frankenberg, Kotok, Schafft, & Mann, 2017).

**Pennsylvania Reports**

Miron and Nelson of Western Michigan University presented the first major report on Pennsylvania charter schools in October of 2000. The mixed-methods report, titled *Autonomy in Exchange for Accountability: An Initial Study of Pennsylvania Charter Schools*, was a comprehensive look into the construction of charters across the state, including their functioning, student, parent, and teacher makeup, finances, innovations, and achievement. The researchers studied the initial 17-months of Pennsylvania charter schools post-legalization for two reasons. First, the charter school law required an evaluation of the program after three years and the researchers were provided a “foundation” for the report. Second, the report was “designed to be largely formative and provide feedback to the schools and policymakers regarding changes that can be made to help these schools function more effectively and achieve their anticipated goals” (p. 1).

In 2011, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) published a report summarizing Pennsylvania charter school performance between 2007 and 2010. The research covered four school years in 116 charter schools, comparing state test scores in grades 3-8 of 73,085 charter school students (CREDO, 2011). The findings were explained in the introduction:

Compared to the educational gains the charter students would have had in their traditional public schools, the analysis shows that students in Pennsylvania charter schools on average make smaller learning gains. More than one quarter of the charter schools have significantly more positive learning gains than their traditional public school counterparts.
in reading, but their performance is eclipsed by the nearly half of charter schools that have significantly lower learning gains. In math, again nearly half of the charter schools studied perform worse than their traditional public school peers and one quarter outperform them. (p. 3)

In other words, there is a wide range of performance in charters across the state. If a charter school is randomly opened in Pennsylvania, it is statistically more likely to underperform its traditional school comparison. If this were the case, why would the state continue to open more charter schools? The report concludes with policy implications, highlighting the “extremely high-performing individual charter schools” that should serve as “strong examples of quality charter schooling”; the state must simply “build on that success to drive quality throughout the sector” (p. 21). In other words, identify what is working and collaborate across schools. Six years later, I found that, while schools like PHCS may in fact be the example charter advocates pursue, their lessons are not dispersed beyond their physical walls. To fully understand if such an ideal school exists, teacher subjectivity must be studied in an effort to highlight the complex tensions and inter-actions between theoretical pursuits and structures and concrete lived experience and narratives.

**Project Overview**

“No excuses” urban charter schools, similar to the one I taught in, utilize a curriculum founded on automation and order. Students work silently, discipline is prioritized, and declarative knowledge and memorization is preferred over higher-level thinking skills because the school is singularly focused and motivated by the achievement of high state test scores (Kerstetter, 2016). This is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to the US. Educational
expectations and attainment have long separated classes, keeping those with wealth in power and expecting the poor and minorities to pursue manual labor (Willis, 1977).

However, our current predicament is unique for two reasons. First, proponents of “no excuses” charter schools claim to be resisting systemic power structures that have historically detained lower class students to lower class career trajectories. Whereas in the past many students would simply not attend public school because they were required to work and could not afford it, dominant discourse today argues all students should have access to exceptional education resulting in access to exceptional higher education (Lamboy & Lu, 2017) assuming they work hard, the American dream (J. Klein, 2014). I am avoiding the argument that this is purely empty language in an attempt to gain control of urban schools or to benefit financially off the sale of services, obviously taking place in many instances, because it requires further substantiation later in this research (Buras, 2014). Second, and far less common in current literature, is the likelihood of the disappearance of manual labor jobs in the near future, as technology replaces manual work. The common argument that “society needs plumbers and mechanics and construction workers” has long been a crutch for advocates of educational inequality based on structures such as funding education through property taxes. In the future, if these jobs continue to decline, as have US manufacturing jobs, “no excuses” charter schools are limiting career options for their students by neglecting the skills they need to be successful, such as critical thinking and debate, social skills such as teamwork in diversity, and the understanding that merely having a college degree does not promise success (Golann, 2015; Kerstetter, 2016).
These two concerns differentiate the early 21st century urban education reform movement from other points in history.

Seven dominant themes emerged and developed through this study in two categories: school theory and praxis. These themes often resist norms identified in research on charter schools. Themes on the school’s theory or structures include a democratization of decision making, continuous professional development for staff, community building between teachers and students, and inter-disciplinary learning and teaching through an emphasis on process and product in the curriculum. Themes on school praxis include professional expectations of staff, surveillance, and individualization. However, these systems do not function without resistance. The tensions between these themes and categories and the teacher subjectivities intra-acting between all seven is the focus of this project.

Teacher subjectivity is tied to systems of power when using a poststructural lens. My participants, Maria and Barbara, had clear definitions of the purpose of education, which was tied directly to the school’s mission and their ideas on curriculum and student “success.” In other words, questions of subjectivity and chaos and order were integrated and cyclical.

This dissertation is divided into nine chapters. I begin with my theoretical framework, poststructuralism, particularly a focus on power and norming, as it shapes my approach to all aspects of my research. Chapter three provides a literature review on charter schools by dividing research into three dominant discourses: inevitability, reinventing the teacher, and resistance. Chapter four provides my method, teacher ethnography, or an ethnography founded on teacher voice and narrative. While school structures emerged as dominant aspects of my research,
teacher subjectivity was the central component to the project in comparison to more general school ethnographies. Chapter five provides the context of the school. This chapter is divided into three parts: the school founder’s journey and mission, the daily lived experiences of a teacher at PHCS, and four dominant school structures. Chapters six and seven provide the stories of Maria and Barbara respectively. Finally, chapter nine brings together my findings and presents the three resultant themes on praxis, highlighting the tensions between the social structures and biographies in the school.

This project heavily relies on pseudonyms and the exclusion of identifying information. The two primary participants, Maria Sanchez and Barbara Jones, as well as the school founder Dr. Williams, are not identified by their real name; their characteristics and even curriculum is thus left out. Furthermore, the school’s website and internal reports are not directly quoted. While this removes valuable information, access to charter schools has become increasingly difficult and in my struggle to gain entrée, I made clear the school would not be identified, nor the participants. The implications for this are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 4.
Without philosophy, educators are directionless in the whats and hows of organizing and implementing what we are trying to achieve. In short, our philosophy of education influences, and to a large extent determines, our educational decisions, choices, and alternatives. (Ornstein, 2008, p. 5)

I have come to rely on poststructuralism as a theoretical framework for multiple reasons. Critical work on corporate education reform is far more common, including the use of disaster capitalism (N. Klein, 2007) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004) to critique urban education reform agendas. I do not view poststructural theory in opposition to these frameworks; they simply take an alternative approach. I also attempt to be constantly aware of my positionality in this discussion. Historically, discussions over improving education have been top-down, amplified in the period since A Nation at Risk (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This often equates to White male dominated debates and solutions, an issue pertinent to me as a White male. I strive to resist perpetuating this cycle of a straight-forward solution to “fix” public schools, especially in cities and states in which I have not lived or experienced first-hand. I attended what I deem proficient public schools in suburban New Hampshire, California, and Virginia; I do not claim to have answers for public schools in urban Pennsylvania, nor did I enter PHCS expecting to find solutions for other schools. Furthermore, I seriously question how well we can claim to understand the phenomenon we attempt to research. Policy has influenced research in numerous ways, not least of which resulting in reductionist work with simplistic conclusions, easily digestible for those in positions of power (Lather, 2010). Poststructuralism works to better understand processes occurring while
deemphasizing simplistic characteristics of good and bad actors so often portrayed in the battle over our nation’s public schools.

Poststructuralism is useful in addressing these concerns in three ways. First, it resists grand narratives, such as all-encompassing theories on economics or knowledge. Second, it questions the existence of truth as well as humanity’s ability to represent truth should it exist. Finally, it disrupts simple binaries common in social justice work, such as oppressor-oppressed.

In this section, I provide my understanding of poststructuralism through a comparison with modernism, postmodernism, structuralism and deconstruction, pulling strengths from each theoretical sphere. Furthermore, I highlight challenges workings with poststructuralism. Next, I introduce two prominent poststructural works and their pertinent concepts: Foucault’s notion of power and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of norming.

In the subsequent sections, I introduce postmodernism and structuralism for their contextual support of my theoretical framework, describe how I apply Foucault and Deleuze’s work, and explain why poststructuralism is a unique but appropriate lens through which to view charter school research.

**Context: Postmodernism and Structuralism**

Postmodernism and poststructuralism are often used interchangeably, although they diverge in their original aims. First and foremost, postmodernism is defined by its rejection of grand narratives, put forth by Lyotard (1984). In education, this means a rejection of a singular learning theory able to guide pedagogy. For Agger (1991), postmodernism is more general than poststructuralism, making “connections with mainstream social science” (p.115). A work or
writer may be deemed both postmodern and poststructural, or they may be one or the other, depending on their focus, with the former typically focused on “a cultural and political movement, and to a historical moment” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 451). In this way, I see poststructuralism as a theoretical framework taking place during a postmodern moment.

Poststructuralism accentuates certain tenants of postmodernism, such as problematizing the “progress” central to modernism. “In philosophy (and theology), modernism can be seen as a movement sustained by a belief in the advancement of knowledge and human progress, made on the basis of experience and scientific method” (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 9). Postmodernism disrupts linear progress in many ways, including research methodology. For researchers, this translates to a questioning of one “best” way to approach a problem. For educators, this means students do not slowly accumulate knowledge through the years.

Slattery argues the strength of postmodernism is its eclecticism, seen through exploration and discovering new possibilities, especially important in the field of education during an era of standardization, accountability, and reductionism. “Postmodernism seeks to transcend the ravages of modernity with a radically new concept of society, culture, language, and power” (Slattery, 2013, p. 20). This is accomplished through three aspects: open systems, complexity, and transformatory change (Doll, 1987). Postmodernism does not directly reject all scientisms, but works to critique and reimagine terms such as validity (Lather, 1993). These critiques can present opportunities for “new” sciences.
Structuralism

Structuralism differs from alternative modes of inquiry and method by privileging the structures, systems, and relationships that make meaning, as opposed to the specific phenomena which exist or are created from these interactions (Pinar et al., 1995). This decentering of the human resists forms of idealism and results in an “attack on the subject, on humanism, and on the Enlightenment project” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 461). These attacks on rational individuality were foundational to poststructuralism and represent similarities between the two philosophies.

Poststructuralism relies on three integral tenets supplied by structuralism’s general critique of Enlightenment philosophy. First is a skepticism over human consciousness as autonomous. Second, interactions and shared systems of language are more important than individual pieces. Third, invisible structures often constrain human behavior (Peters & Burbules, 2004). These tenets lead to extensive research concerning the subject and subjectivity.

“Structuralism is not at all a form of thought that suppresses the subject, but one that breaks it up and distributes it systematically, that contests the identity of the subject, that dissipates it and makes it shift” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 190). Subjectivity is socially constructed, changes depending on language, and depends on power relations in over-arching structures.

Poststructuralism shares many of the insights provided by the structuralist thinkers of the middle 20th century. Furthermore, structuralism continues to prevail as an important framework in particular education fields, such as the sociology of education and the psychology of education, and is often overlooked in disparate fields including intercultural studies, where difference is often mistakenly assumed to be a result of the unknown (Shim, 2011). However,
structuralism’s move from abstract structures towards concrete evidence or lived experience, and the subsequent paralysis, ultimately leads to the poststructuralist critique. “[T]he structuralist desiring mechanism is one that still privileges a grounding in content, whereas the poststructuralist one is more at ease, if not joyful, in the abandonment of such claims” (Kaufman, 2007).

Postructuralism’s break from structuralism occurs by moving away from what is said to what is unsaid. Poststructuralism rejects any foundational platform from which a system of thought can arise. Schrift (1995) summarizes this difference:

That is to say, where the structuralist’s [sic] responded to existentialism’s privileging of consciousness and history by eliminating them both, the poststructuralists took from structuralism insights concerning the workings of linguistic and systemic forces and returned with these insights to reinvoke the question of the subject in terms of constituted-constitutive-constituting agency situated and operating within a complex network of socio-historical and intersubjective relations. (p. 5-6)

This difference is relevant in praxis. Whereas structuralism illustrates structures, poststructuralism aims at deconstructing through difference. In practice, structuralism takes evidence through observation and draws abstract structures, followed by an attempt to then move back to concrete examples using the newly formed structures. In comparison, poststructuralism begins in abstract terms, moves towards concrete examples, and returns to an abstract resting place (Kaufman, 2007) as evidenced in poststructural genealogies.

**Language and Limits**

Language is central to poststructuralism, as it was for structuralism before it, although the former prioritizes what is unsaid as opposed to the latter focusing on what is said. This point is made clear by Martusewicz (2001):
Post-structuralism, a broad, multidimensional, and far from unified set of writings, examines the relation between language and its use to understand social and personal experience. All experience and knowledge in this view must be understood as filtered, meaningful only through the symbolic order—language and culture. (p. 11)

Instead, poststructuralism is interested in limits, including discourse. “Poststructuralists don’t (normally) doubt that there is a world: their anxiety concerns what we can claim to know about it with any certainty” (Belsey, 2002, p. 71). Thus, any movement or theory or political group is defined not by its supposed core value or characteristics, but by the extent of its limits. What does this movement include? Who is excluded? Why are they excluded? These questions are shaped and limited by discourse.

St. Pierre (2000) illustrates challenges facing poststructuralism both from the outside and from within. First, the term encapsulates a wide range of authors and ideas, making it difficult to understand what is exactly meant by poststructuralism, but also making the theory easier to disregard by opponents. Next, poststructuralism is often deemed too difficult to understand. This can lead to an oversimplification, complete neglect, or a translation prioritizing certain information. Finally, poststructuralism has merely four decades of experience and exists in a world dominated by centuries of humanism or modernity complicating the process. The solution is not simply to oppose modernism through poststructuralism, as the latter exists “in a worldview wherein traditional categories, such as order and disorder, are not diametrically opposed or separated but are entwined, each within the other, each reinforcing and sustaining the other” (Doll, 1993, pp. 279-280). Poststructuralism does not outright reject the theories it works against, nor does it ignore them.
Poststructuralism begins with a simple premise: universal truths are too complex to accurately represent through philosophy. This premise disrupts common understandings of the purpose of theory. If simple, reductionist truths cannot be represented through philosophy, the purpose of theory must change. Instead of determining truths, philosophers should question, criticize, imagine, and reimagine. “The tendency in poststructuralism is therefore to regard truth as a multiplicity, to exult in the play of diverse meanings, in the continual process of reinterpretation, in the contention of opposing claims” (Poster, 1989, p. 15).

**Power and Norming**

In this section, I describe two pertinent concepts put forth by poststructuralist thinkers integral to my research on teacher culture in charter schools. The first, Foucault’s power, is useful in that it disrupts common binaries between oppressor/oppressed, teacher/student, insider/outsider, and so forth. The second, Deleuze and Guattari’s norming, questions why particular types of knowledge, learning, schooling, and research are privileged over their counterparts and what we can do to break these molds. Both will resonate throughout my research.

**Foucault and Power**

Foucault’s notion of power is presented in *Discipline and Punish* and “is understood as a range of relations that frame both knowledge and action” (S. L. Pratt, 2011, p. 77). Foucault’s driving purpose was in understanding how people are made into subjects, a process correlated with power relations (Foucault, 1982). In opposition to other more common definitions, Foucault’s power is not possessed as property but instead is a strategy in the form of a “network
of relations, constantly in tension, in activity” (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). Power is not a commodity strived for by individuals to then yield over others. As summarized by Ball, “Power is not a mode of subjugation, or a general system of domination and indeed power is as much about what can be said and thought as what can be done—it is discursive” (2013, p. 30). Power is everywhere at all times, but can never be fully explained or theorized because it is always changing and is different depending on the time and place. Knowledge is not power but power is also not knowledge. These terms are not equivalent. Foucault focuses on the relationship between these terms, namely that knowledge is an effect of power, and thus Foucault avoids the traditional aims of defining such terms (Kautzer & Mendieta, 2009).

For Foucault, juridical and economic power, common in alternative theoretical work such as critical theory, are “understood as a right, a commodity, and something that is transferable” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 51). Neo-Marxist thought often leads to critique of oppressive powers over subjects. This notion of power is problematic to Foucault. If power can be attained and commoditized, those who are marginalized can revolt and take back the power from their oppressors. However, this is an oversimplification, as not all relationships involve an oppressor and an oppressed. Foucault is also critical of the importance of autonomy in such definitions. Autonomy is often discussed as a way to “give” power to an individual, granting them increased freedom and individuality. For Foucault, this is problematic because the extent of such autonomy is often an illusion. Social contract theory emphasizes the freedoms we choose to give up to enter into a society with rules and regulations to protect citizens. However, to Foucault, we do not actually have a choice in this agreement and are forced into such a contract based on the time and
place of our birth. “In other words, despite the foundational rhetoric of nations and states on contract, choice, and consent, membership is institutionalized at birth and not consent or choice” (Isin, 2012). This notion translates to education: a middle school student may be given autonomy to work independently on a task of his or her choosing, yet the law requires that the student is in the school in the first place.

According to Foucault’s interpretation of power, traditional educational policy analysis studying power and influence of the state over local school districts is insufficient. Mechanisms of power are at work at all times everywhere. As such, an authoritarian central government is only one component or vehicle of power, and may influence the daily actions of citizens in a insignificant way. Instead of continuing to focus on the state apparatus, power should be interpreted on a more localized and immediate scale. For education, the federal and state policy decisions or actions of the superintendent and school board are supplanted by the lived experience of the student or teacher “on a much more minute and everyday level” (Foucault, 1980, p. 60).

Power can be studied through a variety of approaches. Often, power is used to describe social classes or the haves and have nots. Today, much is made of the role of lobbying and campaign contributions in the United State’s political system, equating wealth with political power. This analysis posits poorer citizens as holding less political power. Foucault is less interested in this traditional definition of power, stating:

Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc. In other words, rather than ask
ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. (p. 97)

Foucault is less concerned with how the state dominates its citizens and more concerned with how domination is exercised between citizens. In education, this equates to less of an emphasis on the law and policy passed hundreds or thousands of miles away from a school. This is difficult because, in an attempt to do the most good and influence the most people, we are often driven to find perfect solutions able to trickle down from a single source. Instead, Foucault suggests researchers “investigate historically, and beginning from the lowest level, how mechanisms of power have been able to function” (p. 100) by analyzing people society often neglects. In education, research on teachers begins with the everyday classes and assignments, the morning routines of eating breakfast, helping family members get dressed and prepare for the day, sitting in traffic, remembering school supplies, and the common interactions with their peers and students. This daily and individualized scale contrasts the top-down approach of policy analysis or even research on district superintendents or school principals.

**Deleuze and Guattari and Norming**

Norm, norming, normalcy, normality, and normalization are terms found directly in Foucault’s writing and indirectly in Deleuze and Guattari’s. For the purpose of this work, I will rely heavily on *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), whereby the authors present schizoanalysis as an alternative to Freud’s psychoanalysis. For Foucault, breaking down practices, such as schooling through an analysis of interrelating mechanisms ultimately leads to a thorough understanding of how norms are produced. For Deleuze and
Guattari, normality is explained through two opposing forces: the plane of organization and the plane of consistency.

The plane of organization is a space of complete order and stratification. This space is predictable, expected, and is the norm. Mechanisms binding us to the plane of organization are unethical because they limit our possibilities, close doors, and remove thresholds to new becomings. By being orderly and predictable, this space prevents new ideas or ways of knowing and being. Each strata or plane has a defined role and purpose. Each organ has a function, can be studied, and determined to be functioning or defective. For instance, a student is or is not able to multiply fractions. In the plane of organization, failure is identified and can be corrected in an effort to develop, but is not inevitable. In the plane of consistency, failure is difficult to define because the plane does not have a clear identity and is in the plane’s “nature” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 269).

In capitalist societies, people are ordered based on their accumulated wealth, not by a domineering state but by the people themselves. We motivate ourselves to work harder in order to pay for more items and services, resulting in an orderly and predictable society. According to free market economics, the most successful, resilient, hardworking, intelligent people rest at the top of society with the most wealth, opposite the least deserving, lazy, unintelligent people void of wealth (Harvey, 2007). The plane of consistency is a space able to resist this order, a space of disorder and thus creativity.

The plane of consistency is in opposition to the plane of organization. It is not concerned with order and development or the subject, but is chaotic and spontaneous. “Precisely because it
is not a plan(e) of organization, development, or formation, but of nonvoluntary transmutation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 269). The authors use strata throughout the book in numerous ways. The layers of strata in the geologic sense are red, orange, brown, and yellow layers of rock, stacked one on top of the other, molding together to make a cliff. The plane of consistency de-stratifies and fights subjectification through experimentation (p. 134). Without the plane of organization pulling and working on the plane of consistency, there would be no subject or organism left.

You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of signifiance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations, force you to; and you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality. Mimic the strata. (p. 160)

The plane of consistency is only understood alongside the plane of organization and vice versa. The plane of consistency and the plane of organization are not polar opposites to be equated with good and bad or democratic and fascist. In other words, it is not simply better to exist in the plane of consistency. Furthermore, their descriptions are not used to simplify a phenomenon and their application often results in the exact opposite.

Why does the opposition between the two kinds of planes lead to a still more abstract hypothesis? Because one continually passes from one to the other, by unnoticeable degrees and without being aware of it, or one becomes aware of it only afterward. Because one continually reconstitutes one plane atop another, or extricates one from the other. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 269)

The two planes are constantly working on each other. The plane of organization works to stop the plane of consistency from deterritorializing while the plane of consistency tries to pull away and “break down” the order and functions of the plane of organization. However, “so much
caution is needed to prevent the plane of consistency from becoming a pure plane of abolition or death” (p. 270). This appears to result in a regression to stability and order due to the norm’s security. The plane of organization does not result in immediate and dramatic death; its death is a slow and metaphysical one of predictability, repetition, tradition, and stagnation.

**Body without Organs**

To better explain the plane of consistency, Deleuze and Guattari put forth a different concept, the Body without Organs (BwO). The BwO is not an organ-less body but is a system that resists the prototypical organization of organs. Of course, a BwO cannot completely resist our traditional ideas about the body and how organs are organized, otherwise the organs would lack meaning and function. The BwO exists in the same world as the traditional body of organs, but works to disorganize, create, and become new.

The most obvious example of a BwO is a conversation between two people because mouth and tongue are not used for their traditional/natural purposes: eating. This would be considered a low intensity BwO because of its commonality. Drug use is a high intensity BwO. “The BwO is a locus of an on-going struggle between stratification and de-stratification, between normalization and free experimentation, autonomy” (Holland, 2013, p. 98). Constructing and maintaining a BwO is difficult because it must balance between becoming too free and disorganized and returning to the accepted norm, also known as the plane of organization. In education, this may be a curriculum unchanged for several decades, ignoring societal changes in technology and or a politic too principled; a school without order, *Lord of the Flies*, is even more undesirable. Becoming a BwO is not a delicate point in the middle of this spectrum; it is about
possibility, not increasing anarchy and decreasing order. This mimics the unending process of deconstruction in that no “point of resolution” is ever known nor achieved (Egéa-Kuehne, 1995).

Becoming is central to poststructural work because it removes goals or endpoints. This is similar to researchers working and reworking data and the view that research methods are cyclical and not linear. Modernism is defined by quantitative measures, including exact models of success. A person is intelligent based on an IQ score and is in a definitive social class based on wealth. These are achievable endpoints for individuals. Poststructuralism rejects the notion of completeness; a person is always becoming anew. For Deleuze and Guattari, the BwO is the vehicle for incompleteness and becoming.

**Praxis**

Schizoanalysis, as the analysis of desire, is immediately practical and political, whether it is a question of an individual, group, or society. For politics precedes being. Practice does not come after the emplacement of the terms and their relations, but actively participates in the drawing of the lines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 203).

The move from seemingly abstract theory to implications for charter schools is not as difficult as it may initially appear. After all, poststructuralism is inherently political and useful because of its origins. Emancipation is central to the postmodern paradigm and thus poststructuralism (Lather, 1986, 1991a), especially when discussing how culture is affected by power and the ability or inability to describe such processes as being imperfect and fluid (Lather, 2003). Foucault’s pursuit of freedom uses philosophy as an “educational enterprise” (J. Marshall, 1998, p. 65). While writing in the poststructural tradition is often seen as abstract, it is tied to political movements and applied research in a variety of fields, in my case in the discourse and culture surrounding charter schools and in teachers’ subjectivity and subjectification. Foucault
went so far as to show disdain for those who merely studied him abstractly as opposed to applying his writings and lectures to “the sort of practical analytical work that he advocated so vigorously” (Ball, 2013, p. 18), a point which coincides with the application of theory to current urban education reforms.

Both Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari question further study of one’s subjectivity or common characteristics such as Black, female, or student. Instead, we should analyze the mechanisms producing these terms. After all, Black, female, and student will always be understood in their relation to those terms granted power by societal constructs, such as White, male, and teacher. In other words, we traditionally can’t explain the first group of terms without the second, and a power structure is inherent in the terms, having been conditioned to favor one group over the other. Similarly, the minority will always be judged against how far they deviate from the norm. “Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 178). The solution, or perhaps possibility, is presented in two different ways. For Foucault, resisting traditional studies of subjectivity result in historical genealogies. For Deleuze and Guattari, a new language is constructed, relying on common words with new meanings.

Charter schools exist in an age of accountability. Standardized test scores are used to determine which school districts, schools, teachers, and students are performing sufficiently (Buras, 2012; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Opfer, 2001; Ravitch, 2011, 2013; Wells, 2002). Modernity is very much alive, as policymakers assume, or hope, that learning and success are easily quantifiable. Education research has not influenced education policy; instead, education
policy has degraded how research is conducted, with an overemphasis on quantitative methodology in an attempt to represent what does and does not work in the classroom and in schools (Lather, 2010). This heightened level of accountability resembles Foucault’s panopticon in that all actors are consistently under surveillance to ensure they are meeting norms, restricting creativity in pedagogy, and leading to the replication of school structures (Opfer, 2001).

**Poststructuralism and Charter Schools**

Charter schools are proposed as a solution to “fix” public urban schools with historically high dropout rates and low graduation rates. To date, much of the research on charter schools has been policy-based and often disregards culture. For example, Baker and Dickerson (2006) analyzed charter school teacher quality by comparing the competitiveness of colleges attended by teachers at traditional schools and charter schools, assuming the “quality” of the teacher for a given classroom is correlated with a college’s national ranking. Furthermore, policy research is often structured around “market efficiencies”, founded on the premise that a more successful school district will be one with the most current free-market business theory. This framework can have a profound effect on the community. For example, schools in New Orleans are often identified by their school performance score, leading to student recruitment or attrition challenges (Jabbar, 2016). By focusing on survey data of teacher credentials or how district policy can restrict or enhance school leaders, these policy analyses neglect complex human elements of power in urban settings, devolving into positivist/objectivism.

Poststructuralism rejects the underlying grand narrative of neoliberal free-market capitalism and the idea that deregulation increases freedom by exposing how we are controlled.
such systems, specifically through biopolitics. Historically, those in power could physically take resources and subject individuals to their will, or exclude them completely by creating societal hierarchies based on race, class, gender, etc. (Macey, 2009). However, over time the political process (seen as a union between politics and life) has transitioned from a reductive to a productive process. “Within this discourse, politics is no longer understood exclusively through body—a body to be measured, surveilled, managed, included in forecasts, surveys, and statistical projections” (Giroux, 2006, p. 12). Ideology is now prioritized. It is not enough that students are physically controlled in a school, they must now also share the school’s ideology. This is immediately apparent when entering a charter school, with names of colleges and key terms (excellence, determination, growth…) written on the walls, as students sing about their long-term plans of attending a four-year college and becoming “successful.” This shared ideology spreads from the school to the city landscape in the form of television commercials, billboards, and fairs. Neoliberalism and business philosophy disregard culture and race through an ahistorical representation of why urban public schools have historically “failed”, namely because the community has valued the wrong ideology, as opposed to White flight and government disinvestment (Buras, 2014).

A more direct example of power relations in charter school expansion is through an analysis of who is physically working in and running the newly formed schools. Scheurich and Imber (1997) summarize this dilemma:

School reforms are allocations or reallocations of scarce educational resources. Whoever controls the educational change process has the power to benefit some students or community constituencies more than others. The traditional model of educational
administration, functionalism, concentrates power in the educational expert, usually the superintendent in the case of district-wide reforms. (p. 24)

In many cities, such as Chicago, New York City, and New Orleans, this has meant top-down bureaucratic changes, including circumventing democratically elected school boards with CEO’s or superintendents appointed by mayors (Nunez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015). Meanwhile, local community run schools are taken over and given to charter management organizations or run as independent charters, often by non-locals. This process, known as accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004), thrives on disaster and disorder, whereby privatizers can flourish in deregulated markets (N. Klein, 2007).

**Problematizing Grand Narratives in Charter School Discourse**

My goal in developing a theoretical framework is to construct a “language of critique and possibility that is as self-critical as it is socially responsible” (Giroux, 2003). To this point, literature on charter schools is designed to improve charters, determine their effectiveness, or offer critiques. Critiques typically rely on critical theory and recent scholarship do not rely on poststructural theorists. “Unlike some poststructural tendencies, critical theory springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain, that much can be done to alleviate that pain, and that theory has a crucial role to play in that process” (Poster, 1989, p. 3). Thus, critical theory has a concrete goal or aim in a way that poststructuralism does not. I am weary of such a goal for the same reason I am skeptical of top-down strategies promising to “fix” education problems or inequities. However, as previously discussed, poststructuralism does lead to an emphasis of freedom indirectly through power relations which impose subjectivities, for Foucault through institutional control, for Deleuze and Guattari through the desire of order via norming.
Poststructuralism rejects reductionist representations of truth and is weary of “just” causes. As such, traditional studies of resistance do not coincide with poststructural thinking. “To equate resistance with what is progressive and good is to buy into the standard way of thinking of power as bad and freedom as good, when this dichotomy is part of what is in question” (Hoy, 2004, p. 5). For this reason, I do not rely on critical theory, even though historically it has been used when documenting tangible resistance to neoliberal reforms (Masquelier, 2013). Nor did I approach the school searching for teacher and student resistances while assuming the charter embodies neoliberal practices. Poststructuralism avoids grand narratives, even when they appear to be in the name of social justice. Thus, while I am interested in the power relations inside and surrounding charter schools, I do not view it as a singular phenomenon, whereby teachers simply either accept or reject neoliberal ideology.

The era in which we live, work, and teach is directly correlated with the realization of our theory. To this point, postmodern theory has developed and spread sufficiently within educational theory, it is the application of such theory which has faltered under the onslaught of market-based reforms in public education (Allan, 2004). For me, this starts with teachers in charter schools, perfectly positioned in the middle of conflicting power relationships perpetuated by neoliberal ideology (Slater, 2015). “Critically reflective educators who can engage with learning in a wide range of contexts” (Holloway & Gouthro, 2011, p. 29) became central to my research focus. Furthermore, as a former charter school teacher, my constant reflection and interviews of my fellow teachers articulated the lack of endpoint in such research. No definitive conclusion occurred. Nor did any dramatic and public displays of traditionally defined resistance.
No such clear, linear progress exists in poststructural theory. These concepts are far too complex to reduce into a report on the protagonists and antagonists of the charter school reform world. The processes and becomings found in the daily interactions and lessons were far more appropriate to my theoretical framework.
CHAPTER 3. A GENEALOGY ON CHARTER SCHOOL DISCOURSES

There is no clear origin story for charter schools founded on a unifying purpose, effect, or support. Nor are there decisive summative reports on the effectiveness of charter schools, in part due to their unique nature, but also because they have been shown to have a wide range of outcomes (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). Given my poststructural lens, I examine research on charter schools through discourses that produce power and subjectivity in particular ways. I utilize Foucault’s (1980) notion of power as discursive and diffuse. Furthermore, applying genealogy, “a critical interpretive practice that aims to discern the ways in which discourses constitute the objects, practices, and/or subjects (subjectivities) that are available for study” (Davis, 2004, p. 206), a decisive linear progression of charter school expansion is disrupted.

There are numerous ways to categorize charter school research. Most obviously, research can be chronicled linearly, beginning with the origins of charter schools already discussed and ending with the most recent research. Alternatively, ideologies could be articulated, either in support or opposition of charter schools, with a third group for research refraining from making a political stand. Otherwise, research can be organized by method: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches, with all three growing each year in breadth and depth. For Wohlstetter, Smith, and Farrell (2013), charter school history is divided into three generations: original state and community led experimentation, expansion, and refinements. These categorizations are problematic because they create simplistic binaries of support and opposition to charter schools, a positivist notion of “successful” schooling, and often exclude vital
contextual and historical information in attempt to isolate variables. Alternatively, I view research on charters as a complex network of discourses in line with my poststructural lens. Problematizing the notion that there is a singular way to represent charters while demonstrating the tensions between conflicting data, underlying premises, and grand narratives.

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize current research on charter schools in the United States, providing both a context and justification for my research. Three dominant discourses emerge when synthesizing charter school research through a poststructural lens. First, a discourse of inevitability propagated early charter research, beginning in the 1990’s. This mostly theoretical approach argues free-markets spread and evolve out of necessity and is contingent on the premise that public schools are failing and can be fixed through innovation and choice. If the “shining city upon a hill” is a result of American Exceptionalism (CITE) defined by economic progress, so too should the ideal school or school system. Second, a discourse of reinventing the teacher has emerged. As charters expanded throughout the 2000’s, a redefining of “successful” teaching occurred through a diverse range of voices. Public school critics have attacked teacher tenure and unions for limiting teacher voice and independence, arguing against the traditional view of teaching as a lifelong profession, to be examined, debated, and taught in schools of education. Pro-charter advocates have simultaneously argued charter schools will stoke innovation and improve teaching “quality” by allowing principals to fire “bad” teachers. However, charterers exist in an audit culture, both for schools and teachers, with strict curricular requirements and standards of “effective” teaching determined through state test scores. This tension creates a new space or discourse on how teachers navigate their subjectivity and “teacher
expectations.” Finally, a discourse of resistance has developed in opposition to charter school expansion. This research, largely founded on critical theory, positions charter schools inside a larger debate over the privatization of public schools and the public sphere, and focuses on the corporate interests of those promoting charters. For each discourse, I rely on poststructural theory, to analyze both possibilities and limitations.

**Table 3.1. Charter School Discourses**

A Discourse of Inevitability

Charter schools originated with broad bipartisan support at the state and local level. This was also true in academia during their conception. Discourse during their inception was largely hopeful, typing a variety of common themes together, including community activism, parent and student voice, and most notably market dynamics. However, these were strongly linked to a
growing discourses on accountability and a “crisis” in education. Furthermore, a lack of substantive research on charter schools, due in part to the lack of available research sites, limited more thorough discussions, resulting in mostly theoretical works. This discourse continues today in policy work advocating for further charter expansion and school choice.

**Uniting Discourses: Market Dynamics and Hope**

From 1990 until 2005, charter school literature often focused on the promise and hope of charter schools, citing bipartisan support for charters as evidence of their potency. At the time, charters also brought together a wide range of community members, from minority activists resisting traditional urban school systems suffering from white flight, a lack of funding, and neglect in a “post-integration” age, to wealthy suburban parents looking for an idyllic school, not unlike previous generations of highly educated and interested parents maneuvering for beneficial access for their children (Bulkley & Wohlstetter, 2004). Ultimately, research held out hope that charters could make a positive net impact on public education, ranging from a small isolated solution for some children in unique areas to the answer, an evolution of public education culminating in the charter school. These arguments were mostly theoretical and lacking substantive data.

Research on charter schools grew in the late 1990s but the phenomenon was still relatively new, with few research sites to study and little longitudinal data available. Instead, research focused on the philosophical arguments for and against charter schools, supplementing their assertions with data from the few regions of the country experimenting with charters, including Milwaukee, where school vouchers originated, and Washington, DC, a city with a long
history of education reform due to its unique governance structure. These philosophical
arguments provide some historical context, for example detailing the current struggles of public
schools (Stulberg, 2004) and segregation policy (King Jr., 2004), but were founded on the
premise that public schools required fixing. Charters, a market-based solution to fix public
schools, was equated to other school reform policies such as class size reduction and improved
teacher professional development, and was justified through the “frustration with the existing
system” (Timpane, Brewer, Gill, & Ross, 2001, p. 3). The proposed solution is to simply apply
free-market theories to the public sphere.

Discourse supporting charter schools embraces market-based ideology, particularly the
dichotomy between democracy and markets put forward by Chubb and Moe (1990). For market
enthusiasts, regulations over schools limit autonomy, while teacher unions inhibit student
interests by prioritizing the interests of the organization. Thus, these two aspects limit customer
satisfaction. It should be noted, during their conception, charters were also argued to improve
democratic practice through greater participation (S. Smith, 1998), often using pragmatism as a
theoretical framework (Abowitz, 2001; Waks, 2010). However, these arguments have also
become common discourse on resisting charter expansion. Ultimately, charter schools and
privatization discourse argues for disruption of bureaucracy to spur innovation and opportunity.

Opportunity is central to the philosophical arguments in support of charter school growth.
Hassel (1999) outlines these opportunities. First, charter schools are practical because they
theoretically grow from the ground up, circumventing large-scale policy changes requiring
lengthy debate and deliberation and possible resistance by elected officials such as school board
members. Second, charter schools are directly held accountable by parents who choose to enroll their students, or take their students out of the school if they are not satisfied. Third, charters provide competitive pressures on traditional public schools. If teachers or school leaders want change, they can find it at a charter school. Fourth, charter schools can serve as laboratories, free of constraints from law and policy found in traditional public schools. Best practices can then be exported to other schools. Finally, charter schools may help transform public education through simple replacement of the traditional public school style. Hill, Pierce, and Guthrie (1997) made similar suggestions of how charters could implement market strategies, including contracts between public school boards and private providers, “making them better able to meet standards of achievement” (cite).

Opportunity and choice are critical components of the free market and have generally not been integral to traditional public school systems in the United States. Wells (2002) traced charters back to laissez-faire economic theory, or neoliberalism. Neoliberalism works to deregulate markets, resulting in competition, forcing actors to innovate to ensure customer satisfaction. In education, neoliberals argue for school choice and vouchers (Friedman, 1962). Furthermore, charter schools aligned with the standards and assessments movement already taking place since A Nation at Risk. For increased autonomy, charters agreed to increase accountability. In this way, charter school discourse become linked to discourses on accountability, also expanding with the passage of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Ultimately, Wells is critical of the implementation of charter schools and provides extensive recommendations, mostly to be implemented through stricter law and policy.
Charter school discourse focusing on the market components of charter expansion is generally hopeful. Early on, charters were enjoying bipartisan support, growing in a variety of ways across the nation, and seemed to offer something for everyone. Put simply, researchers were unsure of their future, had little foundational evidence for their effectiveness, and relied on theoretical arguments aimed at unifying parties. “This process also promises to forge connections between disempowered parents and the education system by enhancing their participation in their children’s education” (Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999, p. 194). Over time, this discourse shifted in its focus. Community grassroots organization was replaced with neoliberals focused on deregulation and free markets, not community empowerment (Wells et al., 2002). Meanwhile alternative researchers worked to mix grassroots community empowerment and deregulation, arguing the former was made possible by the latter. This work argued charters created an alternative space for resistance to White supremacy and reproducing inequality (Rofes, 2004), and focused on the positive effects of competition (Medler, 2004). These unifying efforts between differing parties was seen as a pragmatic compromise between school vouchers and a completely laissez-faire approach and the status quo.

More recently, inevitability has resulted in a silencing of the context surrounding charter schools. Instead, discourse focuses on best-practices and how to improve charters. By circumventing the more complex debate on who controls public schools, charters appear as inevitable and here to stay. For example, Merseth (2009) avoids the political or philosophical discussions of charter schools and approaches the topic as an objective researcher attempting to determine what successful charter schools are doing that other schools may be neglecting.
Merseth describes five Massachusetts charter schools and the theme or trait separating them from more ordinary schools: intimacy in a data-driven school, planning and executing for achievement, bringing college to students and students to college, and paving the way to adulthood. Discourse assuming charters should be studied as apolitical phenomenon moves power away from resistance efforts by dismissing further debate.

**Power and the Promise of Charters**

Traditional definitions of power often focus on who possesses it and how it can be used to dominate those who do not. This is apparent in arguments for charter schools focused on taking power away from the bureaucratic monopoly that has traditionally characterized public education and giving it back to parents and the community. This is further complicated when considering community stakeholders are more likely to understand problems affecting their community and may be in better position to construct solutions (Sarason, 1998). Is power this easily manipulated, a tangible product to be easily moved from bureaucrats to parents and teachers?

Poststructuralism, namely Foucault, rejects common binaries between powerful and powerless or liberation and oppression (Marshall, 2004). First, discourse around the failure of traditional public schools and the need for drastic solutions must be questioned. If schools are failing, a solution or change is inevitable. But what evidence asserts such failures, and what are the most likely causes? Second, charter schools may show promise and of course should be implemented in effective ways as opposed to the opposite, but how sure are we that charters are the answer? Discourse over school choice is far from solidified, with plenty of academics on
both sides of the issues, including research questioning the effectiveness of parental choice and complications with availability at the preferable schools (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). Research often started from a premise that schools were failing but did not substantiate the claim, or misinterpreted the quantitative research on public schooling (Ravitch, 2013). Furthermore, similar to political stances over laissez-faire capitalism, terms such as “competition”, “choice”, “consumer satisfaction”, and “supply and demand” are often used over simplistically. That is, economic theory can predict what will happen, but it is problematic to assume these predictions are inevitable.

Theoretical discussions over the legitimacy and promise of charter schools leave out an important component: student and teacher voice. While arguments for charter expansion highlighted community and parental involvement and reallocating power to local stakeholders, the student experience was neglected, in part due to a lack of available data. In this way, research did not sufficiently detail a complete depiction of power, as students and teachers lived experiences were unused. Research prioritizing teacher and student voice (Bulkley, 2005; Peebles, 2004) solely included stakeholders inside charter schools (Villavicencio, 2013), neglecting the voices of those still in attendance of traditional public schools but where funds were reallocated to charters. Obviously, this is in part the result of logistical limitations of research; it is far easier to survey those inside a new charter compared to teachers, students, and

\[10\] Bulkley’s (2005) work details stakeholder voice when a charter begins to work with an education management organization whereas Peebles’ research uses stakeholder voice to highlight curricular challenges when beginning a charter school.
parents in a neighboring school. In sum, charter school discourse on inevitability does not take a holistic approach to stakeholder voice.

During charter expansion, autonomy is granted for an increase in accountability. According to neoliberals, this leads to increased exploration and experimentation, with the most effective schools gaining the most customer satisfaction and further growth. However, because accountability can be extremely specific, often through student state test scores or school performance scores, a norming effect can occur, whereby all schools attempt to accomplish identical goals. A singular goal can result in common, singular practices. Furthermore, the school is “rewarded” with higher scores if they only accept and retain students who “fit” the school’s mission. This incentive has not been supported in large scale quantitative research (Winters, Clayton, & Carpenter II, 2017; Zimmer & Guarino, 2013) but is vehemently defended both theoretically (Ravitch, 2013) and anecdotally (Dreilinger, 2016). Charter schools have similar goals to traditional public schools: high graduation rates, college acceptance, high state test scores, etc. “Primarily, the pairing of accountability with charter schools hides the conformity required in the curriculum to meet testing demands while implying that schools are free to teach as they see fit” (Opfer, 2001, p. 209). This norming or narrowing of the purpose of charters into producing college bound students (Lamboy & Lu, 2017) is in tension with the original purpose of exploration and innovation through autonomy (Shanker, 1988).

Discourse highlighting the hope and promise of charters from bipartisan groups has diminished in recent years. The discourse of inevitability promoting charters as an evolution of

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11 Eventually, researchers did begin to include “outside” stakeholders. This will be discussed in the subsequent section on Resistance.
public school, incorporating market dynamics into the public sphere, has splintered and fractured into new competing and even hostile discourses. Original discussions of charters, promoting unity and bringing groups together, have largely diminished, and mostly exist only in policy work promoting school choice.

A Discourse of Reinventing the Teacher

As charter schools expanded across the country, philosophical debates over their promise and efficacy began to be supplemented with qualitative research inside of schools. Initially, these projects worked to understand how charter schools were materializing in different regions of the country. However, once the charter phenomenon was established and further expansion appeared inevitable, some qualitative research moved beyond any discussion over the politics of charter schools and instead focused on either the best practices or understanding “successful” charter principles or the student culture and discipline in “no excuses” charters. While both have the opportunity to address teacher subjectivity, to date, neither has consistently placed teachers at the center of extensive research. This is highly problematic, as teachers subjectivity is vital to understanding how charter theory is put into practice.

In one of the first and most comprehensive research projects to date on charter schools, Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2001) interviewed school leaders, policymakers, and teachers while observing schools and surveying parents to generate data on the charter school landscape. The authors also include discussions about the evolution of charter law and policy and political debates, although charter school opposition has greatly changed in the 16 years since the book’s publication. In the book’s concluding chapter “Will Charter Schools Save Public Education”, the
authors imagine a city, New Pensylina, completely chartered by the year 2007. For the authors, charter schools have the potential to fix public schooling in this country. Advocating for a completely chartered city is a top-down policy framework in contrast to individual charter schools working in parallel with traditional districts to address particular challenges or to experiment with original curriculum and pedagogy. Discourse on charter origins as a spontaneous grassroots and community driven phenomenon evolved and became a top-down mandate requiring districts to allow for charters to be created. This difference between the theoretical arguments for charters and the practical reality of their politics mimics the omission of research on teacher subjectivity and curriculum in charter schools early in their progression. In theory, teachers would have more autonomy and freedom to innovate in the classroom but in practice they became dependent on their charter’s guiding philosophy or mission.

**Teacher Subjectivity**

Central to my research on charter schools is the concept of teacher subjectivity, a topic overlooked in research to date, particularly using a poststructural lens, whereby identity is viewed as in-flux and dynamic. While this topic has been comprehensively studied (A. Y. Jackson, 2001; St. Pierre, 2004; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), it has not been addressed inside charter schools.

So, although teacher becoming, which is our central issue here, may appear to be something personal, it is really a matter of getting away from personalist conceptions toward a more tectonic and geographical distribution of forces and intensities through which one can be a producer of affective power. (Roy, 2003, p. 47)

Torres (2014; Torres & Oluwolf, 2015; Weiner & Torres, 2016) is one of the few researchers publishing multiple times on the topic of charter school teachers. Torres (2014)
interviewed charter school teachers at schools run with and without charter management organizations to study teacher autonomy, ultimately finding the topic to be complex. Teachers stated autonomy was important when deciding to join a newly formed school in a charter management organization but ultimately did not feel they had a voice in their school decision-making processes. Charter management organizations often have preordained philosophies and principles before opening additional schools, limiting the decision making of new teachers or leaders. This work built on Gawlik’s (2007) findings, whereby teachers did not necessarily have more autonomy at charter schools as a result of the strong reliance on the district. Gawlik advocates for a better balance between autonomy and accountability and to resist the assumptions that an increase in both is a simple solution. In other words, teachers choosing to work at a specific charter school do not necessarily have more autonomy than their traditional public school counterparts. To improve teacher retention in charters, Torres and Oluwolf (Torres & Oluwolf, 2015) advocate for state laws that balance charter school flexibility, teacher voice, and teacher protections. Similarly, Beabout (2015) found charter teachers to pursue collective bargaining for the following reasons: pay, job security, teacher voice, and compliance concerns.

Finally, Weiner and Torres (2016) directly studied teacher professional identities. The authors found charter school teachers held negative views of traditional public schools, particularly by viewing teaching positions as lacking prestige. Interviewed teachers viewed their charters as maintaining a desired “coherent and pervasive organizational structure” (p. 82) through mentorship and internal training programs. However, teachers developed concerns with the balancing between their professional and personal identities, had difficulty sharing critiques
amongst the seemingly homogenous workforce, and forced teachers to appear like they were not struggling, even when they were overwhelmed.

Research on charter school teachers has largely been neglected. When it has been conducted, a clear purpose or goal is present, such as decreasing teacher turnover (Torres, 2016). Furthermore, teacher identity is often approached using a singular or static definition, problematic in complex neoliberal times whereby teachers act and perform to meet conflicting expectations including corporate philanthropy (Brown, 2017), clearly linked to how “White male subjectivity has long stood as normative for ‘human’”(St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 54). Similarly, charter school “improvements” or linear progress in school reform is contrary to poststructural views of subjectivity.

It is that schools…must operate as becoming structures. The difference being that becoming does not involve going from point A to point B, as the term evolving might imply. Instead, becoming generates new and irregular spaces of proliferating connections that have important consequences for the harnessing of new forces. But it also means preparing teachers to enter those spaces in productive ways. (Roy, 2003, p. 64)

The Politics of Teacher Subjectivity

Charter schools are inherently political. Because charter laws follow conservative policies such as deregulation and privatization and are often anti-union, states with a higher percentage of GOP legislators were more likely to pass stronger charter school laws earlier than states with lower percentages of GOP legislators. Similarly, between 1995 and 1998, no state with a Democratic legislature and governor passed a charter school law (Hassel, 1999). As discourse shifted from the community level to the state and federal level, charter research also became more political. Jabbar (2016) analyzed how government regulations and policies
influence charter schools through their school leaders suggesting government intervention could improve certain aspects of the free-market education environment by ensuring equitable practices, concluding:

Too often the economics of education literature has focused exclusively on market mechanisms, thus downplaying the political dimensions that influence school leaders’ perceptions and responses to competition. This focus ignores important differences between local education markets and their different approaches to market design, incentives, and regulation. (p. 23)

What is important to note, beyond the possible government regulations, is the business terminology. Policy and political discourse neglects the tension between theory and practice, focusing on laws, policy groups, district and school leaders in studying implementation. However, for a holistic portrayal, research must include teacher voice and subjectivity to characterize charter school application. Furthermore, teacher subjectivity can provide context to a charter debate that has become deeply political.

During the first and second eras of charter school history, it was difficult to contextualize research because the charter phenomenon was brand-new. Researchers made projections based on their understanding of public education and their optimism or pessimism for education reforms. As discourse progressed, research began neglecting the history altogether, instead coming to a simplified notion summarized by Buckley and Schneider in the conclusion of Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?

Charter schools are now stubborn facts on the ground. While both criticism and compliments will no doubt accrue simultaneously and while the proponents and the opponents of charter schools will continue to pick and choose which criticisms and compliments they emphasize, perhaps the most reasonable position is a pragmatic middle ground emerging among those who are working among charter schools on a day-to-day basis. (2009, pp. 284-285)
History and context is diminished when this pragmatic conclusion is reached: charter schools exist and will continue to exist, therefore research on how they are run and how they can be improved is important. This creates endless possibilities for future research, but also neglects the inner turmoil and tensions inside the charter school debate.

Charter schools vary greatly today in a way they did not when they originated during their first era. Research on charter schools void of history or context while avoiding the political contentiousness of the topic can work to create a discourse of unity for all charter schools. This singular charter vision is in contrast to their exploratory origins. Charter schools are often viewed as a viable solution to failing public schools, putting power back in the hands of parents to choose the correct school. However, choices for parents vary greatly depending on region. A parent with only a choice of a for-profit online charter school in rural Florida or a traditional public school is different from a parent in a city deciding between charters offering unique curriculum opportunities. This norming can also work to silence the current debate over the efficacy and ethics of charter schools by beginning discussions at the premise that charters exist in the US and will continue to exist into the future, most likely expanding at a steady rate. By creating a more substantive discourse around teacher subjectivity, charter schools are explored more appropriately, with a newfound emphasis on their actual implementation.

Finally, charter school expansion exists in an era of accountability. In charter schools, teachers account for a smaller percentage of the overall budget (Arsen & Ni, 2012), although this is contested in part because teachers at charter schools often do not have long-term financial obligations such as pensions. This climate has the possibility to lead to a surplus of research on
the law and policy of charters, each with the hope to construct a piece (or whole) of the silver bullet solution to *fixing* failing public schools. As teachers leave charters to move on to other professions or roles in the field of education, an interest in charters may resume. Teach For America and similar programs actively recruit future leaders and policy makers (Schneider, 2014a) who, after working in charter schools, may have a higher likelihood of studying the phenomenon from a policy perspective. The sheer quantity of policy analysis may move power away from other themes of charter school research. Furthermore, the language of policy analysis can help to bolster a wider audience, using apolitical terminology in an attempt to answer the fundamental question: are charter schools working? This question is reductionist and language appearing apolitical is often quite the opposite. This furthers the need for nuanced discourse from inside of charters.

**A Discourse of Resistance**

For the purpose of this section, I use a broad definition of critical theory to encapsulate the growing body of research aimed at questioning and critiquing the phenomenon of charter schools. This literature has roots in research critiquing neoliberal policy reforms of the 1980s and 1990s but has recently been applied to privatization efforts in education. At the core of these critiques is a theme of interdependence. For critical researchers, charter schools are not an independent, ahistorical, apolitical idea of how to improve education for struggling students. Instead, issues of poverty, race, class, gender, urban space, history, and politics are intertwined, creating the highly complex and controversial phenomenon.
Austerity and libertarian principles of small government are vital to neoliberal ideology. Austerity measures are implemented after politicians promise tax cuts, leading to diminished or failing government systems. This failure then allows policymakers to collect evidence on the inadequacies of government, with market competition and entrepreneurship presented as the most reasonable solution. Of course, this evidence greatly neglects the positive influence egalitarian philosophy in general and collaboration in particular can have on education systems (Fabricant & Fine, 2012b). Furthermore, successful democratic models for education are often overlooked or dismissed (Apple, 2004). Austerity politics began infiltrating education in the 1980s and are found in many charter schools and chains (Saltman, 2014). Critical work addresses the corporatization of public schooling by naming the business interests and actors involved (Schneider, 2014a) while historicizing the effects of neoliberalism across sectors of public life (Klein, 2007).

A common critique for charter opponents focuses on the characteristics of charter school staff. Buras (2011) utilizes Harvey’s (2004) theory of accumulation by dispossession to detail how local New Orleans public schools were taken over by mostly White non-locals. Opponents (Ravitch, 2011, 2013; Schneider, 2014a, 2014b) are also critical of the makeup of policymakers promoting charter schools as a way to fix broken public schooling, who often lack degrees in the field of education, and are White, male, and wealthy. These elites use their wealth to then withhold policy-making decisions from the remaining populace, resulting in an oligarchy. It is often difficult to identify the relationships and partnerships between elites, or “flexians” (Wedel,
2009), moving between the public and private sphere with ease (Ball, 2008), making business transactions in the name of “reform” (Spring, 2012).

More generally, critical work often problematizes neoliberal ideology prioritizing market transactions and personal liberties by noting how neoliberalism overlooks complex historical issues, including race and gender. Critical theorists argue this neglect is not coincidental. Groups in power have a vested interested in seeing the world incorrectly, preventing disruptions to the social order (Mills, 1997). Of course, it is not simply a matter of not seeing or ignoring race, as if this were possible.

If the central justification for choice in the late civil rights era was to create voluntary desegregation and equalize education through innovation, the choice programs that have come to the fore in a more conservative era have often been hailed not as a means to an end but as solutions to failing urban schools without any reference to segregation or systemic barriers to choice. (Orfield, 2013a, p. 17)

In this way, neoliberalism is ahistorical, discounting prior events through a reductionist approach. For neoliberals, the American dream is attainable to those who work hard, value education, and play by the rules; context need not apply

School choice appeals to those cynical of government control and intervention because, they argue, it gives local actors the ability to make decisions for their own families and communities. Some portion of charter supporters disregard evidence on their effectiveness because they entirely support the theoretical foundation of free market ideology and its promise to bring competition and innovation to public schooling. “Wealthy business leaders who insist on data rather than theories in their own businesses pour money into charter schools based on a simple faith that markets relying on individual choice have transformative power” (Orfield,
This was especially true in the early years of charter expansion when little research was available. Critical work is skeptical of such claims and explains the negative results of their implementation. Often, this is accomplished through rich personal accounts. These stories of families, students, and teachers in and near charter schools combat lofty aspirational language. For example, Hill put forth an idea for expanding charter schools relying almost entirely on ideology. \(^{12}\)

Schools would be forced to attend to student needs and parent preferences, rather than to the requirements of a centralized bureaucracy. Funding would be explicitly based on attendance, not on opaque staff allocations. Teachers and principals would have a strong incentive to collaborate, to press one another for good performance, to weed out weak staff members, and to work as hard as necessary to build their school’s clientele. Teacher pay and job security would depend on contribution to the school’s performance, not on longevity or accumulation of degrees. (1994, p. 76)

Hill was building on Chubb and Moe’s (1990) argument for school choice. More recently, charter advocates have argued traditional public school students will benefit from charters through competition and the diffusion of innovating learning strategies. However, this logic has not been substantiated in research to this point (Ni & Arsen, 2010). To oppose such theories, critical work researches their implementation from the ground-up. Sondel (2016) describes the constant surveillance and deficit language in no-excuses charter schools. Buras documents the local disruptions to democratic practices, including illegal firings of veteran teachers (2016). These more personal accounts describe difficulties implementing theoretical ideas about education reform.

\(^{12}\) The eleven page work, published in *Privatizing Education and Educational Choice: Concepts, Plans, and Experiences*, used five references.
Critical work on charter schools has helped question assumptions made by both researchers and policymakers in the field. An example is the problematizing of “choice.” In education, school choice allows the most involved and active parents to seek out the most promising schools and subsequently influence how those schools are run. For example, parents of high achieving students have argued for tracking policies to remain in place to ensure their children remain in honors level courses, even though research supports dismantling of such policies (Convertino, 2015). Further examples include questioning the tangible differences between charter schools and traditional public schools. For Opfer (2001), this is a result of the influence accountability measures at the state level have on charter schools, a similar relationship with traditional public schools. For Lubienksi (2003), charters should not be assumed to be more innovative than traditional public schools due to a lack of substantive evidence showing correlation between autonomy and innovative practices, even if market theory posits otherwise.

Critics of neoliberal ideology argue market-based reforms exist and promote accountability and the quantification of education but often seem immune to research and critique. In this way, neoliberalism is a religion, upholding principle beyond evidence. It has been fifteen years since Hadden (2000) warned of a school environment where teachers are merely “disciples of received wisdom” that “reinforce existing power relations” (p. 243-244). When an entire staff is comprised of alternatively-certified teachers, whose wisdom are the teachers imitating? How creative and active will they be in their approach? The conservative, repetitive environment Hadden critiques can become the norm in urban charter schools, avoiding exploration or other integral parts of learning that are omitted from schools’ performance scores.
The once promising charter school is now goal-oriented, either on a specific school grade, a specific performance score, or “meets expectations.” Charter schools do not innovate any more than public schools (Preston et al., 2012). To disrupt this evolution, schools must move away from staffing young, inexperienced teachers (Carruthers, 2012) that lack the foundational tools to be creative. Teachers must be developed and retained (Miron & Applegate, 2007). Furthermore, schools must reject a simplistic view of “successful” schooling and constantly disrupt their own trends and structures (Biesta, 2014). Neglecting these concerns and continuing top-down market-based education reforms may lead to further teacher resistance to neoliberal ideology (Convertino, 2015; Horn, 2014).

Limitations in Critical Work

Three pertinent limitations to critical work on charter schools should be noted. First, it is often assumed charter opponents are supporters of the status quo and defenders of public schools that, by many measures, were and are failing students. However, this is often not the case, and charter opponents also critique traditional public schooling. Second, critiques can lack a pragmatic solution or clear implementation of an alternative to charter schools, assuming the status quo is not preferred. Finally, critical work often attacks meta-theory, such as neoliberal ideology. However, charter schools can form and are run in a variety of ways. King Elementary in the Lower 9th Ward was started out of absolute necessity after the storm, when local students did not have an alternative school to attend. The teaching staff was mostly local veteran Black teachers, compared to the “transient white recruits from outside the city with no teaching experience whatsoever” (Buras, 2014, p. 85). Therefore, critiques may need to list exceptions to
their general opposition to charter schools, whereby locally run charters with veteran teachers serving students struggling in the traditional system can gain additional supports. However, generally speaking, critical work is positioned to introduce necessary nuance to the debate by studying additional or unique sources of data. For example, parent voice (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Villavicencio, 2013) has largely been neglected in charter school research, but critical work attempts to include a more holistic understanding of how charters influence communities and not merely attending students.

**Charter School Discourse in Practice**

Thus far, most research indicates that charter schools have not produced many of the substantial benefits in innovation and competitive effects predicted by advocates. The evidence on competitive effects is mixed and when positive effects are found, they tend to be quite small. In student achievement, charter schools on average are performing no better than traditional public schools. Innovation research has found that many charter schools are implementing new ideas in management and marketing, but the schools tend to be very traditional and conservative in curriculum and instruction. Nonetheless, much of the political rhetoric around charter schools continues to emphasize their role as innovators, competitive catalysts, and exemplars of high performance. (Weitzel & Lubienski, 2010, pp. 30-31)

Charter school research has exploded over the last two decades. It could be argued it has exceeded the real impact of charters, currently serving only about 5-6 percent of students in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). However, this could be disputed by citing the neglect urban impoverished education has suffered in the 20th century, requiring additional attention and resources in this century. In many ways, research on charter schools has improved during this time (Betts & Hill, 2010). For this chapter, I largely omitted quantitative assessments of charters because, to this point, findings are mixed over the effectiveness of charter schools in raising student achievement (Wohlstetter et al., 2013).
Where is power circulating in charter school research? For Lather (2010), our current dubious relationship between academia and the political sphere has resulted in policy informing research when the opposite should be true. Charter schools are expanding quickly and therefore research on the topic will grow to satisfy policy makers. How are these discourses being used or neglected when considering charter schools? It is easy to assume policy work is the most pertinent because it has the opportunity to affect change on a larger scale, from the top-down. However, charter schools were originally popular because they claimed to give local parents and communities more power from the ground-up, a grassroots movement void of top-down government intervention. Research mimicking this promise may be more appropriate, although it comes with obvious limitations, such as feasibility and generalizability.

Further complicating the wide range and substantial literature on charter schools are the variables related to the phenomenon. Charter school research is often situated in literature on the privatization and corporatization of public education and school choice but often relates to a variety of other topics. These fields have been deeply explored independently and some, but not all, have been discussed in relation to charter schools.

Future research should work to complicate integral aspects of charter school research and resist the over-simplification of ahistorical research, as if such a thing existed. This does not mean that only critical work on charter schools is necessary. Nor should we assume charters are

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13 These include public-private spheres, teacher certification and the rise of alternative certification programs like Teach For America, neo-conservative education movements such as nationalizing standards and tests, teacher unions, federal policy such as No Child Left Behind, state and federal standards such as Common Core, school segregation and race relations, the rising cost of higher education and the worth of college degrees, general urban or rural issues such as poverty and white flight, school leadership training, and many more.
a pragmatic solution devoid of political affiliations. To this point, literature on the history of charter school expansion is greatly lacking even though it may appear to be expanding at an adequate rate. One approach is to emphasize teacher voice in order to better understand how charter schools function and influence teacher subjectivity. By emphasizing the tensions between teacher identity and power structures in charters, the phenomenon is represented as a dynamic system.
CHAPTER 4. A CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHER ETHNOGRAPHY

A review of charter school literature illustrates the need for holistic analyses of charters predominantly focused on teachers. Research on charters has mimicked historical trends in educational research, favoring positivist approaches aimed at determining “effectiveness” in schooling and schools. This is further complicated when considering the shift from the vision of charters as local and grassroots institutions of exploration and innovation to large scale federally promoted institutions often quickly replicated using a singular model. Therefore, it is not merely that the majority of previous research has been positivist in nature, it is also that local and comprehensive research projects are necessary in order to see if the original idea of autonomy and innovation has been achieved.

I consider this project a school ethnography (Spindler, 1982) built on the foundation of teacher narratives (Reissman, 2008). Charter schools are a complex political phenomenon, reaching from the teacher and classroom outside to the local community and all the way to the state house and Washington, DC. As such, I question the ability of researchers to isolate variables from their surrounding context. Furthermore, charters are a relatively recent phenomenon, expanding quickly since the early 2000s but still uncommon in many geographic locations as well as uncommon in general discourse on education. Therefore, a more thorough representation, including state policy, is necessary. Many states, including Pennsylvania, have seen considerable growth in the charter sector across the state, while the vast majority of the school-based research predominantly occurs in the largest urban city of each state, such as Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. In sum, the
independence and autonomy of charters may result in a range of impacts on communities, and research in the largest few urban cities may not be representative of all urban regions of the country.

This research investigated the relationship between teacher subjectivity, pedagogy and school curriculum at a “successful” urban charter school in Pennsylvania. I studied the classrooms of two teachers and their relationship to school structures, specifically how their idea of a “successful” curriculum fit at that school. I conducted a yearlong ethnography at the school, observing and interviewing both teachers, while also interviewing the school founder and conducting document analysis on school, classroom, and statewide artifacts.

This chapter will outline the method I used at the Pennsylvania High Charter School. First, I will briefly explain my justification for the use of qualitative research, including the history of resisting positivist methods and the relationship of ethnography to post-inquiry, a central tenant of my theoretical framework. Next, I discuss recent trends in ethnography that have indirectly influenced my method, namely the use of critical ethnography and network ethnography in studies of neoliberal education reforms. Finally, I address structural components of my approach, namely style, voice, and immersion.

**Context, Justification, and Post-Inquiry**

Ethnography in education (Wilcox, 1982) works against the dominating mode of inquiry in the field: logical positivism and empiricism (LPE). Popular since its inception at the turn of the end of the 19th century, LPE maintains science should play an integral role in reshaping society. Furthermore, LPE is based on quantitative methods, specifically mathematics and logic.
LPE was founded in the hard sciences but infiltrated the social sciences, including education, because the field was lacking a defining and unifying theoretical framework. Because LPE was well respected, educationists gained credibility through its application. Instead of developing unique methods (or lack thereof), fields such as education relied on the method of the more credible sciences. The political nature of education meant that LPE and the attempted quantification of learning had serious effects on society at large (Gould, 1996), as well as on higher education (Lagemann, 2002). Philosophical critiques of LPE amassed throughout the second half of the 20th century (and continue) in education, but LPE remains the dominant paradigm across social science.

Throughout the 20th century, critiques of quantitative research methods in education slowly amassed. For Guba and Lincoln (1994), these critiques are either internal or external. Internal critiques of quantification include context stripping, the exclusion of meaning or purpose, disconnect between macro theory and micro context, the inapplicability of general data to individual cases, and the exclusion of creative and unconventional methods. Such critiques support qualitative methods in the field. External critiques are more complex in that they argue for a new paradigm of education research. For a paradigm shift to occur, revolutionary science must drastically alter the landscape, in contrast to incremental change in research methods (Kuhn, 1970). This critique arises out of the relationship between theories and facts. For positivists, observations are made objectively. Postmodernists assert facts are always partial, socially constructed, and viewed through a theoretical lens; there is no one representative truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).
According to Schram (2003), qualitative inquiry is guided by five principles: direct personal experience in real-world settings, an interactive and intersubjective nature, a sensitivity to context, an attentiveness to particulars, and an interpretive nature. I have come to rely on qualitative inquiry for two general reasons. Historically, education research has overemphasized what can and should be quantified, the effects of which cannot be overstated. Education was not yet considered a distinct field of research and therefore needed to develop at the turn of the 20th century. The fields of psychology and philosophy influenced this development, although psychology was also in its infant stages. To gain recognition, social scientists adopted methodologies from the hard science methods, aimed at quantifying best practices and policies. This led to an increase in school surveying and testing. Dewey and others, opposing the quantification of education research, were ultimately pushed to the margins of the field for their resistance as higher education institutes worked to expand and produce quickly by adapting a simplified research method consisting of a list of steps (Lagemann, 2002). More consequential was the quantifying of brain capacity and intelligence, leading to the scientism of explicit social hierarchies: White male dominance (Gould, 1996). Second, more recently and personally, I have worked in a charter school driven by an obsession with data, a result of the accountability movement begun in 2001 with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). By focusing so heavily on data, students and teachers were restricted in their creativity, exploration, and becoming, integral components to the origination of charter schools (Shanker, 1988). While I acknowledge the importance of quantitative research, I have chosen qualitative research methods to attempt to resist these historical trends, particularly the fundamental assumption that education and learning
can be easily assessed, described, and used to evaluate “good” and “bad” teaching and student “success.”

**Post-Inquiry**

Defending qualitative research and postmodernism against the onslaught of positivist empiricism is no longer necessary. Instead, researchers intertwine theory and method to shift from common epistemological (knowledge) questions to less common ontological (being) questions. Youngblood-Jackson and Mazzeei’s plugging in (2012) intertwines theory, data, and method, exposing intra-actions and disrupting traditional binaries. In this way, my method and theory are deeply intertwined, both building on the central tenant: traditional representations of truth are flawed.

Plugging in relies on three criterions. First, to disrupt the theory/practice binary, consider how the two construct and build upon one another, as opposed to viewing a phenomenon through a particular lens. Second, consider the possibility that research questions may arise throughout the process, not merely at the beginning. This greatly alters how we construct our projects because we do not have a singular original question shaping our trajectory. Finally, work and rework our data. This point is foundational to poststructuralism in that processes such as deconstruction require the consideration of problematic binaries, what is unsaid, the impossible. Deemphasizing linear methods (observe, question, collect data, make conclusions, communicate) is crucial to post-inquiry.

Ultimately, the ontological turn, or post-qualitative inquiry, or post-inquiry, is not asserting we move away from qualitative methods. Instead, the work is based on understanding
that qualitative methods were developed and exist under the auspices of positivist empiricism and are therefore “incommensurable” (St. Pierre, 2014) with critical and poststructural theory. Ethnography is represented through language and writing and therefore must omit someone or something. “For poststructuralists, representation is always in crisis, knowledge is constitutive of power, and agency is the constitutive effect, and not the originator, of situated practices and histories” (Britzman, 1995, p. 231). This also leads to a troubling of traditional linear depictions of history, instead preferring genealogies often appearing disjointed, such as Lather’s (2010) work on education policy.

Lather argues for research-as-praxis, a more “collaborative approach to critical inquiry” (Lather, 1986). Praxis is the “self-creative activity through which we make the world” (Lather, 2003). Research in the social sciences must proceed in many different directions as opposed to attempting to create one perfect method that can be duplicated in many fields. By emphasizing pluralism in research methods, the grand narratives common in literature are less likely (Maynard, 1993). However, researchers should not actively avoid experimentation and failure. This also requires the reader to “construct more complicated reading practices that move them beyond the myth of literal representations and the deceptive promise that ‘the real’ is transparent, stable, and just like the representational” (Britzman, 1995, p. 237). The ethnographer develops narratives founded on what is possible (and impossible) and not on simply representing past experiences (Johnston, 2004). In this way, my method is not a list of steps to be duplicated, nor is it a simplified protocol put forth by prominent scholars in the field. Instead, it is a weaving of my own past experiences (data), theory, and interpretation of best practices in ethnography (method).
Recent Trends: Critical and Network Ethnography

I do not claim to use critical ethnography nor network ethnography. However, both were vital to my understanding of how ethnography might be employed in schools. Furthermore, critical ethnography is almost exclusively used in the relatively scarce literature on urban charter schools. Therefore, because it is central to my literature review, has influenced my interpretation of method, and will continue to be prominent in future works on charter schools, I will briefly address it here. Additionally, I assert network ethnography is an ideal approach to studying charter schools in future research. However, due to practical concerns, namely access to participants and time constraints, I was unable to employ it in this project. Therefore, I will briefly describe why I argue for future research to apply this method.

Critical Ethnography

While I do not explicitly apply critical ethnography, it is relied upon by many of the researchers studying urban education (Ferguson, 2001; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Sondel, 2016). As such, I have adapted certain aspects of these critical works to my method, if only by proximity. Carspecken (2002) puts forth the following steps for critical ethnographers:

First, reconstruct the culture of a group one is interested in, allowing members plenty of input into the analysis itself. Look for deep structures in this culture: core views, values, beliefs, and the structural relations between them that are implicated by routine activities and interactions. Show how these deep structures are employed in the continuous construction of identities. Second, examine the resulting cultural reconstructions for their relationship to institutional orders and self-maintaining, self-adapting systems. (p. 62)

This method has spread across the education field, detailing inequality based on social status and spreading to race (Hopson & Dixson, 2016), gender, students with disabilities, and other power dynamics. I do not use critical ethnography for two reasons. First and foremost, gaining access to
a charter school can be more difficult for critical scholars, as Sondel observed (2016). Second, I question how my poststructural theoretical framework fits with critical method. Specifically, poststructural theory problematizes oppressor-oppressed binaries often central to critical work. So while I do not use critical ethnography, it should be noted that it currently dominates much of the qualitative work surrounding urban charter schools.

**Network Ethnography**

Place and time are crucial aspects to ethnographic research in schools. The physical location and structure of the building, the surrounding community, classroom size, technology, nearby universities, local businesses and government all play a part in situating the school in the context of society. Typically, research questions determine where the researchers will spend the majority of their time in the schools. For example, research questions related to teaching will lead to time inside classrooms and questions on school leadership will lead to following principals or vice-principals to offices or board meetings. The field site is constructed by the researcher and is nonexistent before the outsider enters the environment. Historically, this has meant a student of anthropology entering an isolated village, working to gain access and move from an outsider to an insider to study the local indigenous people. Education researchers may work alongside teachers as participant observers, work to gain access to the parents of students, or students themselves, such as through after school tutoring.

It is vital to consider how a 21st century global society impacts the framework for fieldwork. Students learn online with people across the globe, study abroad, and socialize through video games. The notion that a person is born, raised, and settles in a local finite area is
less common today. Ethnography can address this by situating people and locations in the context of a world-view system, such as Neo-Marxism. However, these world system perspectives also require researchers to follow their participants and ideas through space and time. For researchers to study race and gender in an urban impoverished school, Ferguson (2001) studied Black male middle school students in classrooms, detention rooms, after school, and at home, interviewing a range of both students and adults. Just as culture does not exist merely in the remote village, charter schools do not exist in a remote area, unaffected by surroundings. This is difficult, as the fundamental nature of ethnography, paying attention to everyday actions and interactions, partially resists the expansion to new and wider areas. Researchers in multi-site ethnographies may change positionality based on their role and environment, “renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system (Marcus, 1995, p. 113). This awareness is likely difficult to explain before beginning fieldwork and must be developed throughout the project. Ultimately, viewing a field site as a network may better represent culture in today’s global society (Burrell, 2009). This can present challenges, including access, researcher positionality, or scope, and requires the researcher to make necessary decisions about which spaces to include and exclude. For example, when studying market-based education reform, the breadth and depth of field sites is unclear. Therefore, while the boundaries may often appear arbitrary, frequently they are representative of challenges in studying global-local relationships and the incompleteness of qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular (Cook, Laidlaw, & Mair, 2009).
Structural Components

Evocation—that is to say, “ethnography”—is the discourse of the post-modern world, for
the world that made science, and that science made, has disappeared, and scientific
thought is now an archaic mode of consciousness surviving for a while yet in degraded
form without the ethnographic context that created and sustained it. Scientific thought
succumbed because it violated the first law of culture, which says that ‘the more man
controls anything, the more uncontrollable both become.’ (Tyler, 1986, p. 123)

The “no excuses” culture common in many public charter schools is central to my
research problem (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). I employ ethnography, the “written representation of a
culture” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 1), to study teacher culture inside an urban charter school.
Ethnography was created in anthropology, the study of humans and their societies throughout
history, in the second half of the 19th century. Two characteristics are fundamental to
ethnographic research. First, ethnographies are founded on writing and text. The researcher,
through extensive fieldnotes, attempts to transcribe his or her experiences and observations.
Therefore, the researcher is an author and must consider style. Second, ethnographies are
innately partial. No clear and universal truth underlies any type of ethnography, nor does the
researcher attempt to find such a truth. Ethnographic truths, like the final product, are
incomplete, as no amount of writing can capture an entire person, place, culture, or society
(Clifford, 1986). This places great responsibility on the researcher to know how long to stay in
the field, what fieldnotes to disregard, which participants’ voices to highlight, and when it is time
to leave the research site. “Culture is not strictly speaking a scientific object, but is created, as is
the reader’s view of it, by the active construction of text” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 7). This is an
arduous task, and the limits of both narrative and the partiality of ethnography are important to
maintain. These central tenants are shared with poststructuralism, a never ending process void of universal truths and concerned with the processes underlying power dynamics.

**Variety and Immersion**

Ethnographic writing can take a variety of forms. Authors must consider how best to present their research. Wolf (1992) provides commentaries through *A Thrice Told Tale* to highlight the researcher’s internal struggles with method. Ferguson (2001) includes long excerpts of fieldnotes and entire interviews with participants to allow the reader to independently analyze data and draw conclusions. Pope (2003) simplifies the traditionally verbose language of higher education for a mainstream audience, relying on high school students for the majority of her data. These stylistic decisions most likely were developed throughout the fieldwork and writing process and demonstrate that ethnographic method is fluid and is continuously altered.

Ethnographers attempt to capture and convey society through fieldwork. Ethnography is unique in the heightened immersion of the researcher in the field. Often, the researchers live alongside their participants for long periods of time, until the everyday mundane or “normal” are illuminated. “In this way, immersion gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others’ lives and enhances his sensitivity to interaction and process” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 2). Researchers often use thick description, a term attributed to Geertz and apparent in his essay entitled *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973), to explain structures and provide interpretations which result in meaning. This opposes a thin description whereby the researcher merely relays observed facts. Geertz summarizes “whatever the level at which one operates, and
however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations” (Geertz, 1973, p. 453).

**Voice**

Over time, the balancing of subjectivity and objectivity has shifted in ethnographic works, particularly concerning researcher voice. Often, traditional ethnographies hid authorial voice in an attempt to enhance objectivity and portray the world the way that it is as opposed to the way one interprets it. This challenge is summarized by Geertz (1988):

> The question of signature, the establishment of an authorial presence within a text, has haunted ethnography from very early on, though for the most part it has done so in a disguised form. Disguised, because it has been generally cast not as a narratological issue, a matter of how best to get an honest story honestly told, but as an epistemological one, a matter of how to prevent subjective views from coloring objective facts. The clash between the expository conventions of author-saturated texts and those of author-evacuated ones that grows out of the particular nature of the ethnographic enterprise is imagined to be a clash between seeing things as one would have them and seeing them as they really are. (p. 9)

More modern ethnographies (Rambo, 2005) enhanced researcher voice, highlighting both prior experience and positionality. By the 1960s, researchers began disrupting the balance altogether through reflexivity and questioning objectivity and its representations in text (Clifford, 1986). This questioning of representation is common in poststructural thinking, discussed in Chapter 2.

Structurally, I rely on Van Maanen’s (2011) three types of ethnographic writing: realist tales, confessional tales, and impressionist tales. Realist tales are the most common, typically written in the third person in a way that almost completely hides the author. The details observed are common, daily, and often mundane. For a classroom, this may be the collecting of folders at the end of class or the hushed side conversations between students as they settle into their seats.
The perspective of the teacher is central to realist tales and can be in part illustrated through quotations. Confessional tales are important to my research because they include “stories of infiltration, fables of fieldwork rapport, minimelodramas of hardships endured (and overcome), and accounts of what fieldwork did to the fieldworker” (p. 73). I once “belonged” to the cultural group I am studying, urban charter school teachers, and developed relationships with both my former colleagues in New Orleans and the teachers of PHCS. In this way, my voice was central to the research. Impressionist tales use “dramatic recall” so that the audience can “relive the tale with the fieldworker, not interpret or analyze it” (p. 103). In this way, ethnography becomes poetic, prioritizing the voice of participants, thus creating interest. All three types of ethnography are used in this study and are present in the coming chapters.

Finally, participant voice is emphasized in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. Presenting elongated direct narration from each teacher and the school founder is purposeful. I model these chapters after Lather’s approach working with women with HIV/AIDS (Lather & Smithies, 1997). “Positioning myself as a translator bearing witness, then, the women’s words become the motor of the inquiry” (Lather, 1995, p. 49). In other words, the teachers were not merely sources of information necessary in addressing my research questions. Instead, I witnessed their being in the classroom, their understanding of the school’s structure and functioning, and eliciting what they do and do not know independent from traditional representations of truth.

Writing Style

As a researcher with experience in the field I am studying, personal narrative will take place throughout the research process and final product. For Pratt, personal narrative does not
only occur as an introduction and conclusion to the research. Instead, it illustrates the feelings of rejection during research and loss upon conclusion. Furthermore, personal narrative “mediates a contradiction within the discipline between personal and scientific authority, a contradiction that has become acute since the advent of fieldwork as a methodological norm” (M. L. Pratt, 1986, p. 32). This contradiction is furthered by Tyler, who prefers “evoking” over “representing”, the latter of which is a result of the “urge to conform to the canons of scientific rhetoric” (Tyler, 1986, p. 130). In other words, ethnography should embrace fragmentation and disorganization because the world and our field sites are not easily described and categorized spaces. Culture is not a tangible product easily explained by the author; readership is diverse. As such, the researcher implements diverse writing styles, breaching the divide between author and reader. Ultimately, the ethnographer must convince their reader, which is especially difficult with a political topic like charter schools. Ethnographers must walk a delicate line between only telling a partial truth to better persuade their audience and becoming unconvincing or even dull (Crpanzano, 1986).

**Doubt**

Hendry (2009) puts forth doubt as a fundamental component of narrative work. I assert doubt is integral to both my theory (poststructuralism) and method (ethnography). In poststructuralism, rejection of grand narratives and the continued problematizing of complex processes result in feelings of doubt. In ethnography, the research process does not have a safe end point or boundaries. Furthermore, the researcher is interpreting the culture of others, resulting in doubts regarding both interpretation and presentation of such complex subject
matter. When should I stop researching? What should I include and exclude? Doubt is not only applied towards concepts I am skeptical of, such as charters, but to my methods, my theory, and myself. “The heart of narrative inquiry is the raising of questions, of doubt. Because there will always be change or, in other words, because the world is not static, research requires ongoing questions” (Hendry, 2009, p. 78). This seems appropriate, as I continue to doubt not only what I was doing in the classroom, but how I make sense of the experience, what those years meant, and how they will shape our trajectory and the trajectory of the students we attempted to teach.

Ethics

Ethnographers enter fieldwork from a position of privilege. They attempt to learn about and from local people by invading their world for a temporary time period, ultimately deciding what is and is not noteworthy about the local people through their writing. These issues are multiplied in schools because young impressionable people are present. I separate my ethical concerns into three interrelated groups: concerns for participants, principles, and access. While formal checks can provide oversight, including Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix B), research introspection is equally necessary.

Participants

Locals in a school can include students, teachers, parents, administrators, non-teaching staff, and community members. Due to the focus of this research, my primary concern was for my teacher participants. While students were present, our interactions were mostly general conversations about the daily assignments. Observing teachers and classrooms is sensitive for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, a person’s livelihood, career, and passion are evaluated
when a researcher observes and describes the observations. The research can work towards an even power structure with the teacher but ultimately one person is being observed and one person is doing the “noticing.” I provided a research proposal to each participant, created opportunities to ask questions, and provided transcripts of interviews to review and alter if needed. Furthermore, I highlighted my initial findings throughout the process in an attempt to collaborate and work through my areas of interest alongside the participants. These strategies were often informal, such as emails or conversations between classes. Researchers must present themselves to teachers authentically and maintain the role both parties have agreed upon while building rapport (Schram, 2003).

**Principles of Research**

Confidentiality and anonymity are fundamental aspects of qualitative research. Anonymity requires the researcher to ensure the participants’ identities are not known. Confidentiality requires the researcher to ensure they talk to their participants about what can and cannot be done with the information collected and keeping sensitive information in a safe and secure location (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). Understanding these concepts benefits all parties involved, including the children, parents, teachers, and school as a whole. Research can potentially cause harm if information can be tied back to an individual or school. Observing, conversing, and recording personal details about a participant should be considered sensitive exercises (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). To make the data confidential and anonymous, I followed the following protocols: using letters or symbols when transcribing data, changing identifying characteristics, keeping files secure at all times, and destroying records after the
research is concluded (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). In the field of education reform policy, participant anonymity is not a universal ideal shared by all researchers. For example, Schneider’s (2014a) research exposes educational injustices by researching the identities and backgrounds of those in charge of education policy making, as does Spring (2012) for private-public partnerships, and Buras (2014) in urban education reform. The difference in these policy-oriented projects is the distance between the researcher and the participants of the writing. For my research, I used anonymity because I worked alongside teachers on a more personal level. Therefore, I identified the state where the school resides (Pennsylvania), the type of school (charter) and environment (urban). Identifying the state was important because of the wealth of information collected through state specific charter law and the historical context unique to the state. By not identifying the particular city, the school is more likely to stay anonymous because it does not narrow the more than 150 charter schools in the state to one location.

When considering possible ethical ambiguities, it may be beneficial to discuss necessary virtues for researchers. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) put forth three virtues qualitative researchers should cultivate: dedication, objectivity, and independence. Dedication is generic, applying to many professions and including criteria such as prohibiting personal lives to limit potential or pursuing research for monetary purposes. Dedication required consistent concern for my participants and my influence on the classrooms I observed. Objectivity is the limiting of outside influence. Members of PHCS view the school as highly successful. This led to a surplus of data explicating what is working well at the school, or possibilities for improvement, and a deficit of challenges, or limitations. Objectivity requires the researcher to remain neutral even if
all participants have a similar conclusion that PHCS is a “really, really great school.” No researcher is fully objective but that does not mean we should not strive to remain as neutral as possible. I did not work to disprove what I observed, I allowed for the possibility of alternative interpretations or disruptions of the common “good” or “bad” school processes. Independence is unique to research. Researchers must have the independence to move beyond merely approaching truth, or reaching the level of truth others deem appropriate. The research must fully attempt to surpass the “threshold of acceptance by fellow members” (p. 44), a minimum in peer-reviewed academia. Therefore, the goal of my research is not to meet the requirements of my dissertation committee, but to conduct a quality ethnographic study. Virtues are more flexible than principles of ethical research and able to apply to a wider range of methods and situations.

Access

Gaining access to a charter school to complete teacher observations can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Recently, numerous outlets have scrutinized charter schools. First, mainstream media has begun to document cases of fraud and school closings across the country, often reported by local news at the state level. However, more recent reporting at the national level has been cumulative and more impactful. Second, organizations such as the NAACP have made public renunciations towards the charter sector, garnering more public attention to the issue (Zernike, 2016). Finally, public protests in major cities, often led by teachers, community members, and organizations promoting traditional public schooling have become more common (Nunez et al., 2015). National discourse on charter schools was often favorable in the first decade
of the 21st century but more recent critiques may cause charter schools to shy from allowing outsiders into their buildings.

As independent entities, charter schools may lack experience with outside researchers. In comparison, public school systems, especially larger chains in cities, often have a regimented process for applying to conduct research within the district. None of the schools I contacted had formal processes for applying to conduct research on-site, whereas the local public school district had a web-site with required documentation needed for research.

As previously mentioned, gaining access to charter schools to conduct research has been referred to as a “complicated process” (Sondel, 2016). As such, I did not limit the number of possible research sites. In late August 2016, I sent out emails to every charter high school in the local urban area with an invitation to participate in my research (Appendix C). On August 30, 2016, the school leader of PHCS contacted me after reading my initial email.

Dr. Ryan called this afternoon and asked for a brief project overview so that he can determine if the research is a good fit. He stated he would review the proposal with his leadership team. Furthermore, he mentioned that [PHCS] prioritizes collaboration with researchers. (Fieldnotes, August 30, 2016)

Indeed, of the charter schools I attempted to contact, PHCS had by far the most extensive catalogue of research openly available on its’ website. I prepared a two-page document with the project’s purpose, background, protocol, and issues of transparency (Appendix D). I also included the teacher consent form (Appendix E) and administrator consent form (Appendix F) in my reply to Dr. Ryan. In an email chain with Dr. Ryan and an outside curriculum consultant based in California, we negotiated the time requirements my research would impose on teachers.

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14 The number of schools I contacted is redacted to keep the location anonymous.
Because other schools had not been receptive to my research, I was very concerned about asking for too much access or time with teachers. I was also not particular in the type of teacher who volunteered. In late September, Dr. Ryan sent out an email to the school asking for volunteers to participate. One teacher replied directly, stating their interest and we subsequently met in person to discuss the project on.

I used convenience sampling in my identification of a research site (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). Only a limited number of charter schools were within a practical distance and urban. The process of identifying a gatekeeper was streamlined in comparison to working with a public school district because the review process was the responsibility of the school leader, not an application to the district. This most likely helped in gaining access to PHCS, but it may have prohibited me from gaining access to additional schools if they did not have a procedure in place for working with external researchers. I was able to take advantage of PHCS’ history of working with researchers.

Established researcher norms were utilized throughout the access negotiation process. I emphasized my research institution, my availability, the flexibility of my research interests, and was transparent about my purpose and goals (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2004). As a former charter school teacher, I expected the school gatekeepers to be protective of their teachers’ time and energy. Therefore, I assumed school leadership would most likely not volunteer their teachers for lengthy projects requiring extensive individualized attention outside the classroom such as long weekly interviews.
Out of the 65 teachers on staff, one teacher replied to Dr. Ryan’s email describing my project and asking for volunteers. When I met with Barbara the following week after school, she devised a plan to recruit additional participants and subsequently put me in contact with Maria. Two weeks later, Barbara emailed me, explaining she would be interested in participating in the study. After exchanging information and the purpose of my study, Maria, Barbara, and I negotiated a weekly observation schedule including where I should sit in the classroom, how I could record fieldnotes, and school security procedures.

Data

Fieldnotes, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis traditionally form the core of data collection for ethnographic studies. These sources were used cyclically. I conducted five classroom observations before the first formal interview while performing document analysis throughout. Furthermore, document analysis evolved because of its timely nature.

Data collection and analysis is dependent on the type of school and project. However, central to school ethnography are the daily behaviors and interactions, described in detail for extended periods of time. Interviews can be informal, spontaneous, and brief, or formal, methodical, and regular. This project relied on both scheduled formal interviews and informal brief conversations, typically between classes. Questionnaires can help to supplement interview data. These collection methods may require the researcher to change roles, as stated by Wilcox (1982):

While observation within the classroom is often of the nonparticipant observation variety, the ethnographer frequently moves into the role of participant observer as s/he has coffee
The researcher attempts to collect data in a variety of capacities while working towards insider status of a community.

**Observations and Fieldnotes**

Fieldnotes were kept before, during, and after weekly observations. Observations typically lasted two 55-minute class periods, one per teacher. Upon entering the room, I sat at a desk in the back of the classroom and observed teacher directions and interactions with students. I also monitored student actions and the environment such as desk layout or what is written and posted on the board. I would often have informal conversations with teachers between classes when walking from one room to the next. Shorter conversations also took place with teachers during class during student work time. After I left the school, I converted my observations or jottings into more thorough fieldnotes with “sufficient and lively detail” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 57). Fieldnotes tell a story and evoke meaning as opposed to merely describing what took place and are foundational to ethnography.

During each class, a few obvious observations were made: what the students were doing when they first came into the room; the objective or purpose of the lesson; what the teacher was saying throughout the class; the general type of assignment the students were working on; how the students were arranged in the room; and what possible confrontations took place between people. This routine provided me longitudinal data to compare throughout the year, as I was interested in how the teacher may differ in their approach throughout the year. During class, a theme would often emerge. One theme was assigning students to small groups and taking them
into separate classrooms. Another was student-teacher conflict on a day when numerous students were sent into the hall for talking. A third was teaching students how to use stations and working as groups instead of their typical individual work style. These themes were then used during my coding process as a way to highlight my initial impressions of the individual class period. Ultimately, the purpose of my classroom observations was to understand how Barbara and Maria approach their profession, how their teaching style is situated in relation to the school’s philosophy and structures, and a general understanding of student culture, curriculum, and discipline.

Once per month for eight months I would attend a Friday professional development session. These sessions were held during half-days for students and were divided by grade-level teams. I observed the 10th grade level team each month during the spring semester. My observations and fieldnotes were taken in a similar manner as my classroom observations.

**Interviews**

When negotiating with PHCS administration over the terms of my research project, interviews were especially controversial. School leadership conveyed concerns with additional burdens for teachers and preferred to limit out of class time constraints.

In late October, I visited PHCS for the first time and met with Barbara Jones to discuss the research project. This initial interview was informal and brief (about 30 minutes) and focused predominantly on the logistics of the project, including when I could conduct observations, if I could keep a laptop out in-class, and the background of my research. In short, I was introducing myself and allowing Barbara the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
In December of 2016, I conducted formal taped interviews at the school. I had been conducting observations for about six weeks at the time. Interviews took place during finals week and lasted one sixty-minute class period. I then transcribed the interview and sent the text to both teachers to review, providing the opportunity to omit any dialogue. Neither teacher elected to omit any part of the interview. This procedure was then mimicked in March.

The protocol used for teacher initial interviews was informed by Weiner and Torres (2016) and applied a semi-structured approach. This protocol was used because it is one of the only research studies to address teacher identity in a charter school. Teacher discussions typically moved away from the more structured and direct line of questioning to a more conversational approach based on what the teacher’s interest (Appendix F and Appendix G). Teacher interviews were similar in their approach, beginning with their path into teaching generally and PHCS specifically, but then diverted based on the unique observations I had made in each of their classrooms and the responses they provided.

In January 2017, I met with school founder Dr. William at a coffee house in the city. I interviewed Dr. William for about 90 minutes using a semi-structured interview protocol. I emailed general questions to Dr. Williams before the meeting because we had not yet met and I wanted him to be familiar with the line of inquiry I was interested in (Appendix I).

Finally, a concluding conversation in August with the teachers on my classroom observations was important for two reasons. First, I wanted a formal time to meet and discuss my findings with the teachers; to reflect back on what I noticed and space for the teachers to ask questions about my work. Second, when reflecting on my observations, the teachers expanded on
my understandings of what was or was not taking place. This additional interview transcript was then added as a final data source.

Artifacts

Artifacts were collected throughout the research process and were divided into three categories: classroom, school, and state. Classroom artifacts include work products from teachers or students, including worksheets, lesson plans, blogs, and online assignments. They were distributed in class or online. School artifacts are publicly available resources from and about the school, including internal research reports, governance documents, or performance reports. Statewide artifacts are more general documents pertaining to charter schools in Pennsylvania including laws and legislation, court cases, opinions on legal disputes over charter schools, and state reports on charter school performance.

Due to the timely nature of this research, artifacts were added throughout the school year. The election of November 2016 played an important role in the debate over charter schools, including in Pennsylvania where prominent politicians worked to revise the Charter School Law of 1997 as it approached its 20th anniversary. These debates provide important situational background for my research. Table 4.1 lists and describes each data source.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1. Data Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observations</td>
<td>Weekly observations conducted in both classrooms, from 10/16 to 5/17 (total=17).</td>
<td>Numerous classes of both instructors were observed throughout the year (different ages, courses, locations).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development observations (table cont’d)</td>
<td>Three total observations conducted on half-days, one per month. Typically lasted one to two hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

104
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher interviews</td>
<td>Initial interview with Barbara 30 mins. was not recorded. First transcribed interviews on 12/6. 3 total interviews were conducted with each teacher. The first interview with Barbara was focused on logistics and background information. First transcribed interviews (Appendix E and F) lasted about 50 minutes each and focused on education background and perspective on the school. Final interview on the conclusion of the research project was conducted 5/17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School founder interview</td>
<td>One interview conducted on 1/17. Interview with the school founder lasted about 90 minutes (Appendix J). Focused on the climate of public education in the early 2000’s, starting the school, challenges, and general reflections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom artifacts</td>
<td>Documents collected from teacher lessons and work products of students. Also includes online work such as blogs by teachers and students. Typically collected worksheets the students received each class. Also read teacher blogs about education and student blogs about their work, often assigned by the teacher as part of a lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School artifacts</td>
<td>Documents provided online by the school on curriculum, governance, and internal reports. For example, the teacher evaluation process is entirely posted online, including how teachers are promoted. Other examples include the special education program and technology integration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State artifacts</td>
<td>Artifacts provided by the state on charter school law, governance, and audits of the school. The state also requires consistent external evaluators monitor the progress of the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Triangulation**

I implemented triangulation (Creswell, 2012) through the use of three distinct and comprehensive sources of data, which is useful for comparing findings across sources. For example, I found school goals from school research reports posted online, looked for daily implementation in the classroom, and asked teachers to elaborate on the goals. Furthermore, I
asked teachers to corroborate my observations with their experiences as a form of “investigator triangulation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 245) and compare findings. Lather altered the traditional definition of triangulation by extending it from data sources to “methods[] and theoretical schemes” (Lather, 1991b, p. 66). This was accomplished by presenting alternative theories and methods consistently proximal to my work. For example, theoretical frameworks including critical theory, accumulation by dispossession, and disaster capitalism were discussed in chapter 2. Critical ethnography was briefly discussed earlier in this chapter, and similarities between my method and narrative research (chapters 5 and 6) will become evident.

Analysis

Data analysis was a recursive process. First, I read and reread documents to develop a solid familiarity with their content. I personally transcribed all interviews, paying attention to all matter of detail. My conversion of observational writing and jottings to comprehensive fieldnotes also provided a level of scrutiny. The research was conducted over almost an entire year. Therefore, I reviewed and reread content from early on in the research process throughout the year to remain familiar. For example, state background information collected in August was reviewed again in March.

Coding interviews, fieldnotes, and artifacts was conducted in “close, systematic ways” to “generate analytic categories” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). First, all documents were imported into Atlas.TI, a qualitative research software program for storing and evaluating documents and writing. I used open coding “as a way to name, distinguish, and identify the conceptual import and significance of particular observations” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 175). Initially, I was
focused on the processes at the school and did not make conjectures about underlying motivations. These codes were then consolidated into themes. Codes and themes then led me to continue reflexive fieldnotes in neglected domains and resulted in new interview questions. In other words, I was considering and reconsidering these ideas and meanings throughout the process and a theme did not spontaneously appear at the end of the process. Because the experience of teaching is broad, the data resulted in a wide range of initial open codes. “But the fact that fieldnotes seem unwieldy, with codings leading in many different directions, is actually a good thing at this stage; such codings will suggest a myriad of possible issues and directions” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 185). Memos were also written alongside fieldnotes, interviews, and artifacts to identify general ideas, codes, and themes.

Initial codes and themes generated from open coding and memos were then applied to the process of focused coding. By applying a new code or theme to the rereading of interviews, artifacts, or fieldnotes, I generated new relationships between the code or theme and the text. This process also highlights the recursive nature of my work. Once again, memos were written alongside focused coding, as are integrative memos constructing new linkages between text and pushing towards “theoretical connections” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 195).

Data analysis is not a singular point in the research process. I was constantly forging meaning from observations and discussions in the school, from the first time I researched charter school laws in Pennsylvania, to the last time I walked out of the school, to the submitting of my final document. Codes, themes, sub-themes, memos, and families did not arise out of a linear process of adding up codes until they were substantial enough to create theory. Instead, I
recursively worked and reworked data, constructing and rearranging the building blocks that led to my findings.

“Representing” Teachers in a Charter School

For Spradley, ethnography focuses on three components: “what people are doing, what people know, and the things people make and use” (Spradley, 1980, p. 5). In a school, this can be applied to a wide range of process taking place in a range of locations. Studies can occur in and out of the classroom alongside students, teachers, administrators, parents, and/or community members, on a variety of subjects, such as a teacher’s pedagogy or student knowledge. Spindler (1982) provides a visual representation of these interacting components, stating “Classrooms can be thought of as embedded within a series of concentric circles representing aspects of the social and cultural environment in which interaction within the classroom takes place” (p. 275). The center of the circle is the classroom, surrounded by the neighborhood (history, demographic makeup, parents’ relations with the school), the school district, the community (history, demographic makeup), the state school system (ideology, funding, testing and ranking procedures), and finally the economic structure. Each level interacts with those above and below. Traditional education ethnographies take place in the classroom, often for one complete school year, whereby the researcher may observe numerous variables. This can include the type of class or subject, the age group or grade, or the type of teacher. The extent of the interactions between the researcher and the teachers, students, parents, and staff members is dependent on the project and situation but typically interviews supplement the researcher observations, to lend voice to
those who live in the studied environment. Every interaction, observation, reflection, interview, and reading of texts related to the field site is admissible as data.

In 1938, Powdermaker and Semper published on their sociological study of African American educational attainment and pay in New Haven, Connecticut. “In the past, it had been assumed that education was the open sesame to opportunity and leadership (Powdermaker & Semper, 1938, p. 200). The authors ultimately found that the higher the educational attainment, the better the pay of work. Today, the resonance of this conclusion and the many it represents has been used to argue for and implement drastic changes in our public schooling system, with the ultimate goal of increased graduation rates of the poorest communities.

The number of teachers working in charter schools has greatly increased over the last two decades as states passed a wide range of legislation on school choice. As such, the category of ‘charter school teacher’ is impossible to generalize. Similarly, it is impossible to portray a ‘typical’ charter school. The method outlined in this chapter has allowed me the close daily perspective needed to understand processes in one charter school. My recursive procedure has allowed me to build on a variety of sources, to triangulate data, and to plug in theory and method and to problematize traditional binaries in the research process.

In the next three chapters, I provide the social structures (chapter 5) and biographies (chapters 6 and 7) that combine to create double insight (Britzman, 2003). In chapter 5, the school structures are detailed, including their origins as told through the biography of the school founder. In chapters 6 and 7, Barbara and Maria’s life stories and experiences inside PHCS are
portrayed. Finally, in chapter 8, I describe the emergent themes and tensions between the social structures and biographies.
CHAPTER 5. BUILDING THE STRUCTURES OF THE SHINING SCHOOL UPON THE HILL

This chapter provides data collected throughout my year spent at Pennsylvania High Charter School, specifically the macro- and micro-level structures of the school. These structures present necessary context and background information on the school, and are divided into three sections. The first section is a biographical account of the school founder, Tyler Williams, and his process for starting the school. Based predominantly on an interview with Dr. Williams, this section provides narrative on the founding of the school along with his personal reflections on the successes and challenges of beginning a charter school in Pennsylvania in the early 2000’s. The second section describes the four integral formal structures of the school: democratization, continuous professional development, community building, and inter-disciplinary learning and teaching. Finally, the micro-level structures at PHCS are described. This section presents the school as it stands in 2016 through a description of a typical day, the school’s evaluation process, and student graduation outcomes.

School Founder

Dr. Tyler Williams was born in Cleveland, Ohio in the early 1950’s, attending working class public schools throughout elementary, middle, and high school. A smart and successful student, Dr. Williams graduated from high school and attended an elite private university in the region, majoring in mathematics. Growing up, his parents cared deeply about education. After 6th grade, Dr. Williams’ parents attended a school conference and were troubled with the lack of opportunities for Dr. William at his neighborhood public school. “The next day, they put the house up for sale and I went to another school. I say that only because I have always thought that
school choice existed in America based on where people decide to live” (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017). Dr. Williams reaped the benefits of his parent’s access to school choice, a fact integral to his philosophy on education.

Background

Nearing graduation from college, Dr. Williams was unsure of his career trajectory. He had fallen in love with his soon to be wife, who noticed his happiness in the summers when he worked at an Outward Bound program with local youth. His parents were surprised by the sudden interest in education, having advocated for graduate school in law or medicine. The university had a small certification program comprised of three classes plus student teaching and so Dr. Williams “became a teacher.” Looking for teaching positions in the city, he found “they weren’t able to hire me because the city is pretty bureaucratic.” Instead, he went to work at a wealthy suburban school for two years. “I was a new teacher so I wasn’t very good. I was terrible. But I was learning quickly and I learned a lot over those two years.” At the time, Pennsylvania required teachers to earn graduate credits within six years of beginning teaching. The district would not grant Dr. Williams a “leave of absence” because he had only been teaching for two years, so he left his job and enrolled in a graduate program at a local private university for a degree in counseling for alcohol and addiction, specifically with adolescents. In 1980, he was hired by the city school district where he worked for the next two decades as a member of the city’s teachers union.

\[15\] Subsequent quotations from Dr. Williams in this chapter are from the same interview unless explicitly stated.
For ten years, Dr. Williams taught high school math at two different schools, eventually becoming a math supervisor for the district. There, he supervised math teachers and worked on curriculum development through the curriculum, instruction, and assessment (CIA) program.

After that I took a technology position and ran a 5-year National Science Foundation project with the school district to implement the internet. We were one of only four test beds across the country to implement the internet at a time when the internet was a prompt, the Unix, not the World Wide Web. So I started out as a teacher, became a supervisor, got a central office technology position, and became a coordinator of instructional technology for the district.

As evidenced by reflections on his career, Dr. Williams did not follow a traditional path into the classroom, nor did he remain a classroom teacher indefinitely. “I am a guy who has got to keep moving forward. Every five years, I want to do more.” These characteristics, along with a conflict with the district office and the passage of the 1997 Pennsylvania Charter School Law, led to the planning of PHCS.

Dr. Williams returned to his graduate school alma mater to pursue a doctoral degree in education. During this time, he was finding great success in the implementation of the National Science Foundation (NSF) grant.

We had developed some really interesting programs…We located the instructional technology group in a high school. We got a chance to put a program through a state grant to get kids Microsoft certified. We trained a teacher; we brought a lab in, got the whole program running. It was an absolute success, extraordinary success. The first year we had 180 Microsoft certifications…I went and tried to scale the program the next year by working with the principal, he wouldn’t do it. Wouldn’t cost him anything. He wouldn’t do it because he had a teacher who was going to retire in three or four years and was still using typewriters and couldn’t handle the training. I got a little upset. Went to the director of vocational ed. for the district and offered the program. I said he could take all the credit. “Here is the success story.” Told me to get out of his office. I said “This is it, I can’t do it, I can’t work in this bureaucracy anymore, it is just maddening. I either have to quit education or I gotta do something different.” Coincidentally, charter school law passed in Pennsylvania in 1997.
At the time, Dr. Williams was a graduate student working on his doctoral thesis. He and his colleague James Moore began talking about beginning their own school. Both had long-standing relationships with a local endowment and presented the idea of starting a “top-notch quality charter high school” to two project directors over dinner. Dr. Williams and his partner did not expect to be successful in pitching the idea:

They called our bluff. They said what do you need? We asked them for a quarter-million dollars to take a year off from school and plan it. Pay our salaries for a year, travel and visit about 7 or 8 quality charter schools across country, put advisory committees together. And they said “Sure. Get a non-profit and we are ready to go.” And that is what we did. The school wouldn’t be here, you wouldn’t be talking to me if it wasn’t for two men at the [local] endowments who said “This is a valid idea and we trust you because we have a long relationship with you two to do this.”

**Starting the School**

According to Dr. Williams, PHCS was successfully planned and built for a few reasons. First, the three school leaders had 80 years of experience working in urban public schools and had a thorough understanding of what a “successful” school looks like. The team travelled the country and spoke with charter school leaders while putting together two advisory committees to oversee the school planning process. “One was a kind of overseer group of powerful people that would help us politically and help us intellectually look at the big picture. Lawyers, accountants, businessmen, educators, university professors, great committee.” This group met a few times throughout the year to provide feedback. The second group was comprised of local educators, about a third of which would ultimately go to work at PHCS the following year. Two Saturdays per month, they met and worked on the school plan. Meanwhile, the leaders were working on a more macro level with community actors.
While planning the daily operation of the school, Dr. Williams and James were also making political decisions and maneuvers surrounding the school. Most notably, they at least made it appear to the community that they would be willing to keep the school in the district and work with the teacher’s union, a powerful actor in the city. Dr. Williams met with the district superintendent, the teacher’s union, and the school where he and James had worked together, to present a compromise to keep the school inside the local district and to employ unionized teachers; a plan to collaborate. In so doing, the school gained necessary evidence they had attempted to remain in the district and follow traditional school turnaround procedures but were unsuccessful because of resistance by local actors. Dr. Williams reflects on this process.

Normally charter schools are started by some educators, some disgruntled parents, a group of people that are pissed off; somebody with a hidden agenda. No, no, no, no. We were literally saying “We can’t do this within this school district, so we are going to break away.” Actually it is another story that I have to say because it is very important for you to know. So we did three things, that were really important…Because they don’t want charters and it is a heavy union environment. And the school district is well loved and certainly politically supported. Well I have been in that game for a long time. So I said we are going to do three things that my partners said “Well none of them are going to work” and I said, “I know. But it is important that we do them and have them in the record because 10 years from now, watch what it does for us.” So the three things we did. One, I walked into the superintendent’s office, and I said, “Look we are thinking of doing this charter, we would rather do it in the district. But you don’t seem to be welcoming of that.” And he threw me out of his office. And I went to the Assistant Superintendent and asked her to be on our advisory committee and she said she would love to but would have to ask for permission from the superintendent. He didn’t give it to her…Number two; I called my buddy, the president of the union. I was a 25-year member of the union…a wonderful man, a powerful man, did great things for education, but it is really strong union. I said [to him] “I want to meet with you and your team, I want to pitch an idea.” “Sure Dr. Williams, come ahead.” So I go in, we have a PowerPoint, pitch this idea of a 21st century high school that is best practices. I said “Look, we want to do it as a charter but we want to work with you. There are charters in Miami the union is running, why don’t we partner and put a big sign on the side that will say ‘[Teachers Union]: we fix education’. Reforms education; creates a model school.” They absolutely turned us down…That was the best thing we ever did was to offer it to them… The third thing we
did then was there was a part of the law that said a local public school could charter itself within the district if 75% of the faculty, I think it was 75% or 65% of the faculty would vote for it. So we approached the school we had been living in for all those years, the school I had taught and I approached the leadership team and said, “Let’s do this.” The school was falling apart and we can do this. The leadership team thought about it for two weeks and came back and said “No.”

The school founders had 80 years in the city of “street cred” and offered to work inside the district. This gave the school an “insurance policy” and was worth “a million dollars” to the school because it showed they were not inherently adversarial. The school put the hones of responsibility on the district to be “progressive” and when they refused, the charter gained leverage in their application to work outside the district norms. According to Dr. Williams, the union did not work with PHCS because the school did not have a tenure process and because they were implementing a new and unique way to evaluate teachers, namely dismissing seniority based on years of experience for a more comprehensive model.

The year before Dr. Williams retired, PHCS published a series of research reports on differing aspects of the school. The reports were posted online and typically consist of an overview of the topic, how the system works, challenges, and student and teacher testimonials. The reports, prepared by Dr. Hannah Thompson, cover the one to one laptop program, teacher looping (moving up a grade level each year), curriculum integration between and across subjects, special education, career readiness and internships, and teacher evaluation. PHCS uses a competency-based teacher promotion and evaluation system, whereby a teacher applies for a promotion by completing a portfolio throughout the year. First and second year teachers, or teaching assistants, typically do not lead classrooms and remain in support roles. From there, staff is promoted to the rank of apprentice, journeyman, expert, and master teacher.
In the spring of 2002, the city school board approved the charter application and Dr. Williams and his team quickly began recruiting families. With funds from the endowment grant, they hired a local firm to conduct a market research study to determine parent’s interest in a technology-based charter school. Results from the surveys, interviews, and focus groups were positive. Next, they took an unconventional and economical approach to marketing, advertising on billboards and commercials before movies as opposed to more expensive television and radio. Today, the slogan remains. The school opened as solely ninth grade and added a grade each year for three years. Unlike some charters in the area, the school has remained independent and never scaled up to serve additional communities and students.

Scaling PHCS vs. the Independent Model

Dr. Williams and his partner James constructed PHCS as a stand-alone school, with no intentions of either adding a k-8 student pipeline or replicating the model in additional high schools. James does not regret this decision. However, Williams says, “This is the one decision, the only decision, that I believe I completely screwed up on.” They discussed ideas of scaling early on in the process as a debate over the school’s mission.

Should our mission be to open a school, do a very good job of proving proof of concept, and then scale it up, or should the school be a stand-alone school that is a beta-site of best practices and a whole new model of education? Produce research, invite people in, have people do their dissertations on it, and really learn about it.

The school leaders adopted the latter because the district was not expanding at the time, and they worried about continuously taking over additional schools. For Dr. Williams, charters are able to scale in cities adding population because the districts are overwhelmed. For example, in Miami the student population was growing and “they were so behind the schools couldn’t handle it so
they wanted charter schools… When you are a shrinking economy, it makes it a little more intense for the charter schools.” They were confident their experience and expertise would result in a successful high school but were weary of the long-term viability of charter expansion efforts in the city.

Dr. Williams generally views education in the city as anti-charter. He also asserts “education in America” is failing in it’s pursuit of the ideal high school. Dr. Williams points to successful charter schools in cities outside of Pennsylvania but notes they are predominantly k-8 schools. Ultimately, the decision to develop and remain an independent school was made with the hope that those in the surrounding community would be open to collaboration. Dr. Williams imagined an ideal school upon the hill for others to visit and learn from. Much to his disappointment, partnerships with neighboring schools, colleges, or interested groups rarely developed (Chapter 9).

**The Four School-wide Structures**

Four unique school wide structures are central to the functioning of PHCS. First, the school uses a democratic decision making process, driven through grade-level teams. Second, teachers and staff are part of continuous professional development and work towards three major promotions based on a “teacher ladder.” Third, the school culture and environment is founded on community building and a familiar atmosphere. Finally, the school utilizes an inter-disciplinary curriculum focused on blending subjects, skills, college and work preparation, and technology. This section will detail each of these four structures aspects of the school.
Democratic Decision Making

Accountability measures have often expanded as a result of top-down legislation at the federal level, particularly the passing of No Child Left Behind under President G.W. Bush and Race to the Top under President Obama. In cities such as New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, mayors have taken control of urban schools, bypassing democratically elected school boards to appoint special superintendents and CEOs. Schools are mandated to use student test scores on state tests as a portion of their evaluation. With increased autonomy, charters are capable of being run in a variety of ways. PHCS uses a decentralized democratic school model that is unique in the top-down accountability movement. The result is four small, independent schools functioning inside the larger body, beginning with the physical space PHCS occupies.

The space and environment of the school is related to a few different components. First, it is located downtown, with the idea that community partners and resources are close-by. Students often walk to museums to conduct research or businesses for their internships. Second, each floor of the school is assigned one grade level, creating a clear separation between teacher teams. This is by design, as the cohort of teachers and students move up each floor together each year, relationships are forged. Furthermore, the individuality afforded to each grade-level team allows for solutions to be enacted from the ground-up, based on the premise that teachers are better equipped to solve weekly issues than a traditional centralized school administration.

Each grade level team has a vice principal who oversees the team and loops for all four years. During weekly meetings, the grade level team discusses how best to address concerns and sends a planned report to the vice principal. Occasionally, administration will implement top
down changes, with their frequency dependent on the vice principal and the structure of the grade-level team. Barbara explains:

Different teams do it differently. Some teams are more democratic and kind of disperse responsibilities and roles and who talks to admin than others. It kind of depends on your admin and team facilitators. It kind of depends on the experience of who is on the grade level team, how long they’ve been together. And it depends on how the Ed. leaders/ team facilitators run their floor. So I would say this team is a little more democratic than other teams. Some team leaders make decisions and disseminate information to the people on the floor and there’s pros and cons to that. And I think that has a lot to do with the leadership…I hear it a lot from people who have been here longer than me that the idea is that this should be four different schools…within a building. The decisions we decide to make may not be the decisions that other teams decide to make, and that’s fine. We don’t have to have a standard, but it is not uncommon that teams share best practices. And then sometimes you’ll get into situations where admin wants things to happen in a certain way for the team that they lead, even if the grade level team doesn’t feel like that is the best path. And then vice versa, the team wants to do something in a certain way for their students but admin doesn’t see it. That doesn’t happen often. (B. Jones, personal interview, April 5, 2017)

Furthermore, meetings among the entire faculty are infrequent. The school holds a whole-staff lunch once per month, where the school leader makes announcements and teachers socialize, but all other meetings are conducted as grade-level teams, another indication the school is run as four separate entities.

Designing the school to be teacher-led, with entire teams of staff and students remaining together for all four years was not only for the democratization of decision-making. When designing PHCS, Dr. Williams had a clear vision founded on his experience as a counselor working with urban youth: for students to be successful, the school needed to provide a family-like atmosphere.

We [traditional schools] assumed high school was the last school you were going to attend before college and they decided the nurturing has to stop and we are going to run it like a college, like a factory, and it’s time for you to grow up. Well they’re wrong.
Adolescents is the hardest time of a persons’ life and that is when they need the most support. So high schools are not caring places, they are factories. [PHCS] is a caring place. I mean how many schools do you know…that have two full time social workers that do nothing other than children and their health, their mental, emotional health. (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017)

Between the investment in mental health and teacher looping, students at PHCS develop a familiarity with the staff uncommon in many large public high schools. When reflecting on the strengths of her previous teaching assignments, Barbara highlighted the strong relationships school counselors established with students as they looped through high school and spent a fifth year following up on post-graduation experience. This program has been expanded to the entirety of PHCS. Therefore, teachers are responsible for all aspects of a student’s success, not a singular grade in one subject. Teachers work closely with social workers and other support staff to address issues plaguing many students in impoverished urban schools.

By dividing the school, it is argued each team creates a familial atmosphere, relating back to the education and support of the whole student. Teachers create strong bonds with each other, covering for each other when sick, designing systems of support such as birthday celebrations, and attend functions outside of school such as the gym or happy hours. Perhaps most importantly, they are familiar with each other and understand how they fit in with the rest of the grade-level team. Dr. Williams describes this phenomenon:

Because the power is in the team…the place that runs that school is the 9th grade team, 10th grade team, 11th grade team, and 12th grade team, and the social service department that is supporting everybody. That’s who runs the school. That’s who is managing the school. That’s powerful…These folks know those kids, they know the curriculum, they know everything. We hire paraprofessionals that are often certified teachers, go in the room and teach. Amazing isn’t it? You see the design of the school. It’s synergy. It’s build a team, we’re in a business, we’re in a human business. Humans want to be part of something. They want to be on a team, they want to care, they want to have each other’s
back, they want to know you have their back. (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017)

Dr. Williams is convinced an urban school must provide additional services when compared to traditional public schools (TPSs), particularly social support services, and a familial atmosphere is therefore necessary.

PHCS prioritizes macro-level philosophies, as evidenced in a curriculum founded on big ideas and themes while disregarding minute details such as exact dates. However, this is not simply a tenant of teacher pedagogy, it is found throughout the school, to consistently recognize the big picture. This is apparent in the school’s consideration of long-term student success, achievable only through the development of the entire student.

Continuous Professional Development

The PHCS staff does not experience teaching uniform to my perception of the traditional public school teacher for two distinct reasons. First, teachers do not work towards teacher tenure and must apply for promotion through a “teacher ladder” with four levels, referred to as “competency-based promotion. Second, because teachers co-teach and move grade levels each year, they have continuous professional development, primarily focused on skills and processes.

Promotion

When designing the school, Dr. Williams favored a career ladder system as opposed to tenure-track with yearly pay increases common in many TPS systems. PHCS does not have tenure and teachers are at-will employees. To be considered for a promotion, teachers self-nominate and endure a yearlong evaluation process comprised of eight steps: teacher initiation, initial rubric review, administrator sign off, development planning, evidence gathering,
observations and feedback, narrative writing, and a vote by the school leadership team. These eight components are then combined to form a portfolio to be turned in and evaluated by a team of administrators and senior teachers at the end of the year.

For full-time classroom teachers, the ladder begins at apprentice, followed by journeyman, expert, and finally educational leader. The school also employs assistant teachers, typically recent college graduates or individuals with little or no education experience. After a year or two as an assistant teacher, they may be promoted into lead classroom positions as apprentice teachers. Because Barbara had six years of teaching experience when she arrived at PHCS, she started at the journeyman level. During her second year, she successfully completed the promotion process and became an expert teacher. Maria, beginning at PHCS with no formal teaching experience, started at the school designated apprentice level and was later promoted to journeyman teacher. Similar to other integral components of the school’s philosophy, competency-based promotion is covered by a seven-page internal research report,\textsuperscript{16} published in 2011 and authored by Dr. Hannah Thompson, the school’s curriculum consultant.

In the research report available on the school’s website,\textsuperscript{17} competency-based promotion is preferable to traditional experience-based models for five reasons. First, it encourages teachers to commit to the school long-term because they are investing time and energy in the promotion process, decreasing the likelihood they will leave in the near-term. Second, teachers are continuously focusing on how they can improve, with new competencies at each level of the ladder. Third, communication between school administrators and teachers is strengthened

\textsuperscript{16} The details of the school’s internal reports are not provided to protect anonymity.

\textsuperscript{17} The reports are not included in this research to protect anonymity.
through the observation-feedback component of the evaluation process. Fourth, teachers must be reflective and consider their professional goals and how best to improve their practice. Finally, the process encourages an “ethic of professionalism” and the difference between a “job” and a “profession.” The school asserts the program is working through teacher survey data and the number of promotions each year. While all five benefits are important, the first, teacher retention, is perhaps the most applicable to discussions on charter schools.

The school report clearly outlines the possibilities of teacher competency-based promotion. What are possible limitations? If this process is ideal, why have schools not adopted it on a large-scale? Most obviously, the promotional process creates a hierarchy of teachers at the school. Each teacher carries with them a level on the corporate ladder, similar to many business organizational styles. This is combatted by the grade-level team’s democratic structure, whereby each teacher has input in decision-making each week. However, the group leaders or facilitators are the most advanced (on the ladder) male and female teacher for each grade-level. For example, Barbara, as an expert teacher, was one of her grade level’s facilitators because she was the highest ranked female teacher in the grade. In other words, teachers earn responsibility based on the promotional process in addition to an increase in pay and status.

Comparing teacher evaluation and promotion at PHCS to similar charters is difficult. In general, research on charter school teacher evaluation is scarce (Green III, Donaldson, & Oluwole, 2014). Critical work on charters aligns value-added teacher measures based on quantitative test scores with neoliberal or corporate reform agenda (C. R. Anderson et al., 2017).
This style of teacher evaluation was void at PHCS, another reason why the school conflicted with my preconceived notion of a charter school.

When designing the school, Dr. Williams was adamant PHCS would not use traditional teacher tenure and would evaluate teachers based on a rubric. He presented this idea to the local union who rejected working without employee protections. Research on unionized teacher labor is mixed (Cowen & Strunk, 2015), although there is evidence that unions and charters may not always be diametrically opposed (Beabout, 2015). Regardless, understanding unions is also integral to providing context to the teacher experience at PHCS, as the school excludes those who are adamantly in support of unions. This was apparent in teacher discourse, when one teacher stated charters schools hire based on “merit”, implying traditional schools hire on something else.

The teacher promotion protocol at PHCS is flexible in that teachers to choose when they apply and aspects of the application can be customized to fit the teacher’s strengths. Some teachers elect to include student work, reflections, data analysis, or other evidence displaying their teaching traits. In this way, teachers are not competing against their peers but are working on their individualized professional development. In a traditional model prioritizing years of experience, hierarchies can remain stagnant, as the most experienced teacher(s) remain at the school while possibly in control of curriculum. In comparison, the competency model is in flux; teachers can move up the ladder based on promotion and change power dynamics at the school. All of this is dependent on the teacher developing and displaying their development to those in administration.
Development

Professional development at PHCS is predominantly run through the grade level teams. Typically, the most senior male and female teachers, the Facilitators, run professional development seminars on teaching strategies, mimicking their management style to the class of teachers. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes provides insight into how professional development is run at PHCS.

Professional development is run similar to a typical class at PHCS, with Ms. Sanchez leading a room full of thirteen teachers in a lesson on using primary sources to investigate immigration and anti-immigration sentiments throughout US history. After a brief lecture introducing the topic, the teachers break up into four groups and discuss cartoons from the early twentieth century. One person in each group takes notes and after about seven minutes, the groups share their thoughts with the rest of the class. Meanwhile, Ms. Sanchez synthesizes the class’s ideas onto a large poster board with two columns, one for questions and one for main ideas. For a Friday afternoon, the teachers are energized and attentive, joking about the overt racism of the cartoons while they build on each other’s ideas. When sharing, the teachers focus on the social justice aspects of anti-immigration propaganda, comparing historical views to the current political and social landscape. Throughout the lesson, Ms. Sanchez interjects common occurrences from her experience, proposing ideas or solutions to common classroom challenges, such as students providing evidence for their assertions. ‘This is an example of how one can use one particular issue. Helping students to be able to discern the veracity of information and able to defend their own positions, able to identify bias and misinformation, and at the same time able to defend a position’. About forty-five minutes into the lesson, the teachers start to lag. The staff enjoys a large prepared lunch by the school chef on half-day Fridays, resulting in yawning and slouching in their chairs. Ms. Sanchez changes course and decides to show the class a video on Project Zero, a research initiative at Harvard Graduate School of Education, whereby students and teachers testify to the importance of primary documents and a holistic approach to social studies, to ‘Think like a historian’. The ninety-minute session concludes with Ms. Sanchez stressing a different focus in future sessions by prioritizing each teacher’s subject matter. For homework, the teachers are asked to bring a lesson they expect to teach to the professional development session next month.

Teachers can supplement PHCS professional development with additional opportunities outside of the school. For example, Barbara teaches an online course on technology integration in the
classroom each year. Furthermore, because the school has one half-day each month, teachers have access to regular internal professional development opportunities.

Dr. Williams cited professional development in our discussion on the construction of PHCS as a benefit of teacher looping. Because teachers are changing subjects each year, they are less fixated on content. Whereas in a traditional high school, each teacher may be responsible for one or two subjects, PHCS must change subjects each year when they advance to the next grade. A veteran teacher at the school for 12 years will have only taught any one grade-level subject a maximum of three times. This requires consistent teacher development focusing on transferable learning strategies, as time spent on individual grade content will not be used for the following three school years. For Dr. Williams, this can change pedagogy.

Now the focus becomes the kid and learning styles and individual differences and multiple intelligences and multiple representations and differentiated instruction…It also gives the teacher an opportunity to dive into the kids head and learn what makes the kid tick and become very close with the kid and emotionally invested in the child. Intellectually but also emotionally invested in the child…The whole goal of the school is to get you ready for life. (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017)

Therefore, teacher development is not content-centric. This may exclude teachers entering the field because of a strong passion for a particular subject.

PHCS maintains a 100% effective teacher-certification rate. Looping teachers earn and maintain a general certification, such as general science 9-12, and therefore do not earn a new subject specific certification each year. However, the school offers subject specific honors courses for seniors and employs a non-looping teacher certified in that particular subject. For

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18 Occasionally, this number may drop to 98% if one new teacher is working on a certification, such as a new special education teacher hired mid-year who is working as a teacher support in larger classrooms. However, this is irregular and only occurs with one or two teachers at a time.
example, one science teacher is certified to teach physics and teaches all twelfth graders with the support of the looping science teacher. The teacher remains in twelfth grade the following year and the looping teacher returns to ninth grade. This is duplicated in math, English, and social studies.

Teachers who have been certified are more effective than non-certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). Furthermore, Stuit and Smith (2012) found low teacher retention rates in charter schools is a result of the lack of certification programs and teacher unions. Nationally, charter schools typically have a higher percentage of teachers who have been alternatively certified and who hold a degree from a highly competitive college in a subject other than education (Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014), although these findings are dependent on the teacher supply (Baker & Dickerson, 2006). PHCS does not resemble the high teacher turnover often attributed to charter schools, nor does it employ a staff with only alternatively-certified teachers, much like the school I worked at in New Orleans, where some years not a single teacher had a traditional education degree.

Senior year, teacher course loads are diminished because students spend time out of the school performing community service and internships. During this time, teachers can observe and collaborate with ninth grade teachers, preparing for their move the following fall. The notion that teachers and staff should not become stagnant in one grade and one subject is echoed throughout the school, from the teacher ladder and striving to be promoted to the next level, to the changing curriculum for teachers each year through looping, to the reflections and

19 From 2003-2004, the authors found charter school teachers were twice as likely to leave the classroom when compared to their TPS peers.
experimenting proposed in professional development. No doubt, this will suit many teachers, but it also relates strongly to discussions on teacher turnover, burnout, and how best to retain effective teachers.

**Community Building**

Creating a familial atmosphere was essential to Dr. Williams’ initial designs of PHCS, resulting in a unique school environment. “Adolescence is the hardest time of a person’s life and that is when they need the most support. So high schools are not caring places, they are factories.” The school maintains two full time social workers and a nurse and numerous school administrators through the years have had backgrounds in counseling or special education. “[PHCS] is a caring place…It’s a whole mental health system we have there.” This sense of community is reinforced through a variety of systems, including co-teaching and grade-level teams, available mental health services, and student cohorts and advisory groups. However, teacher looping is the most essential aspect of the school’s central tenant of community.

**Looping**

Each year, teachers move with their students up the grade level ladder. For example, a ninth grade math teacher will move to tenth grade at the end of the year, followed by moving to eleventh grade the subsequent year. At the end of the four-year cycle, the group of teachers returns to ninth grade and initiates a new cycle. At PHCS, this process is referred to as looping.

According to the PHCS self-reports, looping is the defining characteristic of the school; all organizational planning stems from the idea that students and teachers should remain together. Dr. Williams elaborated on the importance of looping:
[Looping is] key because it answered a thousand questions. One, if you take kids from the inner city who have all sorts of tumult in their lives, they don’t often have two parents…they bounce from school to school, people die in their families. They just haven’t had a solid adult resource network as people of means have…So that was powerful from sort of a mental health approach. It was powerful from an accountability approach…Once I know me and I know you and we are going to spend 4 years together there is accountability there…It creates this massive imbedded professional development opportunity for the teacher. Because now your focus in high school, the focus has always been on content. Now the focus becomes the kid and learning styles and individual differences and multiple intelligences and multiple representations and differentiated instruction and all those things. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to dive into the kid’s head and learn what makes the kid tick and become very close with the kid and emotionally invested in the child. Intellectually but also emotionally invested in the child. It gives the kid safety. It gives the opportunity that when you can’t get along with the teacher, or can’t get along with the student, we have to figure that out, because that’s life. The whole goal of the school is to get you ready for life.

Dr. Williams’ description of looping is supported by claims in the self-reports. When students remain with the same group of teachers, they are more likely to build strong lasting relationships. Students are well known and can’t “hide” from attention. This results in a safer environment and individualized attention because teachers know more about students and have developed familiarity. For teachers, the school argues looping builds deeper content knowledge because they experience curriculum across grade levels and work to build their own understanding. Furthermore, teachers have more time to construct meaning in their scope and sequence because they already have relationships with their students, leading to more effective differentiated instruction. Furthermore, the teachers build strong peer groups in their grade-level teams, disrupting common feelings of teacher isolation and resulting in positive collaboration.

Each floor of the building is divided by grade level. The 9th grade is predominantly on the second floor, the 10th grade on the third floor, and the 11th grade on the fourth floor. Twelfth grades move throughout and have a unique schedule because of their internship program. Each
floor has a teacher lobby where teachers can collaborate and plan together. This is integral to the plan of looping. By having an entire floor dedicated to one grade and one team of teachers and staff, the school argues accountability is enhanced. The grade level team clearly “own this group of kids” in an “almost paternal” way. By increasing accountability, the school also increases the reward when students graduate at the end of the fourth year. PHCS’s evidence in support of looping is twofold. First, PHCS maintains lower average teacher turnover rates than charter schools in the same region of the country (about 16% vs. about 31%) and higher student graduation rates than the local public school (about 95% vs. about 85%). Second, annual survey data monitors variables related to school climate such as teacher/student trust and the extent to which students feel cared for and safe.

**Inter-disciplinary Curriculum**

Charter schools exist in an age of accountability, a fact that has been shown to redirect school leadership from focusing on pedagogical issues to state accountability concerns (Bickmore & Sulentic Dowell, 2014). However, at PHCS, curriculum and pedagogy is built into the school’s foundation, particularly focusing on inter-disciplinary pedagogy. The curriculum works in tandem with other school systems, such as the looping program. Teachers are often co-teaching courses and the curriculum often weaves multiple subjects otherwise taught separately. PHCS “clusters” the Pennsylvania Chapter 4 Academic Standards into cultural literacy, scientific literacy, work skills literacy, and wellness literacy. The first three literacies are multi-category groups spread out across multiple years, whereas wellness literacy is completed over two trimesters freshman year. The following is a typical schedule for a 9th grade student.
Table 5.1. Sample 9th Grade Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trimester 1</th>
<th>Trimester 2</th>
<th>Trimester 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period A/B: ELA 9 and US History 9</td>
<td>Period A/B: ELA 9 and US History 9</td>
<td>Period A/B: Research 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period C: Fitness</td>
<td>Period C: Health</td>
<td>Period C: Career Readiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory/Club</td>
<td>Advisory/Club</td>
<td>Advisory/Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period F: Enterprise Development</td>
<td>Period F: Elective</td>
<td>Period F: Geometry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between teaching skills and content was reiterated throughout my time at PHCS, from the school founder to the school’s internal reporting to teacher interviews and classroom observations. Dr. Williams summarized why the school was designed to minimize teaching content:

If [students] don’t know what the war of 1812, I don’t really care. If they are critical thinkers and problem solvers and they understand the general concepts and modes of thinking, critical thinking in social studies and what it means to be a citizen and so forth, then you’ve done your job. We are trying to teach process, we’re not trying to teach content. Anybody can teach content. So by doing that, instead of having massive curriculum guides that you are supposed to do, we put the hones on the teacher to figure it out. Which from a constructivist perspective is pretty damn powerful. The English department, I don’t care if you start doing the Scarlett Letter and the Crucible, if you want to teach it that’s great. You all should teach good, critical literature. Multiple genres, broad based, with an attention to diversity, but do it. You are an expert, I am not telling you what to do.

In this section, I describe the three core subject areas at the school, followed by the integration of technology. These four fields collectively prioritize process skills and
Cultural Literacy

Cultural literacy is comprised of four sections: English Language Arts (ELA), Social Studies, Information Literacy, and World Languages. English Language Arts is taught each year for two semesters, as is Social Studies. These two subjects are woven together and taught during a 2 period block each day in a large room of about 50 to 60 students. Two certified teachers are responsible for short and long-term planning and typically lead lessons while a teaching assistant and paraprofessional share alternative responsibilities such as answering individual questions or redirecting students. Each year, ELA is paired with US History (9th grade), US History and Government (10th grade), World Cultures and Politics (11th grade) and Politics and Civics (12th grade). According to the PHCS self-report on cultural literacy, students “just learn better” when the course focus is depth not breadth. Students review current events, engage with the community through outings to local performances, and apply new skills in context while tests are thematic-based as opposed to an overemphasis on broad content knowledge. The ELA/Social Studies block is supplemented by two additional courses in Cultural Literacy.

Each year, students enroll in Information Literacy for one trimester. For the majority of my observations spent with Maria, I observed Research 9, although I also observed Research 10. These courses will be expanded upon in the following section on Maria. In 11th and 12th grade, the research block is devoted to a Capstone Project, a research idea unique to the individual student, defended by students during the second semester of senior year. Much of what is taught in and out of Information Literacy at PHCS prepares students to excel on their Capstone Project. During Junior year, students choose a topic and complete a rough draft of their literature review
and annotated bibliography while maintaining detailed notes of the process. Senior year, they complete the project, including an action component involving either a display at a local museum, volunteering, or equivalent engagement with the local community. The final presentation takes place before local community members and experts in their field. The PHCS Capstone Project has been recognized by national organizations as a model for comprehensive high school capstone programs.

**Table 5.2. Capstone Project Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junior Year Grade</th>
<th>Literature Review</th>
<th>Presentation</th>
<th>Independent Learning Grade</th>
<th>Action Project</th>
<th>Final Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foreign language is limited at PHCS when compared to typical 4-year schedules in public high schools. Sophomore year, students take Spanish for 2 semesters. No other languages are offered. There is one full time foreign language teacher at the school who leads classes of about 26 individually or with the support of a paraprofessional. Spanish 1 and 2 blend cultural topics on South America such as immigration and social norms with an introductory “communicative experience.” A part-time Spanish teacher leads an elective Spanish course for students one trimester during Junior or Senior year during a two-hour block. Additionally, students in good academic standing can take a Spanish course at the local community college as an elective.

**Scientific Literacy**

Scientific literacy is comprised of a math component and a science component. Students at PHCS enroll in math year-round with one trimester devoted to a grade-specific topic. Students
take Geometry in 9th grade and Probability and Statistics in 10th grade. Science is taught for 2 trimesters each year, beginning with Physics in 9th grade, Applied Biology and Chemistry in 10th grade, Biology in 11th grade, and a course on Scientific Research and Design in 12th grade. In 10th and 12th grade, the science course is accompanied with a lab. Over the previous year, science was made a top-priority for improvement school wide according to public governance records posted on the school website.

Science at PHCS is unique in three ways. First, Physics is taught in 9th grade, before Biology and Chemistry, because the content allows for substantial hands-on experiences and supports learning in the subsequent science classes. Furthermore, it ensures all students have access to Physics, not merely those who are successful early in their high school careers. Second, the curriculum is shaped around “concepts and applications.” Third, inquiry is integral to all science curriculums, a philosophy shared throughout the school’s “preference for discovery over didactic pedagogy.” During the 2014-2015 school year, science teachers tested a plan to improve state test scores by aligning curriculum more closely with the state test, using formative assessments, and providing a science elective for struggling students and students with an interest in the medical fields. Raising test scores was prioritized because exams were becoming part of their graduation requirement and the school’s “reputation suffered” because of the public fallout of inadequate state test scores. Ultimately, scores rose from about 30% proficient or advanced to about 70% proficient or advanced.
The PHCS website provides a long-term scope and sequence for math and science subjects. Between 4 and 6 major unit topics are listed for each grade, followed by the following chart.

**Table 5.3. Scope and Sequence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PA Common Core Standards</th>
<th>Process Skills</th>
<th>9th Grade</th>
<th>10th Grade</th>
<th>11th Grade</th>
<th>12th Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

According to the above chart, process skills are spiraled both horizontally, across subjects and topics, and vertically, across grade levels.

Similar to the co-teaching in Cultural Literacy courses, math and science blocks have two certified teachers, one from each subject. The teachers share planning periods and weave content. In other words, the blocks are not merely divided in half with math receiving an hour and science receiving an hour. Students at PHCS are automatically enrolled in more math courses than any other subject based on number of trimesters, although it breaks down to about one hour per day for four years, which is typical of high school schedules. The school does not provide a self-report on scientific literacy, whereas cultural literacy and workforce literacy reports are available on the website.

**Workskills Literacy**

Pennsylvania High places an emphasis on preparing students for the workforce, either directly out of high school or post-secondary education. To become proficient in Workskills Literacy, students are enrolled in 3 trimesters of Financial Literacy, 5 trimesters of Technology, 4 trimesters of Career Readiness, and 1 trimester of Service Learning. Workskills is referred to in a few different ways, including workforce culture and career readiness. It is a synergistic
relationship between a litany of factors, including the student’s professional attire, the career courses required at the school, the internship program, and the school’s mission statement.

Whereas many charters emphasize acceptance to a college or university, PHCS prioritizes long-term professional success, either immediately out of high school or after earning a degree.

During junior year, students apply for internships with local business and establishments in the field of their choosing. Maria describes the process:

So the way the program is set up, we have a career and post-high school planning curriculum area. They start with career classes in 9th, 10th, and 11th grade, which is a lot of interest inventory, career exploration, and then it eventually steers towards “If that is the career you want, what are the education and training options that you need?” By the time they are in 11th grade, “This is the job that I want, this is the education that I will need, this is what the education will cost, this is how I will fund it.” At that time, they get handed off to the internship people who actually start working with the students in 10th grade so that they can set up their internship plans in 11th grade based on the interest inventory… They’ll do 4 hours of classes and then leave after lunch for their internship. So it’s from 8 to noon in school, that hour is their time to get lunch and whatever transportation time it takes to get to their site. And then they have to stay on the site until at least 3:30… They have to log hours just like if they were on a real job. They have to keep a journal every week reflecting on the experience and turn that in… And so we chose people who had a sense of networks to be able to get people across a broad range of industries to agree to accept our students.

Internships take place the final trimester of junior year and the first two trimesters of senior year.

Notable cooperating organizations include the YMCA, American Red Cross, Boys and Girls Club, Head Start, and Urban League, as well as numerous local hospitals, museums, art galleries, restaurants, law offices, and non-profits. Ideally, students learn to be dependable and productive workers, follow instructions and rules, interact and communicate properly, and “advocate for oneself as ideas and opportunities develop.”
To prepare students for their internships and individual financial responsibility after high school, Financial Literacy is taught for 3 trimesters: Enterprise Development in 9th grade and Financial Literacy in 10th and 11th grade. Meanwhile, students are enrolled in technology courses. In 9th grade, students take Tech Applications and in 10th Web Applications, followed by courses in software certifications previously mentioned. In career readiness courses, students prepare for all aspects of the job hunt, from conducting mock interviews to preparing and editing resumes, to learning how to behave professionally in a workplace. Exposure to the student’s field of interest in high school creates learning opportunities often remise until officially entering the workforce.

The report prepared by Dr. Thompson on Workskills Literacy summarizes the beneficial outcomes of the program. First, students “calibrate their aspirations” by utilizing a “reality cure” approach to addressing exactly what it takes to become a professional in their desired field. Students are taught and implement the “nitty gritty” skills necessary for success in the workplace, including arriving on time, writing cover letters, and following directions. The worksite managers are encouraged to be honest with the students, providing feedback disparate from teacher corrections. PHCS asserts the program’s success by conducting surveys of mentor sites, including their overall satisfaction. Furthermore, mentors evaluate student’s work ethic, demeanor, and responsibility. Close to 99% of the sites agree to work with the school after their first year. Program challenges include defining a role for parents in the process, finding difficult matches for some 10% of students, and balancing the level of support for student’s aspirations with realistic opportunities in the area.
In accordance with Pennsylvania state law, students must earn health and physical education credits to graduate. At PHCS, students take one trimester of Fitness 9 and one trimester of Health 9 under the auspices of Wellness Literacy. While this is identified as a separate literacy, it is not expanded upon due to its brevity and lack of detail on the school website and in self-reports.

**Technology**

Technology is integral to the operation of PHCS, from daily lessons to the mission statement, where it is mentioned in the first line. Most notably, every student is issued a laptop, uncommon in public high schools. Students are responsible for the laptop year-round and take it home every day. The school has wireless internet throughout and the majority of assignments are laptop based.

When observing a classroom at PHCS, it is uncommon to see a desk or table without a laptop. Laptops are an “educational tool” and are used for “most assignments.” Classrooms are void of traditional textbooks and notebook paper. According to the self-report on technology at PHCS, laptops allow students to be responsible for a larger share of the active learning process and “do more of the work.” Teachers share resources online, such as the daily PowerPoint lesson, and students easily download the file to their computers. Students then actively fill in missing information or take notes in the file.

PHCS asserts their technology-infused curriculum is superior in four ways. First, content is more flexible and can be tailored to student’s interests and needs. This allows for increased differentiation by providing supports and sophistication on an individual basis. Second, the
curriculum is modern and can be easily updated, whereas expensive textbooks become either outdated or must be continuously purchased. Next, technology provides a holistic view of the school. Teachers and administrators can instantly communicate current data on students, providing transparency on issues including discipline and academic performance. Finally, information gathering and management is streamlined. Teachers immediately collect and analyze test data to identifying struggling students or content requiring further instruction. Administrators survey students and parents on a range of topics from extracurricular opportunities to general satisfaction. These components work together to foster “soft skills” including responsibility and individual ownership while preparing students for a 21st century workforce.

Technological fluency is viewed as a central tenant of preparing students for a career post-PHCS. On average, a student will graduate with 4 Microsoft Office Suite certifications. Furthermore, computer repairs and support is student led. “So the idea that if I can give them some training and can leave here and get a job at Best Buy on the Geek Squad or something like that, those were some hard skills that they could take with them” (Teacher Interview D 12/6/16). At PHCS, combining specific hard and soft skills acquired through a curriculum explicitly and implicitly tied to technology prepares students to earn and maintain employment.

A projector hangs from every classroom ceiling, displaying a bright screen on a central whiteboard. Teachers typically use the projector for PowerPoint slidshows, modeling exercises such as creating an outline in a word document, listing directions for an assignment, or displaying a timer for how long students are required to work on their current task. It is common for the projector to be on for the entire class period. Traditional writing on a whiteboard requires
the teacher to turn away from the class. A projector supports classroom management by allowing the teacher to face students while also having the capability to display a variety of sources.

Students have access to numerous resources both on and offline. Laptops are installed with Microsoft Office, web browsers, and a comprehensive management program for email, event and task planning, and general organization. Furthermore, students have access to online programs through school subscriptions, including online encyclopedias and news including a subscription to the local newspaper and the New York Times.

The PHCS technology self-report identifies challenges and opportunities common in today’s technology classroom. First and foremost, off-task behavior distracts and leads to inefficient class time. A clear and strict discipline policy along with updated filtering programs focuses students. Teachers are expected to manage their classrooms and ensure cooperation. When students first arrive at the school, they do not take laptops home each day and must earn the privilege over time. Students are taught how to effectively use the computers to gather information while thinking critically, a point I will illustrate in the subsequent section on curriculum. Furthermore, administrators may struggle with information overload at the school, while teachers may be overwhelmed without a textbook to rely on. Ultimately, the self-reporting on 1 to 1 computing at PHCS is extremely optimistic towards the integration of technology into all facets of the school.

**Today’s Operation of PHCS**

PHCS opened its doors for students in the fall of 2002, located downtown in an urban Pennsylvania city. Total enrollment for the 2016 school year was about 600 students, or about
150 per grade level. About 2/3 of students were deemed “economically disadvantaged”, a
categorization determined by the district based on poverty data sources such as the census,
Medicaid, foster home enrollment, and free or reduced price lunch eligibility. Half the students at
PHCS are Black or African American, 40% are White, 8% are multiracial, 2% are Hispanic, and
1% is Asian.

PHCS is a year round school with three trimesters. The first day of school for students is
typically the first week of September and the year officially ends the last week of July. Students
have two three-week vacations; in the middle of December and again in the middle of April,
followed by a five-week vacation throughout August. Students are expected to arrive to school
by 7:50 am, the first class begins at 8:00, and dismissal takes places at 3:45.

**Daily Operation and Micro-Structures**

Barbara Jones is an avid bicyclist. When the weather is warm, she takes the “Busscycle”
to work, locking her bike to the front of a city bus in the morning and biking the 9 miles home in
the afternoon. On a cold and dark March morning, she carpool with three teachers who live
nearby and parks a few blocks from school in a 10 dollar per day lot. Pennsylvania High Charter
School occupies the first five stories of a 20-story downtown office building. The group enters
the school at 7:30, swiping their keycards at the all-glass door in the rear of the building, then
again at the main door in the lobby to the right of the security station, and once more to enter the
elevator. Barbara presses the elevator button and school day 106 has begun.

Unlocking the door, Barbara enters a long and narrow classroom. The whiteboard on the
wall to the right has a wide blank space separating writing on both sides.
Walking to the opposite side of the room, she places her over-the-shoulder carrier bag filled with graded papers and a water bottle down on the chair behind the last desk. At 7:45, she moves to the hallway to greet students entering the school and to check uniforms. At PHCS, students are required to wear “professional” attire. No “exaggerated” logos, text, or designs permissible. According to a poster on the PHCS website, female students are expected to wear collared shirts, blouses, turtlenecks, or sweaters with dress pants or an appropriate length skirts or dress. Male students wear a collared shirt or sweater with dress pants and dress shoes. Additional illustrations regulate the style of headwear, makeup, and jewelry. On a cool March day, the preferred style appears to be khakis and long sleeve dress shirts for men and pants, blouses, and sweaters for women. Students gather and talk around their lockers and head to their classrooms at 7:55. Period A begins silently at 8:00, void of the traditional school wide bell common in so many traditional high schools.

For the first two periods of the day, from 8:00 to 10:05, Barbara has planning time. Out of the six class periods per day, teachers are required to teach four and plan during two. During planning time, Barbara typically meets with students, plans lessons, and grades. The scheduling allows co-teachers to collaborate during planning time, integrating math with science and English with social studies. For Barbara, this year has been unique because she has been working
towards an English as Second Language (ESL) certification, requiring visits to other schools to conduct classroom observations. Other grade level team requirements can further restrict teacher planning time, such as fulfilling grade-level obligations, helping the office with late student arrivals, or calling parents.

Students transition into Barbara’s room at 10:10 and period C silently begins five minutes later. Walking to their assigned seats, students open their laptops, plug in their headphones, and begin the warm-up inscribed by the projector. Barbara sits in the back of the room, taking attendance on her laptop and monitoring students; a daily routine. If students do not enter quietly and immediately begin their work, they may be asked to line up and reenter the room in a more “appropriate” way. The warm-up typically lasts about ten minutes of silent independent work time, at which time Barbara walks to the front of the class and greets the class.

“Okay class, please go half-mast.” The uniform halfway closing of laptop screens takes about 10 seconds. Barbara reads through the objective for the day along with the agenda, changing the slides on the projector from the warm-up to the next activity. Today, students work in stations and move every ten minutes as a group of four students to the next activity. By 11:10, students are cleaning up their area, chatting, and being dismissed back into the hallway. For the next 10 or so minutes, Barbara will clean and organize her room, preparing for a long afternoon of three consecutive classes. Around 11:20, she takes the elevator back down to the cafeteria to purchase a “pretty tasty and very cheap” lunch, and then it is back upstairs to eat with her fellow teachers at the staff table located in the teacher’s lounge.
The teacher’s lounge is next-door to Barbara’s room and is a long corner office divided into 4 areas by cubicle walls. In the front area sits a large communal table where teachers congregate, eat, work together, and discuss school happenings, with a large refrigerator housed at the end of table. The three subsequent areas are teacher workspaces. Here, Barbara leaves her bag, jacket, and other belongings throughout the day for safekeeping.

At noon, the teachers head back to their classrooms for a thirty minute flex period that changes depending on the day. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students have clubs based on their interest. This Trimester, Barbara leads a sign-language club with about 15 students. She explains her excitement about her next club subject:

I secured funding for a bike club. We are going to ride around downtown, there are about 8 different trails and we are going to bring boxed-lunches from the cafeteria with us and have picnics! The group will probably be smaller, around 8 or so students, but it will be great when the weather is nicer.

On Wednesdays, students have a silent study period to catch up on schoolwork. On Mondays and Fridays, students have advisory when Barbara will assist in a different classroom. Teachers at PHCS are assigned an advisory group and loop with the students for all four years. However, Barbara is one of the few teachers at the school who does not loop and therefore does not run her own advisory. On Mondays, students use advisory time as a “grade check”, looking over progress reports and prioritizing classes in which they are struggling or behind on assignments. During this time, teachers call parents to discuss student progress or upcoming events and hold conferences with students on a variety of issues. On Fridays, advisories conduct exercises and games to build culture.
For the next three hours, Barbara will teach three classes, periods F, H, and I. Students sit in pairs at two person desks, organized into two columns and seven rows. This arrangement allows for easy collaboration between pairs and if larger groups are required, students can simply turn around and form 3-4 person teams. Each class has about 20 students, on the larger size for a lead teacher without any support staff or co-teacher at the school. Barbara moves up and down the center aisle of the room between her work area in the back to the projector displaying the current assignment in the front. Empty desks at the back of the room are often reserved for markers, poster paper, or other necessary class supplies, as well as a space for a student assistant to grade papers. On the shelves in the back of the class are stacks of folders, one set per class, distributed and collected each period. Across from the shelves, a small box sits next to a window holding a class set of headphones, individually wrapped in a zip-lock bag, although at least half the class brings their own each day. At 3:40, Barbara dismisses Period I, the last class of the day, and begins to organize the classroom, a five-minute break before her final formal obligation of the day.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, PHCS holds study club, an optional after-school period for students to work on assignments. Teachers elect to stay and support students during this time. For Barbara, it is a way to meet with students in a less formal environment, to be “relaxed Mrs. Jones.” Study club lasts an hour, from 3:45 until 4:45. For 9th and 10th grade teachers, it is an active hour, working hard to answer student questions, whereas 11th and 12th grade study club can be more relaxed because students manage their work independently. One teacher per grade is responsible for student snacks during this time, funded by Title I money, and is required to keep
track of the food in a spreadsheet. Other grade-level requirements for teachers include managing the school website, managing teacher coverage, and maintaining teacher resources.\textsuperscript{20} These responsibilities are negotiated at the beginning of the year by each grade-level team and vary by group based on their priorities.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, Barbara and her 9\textsuperscript{th} grade team hold a 30-minute meeting after school. Before the meeting is held, an agenda is circulated and teachers can add necessary items. Master teachers also serving as grade level team leaders oversee the meetings as team facilitators. The meetings are used to address four objectives. First, teachers discuss students who are struggling, often academically, emotionally, or with their attendance. Next, they identify the student of the month and other individuals to be recognized for “positive choices.” Next, they address more general concerns with “floor management.” This may include issues with student transitions or overall trends in student behavior. Finally, school wide announcements are passed down from the leadership team. The school holds staff-wide meetings over lunch on half-days one Friday per month.

Now a veteran teacher of 11 years, Barbara works hard to complete her work at school. This often leads to about one day per week staying past six o’clock but typically she is able to leave between five and five-thirty. Keeping her home free of too much grading and lesson planning helps delineate between work time and free time while providing an incentive not to delay necessary tasks or spend unnecessary time on an assignment.

\textsuperscript{20} The PHCS White Paper on teacher looping lists ten teacher roles managing the following: technology for staff, technology for students, graduation requirements, teacher coverages, clubs, leader, field trips, internships, and a facilitator.
School Evaluation

At the end of each year, the school is required by Pennsylvania state law to present an annual evaluation. The state reports Academic Performance Data, student and teacher demographics, and descriptive information of the school on the website www.paschoolperformance.org. In addition, an independent audit of the school’s finances is conducted and available on the website. PHCS provides a more comprehensive interrogation of the school, a 20-page report card designed by Dr. Williams and Dr. Hannah Thompson, an outside curriculum consultant who has been involved with the school since its inception. After Dr. Williams and Dr. Thompson created the document, it was “vetted by our faculty” and has subsequently evolved over the years to improve clarity. Dr. Williams preferred a more inclusive report for two reasons. First, he doesn’t “believe in evaluating schools based on one standardized test score on one day.” Second, constructing a holistic school evaluation was inherently important to the health of the school. To understand if the school is succeeding, you need to “create the language of how that evaluation is going to occur.” In the future, this evaluation could then be used to “show the world how you evaluate a school.”

Initially, the report cards were heavy on details and difficult to absorb. “They are a little more colorful and graphic now. But they are still collecting the same amount of data.” The reports are kept on the school’s website, dating back to the school’s conception.

So if you have 20 pages of how you evaluate a school, you take a look at attendance rates of faculty, staff, and students. You take a look at discipline. You take a look at the number of master’s degrees you have. You take a look at surveys [from] students, parents, and teachers. You take a look at how the board’s behavior is and what they are doing. You take a look at the number of promotions on your teacher evaluation proposal. You [compare] your survey data against survey data of similar questions that have been
aggregated [in another city]…School satisfaction, teacher satisfaction. We are asking questions about staff development, how much we have done with that. We have a variety of assessments. So we are looking at GPAs, graduation rates, college acceptance rates…It’s a complex world…Let’s measure it in a complex way, and then we will have a very good understanding. So if somebody wants to understand whether we are a good school or whether your neighborhood school where you send your child is good, look at this. And if you bring in an outside evaluator, then it has integrity.

The school also highlights particular areas of redress from the previous year, for example, communication between staff and leadership. The subsequent report card evaluates how the school approached the issue and if a resolution or progress occurred.

Staff and faculty investment in the annual report were essential to Dr. Williams, even though he and the outside consultant were its designers. In August of each year, a three-hour period would be spent working in small groups to look through the previous year’s report card and “coming up with concerns and circling things and [having a big discussion]. Well that is powerful.” For Dr. Williams, running and evaluating a school is a science and the more data is collected, analyzed, and clearly presented, the more likely improvements can and will be made.

Dr. Williams views the PHCS as a great success. The school’s performance score exceeds all public high schools in the district and rivals wealthy suburban public schools in the county.

We’re saving lives. Every year we save 624 lives. They used to make fun of me. “You’re an ass, you’re exaggerating, what are you talking about.” And then after a teacher would be there four or five five years, they would come up to me and go “I thought you were a real ass, a real jerk, I mean what is this like NYPD Blue or something”…I truly believe after spending 4 years working with the same children, average children, we are saving lives…We are in the top five, six, seven, eight schools in the county, forgetting free or reduced lunch. We’ve eliminated it. Two years ago, I don’t know if it’s now, we had eliminated the racial achievement gap. Zero!
If the school wanted to expand or replicate, Dr. Williams is sure the city school board would grant permission. While there was resistance in 2001 when applying for the charter, tangible student performance has resulted in a stable and indefinite charter for the school.

**Graduation Results**

Arguments in support of school autonomy through charter expansion are often predicated on an increase in school accountability, sometimes referred to as the autonomy-accountability bargain (Miron & Nelson, 2000). For charter proponents, traditional public school systems and teacher unions are not threatened by consequences for poor performance because cities and towns lack viable alternatives. The extreme pro-charter advocates are not in favor of strict measurement of charter schools and argue parental choice will lead to consequences of failing schools. More moderate charter advocates argue for assessment and evaluation of all schools, including charters. These assessments vary by state, often resembling a school grading system similar to traditional A, B, C, D, F grades common in most schools, a point system, for example from zero to one-hundred, or a combination of the two. For charter high schools, performance is often determined by student performance on state test scores and AP exams, attendance and dropout rates, and the number of graduating students and their immediate prospects, namely job placement or college acceptance.

PHCS is one of the highest performing high schools in the county, annually receiving a state performance score near 80 out of 100. The school outperforms all urban public schools in the district and is comparable to wealthier suburban public high schools outside the city. At PHCS, about half of seniors attend a four-year college or university, one-quarter attend a two
year or technical school, and one-quarter become employed through the military or otherwise. The founder and staff fervently claim the school is “successful” and go to great lengths to add evidence to support the high performance score from the state. The annual reports provided on the school website, required by the state to be presented each year to the local school board, measure a litany of school variables, including graduation rates (about 95%), parent, student, and teacher satisfaction surveys, internship host satisfaction, teacher quality and growth assessments, and of the special education department. School performance data for each category is generally quantitative with written explanations of the provided charter, graph, or table. For example, for Teacher Quality and Growth, the report provides a table of the number of promotions during the year, the percentage of teachers with at least a Master’s degree over the last seven years (currently at about seventy-five percent), and a list of responses with culminating response rates of the annual teacher survey and the yearly fluctuation.

**Discussion**

PHCS is an urban charter school defined by four central structures: democratization, continuous professional development, community, and an interdisciplinary curriculum. These four systems intra-act. For example, democratic decision making at the grade-level creates community amongst the staff, as does co-teaching across subject areas. This “synergy” was critical to how Dr. Williams’ viewed the “ideal” school, emphasizing process and “the big picture” and not small pieces of content knowledge.

Because look, this whole system we have at [PHCS] is built on synergy, and that is a very important point. Everything is pointed in one direction and everything helps everything else work. So it is based on these core principals. (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017)
These four structures should not be expected to be the norm in charter schools, such a norm simply does not exist and is antithetical to the original purpose of charters as autonomous laboratories of innovation. However, as is evidence by Dr. Williams’ discussion, he intended to build a shining school upon a hill to be idealized and used as a model for other schools. The school, through internal reports and evaluations, worked to legitimize these systems, depicting their successes to be used both as evidence for the school’s success and as a model for interested parties. The latter did not occur (chapter 9), much to the chagrin of Dr. Williams, although he is comfortable knowing he built a “successful” charter school in the face of a political landscape that he would argue was not working to support his vision.

The school systems described in this chapter reference the first half of Britzman’s (Britzman, 2003) double insight, whereby social structure and biography inter-act. In the next two chapters, Barbara and Maria’s stories and subjectivities will address the second halve of the double insight. It is in relation to these structures that their subjectivities must negotiate and navigate.
CHAPTER 6. BARBARA JONES: “THE TEACHERS AREN’T BROKEN”

In this chapter, I present Barbara Jones and her narrative of entering the classroom directly out of college. Barbara has been teaching at PHCS for about five years and brings a unique perspective through her experience teaching at both a traditional public school and a charter school before moving to PHCS. In this chapter, I rely on de Certeau’s (1984) notion of “tactics” to explain how Barbara navigates the structures both inside her charter and the larger societal institutions she focuses on in her pursuit and passion for social justice. When a dominant institution, structure, or culture is superimposed onto subjects, a space of plurality and creativity becomes possible through tactics. For de Certeau, as power accumulates, it becomes more difficult to mobilize or spread, leading to more “trickery” by the weak. In education, teachers identify the spaces where power is limited or the “absence of power” (p. 38), where they can make the greatest impact and navigate the structural influences most adeptly, using tactics to disrupt order and stratification. These tactics are important to Barbara’s subjectivity in relation to her work at PHCS, particularly through an understanding of her drive for social justice and equity.

Entering the Field of Education

Barbara Jones was born and raised in a small Midwest city. She attended a high school of about 2,000 students, the only public high school in the city, where “sports were a big thing.” After graduation, she went on to attend a small liberal arts school in the state for scholarship reasons, travelling abroad four separate semesters while majoring in media. Initially, Barbara saw herself as a photojournalist but changed course upon the realization she would be expected
to depict war and destruction. During Barbara’s senior year, a personality test suggested she pursue speech pathology or teaching. Preferring the latter, she applied to the alternative certification programs Teach For America, Teach Austin and the Chicago Teaching Fellows. She enrolled in the latter, an entity of The New Teacher Project, and moved to Chicago to complete the five week summer institute. Each day was broken in half, with student teaching summer school classes in the mourning and learning about education in the afternoons. Upon completion, Barbara was hired at a public high school in Englewood. “I remember looking up the statistics, its like 98 percent African American, 95% receiving free or reduced lunch” (B. Jones, personal interview, December 6, 2016). Barbara, a White, well-travelled, bilingual, photography-loving 22 year old woman from the Midwest with five-weeks of teacher training, had known she wanted to teach for all of six months, but was guided by a strong sense of social justice she maintains in the classroom a decade later.

Barbara began her teaching career in the fall of 2006 at a large neighborhood school of about 1400 students. “I taught for two years at that school. And you know, no resources, it was a rough school…not a learning environment” (B. Jones, personal interview, December 6, 2016). During her second year, she was made the department chair because her superior went on sick leave for four months. Barbara quickly became frustrated with the school’s administration and looked for positions elsewhere.

After two years, Barbara moved to a public charter school on the opposite side of the city. While the charter was similarly made up almost entirely of African-American and Black students, it was substantially smaller, with only about 600 students. The charter was also better
resourced, with 12 desktop computers in each classroom, and a substantial counseling department, counselors looped with the students for four years and spent the fifth year supporting students after high school. The charter school emphasized non-violent conflict resolution and restorative justice practices and “it was definitely a family kind of environment” (B. Jones, personal interview, December 6, 2016). Barbara’s reflections on her time spent teaching in Chicago, specifically her perception of teacher unions and strikes, are useful in describing the prominent education reforms taking place in the city at the time.

**Unions, Strikes, and School Leadership in Chicago**

Chicago is often cited as ground zero for neoliberal reform agendas due in part to Milton Friedman’s time spent at the University of Chicago (N. Klein, 2007). More recently, Paul Vallas\(^1\) and Arne Duncan\(^2\), both former leaders of Chicago Public Schools, have become public figures in the effort to expand charter schools in urban areas. “Chicago, with its long history of very powerful municipal executives, was one of the earliest sites of mayoral takeover and subsequent control of a city’s schools” (Nunez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015, p. 12). In short, reforms and political actions in Chicago reverberate throughout the nation’s urban spaces.

Charter school expansion in urban areas results in diminished teacher unions because charters typically do not employ unionized educators. Barbara was a union member for her first

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\(^{1}\) Vallas served as CEO of Chicago Public Schools from 1995-2001, later serving as the Superintendent of the Recovery School District of Louisiana from 2007-2012. During this time, the city became almost entirely chartered, partly as a result of the devastation and displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina, although privatization efforts were already taking place (Buras, 2014).

\(^{2}\) Duncan served as the Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools from 2001-2009, later serving as President Barack Obama’s Secretary of Education from 2009-2015.
two years while at the TPS but viewed the organization as mostly ensuring teachers were not fired, even if they appeared to be ineffective. This was mostly based on her experiences with teachers at the school, although Barbara admits she was a novice at the time concerning the political aspects of teaching and organizing in a large city.

Barbara’s interpretation of the differences between the TPS and the charter school has changed over the years. While at the TPS, Barbara was critical of the teacher’s union and many of her colleagues who did not appear to take responsibility for the lack of student achievement.

There were some awful teachers at the only public school I’ve worked at. One that comes to mind quickly was a special education teacher who spent most of the period she was supposed to be in class reading magazines in the teachers lounge. I thought the union protected them. (B. Jones, personal reflection, September 10, 2012)

After moving to the Chicago charter school and leaving the union, Barbara closely followed the politics of the shifting education landscape in the city. She maintained close friendships with her former colleagues and other union members and shifted her stance regarding the union.

Now I think that the principal allowed them to be awful. That’s not a union issue, that’s a leadership issue. There were teachers who got laid off, but subs would replace them in those classes for the whole year. Many of the issues that led to such a “bad” school were not union issues but systems-management issues. I’m amazed that school hasn’t been shut down, turned-around, or made into a charter. I have no idea how to fix that school, but the students deserve more than what they got when I was there, and I don’t think it was the teachers who made it that way. (B. Jones, personal reflection, September 10, 2012)

School leadership became the focal point of Barbara’s attention. During her six years in Chicago, she worked for five different principals, three of which were in their first year. The leadership turnover convoluted short and long term expectations of the staff, including salary projections, a factor for Barbara when deciding to leave the charter school. Barbara was not only concerned
about her welfare. The accountability measures pressed down from the Mayor’s office influenced how leaders functioned in schools, resulting in a climate of anxiety and fear.

Being a good leader takes time. It takes a good team. It takes a stable environment and the support to grow… I worry that all these new principals will be operating out of fear. If they don’t create drastic improvements, then not only will they be fired, but the entire school will be shut down. I’ve worked in that environment. It is not conducive to learning. (B. Jones, personal reflection, September 11, 2012)

Ultimately for Barbara, the system had too many deficiencies to overcome, regardless of the quality of leadership or teaching staff, the schools were simply under resourced. Furthermore, a culture of accountability was threatening creativity.

In 2012, the Chicago Teacher’s Union went on strike for the first time in 25 years after failing to find common ground in contract negotiations with the Chicago Public Schools. The union outlined four key demands: smaller classes, a better day to go with a longer day, fair compensation, and job security. Teachers were striking to protect art, music, and physical education programs for the city’s poorest schools, as well as the job security and pay necessary to attract talented professionals willing to work towards social change (Nunez et al., 2015). Barbara supported the efforts of the union.

I have read many Chicago teachers’ perspectives, and listened to why they’re fighting. These teachers are not broken. I am in awe and have amazing respect for them showing up day after day, year after year, supporting and encouraging their students to achieve. Is this strike about pay? Evaluations? I don’t really think so. It definitely seems that way in the media. I think it’s about teachers demanding to be treated better. Better working conditions are better learning conditions. There are many changes being made/proposed. Chicago leaders seem to think that chopping up a district will solve the problem. Sure, there will be less unionized teachers, but the quality of schools will not improve and student outcomes will not be better. The system will still fail kids, and that is not a victory, no matter how much cheaper it is. The Chicago teachers are empowered. In this political climate, unionized teachers are the only people who can truly stand up
and demand that resources be given to all students. The teachers aren’t broken, so stop trying to fix them. Fix the system. (B. Jones, personal reflection, September 13, 2012)

These sentiments echo critiques of neoliberal education reform policy arguing privatization is not about student outcomes but about profit (Saltman, 2014). Barbara did not view the charterization of the city as a holistic solution for unsatisfactory traditional public schools. Furthermore, the turmoil created by the changing education landscape made it difficult to predict her long-term viability in the city, resulting in her eventual departure from Chicago.

**From Chicago to Pennsylvania**

After teaching for six years in Chicago, Barbara was emotionally exhausted. She struggled with the charter’s ambiguous pay scale, predicting when she could afford a home, and whether she could see herself staying in the city long-term. Most importantly, she had met the man who would become her husband and he had moved to an urban part of Pennsylvania. Barbara considered moving back to Chicago Public Schools but the district was in turmoil, laying off hundreds of teachers while closing schools. Instead, she moved with her boyfriend to Pennsylvania and began looking for positions at charter schools in the area. At the time, the local public school system was also in the midst of teacher layoffs in an effort to save money. That spring, after sending her cover letter and resume to Pennsylvania High Charter School, she was hired to begin in the fall of 2012 to teach electives.²³

Barbara has been teaching at PHCS for five years. While she views her time teaching in Chicago as a valuable experience, persevering through difficult and sometimes unimaginable circumstances, she prefers her current school for a variety of reasons. These preferences are

²³ The course subject is omitted to protect anonymity.
important in that they construct how Barbara views a “successful” public school. First and foremost, PHCS is well resourced compared to her Chicago schools. The school provides her with resources and funding to pursue her interests, including reimbursing her for fees to attend national conferences. More menial classroom supplies are covered, and she can easily ship supplies directly to her office, a convenience she noted to me during one of my first visits to the school. Her students are equipped with a laptop and headphones and she has access to a variety of software products that support her instruction. Available resources were one of the driving factors in her move from the TPS to the charter school in Chicago, and PHCS is even more economically stable. “Most schools (charter or otherwise) struggle to teach diverse learners with varied needs. All schools need a equitable amount of resources to address all students” (B. Jones, personal reflection, June 18, 2012). For Barbara, it is not enough that urban schools innovate; they need the resources to support students facing unique challenges.

Barbara has considerable autonomy over her curriculum because she is the only teacher in her content field and was promoted to Expert Teacher. As such, Barbara is afforded more freedom by administration as evidenced by the limited number of observations taking place in her classroom each year.24 The teacher ladder is a unique teacher evaluation system that prioritizes teacher growth through reflection. This protocol appeals to Barbara, who maintains a blog and constantly examines her own practices and role as a teacher. “Blogging for me is meant

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24 Barbara is observed by her grade-level principal about two times per year. The principal randomly observes the teacher, meets with the teacher to discuss the observation, and finally provides written feedback on the process. During the promotion process, teachers are observed more frequently. Furthermore, Barbara assumes teachers lower on the teacher ladder or those in more need of support are observed more frequently.
to be reflective as much as it’s meant to be my contribution to the conversation around education. Sometimes it will stay just with me, but simply getting something out helps me process” (B. Jones, personal reflection, August 1, 2012). She discusses topics related to school choice and teaching in charter schools while reflecting on books relevant to education and teaching in urban environments. Barbara entered education to provide a social good. PHCS provides her the space to reflect on her pedagogy, social justice issues, and their interaction.

Finally, there is an underlying sense that the problems facing PHCS staff members, especially classroom management and student behavior, are less severe than those Barbara faced in her time in Chicago. Students in Chicago face violence and tragedy on a scale uncommon in this area of Pennsylvania. Barbara is passionate about social justice and equity but was unable to balance these pursuits with the emotional burden of living and working in urban Chicago. This is a unique feeling for Barbara, as few teachers at PHCS have experienced teaching in charter school elsewhere in the country.

Combined with her husband’s relocation, these factors attributed to Barbara’s continuity at PHCS longer than her previous two schools. While she does not view charters as a solution to all urban schooling problems, she views her current charter favorably as a result of its unique central tenants.

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25 Books discussed include works by Emdin (2016), Coates (2015), Palmer (2007), and Berlak and Moyenda (2001)
26 In 2016, Chicago had the 9th most homicides of any US city according to the BBC.
Anti-traditional Public Schools

Barbara’s subjectivity is deeply routed in her desire to consider, discuss, debate, and ultimately address social justice issues. She personally devotes her life to issues of equity and equality by remaining in the classroom, long after many of her peers have moved on to other roles or fields. Barbara sees the inadequacies with urban public school as structural. While she was exposed to ineffective teachers in a TPS, she maintains that the causes of the current inequality between “good” and “bad” schools is structural.

Barbara views the TPS where she began her teaching career as the least effective school of the three she has worked. In part, this was due to the available resources at the school. Where PHCS has the most available resources and is viewed the most fondly, the public high school in Chicago with the least available resources is viewed most negatively. Her reflections were also critical of the staff, comparing the teachers at the public school to those at her second school, a charter where she worked in Chicago, she stated:

I think I got the impression that people cared about the students a little bit more. Or they had the time and energy and desire to care about the students a little bit more. And you know, it wasn’t like a show up, do my thing. If these kids act a fool then that’s on them, but it was really like a focusing on relationships was a big part of it. Creating spaces and opportunities for students to see something beyond the classroom and beyond their community, that was one of the things I was excited about. (B. Jones, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

For Barbara, some teachers at the TPS were spending too much time conducting business other than teaching, took unnecessary paid leave, or did not take responsibility for the actions of the students. However, her views of public school teachers in a city are less negative when viewed collectively. Barbara blogged about her support for the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012,
viewing the city’s decisions to expand Teach For America funding and the closing of public city schools as “unjust”, a sentiment echoed by academics in the city (Nunez et al., 2015). Having both attended and worked in TPSs, Barbara’s criticism is most aimed at a few bad actors and not necessarily the institutions. Critiques of the underlying philosophies are far more numerous from the school internal reports.

First, the assumption is made that traditional high schools do not support students enough because students move between teachers each year. At PHCS, it is possible for a four-year student to learn from a total of about 12 lead classroom teachers, whereas TPSs may be closer to two or three times that number. Access to a wider variety of teaching styles and personalities may benefit students, particularly those on the margins who do not easily acclimate to a school norm. Second, a teacher ladder assumes traditional pay-for-experience models do not lead to the development of a teacher, “you can’t just maintain.” The idea that teachers become stagnant in their approach or complacent in their trade is reverberated in the previous argument on the importance of “effective” teaching. An emphasis on internships and business preparation is not merely an addition to the school philosophy: something must be subtracted. Students at PHCS typically have two trimesters of Spanish with the decision to opt in for an additional trimester. Compared to traditional high schools, this is unusual. Furthermore, Advanced Placement classes are not offered, nor are sports, with a few clubs meeting voluntarily after school. A narrowing of the available curriculum or activities for students coinciding with a regimented dress code, behavior plan, and school culture, highlights perhaps the most antithetical tenant of PHCS to TPSs: student access.
PHCS enrolls about 600 students each year, or 150 students per grade. Meanwhile, the school maintains a waiting list of about 150 students, or between 35 and 40 per grade. Directly, access is limited based on the number of seats available versus the number of students who aspire to enroll in the school. Retention rates at the school are not publicly reported but can be approximated by comparing the number of enrolled students from sophomore year to junior year because the school does not accept students after tenth grade. Furthermore, the school only accepts students during the first four weeks of the first or second trimester of freshman year and students must meet academic criteria (earned credits contingent on grades) to begin sophomore year, a “huge perk” over traditional schools forced to accept students throughout the year. This benefit provides structure to the school because teachers are not asked to alter their workload in the middle of the year for new students.

In a conversation about school choice, Barbara wondered about the implications of school choice both for students and the school in the following interaction with myself:

Barbara: I have an example of a student who has hopped around. This is sophomore year; this might be the student’s third school. They didn’t like where they started, so they went to a different charter school. Didn’t like how that was going so started here. So that idea that you aren’t going to work it out, you are just going to move to a different school. Or the fact that I can pick a school that like…And I can pick a school that has my interests and sometimes you will be in a parent conversation and the parent is like “If they want to leave they can leave.”

Gareth: So that would be an example of a negative result of having choice in a school system is students aren’t necessarily working through their issues? It is almost like having too much choice?

Barbara: Yeah. The idea, you don’t like our dress code, you can go somewhere else. The idea that we can kind of say that is also bizarre. And when we were talking about equality across, any student in [this] community, a lot of them are never going to choose to come to [PHCS]. A. because they don’t know about it B. The information they have would
discourage them from choosing to go there, the longer school day, going to school in the summer, no sports.

Gareth: You would say in some way self-selecting a certain type of student.

Barbara: [Nods] (B. Jones, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

Barbara is convinced the school does great work but is concerned with the students who do not attend PHCS and their fate attending TPSs. Obviously the school can’t serve every student in the city, but is the school serving those most in need of a “super strict” school, or does the school’s reputation dissuade those students from attending, instead recruiting students who don’t mind the structure because they are already motivated to work hard and stay on task?

Inside the school, teachers avoid political discussions on the differences between PHCS and TPSs or urban education reform policy. According to Barbara, “the teachers here would rather focus on what they have power in their classroom over the bigger picture of what it really means to be charter vs. public vs. the stuff that is happening with vouchers and things like that” (B. Jones, personal interview, April 5, 2017). However, for Dr. Williams, the animosity towards the public school system is overt, describing the system as “dead, it’s doing nothing, it can’t get anything done.” Clearly, this view influenced Williams’ decision-making when developing the school, knowing he did not want to replicate what he viewed as failing urban public schools. This continues to resonate throughout the school, regardless of whether teachers discuss it openly.

The internal reports posted on the PHCS repeatedly depict the flaws of the traditional neighborhood open-enrollment model of public schooling. It was one of the first topics Dr. Williams brought up in our discussion, when he declared school choice existed “based on where
people decided to live.” A similar sentiment is central to Klein’s (2014) thesis whereby wealthy families in America have access to school choice but poor families do not and competition in urban areas will spur innovation, a supposition founded on the premise that traditional neighborhood schools are stagnant in their approach, do not recruit the best talent and are incapable of addressing poor teaching or poor leadership because of bureaucratic concerns. For charter advocates, including those inside PHCS, challenging the flaws in traditional public schooling is central to the school philosophy because TPS defects are integral to the existence of charters. This point has a long history of contestation and is worth examining.

In 1966, The Office of Education commissioned a report led by James Coleman, a Johns Hopkins’ sociologist, aimed at determining educational opportunities for US students. The report found that segregation continued to exist post-Civil Rights Act but Black and White schools were mostly funded equally. Coleman concluded the most important factor in determining student achievement was home life and the background of the family. Furthermore, middle class White schools had students from a wide range of economic and social backgrounds, many of who valued higher education regardless of their socioeconomic status. Most importantly, Coleman was one of the first researchers to provide evidence in opposition to the widespread belief that the success of a student is directly correlated with teacher quality, instead positing that the makeup of the class is more consequential (Coleman, 1968). Since then, debates over how much a teacher influences the achievement of a student have flourished. Those in favor of TPSs often cite the variance attributable to segregation policies, systemic racism and poverty

27 Talent equating to the SAT scores of college graduates entering the field of teaching, disputed in recent trends (Lankford, Loeb, McEachin, Miller, & Wyckoff, 2014).
surrounding impoverished schools, and parent background and involvement. Those in favor of education reform emphasize the difference an “effective” teacher can make over an “ineffective” teacher, with the assumption this can be quantitatively determined through standardized test scores. The definition of “effective teacher” has changed during this time, from experienced and certified (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000) to high student test score data (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). PHCS fits firmly in the camp affirming TPSs have failed urban students but Barbara is less inclined to place blame for these failures.

One common theme throughout Barbara’s reflections on education reform is erosion of debate across prevailing binary groups: those in support or opposition of charter schools, teacher unions, high stakes testing, value-added measurements, teacher tenure, school takeovers, alternative-certification programs, and many more controversial issues in education. PHCS reports identify alleged shortcomings of TPSs to justify their own systems and procedure. However, Barbara questions where, if, and how blame should be placed.

Everyone is feeling attacked. I am. People think I am attacking them. I have been told by another educator that because I am a charter school teacher, I am destroying everything they hold near and dear to them in this world. This is also frustrating because I support many things that my fellow colleagues are working toward, including stopping the expansion of charters just for the sake of expanding charters, and I supported Chicago teacher’s striking for more resources. I started entering the education debate less than a year ago. I didn’t see my perspective represented in most conversations [on charters], so I wanted to speak of my experiences. But seeing where I’m at now, and seeing where the people I’ve been trying to engage with are at, I think there are far more hurt feelings and frustration than progress. It was not my intent when I began to point out the flaws of opposing viewpoints, only to speak of my experiences. I know that pointing out loopholes and flaws doesn’t build consensus. I also know that it’s important for us to take a nuanced view of these complex topics. We are all on the defense. No one seems to be listening to the other perspective and really hearing another side. In our attempt to convey our passion and perspective we have alienated others. (B. Jones, personal reflection, November 25, 2012)
Barbara is passionate about collaboration and cooperation. It is a driving force in keeping her at the school, as she maintains productive relationships with her peers, students, and friends. However, the discourse surrounding “failing” TPSs is problematic for Barbara. “We need to be careful with the national narrative on education reform and the counter-narrative. There is no black and white, good and evil. The vast majority of everyone involved in education is trying to help children” (B. Jones, personal reflection, November 25, 2012).

**Barbara and Power**

“The purpose of education is to teach people how to think critically about the world around them so they can make informed decisions throughout their life.”

-*Barbara Jones*

After the November 2016 US elections, I asked Barbara about the mood in the school. A relatively young, well educated, and urban workforce, I expected the teachers to be disappointed in the election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. Clinton expectedly won the urban areas of Pennsylvania, while Trump won the rural parts and surprised many by winning the state, cracking the “Blue Wall” of historically unionized and industrial states along the great lakes.\(^{28}\) However, I was interested because PHCS *perhaps* stood to gain under a conservative government. I expected teachers to be distraught but there was a chance, based on their

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\(^{28}\) I did not expect Trump to win the state. As a graduate student, my daily interactions were mostly with highly educated people who opposed Trump, greatly distorting my perception of his support throughout the country, including rural Pennsylvania just 20 miles from the school.
employer, they might welcome a conservative with free market ideals.\textsuperscript{29} Barbara responded to my question with the following list:

- I am disappointed. I am concerned for the future of my students.
- I have been near tears facing students. The mood in the teachers’ office is somber.
- I am thankful to work in a school that actively works to promote cultural understanding. When you work in an inclusive school that pulls from every neighborhood and meets in a center location you practice understanding and respect everyday.
- I appreciated Jay Smooth's video posted on Facebook, particularly the quote "Just as surely as America's history is the story of that hate, it is also the story of our resistance."
- In my class I'm more relaxed, working on our three paper posters, blasting Selena.

PHCS students took a mock election of their own, with Clinton winning 57\% of the vote, followed by Trump earning 32\%.\textsuperscript{30} During the 2016 campaign, Clinton seemed reluctant to fully embrace charter schools in a way President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan did throughout their time in both Chicago and Washington, DC. Clinton also voiced her support of teacher’s unions (Cassidy, 2016). However, these points did not seem to sway the support of the staff.\textsuperscript{31}

Barbara described one possible reason for this later on in the year when discussing political engagement and advocacy supporting charter schools.

But politically, it’s not really big; we [the staff] don’t talk politics [concerning charters] that much. It is something that the principal is aware of and the principal will do some stuff. But even then I get the sense that the teachers here would rather focus on what they have power in their classroom over the bigger picture of what it really means to be charter vs. public vs. the stuff that is happening with vouchers and things like that.

\textsuperscript{29} Whether President Trump is an advocate supporter of neoliberal policies is debatable, at this time his policy positions are often in flux.
\textsuperscript{30} Gary Johnson earned 7\% of the student’s vote and Jill Stein earned 5.0\%.
\textsuperscript{31} The election of Trump was reported to split charter school advocates, particularly after the nomination of Betsy Devos as Secretary of Education (Camera, 2017).
Barbara and the rest of the PHCS staff were working tirelessly to improve their own lessons, classroom management, student engagement, and a litany of other aspects critical to being an effective teacher. A charter school already signed their checks; they had made their choice. And the debate nationwide, or even locally, on whether another charter school should be built or if the city should fire more unionized teachers was out of their control. Regardless, the teacher resistances I initially expected to find (Horn, 2014), the questioning of administration and school philosophy and the feelings of doubt I endured in my time teaching at a charter school in New Orleans, were missing at PHCS. However, this does not mean the staff was unquestioningly working to spread neoliberalism throughout education.

For the PHCS staff in general and Barbara’s subjectivity in particular, their “power” and influence is over their students, not local and state policy making. This may be an affect of the small grade level teams and lack of whole school meetings and anti-unionization. The school prioritizes a familial feel, but this may be at the expense of widespread camaraderie or times for all teachers to meet and discuss more macro-level education concerns. Or teachers worry efforts outside of the school will detract from their impact on students inside the school. If they are to begin to work outside of the school in pursuit of a political goal or agenda, their time and effort could be detracted from the students with which they hold a familial bond. More overt political resistance could also threaten their job security, assuming their administrators do not agree with their political stance. While it appears once the charter school is built and staffed, the debate over privatizing education has concluded, I argue for a more nuanced look at the lives of teachers. In other words, it is easy to assume charter school teachers are entirely in support of further
privatization efforts based on their employment record but this is not necessarily the case. For this, I refer to de Certeau’s (1984) notion of “tactics”, whereby an individual does not follow a prescribed plan and deviates daily according to how they consume the “strategies” of powerful institutions.

A successful charter school has two possible outcomes concerning teacher “tactics.” First, it can work to limit the “tactics” used by teachers to resist the negative aspects of recent accountability measures, test. The school can impose strict guidelines for “successful” teaching, fire teachers who do not meet goals based on student test scores, and limit teacher autonomy.

This point was in tension and unclear at different times. The school’s internal reports emphasize teaching process skills and deemphasize the “teach to the test” culture that prioritizes content knowledge. However, in my discussion with Dr. Williams, he stated

I used to have my math teachers get together at a math meeting and they would bet each other cases of beer about who was going to get the higher test scores because they own those kids. If you have a teacher who has a class who gets shitty test scores, that’s on him or her.

It appeared acceptable state test scores were seen as a minimum for teachers to meet. However, the school was also in the midst of a curriculum overhaul in the science department, as Biology test scores were deemed insufficient. The school as a whole resists accountability measures but only so far as they are not considered failing by the state; the school’s performance grade is still important. Second, a school can build structures to promote teacher tactics. In this way, the school resists the traditional definition of an institution of power (maintaining strategies that outline expectations) and instead allow for tactics or chaos. I advocate for the latter, but expect,
as will be discussed in the following chapter on Maria, that schools create increased order or strategy as they develop and achieve success.

Barbara’s reflections on her transition to PHCS appear to be an argument in support of the shining school upon the hill. She talks endlessly about the available resources, technology, and freedom in her curriculum. She is interested in discussions on how to improve the school, and more general debates over urban education reform, but is unsure of the “solutions” put forth by advocates and opponents to charters. This hesitancy is not always common in such a political debate. The following reflection on her move from Chicago illustrates her acclimation.

In general, I’m much less exhausted emotionally, or physically than my previous schools. I’m still prone to mental exhaustion, but that’s because we are building our curriculum as we teach it. I find it to be challenging and exciting.

In some ways that’s not really a transition. Even if I wasn’t planning or grading, I spent time learning about education policy or new technology tools. I’ve always spent many hours inside and outside of the classroom thinking about education. Many times I think to myself “it will get easier after X…” or “next year it will be easier because I’ll have already gone through it” but then next year comes around and I’ve found something else to delve into.

What do you do when you don’t have to worry about classroom management, administrative documentation, lack of resources, or mandated curriculum? I am in Alice’s Wonderland of teaching...I am generally less stressed. I eat better. I read more books. Having limited amount of friends means my calendar is not full of social events.

The balance between home life and work will become a dominant theme for Barbara moving forward, a tension she has yet to solve, in part due to the lack of available teacher tactics at PHCS. In chapter 8, the tensions between Barbara’s biography and the school structures at PHCS are more thoroughly examined, particularly the tension between teacher autonomy and
expectations, between workforce preparation and curriculum individualization, and between school culture and discipline and surveillance.
CHAPTER 7. MARIA SANCHEZ: “ORGANIZED CHAOS”

This chapter presents Maria Sanchez’ story and subjectivity. Maria is in her early 50’s and came to teaching after her son graduated high school and moved off to college. With experience in a variety of fields including marketing, Maria brings business and technology proficiencies into the classroom. A self-identified risk-taker, Maria’s life experiences result in a classroom tension between order and chaos.

I think there is a certain thing as being an older adult, I am certainly willing to take risks and if it doesn’t work, then you change and alter course. A lot of what you have observed in my classroom, it was based on previous things but I would up the game a bit, change it a bit. Much of what you were observing was the first time things were happening. But I go in it with a lot of confidence so no one really knows. It is the sales and marketing part of [my background]. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

Ultimately, Maria is passionate about preparing students to be successful lifelong learners with the skills to be successful in adapting to a changing workforce.

**Entering the Field of Education**

Maria Sanchez took an especially unusual route into the classroom. A graduate of UCLA in business administration, Maria worked in sales and marketing in both California and Pennsylvania. Maria’s path into the class began with the birth of her youngest son.

When he was born he had some developmental delays, language delays. He was initially diagnosed as autistic, but as soon as his language skills caught up when he was four years old they took that off of the table because at the time they didn’t maintain an autism diagnosis if they were verbal. This was prior to higher functioning autism spectrum and all of that. I was also told because he wasn’t reading at the time, that I should consider special schools…I refused to give up on my child’s entire potential at the age of four. So I took it upon myself to supplement his education. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)
Maria spent time supporting her son’s teachers until he graduated high school and went to college. While still living in California, she studied educational theories and phonetics, supporting teachers in the midst of severe state budget cuts. Maria was still working as a director of marketing and sales manager, but had flexibility in her schedule to spend time in the classroom with her son.

In 1991, her family moved to Pennsylvania for her husband’s career. The small rural school struggled to diagnose her son. “It was kind of like ADHD, there were components of OCD but not really” (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016). Her role at the school expanded. Initially, she would supplement thematic units with resources from the local museum, including books, costumes, historical representations, and even live animals.

It started in my son’s classroom and spread to the whole school. The next thing I knew the whole school district was asking me if I could go to other schools. I did this for a few years and at that time the science center took notice of what I was doing. I invited them to come out for a science fair and they hired me and I was part of their education department for four or five years developing education programs kind of around this whole model. I called it edutainment. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

Maria spent the next part of her career working at the library and science center visiting schools to teach about “a weird eclectic mix of things.” When her son was about to graduate, she decided to pursue teaching.

I was like, maybe I will go back and get a teaching degree; apparently I kind of have a knack for this. Because of charter schools, that made that a realistic option for me. For me to go back and get a teaching degree at 50 would not have made sense. If my only option was a traditional tenured school track, that would not have made any sense. But with the charter school, it is based on merit. I tried to find a program where I could get my degree the fastest and was able to do like a summer fast tracked thing. So I actually, within a year, had a Master’s. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)
Coincidently, Maria earned her Master’s degree from the same university in Pennsylvania her son attended, attending night classes while working during the day.

Maria’s interest in PHCS was spurred by a job listing posted during her second year of school for a research educator. However, the school ended up hiring her immediately instead of waiting until the following year.

I was actually applying for a research job, that was the opening that was posted on the PHCS website. So when I came for the interview with Dr. Williams, when he was taking me around the school he kept talking about technology and business and I was a little bit confused because that was not the opening that was posted. But it turned out that they were letting one of the business teachers go immediately and had an immediate opening at the school. Whereas the research job was not going to be until the following fall. I explained, “I am not graduating until Saturday.” And he says, “great you can start Monday.” So I jumped into the middle of the school. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

She has experience teaching multiple subjects at the school, currently serves as a facilitator and team leader of her grade level team, and has completed multiple loops with students from 9th to 12th grade. Furthermore, she has experience under both the original and present school leadership teams, with a perspective on the difference in school culture since the change.

Using Technology to Prepare Students for the Workforce

Due to her work experience and time spent as a librarian, Maria initially taught business and technology classes at the school, including initiating certification programs in Microsoft Office and Adobe products. When she was hired, the school founders were making an effort to promote hands-on learning in the classrooms. How she came to teaching technology in the school was a bit of a misunderstanding.

I was doing simultaneously that collaboration project between [two local universities] so I was technically an employee of the robotics institute. So they [the school
administration] were all excited that I had this robotics institute background. Not really realizing I was the librarian for the program. So they’re like, “oh you know you could teach the business classes and also teach the technology classes.” I’m like “sure.” I had to brush up on my coding since I hadn’t done anything since way back in the day. You know, I only had to be one day smarter than an 11th grader. So I was pretty confident I could do that. I did introduce the Adobe Suite. We pretty much had a fully developed curriculum certifications in the Microsoft Office Suite products. Photoshop was the big thing that we did in the Adobe Suite. Adobe offers certifications and wanted to bring that in. At the time, Flash was also really popular so I taught myself Flash and wanted to bring that into the curriculum. And I had done some web design work as an independent contractor so I was really familiar with Dream Weaver and was able to bring that into the technology stream. I also piloted an A+ certification course although it did not survive after I left. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

Maria’s courage and willingness to accept challenges is apparent in this excerpt. She had some background in technology but was not as versed as perhaps the school administration expected. However, she was willing to start work much earlier than she expected and was thrust into a subject she was not fully prepared for. She quickly became passionate about the technology certification programs, tools she saw as necessary for students looking for work directly out of high school and for students looking to attend college, and use them as tangible goals for students to work towards.

Maria was willing to begin teaching three days after her interview at the school in a subject she did not apply for. This courage and spontaneity was also present in her classroom, as evidenced when she designed a course project whereby students would break apart their computers and put them back together.

The first day they have their laptops, I had gone out to buy a bunch of cheap screwdrivers. So day one I said take your laptops apart. And they did! And then it took them two days to put them back together and make them work but for those two days they were not in trouble, they were invested. By the time they were done, they had opened up their own repair shop for the students…They’d go from room to room and if
kids were having problems they could repair on the spot. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

Whereas similarly novice teachers may be hesitant of such an approach, especially in their first full year teaching, Maria takes pride in her ingenuity and willingness to take calculated risks. She had built a computer at home before but had never taken a laptop apart. Maria entered the classroom with decades of experience working in schools, libraries, and a business environment, along with having raised her own children. Barbara echoed this sentiment, explaining new teachers at the school typically overreact to what she considers relatively minute predicaments.

Maria’s classroom demeanor was not as chaotic as she may have appeared when she devised a week of breaking apart and rebuilding laptops with her students. As previously stated, the school was working towards implementing hands-on activities into the classroom.

Furthermore, Maria was placed in charge of students who had been struggling in their academics, particularly those who had behavioral concerns. Maria paired students up with various challenges and allowed the instruction to be student driven.

[They] thought the technology classes that I taught lent themselves to students who did not have an academic focus. So the idea that if I can give them some training and they can leave here and get a job at Best Buy on the Geek Squad or something like that, those were some hard skills that they could take with them. Without necessarily having to go to any further training or if they did it would be just a short-term certification program. So I was given the students who spent most of their time sitting in chairs with disciplinary issues. So my class was a really eclectic mix of students who were traditionally disciplinary issues and had failing grades and just really struggled to connect. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

There is a clear desire to directly address challenging work. Whereas other teachers may be skeptical of being assigned students struggling behaviorally, Maria saw it as a challenge. She takes pride in successes, such as when a student with Cerebral Palsy developed a relationship
with “one of the toughest kids in school” while rebuilding their laptops. Her constant laughter when reflecting on these stories explains her awareness that others may view her methods as unconventional or imprudent, like when she brought a snake into school, but Maria has found freedom and enjoyment in the balance between strict hard work and creative chaos.

Balancing Expectations with Innovation

During Dr. Williams’ time leading the school, teachers noticed a difference in the type of academic program prescribed to each student. The school was in its infancy and needed to determine what did and did not work. By allowing teachers the freedom to experiment, each academic year provided evidence for what was working. Maria distinguishes between the first and second generation of school leaders:

The retirement of the two founders certainly had a profound effect on the school…they allowed a lot more freedom in the classrooms because of the fact that the school was evolving…So it was more in that, let’s try different things and see what’s going to be best overall for the school. We seem to have stabilized and there is a lot more consistency. Some people view that as a negative but as one of the few people who has raised children through the high school years, [parents] want to know that if their child goes to PHCS these are the things they are going to learn in technology and this class. And there wasn’t that level of consistency because we had so much independence on what we could do. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

Maria contends PHCS is in a unique position because it must provide information to parents so that they can make an informed decision on whether their student should enroll. Furthermore, if their student attends, they will want all available opportunities. However, Maria asserts the change in culture has not created stagnation. Three years prior, Maria created a scope and sequence for the research department, developing learning objectives for each grade level. These guides provide a foundation for the teacher, especially important for teachers looping through the
subjects for the first time. Teachers then decide how to achieve the objectives, similar to the philosophy espoused by Dr. Williams when he stated “I don’t give a shit what you teach”, in reference to allowing experienced and informed teachers the freedom to construct their own curriculum. While Maria did not have extensive teaching experience when she started at PHCS, her life experience proved invaluable, which is experience many younger novice teachers lack. Ultimately, while both Maria and Barbara described a sentiment of change in curricular freedom after Dr. Williams at the school, specific examples were difficult to identify. This is in part because many of the original teachers with experience under both administrations are no longer at the school.

**Student Individuality and Workforce Preparation**

The preparedness of each individual student to enter the workforce is central to both Maria’s explanation of the purpose of education and the mission of PHCS. Individual student competency is emphasized in both the long-term curriculum, particularly the senior capstone research project, and short-term instruction and classroom management.

Maria’s explanation of the purpose of education is centered on job preparation. For Maria, the evolution of curriculum and pedagogy in public schools has been driven by the changing job market, from factory lines to less automated positions.

Historically, public education was designed to prepare children to enter factory work. Children from more affluent families were provided with a tutor or attended private schools where the curriculum was more of a liberal arts program, less about conformity. Public education focused on training children to be compliant and conditioned to rote activities, which made for well-trained assembly line workers. Obviously this is a generalization but much of what we do in public education is still driven by market forces.
As a research teacher, it is not surprising how Maria situates her explanation in a historical context. For example, primary source material is integral to her curriculum. Students actively engage with articles and comic strips from old newspapers and must identify which of their sources are considered primary.

Maria begins her interpretation of educational philosophy in the US in the first half of the 20th century, when factory lines and manufacturing became integral to the economy. As such, her explanation of today’s educational system is deeply related to rote memorization and compliance training.

At [PHCS] we have many classes that are specifically designed to train students to be able to enter the workforce. This focus on career readiness is part of our charter. The career/internship track along with technology courses account for 1.5 credit hours each year out of 9 and passing internship is a requirement for getting a diploma. We also have a separate grade called Workforce that is based on whether students are complying with work place criteria such as dress code, decorum, and other behavioral expectations. Whether we look at education through high school or a PhD program, ultimately it is about getting a job when you are done, hopefully one you want to do. Even though we emphasize critical thinking and collaboration in the core classes, this is also the result of business influences, which needs workers who can work independently as well as work with others. (M. Sanchez, personal interview, December 6, 2016)

For Maria, the type of jobs available upon graduation have changed, thus altering the types of skills students should master. However, the purpose of education, to prepare students to enter the workforce, has survived.

Maria’s educational philosophy is focused on the need to find a job whenever the student finishes schooling, either at the end of high school or graduate school. I see two separate factors influencing this viewpoint. First, state and local curriculum focus on industrial entrepreneurship. The research projects from which students choose are often local organizations, businesspeople,
or companies. Rather than starting her theory with Plato, or Rousseau, or even Dewey, who was operating at the same time and had a starkly different theory, Maria’s curriculum is substantially based on Pennsylvania in the 20th century. Second, Maria explicitly references “children from more affluent families” and their access to “liberal arts” education. This is important given the population of the school, with slightly more than two-thirds deemed “economically disadvantaged” by the state on the School Performance Profile. This echoes the educational trajectories in Willis’ (1977) work, determined by expected future professions. While student interest exploration may cause disruption in these processes, the emphasis on compliance and “code switching” may limit such disruption.

In addition to the relationship to a particular time and geographic location, Maria’s educational philosophy is linked to the urban setting where she teaches.

I think in an urban school education has a secondary role. For many of the students I teach, they must code switch between their home and community self to what we expect of them in the class. Students struggle to comply with dress code as what their family considers "nice" clothes is not allowed. Additionally we expect them to use professional language when addressing the teachers and each other. Even though we celebrate growth (academically and personally) in a mostly criterion system they will still need to be competitive when they enter a norm referenced society.

Maria appears to be arguing that urban educators have the added responsibility of preparing a student for the social and cultural expectations of society. It is unclear exactly why students must “code switch” more in an urban environment than a wealthy suburban area, other than the mention of fashion and professional language. Generally, Maria appears to argue that knowledge is insufficient; the school must also prepare students to assimilate into the business world. This will be accomplished through regimented class time and strict behavioral expectations.
Compliance and Behavior

The most common code identified throughout this project was “discipline.” This is not necessarily a surprise; to this point, much of the attention paid to charter schools in academic research has been on “no excuses” policies and the strictness of student culture (Golann, 2015). Furthermore, discipline and classroom management were paramount to my time teaching at New Orleans Charter School. I brought my experience of silent hallways, quickly sending students out of the classroom for minor infractions, and frequent in and out of school suspensions into PHCS. My experience and the abundant literature on school culture in charters (Golann, 2015; Kerstetter, 2016; Lamboy & Lu, 2017) led to an increased attention to the behavioral policies at PHCS. I paid close attention to classroom discipline in both Barbara’s and Maria’s classrooms and noted that, while they teach distinct curriculum, their management styles were similar.

During my time observing and speaking with Maria, it was unclear how her classroom management style fit in at the school. At times, she referred to herself as “strict” and “tough”, but other times she described her class as “chaotic.” From my perspective, the class was docile. Students mostly worked independently and silently and were given varying demerits for off-task behavior. Maria and her two co-teachers were focused on student compliance, at times above all else. Students who silently worked without distraction were ideal.

Teachers narrate expectations throughout class time, depicting what students should and should not be doing. These general statements are used to illustrate the teacher’s expectations without singling out individual students. “Alright, you are in your seats, quickly, opening your computers to the class homepage.” “You are reading through the checklist and highlighting
anything you need to work on.” These constant reminders guide students throughout the lesson. At times, they become more pointed and focus more on what students should not be doing. This mostly occurs when the teacher senses students are off-task. “You should not be having side conversations.” “Nobody should be getting out of their chair.” “If you are not paying attention during this and ask me a question later on, I am going to walk away.” Teacher narrations tend not to highlight students who are meeting or exceeding expectations. Very few times did teachers highlight a student or group of students who were conducting themselves to the teacher’s satisfaction. Instead, if the class was acting appropriately, the teacher would either be silent or narrate instructions. If the class was not acting appropriately, the teacher would either single students out or narrate what students should not be doing.

The most severe behavioral concerns are addressed when a teacher asks a student to leave the classroom. During my observations, the most severe classroom infraction was off-task behavior such as looking around the room or talking to neighbors. The teacher would ask the student to “step into the hall” and after a few minutes, would go have a conversation with them in private. If the student misbehaved again, or had already received multiple verbal warnings from the teacher, the student would be asked to directly head down to the office and either meet with an administrator or call home to inform their parents they were misbehaving. These confrontations between the teacher and the student were mostly public. The teacher would call out the student from across the room and ask them to go into the hall. This process never resulted in substantive student resistance; they typically left the room within a minute of being asked to do so. However, it made a clear impact on the remaining students. Some would sigh and appear
bothered by the public display while others would stop their own off-task behavior and return to their assignment.

Based on the descriptions of the school’s classroom management and behavior policies, PHCS may appear similar to “no excuses” charters profiled in other research projects (Golann, 2015; Sondel, 2016). However, when directly asked if the school is considered a “no excuses charter school”, Maria disputed this characterization:

I do not think that the school embraces this as an official policy. Even though we have rigid dress code and behavior expectations, we do not require the silent walking between classes or the more tightly controlled classroom environment.

Put simply, the school does not officially embrace a “no excuses” culture. For Barbara, “no excuses” related to the school’s ability to counsel out students who did not assimilate and those with special needs. For Barbara, there is a balancing between being “‘on’ students all the time trying to get them to learn”, to provide the necessary level of support students need to be successful.

Maria asserts the democratization of the organizational structure (chapter five) is also pertinent to discussion on school culture. Because the school is divided into four distinct entities, with individual grade level teams and each principal looping with the teachers and students, each grade can have a distinct identity. This also allows teachers from particular subjects the ability to alter classroom management to best fit their curriculum.

The teachers have a lot of autonomy in their class and between the grade level teams. Our math and science curriculum is based on a lot of collaboration, which means students working in groups and with active engagement. My class is often referred to as being "organized chaos." We invest time to build relationships over the four years, which means there is room for a more casual environment in the school. My grade level team
and my teaching style are at the more relaxed end of the spectrum while others are more comfortable with certain components of the "no excuses" type of policy.

Maria mostly teaches “process classes” and does not have to “deal with the added pressure of test preparation.” This also allows her the freedom to use less conventional classroom management styles.

PHCS does not self-identify as a “no excuses” charter school. Organizational structures prevent the school from adopting a singular management style common in other charter schools, including the experience I had at New Orleans Charter School. However, teachers at the school are cognizant of the balancing between order and management in the classroom, the familial support Dr. Williams emphasized in shaping the school (chapter 4), and the necessary chaos created when students are allowed to learn and construct meaning independent of constant teacher intervention.

**Disciplining Self, Self Discipline**

Poststructuralism resists traditional studies of subjectivity based on simple identifying characteristics. Instead, poststructuralism puts forth a “notion of the self as a site of disunity and conflict that is always in process and constructed within power relations” (Jackson, 2001, p. 386). This becomes clear when comparing Barbara and Maria’s career trajectories and how they situate their classroom management styles in relation to “successful” teaching.

Maria’s path into teaching was unconventional. However, due to her family’s circumstances, she entered the classroom with close to two decades of experience working with students in a variety of ways, as a special education instructor, a librarian, and an informal science teacher. While Barbara also entered education “unconventionally” after graduating from
an alternative-certification program and Chicago Teaching Fellows, Maria had experience both in schools and at home, raising a son with special needs. Whereas Barbara’s views on education are more philosophical, considering social justice issues and policy debates back to her time in Chicago, Maria appears more pragmatic in her reflections, using her own experience in the business world to target specific skills her students will need to be successful in their careers. Coincidentally, their reasons for being at the school align with their educational philosophies. Barbara continues to work in urban education out of a sense of social equity, whereas Maria initially considered charter schools because they were based on “merit” and not a “traditional tenure school track.” These two trajectories have resulted in somewhat similar classroom management styles.

Both Barbara and Maria’s classrooms follow many similar rules. Students are not permitted to hold off-topic conversations during work time, must sit up in their chairs, and must comply directly to teacher directions. When students do not follow these directions, they are either individually addressed or asked to leave the classroom and go to the office. Barbara sent students out of the classroom rarely, typically once every four or five classes, whereas Maria’s classes could have up to five students sent out in one period. The most fundamental difference in the settings is class size: Barbara teaches in a room of about 23 students, whereas Maria teaches alongside two co-teachers in a room of about 58 students. Both teachers closely monitor students, focusing hard to determine who is and is not on task and quickly addressing misbehavior. While their instructional styles differ, Barbara emphasizing more small group instruction and rotating stations and Maria using mostly independent work time with teachers
pulling out 10-20 students for more individualized instruction, their classroom management styles were similar. However, their reflections on their own management styles were unique.

Barbara, motivated by social equity, viewed her progress in classroom management in terms of her teaching style. Barbara once proudly stated she had moved completely away from using worksheets, something she often relied on early in her teaching career, refusing to sacrifice experimentation in her teaching style for a more rigid classroom culture. Barbara’s class evolved throughout the trimester, beginning with mostly brief lectures or videos and independent student time to more collaborative work such as rotating stations with varying activities. Her introductions to start the class were often humorous, poking fun at her self or having the class sing out loud to videos to engage students and practice vocabulary. An apt assessment of her class could be “I am tough because I care”, methodically introducing collaboration, humor, and joy to balance the strict atmosphere.

Maria, motivated by practicality, is results oriented. If students are producing quality work, they are following directions. Students use rubrics and checklists to determine exactly what they should be working on, reducing confusion. Students work almost exclusively on their laptops, allowing their information sources to diverge in a way that a lecture or textbook does not. Particularly in Maria’s class but also across subjects, students work on long-term projects and work to develop transferable skills at the expense of memorizing content. This is meant to illustrate that learning is an active process, something the “student does” and is not “done to them”, or passive. Maria’s narration in class displays this activity: “This is a process class, if you can’t show me you can’t self-evaluate, you won’t be proficient. It is not my ten minutes it is
yours” (Field Observation, February 28, 2017). The curriculum consistently teaches self-reflection and evaluation to depict student progress, but also as a mechanism for classroom management: if students are actively working and producing, they are less likely to be misbehaving. It also simplifies the teacher’s attempt to determine who is and is not following directions. In this way, Maria’s assessment could be “Produce quality work and show me you are learning.”

Differences in management style are illustrated here to portray the classes holistically. To the common observer, sitting in on each class once or twice, they would notice both rooms have actively engaged students producing unique work products, collaborating either with their peers or with research artifacts as teachers work hard to genuinely support students, particularly by answering questions. If each teacher has a distinct career trajectory into the classroom unique ideas on the purpose of education, what are the informal power structures creating a common idea of “successful” classroom management?

Barbara and Maria are at two very different points in their career trajectory. Barbara, married and considering starting a family, has considered the practical concerns of being a working mother. However, there are a number of factors in such a decision. First, should she stay at PHCS, a year-round school with long days and very few teachers successfully modeling how to balance a young family and work schedule? Second, are there positions at the school better suited for such a balance? Barbara is the only teacher in her field and manages the department, lacking the resources of some of the more foundational courses. Third, what other positions are available in the city and would they be more suited for a teacher beginning a family? These
questions directly influence Barbara’s subjectivity. She decides not to overhaul her curriculum because she is unsure of how many years she would implement it. She also cuts back on her online blogging and enrolls in a Social Studies certification program to provide flexibility moving forward. Barbara is forced to develop short-term flexibility in her career and pedagogy because she is not confident in the school’s ability to support new working mothers.

Maria’s path into the classroom was unusual but after seven full years of teaching and considering her past as a part-time volunteer and librarian, it is safe to assume she will continue at the school for the foreseeable future. Supporting this assertion is the local and national recognition the research capstone project seniors are required to complete has received, in large part due to the Maria’s work in the research education department. Having already raised her family, Maria does not share Barbara’s short-term deliberations. She uses this assuredness to plan upcoming curriculum. For example, at the end of her previous loop, during the final trimester of her students’ senior year, she spent time observing freshman classes and collaborating with teachers to prepare for the jump back to younger students. This predictability is apparent in Maria’s confident and assured nature. While career change teachers enter the profession for a variety of reasons, and thoughts of leaving teaching increase over the years (Laming & Horne, 2013), Maria approached her career from a position of stability. This was apparent when reflecting on her long history in schools, almost ten years at PHCS, and a lack of recency bias.

While this chapter focused on Maria’s story, a comparison to a more traditional charter school teacher in Barbara’s story helps explain the unique path Maria took to enter the
classroom. I have refrained from using traditional descriptors of Maria, instead focusing on her relationship to the structures in the school, relation to students and technology, and philosophical views on education. In subsequent discussions, this “data” will be applied to better depict exactly what is made possible and impossible through Maria and Barbara’s in-flux subjectivity (Jackson, 2001), particularly in relation to PHCS’s discourse on “successful” school.
CHAPTER 8. STRUCTURES MEET STORIES: THREE TENSIONS AT PHCS

In the previous three chapters, I presented the social structures (chapter 5) and biographies (chapter 6 and 7) of two teachers at PHCS. The relationship between these two tenants, or double insight (Britzman, 2003), is the focus of this chapter. During my time at PHCS, three tensions emerged between school structures and teacher narratives. The first tension is the relationship between teacher autonomy and professional expectations. This includes the demands placed on teachers at the school, including the year-round schedule, additional job roles, and moving subjects each year. Next, I discuss the tension between preparing students to be sufficient life-long learners and professionals and the individualization which occurs through laptop use, online tracking of students, and classroom management. Third, I present the individualization occurring at the school through laptops, student interests, and workforce preparation. Finally, I present my reflections on conducting research inside a charter school, particularly the power dynamics, context, and ethical concerns related to such research.

My conclusions presented in this chapter are in relation to the informal or underlying school mission I developed for PHCS while at the school: “PHCS is an urban public charter high school preparing students for success in their future employment. Through a democratic school structure, continuous professional development for teachers, community building, and interdisciplinary learning and teaching, students pursue their own unique interests and develop into life-long learners.” This mission statement is representative of the statement posted online but serves as an informal or silent school agenda and influences this discussion.
Table 8.1. Three Tensions Between School Structure and Teacher Subjectivity

Professional Expectations

Professional expectations at PHCS are not emblematic of traditional public schools. The school utilizes a year-round calendar, teachers are not part of a union or working towards tenure, and are part of grade-level teams that loop with students to the following grade each year. Whereas comparable charters working as part of charter management organizations may be governed by a strict philosophy resulting in top-down mandates and limited teacher autonomy (Bulkley, 2005; Goodman, 2013), PHCS increases teacher input and freedom through democratization of decision making by relying on grade level teams. However, formal systems
increasing teacher autonomy in the school can also lead to informal limitations on teacher subjectivity. These structures result in a unique teacher experience and are worth exploring.

**Teacher Time: Scheduling, Responsibilities, and Evaluation**

The state of Pennsylvania requires students to attend school for 180 days per year. PHCS’s calendar for the 2016 school year had 187 school days schedule, with 200 total work days for teachers and 205 for administrators. Teachers had five professional development workdays at the end of August following the five-week summer vacation, two professional workdays at the end of each trimester, and additional individual professional development workdays scattered throughout the year. Teachers are typically in the building from about 7:30 a.m. until about 5:30 p.m., or fifty hours per week.

PHCS teachers have additional roles and responsibilities based on their grade level team. At the beginning of each year, each grade-level team meets and describes potential roles each teacher will be responsible for throughout the year. The following table is representative of Barbara’s grade-level roles, with teachers typically volunteering for about five jobs each. The grade level team attempts to divide the jobs evenly based on the amount of time and energy required for the task. However, because teachers volunteer for the jobs, the more enthusiastic teachers may end up with an unequal share of the responsibilities. For example, teacher #7 volunteered for 10 roles, became overworked during the year, and reassigned one of her jobs to a teacher with only four jobs. When a teacher left during the year, their roles were then distributed to the remaining teachers, increasing their workload. While PHCS teachers have comparable
lesson-planning responsibilities to traditional public school teachers, their roles outside the classroom are more extensive, at least formally.

**Table 8.2. Grade-Level Team Roles and Responsibilities**

| Role                                              | Teacher 1 | Teacher 2 | Teacher 3 | Teacher 4 | Teacher 5 | Teacher 6 | Teacher 7 | Teacher 8 | Teacher 9 | Teacher 10 | Teacher 11 | Teacher 12 | Teacher 13 | Teacher 14 | Teacher 15 | Teacher 16 |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| advisory                                           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| equity/diversity                                   |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| food days, cards, gifts                           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| positivity (SOM, attendance, Bdays, calls, spotlight) |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| team facilitators                                  |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| tech - spares, confiscations ?, COWS               |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| WATS                                              |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| clubs                                              |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| coverages                                          |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Daily News Report (1 or 2)                        |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| dress code                                         |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| fire warden                                        |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| floor manager                                      |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| kitchen                                            |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| manage Fun Zone                                    |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| meeting notes                                      |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| opportunities list                                 |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| photocopier/paper                                  |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Tardies (maybe new way to handle this)             |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| triage                                             |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Study club coordinator                            |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| $Morning hall duty(2)/QuietRoom Signup            |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| activities/field trips                            |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| End of Year Awards Ceremony                        |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Dances/Snowball                                    |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| testing schedule (Aspire, Keystone)                |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Team Data                                          |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| parent conferences                                 |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| IL Rubric                                          |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| bus passes                                         |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| workforce                                          |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Communication with Post-HS Planning                |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Electives Liaison                                  |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| TV monitor in hallway                             |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Photo database                                     |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Lockers                                            |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Wellness Liaison                                   |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Mid Quartile                                       |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| 10th Grade New Student Point Person               |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| IGT                                               |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Peer Tutor for later trimester                     |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Urban Ecotourians                                  |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
PHCS strives to create an environment based on community. Teachers loop with students each year, maintaining the same advisory students for four years. Social workers provide support to teachers and many of the administrators have backgrounds in counseling or special education. When designing the school, Dr. Williams made the assumption urban youth required more from their schools. As such, teachers must do more.

The PHCS organizational structure delegates power and decision making down to each grade level team. Whereas the principal and their staff may typically set formal rules and make decisions standard across a school, PHCS allows the grade level team to determine the best course of action for their particular student body. This democratization increases teacher autonomy, allows for innovation, and allows for solutions to be implemented immediately. As the “owners of the floor”, the grade level team must develop the systems and procedures necessary for student success. By formally detailing a list of roles for teachers, they list what is important or necessary for student success. This places a different type of burden on the teachers.

In a traditional school, a teacher may be required to acclimate to a school policy; at PHCS, the teachers must create the school policy and then enforce it. This requires additional meeting time and teachers must be actively problem-solving and adapting to changes at the school. If a teacher is sick or misses time, their team-members cover their class. As Dr. Williams described: “Here’s an anecdote for you. We’ve never had a substitute teacher in 15 years. But we will take care of our own. No substitute teacher.” This means teachers forgo their planning periods to cover sick teachers. So while the school promotes a familial atmosphere, this requires teachers to also do more.
Looping with students is integral to the community building at PHCS. Teachers move to teach a new grade and subject each year, requiring new certifications and planning. In comparable schools, teachers gain experience with a familiar curriculum, becoming content experts as they perfect how best to approach a unit or lesson. At PHCS, teachers cover material only once every four years. The school reports argue this creates “a greater responsibility” for the student’s success, as all 15 or so teachers work year-round for four years towards graduation. Again, this greatly alters the teacher’s experiences at the school. Each fall, instead of moving back to a solidified curriculum and new students, teachers return to students they have developed a connection with but a curriculum they have covered very little.

Finally, teachers volunteer themselves for promotion and undergo a yearlong evaluation process. This requires teachers to build a portfolio and apply to move up the teacher ladder and earn an increase in pay. As one teacher described, the underlying expectation is that teachers self-nominate about every four years. These evaluations place the hones on the teacher to display their growth and effectiveness to administrators.

Combined, the additional job responsibilities, grade level team requirements, year-round calendar, looping, and promotion system greatly alters the traditional perception of a teacher’s daily routine. Teach autonomy is increased through these tenants, including decision making through democratization, the continuous professional development and pay based on merit, and the creating and choosing of roles they deem necessary, as opposed to being assigned responsibilities by a superior. This tension will be discussed through Barbara’s experience at the school.
Teacher Autonomy

Barbara is a useful example to describe the disconnect between theory and practice at PHCS. Whereas many teachers loop with students, about a quarter of the staff does not, typically because they have experience with a unique subject. Barbara is one such teacher. This grants her autonomy over her department, being the only full-time teacher with experience in her field, but also increases her responsibilities, isolation, and repetition with her curriculum.

Barbara’s unique position at the school affords her even greater influence over her curriculum. The administration has little experience in her field and allows her to make decisions concerning learning objectives and pedagogy. As a result, she has experimented with project-based learning and trimester-long objectives aimed at spurring student interest. However, her curriculum is limited by two factors. First, she is currently working to become certified in a more general subject, which requires time outside of school, limiting her available planning time. Second, unlike most teachers at PHCS, Barbara does not have a co-teacher; she is isolated and responsible for a whole class each period, a unique challenge that limits her ability to create an entirely distinctive curriculum.

I have pretty much complete control…and I guess if I wanted to [change the curriculum] I could. But it kind of goes against a lot of things, I like to play to the strengths of what else is happening in the school and what else the students see. And I do this because it kind of helps them with a few other things like study skills and behaviors more than it does maybe [my subject]. It is a conscious decision. I do feel like if I really wanted to make the change I could. I also kind of recognize that I have ten years of this [type of] experience and I don’t have a wellspring [of another type]. I feel like in order to be successful in doing that I would really need a buddy. This is kind of isolating. I would be more willing to be kind of take that risk if it wasn’t [by myself]. (B. Jones, personal interview, December 6, 2016)
Co-teachers are able to lead the class if a teacher is sick or unable to plan a lesson, but Barbara does not have this support. Completely revamping a curriculum, even if it made sense to her, is a huge burden. If she knew she was going to be teaching the same subject for the foreseeable future, she would consider it. However, if she were to move subjects or schools, the year or two of curriculum redesign would be for naught. So while the school grants her the autonomy to design or redesign curriculum, practical limitations have resulted in a more stagnant approach than she would prefer.

Barbara made it clear on multiple occasions she is considering how starting a family will impact her role at PHCS. Very few teachers at the school have small children. Of those that do, they are mostly married men, senior in rank on the teacher ladder, married, with a homemaker wife. This is vastly different from her positionality. Barbara’s husband also works in the city, and the two would be forced to pay for expensive childcare. It was apparent that the lack of female role models at the school managing to balance a senior teaching position with raising small children was a concern. If nobody is currently living through this experience, how can teachers entering that phase of their life imagine it working? These vital logistical concerns were omitted from the countless pages of reports on the school’s procedures and systems. In other words, the human aspect of teaching had been omitted.

Integral to discussions and reports on the responsibilities and expectations of teachers at PHCS is the teacher ladder and evaluation system. As teachers develop based on the school’s rubric of teacher expectations, they are rewarded with promotions and increases in pay. As their responsibilities increase, so does their monetary compensation. This is a rigid and narrow
understanding of “success” in the workplace. Teachers work to perfect their craft and consider how they can improve in their profession while also considering how to achieve a higher status at the school, thus becoming a more prominent and public figure while increasing their responsibilities. This has obvious consequences for gender in supervisory roles, a concern I noticed when talking with teachers who mentioned men dominate the senior positions at the school.

Jackson’s (1968) seminal work on the lives of teachers identified two threats to teacher autonomy: an inflexible curriculum and administrators “bent on evaluation” (p. 129). PHCS has addressed these concerns by allowing teachers the flexibility to incorporate content they deem necessary while focusing on long-term process skills students build throughout high school. Meanwhile, teachers are not rigidly evaluated every year, and negotiate their assessment through a customized portfolio. However, the more indirect outcomes of a school founded on numerous complex systems and requirements for teachers may restrict teacher autonomy in other ways, such as career and family flexibility. The apparent sacrifices of teachers at PHCS is strongly related to research on high teacher turnover in charters (Stuit & Smith, 2012) and was apparent in my time in the school. Barbara’s grade-level team had already lost half of its members by the time they were beginning the 11th grade, only half-way through the four year loop. Ultimately, Barbara returned to PHCS for the 2017-2018 school year, remaining in the same role as the prior year, but it was apparent she had doubts about her “five-year plan” and whether remaining a department leader would fit with starting a family.
Individualization

Student interests are paramount to the curriculum at PHCS. In conjunction with extensive laptop use, student experience is individualized. The school’s reports argue this creates greater student independence and allows students to customize the curriculum to fit their interests. Furthermore, independence is required in today’s college and workplace settings: students are graded, take standardized tests, arrive to work, complete assignments, and are paid independently. However, curriculum and pedagogy often requires collaboration and divergence. What does a successful student look like? Once again, the difference between the theory and practical application of the school’s philosophy was immediately noticeable during my classroom observations. This individualization was a result of the school’s definition of student success.

Charter schools are often defined by their strict behavioral policies and a definition of student success predicated on college acceptance. PHCS breaks from these norms in two significant ways. First, PHCS uses a more ambiguous definition of student success founded on long-term assuredness and interest in learning. Second, the curriculum prioritizes skills-based learning and deemphasizes content knowledge. These two components are central to the school’s operation as well as to teacher subjectivity, but they also resulted in a theme of individualization

Student Success Defined

Contrary to many charter school mission statements, PHCS does not aspire towards outright college attendance. Since 2009, PHCS has sent between 51% and 63% of graduating seniors to four-year schools (56% average), with between 19% and 44% percent of students
attending two-year or technical degree programs (30% average) and between 5% and 22% percent of students joining the military or other employment (14% average). Instead of striving for all students to attend a four-year college, PHCS aims for assured individualized plans post-graduation. In part, this is because the school works to develop life-long learners; a high school or college degree is not an ultimate goal but a means to that end. Regardless of their plans, students are obligated to develop long-term plans for their chosen professional pursuits, including where they expect to live, the career’s common requirements, and a budget. The students create resumes and conduct mock college interviews, using their long-term plans to determine how best to prepare for achieving their goals. Using a more comprehensive measure of student success is contrary to the state’s quantitative assessment of each school, a 1-100 scale similar to the A through F model common in schools. It is also not emblematic of comparable charter schools often defined or boasting of their high college acceptance rate (Lamboy & Lu, 2017), a number representing a graduating class as a whole, but not the individual student.

Nuanced approaches to “student success” are not guaranteed in charter schools. My former school’s mission could be summarized as “All students will be accepted and succeed in a four-year college or university”, with acceptance as the operant term. In many charter schools, college paraphernalia hangs on walls and classrooms are named after the prestigious universities attended by the young alternatively-certified teachers (C. R. Anderson et al., 2017). In these charters, college acceptance (Lamboy & Lu, 2017) is the definition of success, the more prestigious the university the better. In this way, the school is modeled after my high school experience. These types of missions are clear: “This was my definition of success, and now it is
yours.” This is similar to the fourth “aspect of power” put forth by Delpit (1988): “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (p. 282). The access to internships, interest exploration, and long-term planning at PHCS is “the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home” (p. 286) and is available to all students because the school does not use honors courses or tracking.

For the more than three-quarters of the student body that goes on to either two or four-year programs after high school, PHCS uses a variety of strategies and systems to ease their transition. Most of these strategies are aimed at developing independence for the students. Whereas the first three years at PHCS are highly regimented, with a range of student supports, senior year prioritizes self-sufficiency. First, senior students have a college-like schedule, with weekly class seminars and extended independent study time. Similar to college, instead of having a daily math, science, English, and history class, students may only have a science class once or twice a week. Barbara described seniors’ schedules while giving me a tour of the building during my first day observing at PHCS: “See, they don’t have a class until 11 today so they have free time to get work done. Seniors don’t have traditional classes every day. It prepares them for college life where they have a lot more free time.” The assumption is that 18 year olds entering either college or the workforce must possess self-determination.
Workplace Success

All PHCS students conduct internships for three trimesters at the end of junior year and beginning of senior year while simultaneously conducting community service. One female senior volunteered in Barbara’s class during my observations, grading papers and answering student questions. Other students volunteer at non-profits around the city or work in the school’s computer center, applying their technology certifications to repair broken laptops while gaining work experience and saving the school money.

The school could use time spent on internships and community service to prepare students for short-term goals, such as raising standardized test scores or mandating additional courses. These improvements would improve the school’s state performance score, an assessment of the collective performance of a grade or school. Instead, teachers model the necessary skills to be successful in the workplace. Students are granted the freedom to find work and service partners with the hope that their autonomy will improve interest in the programs. This individualization is not quantifiable at the school level; the experiences of each student at each internship or community service site are unique. Similarly, the challenges to such a program are not easily managed at the school level. For example, internal reports on work and service explain the need to be honest with individual students about their aspirations. If students are struggling in math and science but want to intern at an engineering firm, teachers step in to explain why the fit may not be ideal. This is a balancing act, between being realistic with students and encouraging them to pursue their passions. Allowing students the freedom to

32 For more information on internships, see Chapter 5.
explore and experience workplace norms, either in the classroom or at a physical work site, is a unique approach to charter school curriculum. However, these formal structures increase student autonomy through a prioritization of student interests, but informal forces may create underlying tensions.

I experienced one clear example of the struggle when prioritizing student interests through curriculum early in my observations, when a student presented on their experiences interning at a construction company. The student’s time at the company likely provided valuable insights into the life of a manual laborer, working outside and constructing homes. In the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting*, Sean and Will agree “laying brick” is a “noble profession” because “that is somebody’s home I am building” (Van Sant). However, the student’s father was also in construction. When does access to work become replication (Willis, 1977)? A student becoming a manual laborer identical to his or her father, in many ways, is the plane of organization, a space of complete order and replication. A student struggling in math and science, certain he or she will become an astronaut while their parents urge him or her to consider options not requiring a college degree, is the plane of consistency. When do we determine if a student can succeed in a field? How do we know if it is their passion to enter construction, or one instilled by a father? If graduate schools struggle identifying which students can handle doctoral level work (Delpit, 1992) with a plethora of additional information regarding the student’s academic prowess, how can we determine a high school sophomore’s potential? The difficulty defining student success or the purpose of education (chapter 7) at the individual level is obvious, especially in
comparison to similar charter schools who strictly define success as a 90% acceptance rate for their students when applying to colleges.

**Individualization in the Curriculum**

Out of the four central structures at PHCS, inter-disciplinary learning and teaching has the most profound effect on the individualization of students. First, the curriculum is based on process and product. Content must be culturally relevant to students and support process skills, built upon each year. These skills are culminated in an individualized senior capstone project showcasing the four-years of student development. Second, technology is central to the school’s mission. Students are actively engaged on their laptops throughout the day at PHCS. During my observations, it was uncommon for students to have their laptops closed for more than five-minute intervals. This greatly reduces cooperation between students, although it does create opportunities for students to interact with curriculum. The tension here is the building of an “activity system” in the community, whereby “participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 97). The pursuit of student interests was common, but the sharing of the importance of such interests across a community of practice was less obvious. Together, curriculum at PHCS is highly individualized, creating a classroom environment I found to be similar to both my experiences and current research on “no-excuses” charter schools.

When developing curriculum, PHCS teachers consider exactly what a graduating student should know and be able to do. The following fieldnote excerpt explains the importance of the capstone project to developing curriculum.
For all four years, PHCS students are enrolled in Research Literacy for two hours each day. The freshman trimester is divided into three independent student projects: one whole class topic, one from a range of local historical figures or establishments, and one of the individual student’s choosing. At the end of each unit, the students create a PowerPoint or poster and present to their fellow classmates. This procedure is mimicked in sophomore and junior year, with less support provided by the teacher each year as the students become proficient independent researchers. Senior year, students hold a poster session for community members who evaluate the projects using comprehensive rubric. The capstone project is a culmination of four years in Research Literacy and aims to spur student passion in current topics, including police violence in African-American communities, women in boxing, and female access to contraception.

Understanding how skills scaffold each year ensures teachers have a similar goal for students but allows the teachers the freedom to implement strategies in the classroom to reach that goal. The capstone project creates a final destination for all teachers and students to move towards and provides context for students in understanding why a particular skill, such as identifying primary sources, is vital to their long-term success. This whole-school implementation of curriculum is supported in literature arguing against concrete walls between subjects and grade-levels (Slattery, 2013), although assessment continues to be linear and quantifiable via rubrics and scoring (Doll, 1987). While the school moves together in its curricular pursuits, the final objective is the individual capstone project for the student and a detailed and unique post-graduation plan, complete with financial considerations, where they will be living, and long-term projections. Thoroughly considering curriculum and instruction at the whole-school level while focusing on the aspirations of individual students may be a result of PHCS’ history and current structure.

PHCS has only been in operation for about 15 years and when Dr. Williams was designing the school, there were no entrenched institutions or staff members to consider; it was
designed from scratch. Whereas a new principal must consider what the four science teachers or four math teachers are already teaching each year, Dr. Williams had a blank slate. Furthermore, teachers at PHCS loop with the students and leave behind their lesson and unit plans each year. This creates a detachment from the course content and planning uncommon in a TPS. The school was designed to support a particular type of adolescent: urban high school students interested in technology and not dissuaded by the strict classroom management style, dress code, or lack of sports. By knowing it is not serving every type of student, and if students do not “fit” into the school they have the opportunity to leave, the school can be less accommodating. This was never stated to me in a transcribed interview, however teachers did mention there was no incentive to fight to retain students who did not fit into the culture of the school. The first two years, because students can still be added, it was seen as acceptable if students left PHCS. However, once junior year started and students could no longer enroll, “those are our kids.” In other words, there were tensions concerning the individualized student and what they should embody, particularly during the first two years. The school is able to have a limited ideal of the individualized student because students can choose to leave. No formal systems were in place at the school, as one teacher stated “It’s not like the Hunger Games”, but there was a concealed notion that teachers can be “tough” on students because they have chosen the school and the school does not need to be flexible or “fit” students into it’s structure. “And then what happens to those kids, they just go wreak havoc on public schools.” The number of students who begin the 10th grade year at PHCS and remain through graduation fluctuated over the last seven years, from 67% to 81%, with an average of 74%. The more prominent figures the school highlights in yearly reports are the
graduation rates and freshman retention rates, at 97% and 96% respectively for the 2016 school year. However, these singular data points do not convey the students who leave in between, their purpose for leaving, or their trajectory once they leave.

Through a prioritization of process and product and the interests and aspirations of individual students, formal systems at PHCS appear to work against the plane of organization; they are pushing against charter school norms where curriculum is content based in order to improve standardized test scores or other positivist measures of whole class success. However, the disconnect between theory and practice is once again present, as particular students leave the school based on an inflexibility of school norms.

**Surveillance**

Surveillance and the monitoring of students is deeply connected to the formal structures at PHCS, specifically the building of community and inter-disciplinary learning and teaching. The school infuses technology throughout their operations and allows teachers to closely monitor student work both in and out of school. Because teachers loop with students, they work with one cohort for four years, meaning students may only have about 20 teachers total in high school. This level of familiarity and surveillance is not common in traditional public schools, but is deeply tied to the teacher experience at PHCS. The school’s structures are predicated on a holistic system of support for every student. This network gives rise to a level of monitoring and surveillance in tension with the independence
Community Building and Surveillance

Dr. Williams repeatedly stressed “synergy” as a root explanation for the school’s success. The interaction between long-term student planning, mental health supports, and curriculum focused on transferable skills culminates into a team-like or familial environment where the success of the individual student is the ultimate goal. Whereas traditional high schools may appear partitioned into departments based on subjects, PHCS is constructed so that the staff is consistently moving in the same direction. Teachers looping with students each year accentuates these relationships. According to Dr. Williams, the students “just haven’t had a solid adult resource network as people of means have. So looping changes that. It gives them 15 adults who are going to consistently work with them for years.”

Increased student surveillance, or the close monitoring of student activity and behavior, is another means through which these relationships are accentuated. Barbara emphasized the teachers are always “on” the students. Maria also spoke to me about using technology to analyze exactly how many minutes students had spent on their assignments and easily tracking each student’s progress. The “familial atmosphere” formally developed and prioritized since the school’s inception has developed a culture of surveillance uncommon in schools where students change teachers each year.

This surveillance is accentuated by the size of the school; the same 15 teachers are always in close proximity to the students. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes provides background information on classroom management and surveillance in the classroom.

Maria’s Research Literacy course is taught in a large room of about 60 students. Students are in similar rooms for their two-hour math/ science block and English/history block.
Managing a room of 60 students presents challenges a typical high school teacher of a one-hour block with 25 students would not experience. First, 60 students talking at the same time quickly reaches a high volume. For teachers in a large room, it can be difficult to discern between on-task discussions among students working through a problem or providing important feedback and off-task discussions distracting students from their work. (personal fieldnotes, 11.8.16)

The ratio of students to teachers resembles a typical classroom because the teachers co-lead and have a third teacher in support. However, if two teachers are on one side of the room helping two groups of students, the third teacher can quickly be overwhelmed managing the other 40 students on the opposite side of the room. About half of the time, teachers remove between 12 and 20 students from the room. This greatly reduces management tension by allowing the remaining teachers to spread out students, making it more difficult for them to misbehave. As a result, the majority of the class is silent, individual work time, most likely due to the difficulty managing cooperative group work. Students must keep track of all three teachers if they are to misbehave, whereas in a traditional classroom, it is easy to know where the teacher is and if they are watching you. However, in a room with three teachers constantly moving through the room, it is harder to know if you are being watched.

Surveillance of students in the physical classroom is only unique at PHCS due to the larger class sizes and co-teaching dynamics. In other words, my observations would most likely be found in many charter schools and TPSs. However, the one-to-one laptop program and integration throughout the curriculum presents an additional level of surveillance unique in public high schools. While these aspects distinguish PHCS, similarities can be drawn to Foucault’s panopticism in relation to prisoners. The structure, a tall tower surrounded by prison cells flooded with light, allows one guard could watch hundreds of prisoners in discretion. The
prisoners, not knowing if they were being watched, “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1977, p. 203). Similarly, if a teacher can see exactly what progress a student has made at any point during the hour, day, or week, by monitoring their computers, the students will monitor themselves. For instance, allowing teachers to see what students are working on and how long students have spent on an assignment presents a means to monitor progress and limit plagiarism as minimal time spent on an assignment may indicate plagiarized work.

As surveillance grew in frequency throughout my study, I asked Barbara her thoughts on the matter.

Yeah it has certainly been on my radar that a lot of our products are Google and data mining for advertising and stuff like that. They are getting a lot of good information from [PHCS] kids. So that’s on my radar. That doesn’t necessarily change any actions right now. Maybe in the future it might. I feel like we are really lucky, we are so far past that if they open up the computer they are going to be doing X,Y,Z. We have those kids, but those kids are not turning in their work, those kids are the ones that are failing, those kids are the ones we are calling the parents and stuff like that. It is not the norm…You have to make it fun for them. We are really lucky that this is just the culture of the school. I am not fighting that battle by myself. I think that makes a really big difference as far as our students being disciplined enough and being able to get the un-disciplined students to actually buy in. And if you are shopping for shoes in my class, you are going to do extra stuff outside of class and then you are going to do it crappy and then you are not going to get the grade that you want and then you are going to blame me and I am going to be like “well then you shouldn’t have been shopping for shoes, when I was walking around helping people you should have been asking a question.”

For Barbara, technology is a tool to improve curriculum but it can also clearly distract students and disrupt classroom management. The notion of surveillance is not a concern at the school level but is considered through the more widespread discourse on data collection by corporations. In this way, surveillance is necessary for the school because it ensures students are
on task, completing their assignments, and proving that they are learning. The teacher can quickly sign on to a computer and know exactly how hard each student has worked and can focus their attention in the class on active misbehaving as opposed to determining if a student is absorbing information or understanding new material.

Teaching through a laptop is the norm at PHCS. According to the school’s mission statement, workplace proficiency requires students to master a variety of technological functions. Teachers are able to monitor students, providing immediate support. Dr. Williams argued PHCS was able to “redefine high school as being a giant supportive network for people”, and technology is one tool to implement this change. However, a linear progression ending in maximum technology integration should not be assumed to be superior to alternatives (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Spring, 2012).

**Curriculum: Work Products**

Surveillance is not merely the physical monitoring of students in a classroom or checking the number of minutes a student spent on a particular assignment submitted online. Surveillance is also accomplished when students complete work products that show they have mastered a skill or concept. Students at PHCS are consistently working on completing assignments. They are almost always actively working to complete an assignment.

Although Barbara has autonomy over her curriculum, she is also cognizant of how that curriculum fits into the school’s larger system, which encourages students to constantly produce. The following fieldnotes excerpt explains this point.

The curriculum at PHCS requires students to produce copious work products. Every class, they are reading, writing, editing, and producing. Teachers closely monitor this
work, mostly submitted electronically, and keep close tabs on where students are and where they should be in their work. Students are given extensive rubrics detailing exactly what the teacher expects of them. Very little is left up to chance; either the student completes the task according to expectations, or they fall short. Teachers can then easily point to exactly where the student fell short and how they can improve in the future. This level of clarity is not just for the students; parents are also able to better know why their student is or is not succeeding according to PHCS standards. Such a level of detail towards the curriculum and thus towards each individual student is unusual at the high school level and is clearly by design, as stated in the school’s philosophy to develop the entire student.

I often wondered what creativity and critical thinking would look like at the school. To me, constantly producing material in an effort to illustrate learning was an example of the plane of organization and order. Creativity is often messy and loud and dysfunctional (Biesta, 2014). If the school’s proclaimed goal is teaching critical thinking skills but the underlying culture results in teachers focusing on behavioral skills, teaching may resort to teaching simplistic content (Kerstetter, 2016).

This teaching style was my experience teaching in New Orleans where teachers were motivated by ensuring strict classroom management, resulting in a reduction in complexity in the curriculum; a student actively engaged and producing a simpler work product is easier to manage. However, this is contrary to PHCS’ founder’s explicit mission. Balancing between the planes of organization and consistency is easily explained but difficult in practice. One means of managing this balance is the development of long-term curriculum and a senior capstone project.

**Discipline and Control**

Classroom management and student culture at PHCS was integral to my study. Discipline, as previously discussed, is related to teacher surveillance, curriculum, and definitions of student success. However, it is also an independent component of the charter school
phenomenon based on the accumulating literature on “no excuses” school culture (Brown, 2017; Kerstetter, 2016; Sondel, 2016).

I reviewed over 300 PHCS related documents, from school evaluations to internal reports. The school had an unusually robust collection of data in support of their codes and systems, including teacher and student interviews, multi-year graphs depicting growth and success across numerous variables, all professionally presented to the public. This level of introspection is uncommon on a charter school website and stood in stark contrast to my time teaching at a charter school.

Put simply, I was impressed with the thoroughness in how the school considered and implemented research. The students were dressed professionally without the need for uniforms, were equipped with laptops, and worked diligently on culturally relevant, cross-disciplinary research projects. These promising principles garnered my attention throughout my research time between school visits. While these principles emphasize active collaboration, my observations revealed that, in practice, the classroom norms promote student docility. Teachers actively surveil their students in order quickly identify and eliminate student resistance that threatens the passive classroom norm.

Students at PHCS have an independent grade for their behavior and attendance. Each week, they can earn up to 100 points for their behavior in and out of the classroom. If a student is removed from the class, such as being sent into the hallway for misbehaving, or if they are sent to the office to call home, they lose points for their behavior grade. The behavior grade is factored into their GPA and is reported on each report card. Students can earn behavior points back by exceeding teacher expectations or standing out among their classmates. Teachers often use this grade as a way to motivate students. ‘I am going to take behavior points if your mouth is still moving.’ Once, when a student was being sent to the office, they stated ‘I already lost my behavior points for this week so whatever.’ The assumption is that students are invested in their grades and therefore will
behave and avoid losing workforce points. However, if they are not invested in a grade, possibly because it is considered a long-term goal, workforce may not be a motivating factor for students. (personal fieldnotes, 3.7.17)

Quantifying student behavior into a grade to be compared with performance in traditional subjects could improve transparency for misbehaving students. The student knows exactly how many times they were sent out of class or were not following a teacher’s directions. It could also become overemphasized, overshadowing learning or creating a singular notion of “ideal behavior” (Brickhouse, Lowery, & Schultz, 2000).

Saltman (2014) vehemently opposes the teaching of “grit”, stating:

‘Grit’ is a pedagogy of control that is predicated upon a promise made to poor children that if they learn the tools of self-control and learn to endure drudgery, they can compete with rich children for scarce economic resources. Proponents of teaching “grit” contend that the poor are biologically and psychologically traumatized by poverty. The trauma of poverty, they argue, can be overcome through learned self-control and submission to authority within the school. (p. 43)

PHCS teachers did not reference the term “grit” during my time at the school, a term popular in recent discourse on character development (Tough, 2012). However, students who were unable to sit silently at their desks while working independently on their laptops for 30-40 minutes at a time were often sent out of the room. Infractions were most often for talking or looking around the room. The more savvy students would communicate with their peers online through email or instant messaging, programs to which every student had access. The students did not simply want to communicate with their friends silently through a computer, they were actively resisting against the silent classroom norms and the teacher as authority figure. This dynamic was even more noticeable in class periods when all the students sent out were Black.
The student body of PHCS is about 50% Black and 40% White. The grade-level team I spent the most time with was made up of 12 White teachers (5 males, 7 females) and 1 Black female teacher. These numbers echo the critical scholars questioning the racial makeup of schools teaching mostly non-White students, especially when using extreme disciplinary practices (Brown, 2017; Buras, 2011, 2014; Sondel, 2015). They also related to my own experience, as a 22 year old White male teaching in a school with a 99% Black student body, regularly confused and overwhelmed by how best to address issues of race (Emdin, 2016; Lanier, 2012) and my own implicitness in the long-history of Black schooling in the South (Watkins, 2001). PHCS incorporated diversity and race into the curriculum, including mandating recent research on race in America (Alexander, 2010), but struggled to resist devolving into the strict “no excuses” approach found in comparable charter schools. Once again, the formal systems were in place but informal discourse surrounding “good” behavior and classroom management disrupted their implementation.

**School and Teacher Tensions: A Summary**

PHCS has published numerous reports detailing the school’s attributes and strengths. Each report explains the school’s formal systems from a variety of perspectives including student and teacher interviews, quantitative data, graphs, and comparisons to the systems found at traditional public schools. These reports summarize the formal systems but do not necessarily explain their implementation apart from listing a few possible challenges or limitations to each system, which are included as a way to appear objective. By focusing on the tensions these
systems create between teacher subjectivities, the lived experiences of those enacting the systems, and the structures themselves, I create a more definitive portrait of PHCS.

Both teachers’ experiences before working at PHCS greatly shape their subjectivities. Barbara is excited by the opportunities, resources, and overall performance of PHCS, particularly in comparison to her former schools. The increased autonomy and responsibilities are a burden, but the school’s success justifies the cost. However, outside of school, a tension arises between how she envisions her coming years and the school’s culture of responsibility and sacrifice. For Maria, having already raised her son and transitioned him to college, she embraces the school’s demands. For every question I asked about handling a challenge, Maria had a story or explanation of how she and her team meet the demands of their students and rise to the challenge. Both teachers work to incorporate their passions and lives outside of PHCS into their curriculum through music, culture, museums, libraries, or singing, but it is the demands that they take home that creates tension with their long-term plans.

Second, there is a tension between individualization and a collaborative curriculum. Maria’s experience in the business world influences her understanding of the purpose of education. Today’s schools are not creating cogs in the machine, but dynamic problem solvers able to adapt to a marketplace that is constantly changing. This requires self-disciplined students, passionate about learning, and eager to work hard and pursue their goals. However, this can be in tension with the risk-taking and eclectic style Maria often embodies, breaking apart laptops, bringing snakes into class, and visiting museums and libraries in the city. Students are ultimately judged by their individual ability to complete comprehensive work-products, test well, and either
be accepted into higher education or perform in the workplace. This tension, between student-driven lessons and individualism with collaboration and synergy, exists both between the students and the curriculum, between the teacher and the school’s structures, and between the school and the charter describing the school’s purpose.

Third, the school implements a particular culture similar in many ways to the “no excuses” discipline documented at charter schools (Golann, 2015). Neither Barbara nor Maria considers the school to be “no excuses”, and there are differences, including no official school uniform, silent hallways, or over-emphasis on standardized testing (Sondel, 2015) or college acceptance (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Even with these differences, the school culture, advocated through a prioritization of community building, led to heightened levels of teacher surveillance. The holistic support network Dr. Williams and his team built into the foundation of the school became in tension with the amount of time and energy teachers must spend monitoring student actions and behavior. This was apparent in classroom management strategies, often long periods of silent work, and the monitoring of students on laptops and through technology.

These three tensions are not binary categories of “good” or “bad” instruction. Teachers must monitor students to ensure they are focused and learning. Students require independence and can benefit from student-driven lessons. Teachers with increased responsibilities at a school may find more fulfillment in their work. However, the school structures that are developed, researched, and promoted at PHCS in its quest to be a model school for urban education reform are not without consequence. Through teacher subjectivity, the theory behind these structures can be discussed and debated through praxis, or the relationship between theory and practice.
CHAPTER 9: ON COLLABORATION, SIGNIFICANCE, AND LEARNING FROM THE SHINING SCHOOL IN THE CITY

One year ago, I entered PHCS with a clear perception of how charter schools function, resulting from both my prior experience teaching at a charter and my subsequent graduate studies. No such representative “ideal” of a charter exists because of the autonomy inherent in charter philosophy. However, based on my experiences and readings, I had come to view charters through a “no excuses” model, with strict behavioral policies (Golann, 2015) that define student success through graduation rates and college acceptance (Buras, 2011; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). To me, the charter school was emblematic of neoliberalism, emphasizing individualized work-ethic in an attempt to “escape” the impoverished urban environment (Sondel, 2015). I entered the school expecting to search for resistances to such philosophies (Madeloni, 2014), or at least search for the tensions between teacher subjectivity, neoliberal philosophy, and the chaos and disorder necessary for creative thinking and learning (Biesta, 2014). One year later, I left with more questions than answers and few generalizable findings for “practical” use.

In this chapter, I rely on Deleuze’s notion of norming, or the interactions between the plane of organization and the plane of consistency. The plane of organization, our stereotypes, expectations, or perceptions of order and structure, are most associated with a schools “norms”, including how teachers typically teach, how classroom management usually functions, and the rigid expectations of what students must accomplish before graduating. In comparison, the plane of consistency is a space of disorder, using spaces and tools for unusual purposes and functions, and working against norms. These planes are relational and are neither “good” nor “bad” but are a way to understand how a school or teacher must navigate what is expected and what is perhaps
necessary for creativity, experimentation, or creating possibility. As will be discussed, this is not a simple process, accomplished by merely increasing teacher autonomy or democratic decision making, as formal school policies can influence the lived experiences of teachers in ways difficult to quantify (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Using this notion of “norming”, I discuss how my research on teacher subjectivity provides context to the growing discourse on charter schools. First, I briefly compare Maria and Barbara in relation to the teacher norms at PHCS. This leads to a more broad conversation on the traditional “story” told of being a teacher and how teacher turnover may be altering that narrative. Finally, I briefly reflect on the research project and ethical concerns facing future charter school researchers.

**Comparing Teacher Subjectivities**

In this work, I relied on “subjectivity” as a research focus in preference to the more common “identity”. As is central to the poststructuralism tradition, identity suffers from the “crisis of representation”.

What is called postmodernism entails rejection of the idea of language as a medium expressing or representing what pre-exists. At once, it focuses upon perspectivism and divergence of point of view: voices of the long disqualified, the long silenced are being attended to and, wherever possible, decoded. (Greene, 1994, p. 208)

This means “the subject is always inside/outside discourse” (Strozier, 2002, p. 53).

Teacher subjectivity was central to this project for two main reasons. First, teacher subjectivity has largely been overlooked in research on charter schools. Second, teacher “flexibility”, autonomy over curriculum, and experimentation with pedagogy was central to the original intent of charters.
As an innovation in governance, charter schools aim to bypass the educational establishment; empower new institutions, organizations, and communities; and bring the competition that characterizes the consumer-driven economy of the United States to bear in education as well. Charter schools are essentially structural reforms, largely at the state level, where the alternative governance schemes are implemented. These reforms are intended to create incentives and opportunities for educators to develop new, different, and better approaches to meeting the needs of students. Greater flexibility for teachers and more entrepreneurial management strategies are among the intermediary objectives of these reforms, and these outcomes could serve as evidence that charter leaders are taking advantage of their institutional freedom. However, the ultimate goal for charter schools is improved learning opportunities for students—not only those who attend charter schools but also students at other schools that are affected by competition from charters. (Lubiensky & Weitzel, 2010, p. 2)

As previously discussed, “flexibility” is not easily quantified. Maria and Barbara experience PHCS in vastly different ways, a testament to the difficulty in understanding how charters function at the daily, minute level.

Both Maria and Barbara emphasized their control over their curriculum. Barbara spoke at length on how her teaching style had evolved over the years, most notably resulting in “no worksheets”. She also explained she had control over her curriculum content because few if any administrators were content experts in her area. However, the norms in the school guided her teaching style because she wanted to ensure students were being prepared for upper-level courses. Similarly, Maria described the freedom to explore in how she presented information to students, often using her experience to group students into productive pairs or teams, while using rubrics to explicitly state how students could support each other. Her co-teachers were prepared to efficiently support students who were struggling, moving quickly around the room to answer questions. Whereas Barbara did not need to focus on how her content fit in with the school’s long-term vision for students, Maria’s standards were perfectly aligned with the four-year goals.
for her department. Each skill students learned and practiced was aligned and scaffolded to ensure students were prepared to excel on their senior-year capstone research project. Student graduation expectations were normed throughout the school, or their abilities were representative of the plane of organization, but their interests and the strategies teachers used to develop these abilities were more flexible, representative of the plane of consistency.

Barbara, as a teacher outside of the four core departments, held a unique position at PHCS. She had years of experience teaching one grade, as opposed to looping each year and changing grades, resulting in a level of expertise for one age group that was uncommon at the school. However, this unique position also limited her growth on the career ladder. The norm at PHCS is to teach in a core department and to loop each year. By remaining in one grade level and teaching independently, Barbara questioned how she would reach the final top level of “teacher leader” because her influence on the school was limited. So with less oversight and more freedom in the classroom, Barbara’s short-term experiences were more representative of the plane of consistency, resisting the school’s norm for teachers. However, this also limited her freedom to grow or develop as a teacher because she lacked a clear professional trajectory. Furthermore, the teacher leaders and administrators at the school did not resemble her own current balance between family or life outside of PHCS and her profession. The young men who had been promoted to the top of the ladder were husbands with homemakers to raise their small children and the women in leadership roles at the school did not have small children to care for. While each grade level team has a designated male and female “facilitator”, comprised of the most senior ranking teacher of each sex on the team, more practical concerns faced Barbara and
her ability to start a family and become a teacher leader or even maintain her position at the school. For her, there was no norm of a successful young mother/administrator on staff to look to, only the traditional or stereotypical male school leader with a supporting wife at home. In other words, the plane of organization could provide support to Barbara’s long-term vision of her role at the school, but starting a family while pursuing professional goals was noticeably unpredictable, and the school provided few formal systems to accommodate young female teachers.

The lack of long-term norms or professional models was less a concern for Maria, who had entered teaching after raising her family. Maria has immersed herself completely in the PHCS culture, and did not bring up concerns about her long-term viability at the school. Whereas Barbara worked at two other schools before arriving at PHCS, including one charter, Maria has only formally worked full-time as a lead classroom teacher at PHCS. However, her experience in and around public schools while supporting her son provides her a perspective of how public schools are often run. For Maria, PHCS is a progression from the stereotypical public school because it grants autonomy to the school leaders and teachers to create innovative curricula and access to valuable resources.

The notion of progress is central to PHCS’s mission. PHCS aims to be a school for the future, antithetical to the traditional public school trope of students seated in rows of desks, handwriting notes on lined paper, learning from a textbook or a teacher’s lecture. In this way, those who celebrate the school’s work and mission are working against a norm or tradition, as described by the internal reports on the school’s website, often written in a form that compares
why PHCS is better than traditional forms of schooling. The representation of norms, including subsequent critiques, is common in numerous aspects of charter school discourse, as discussed in Chapter 1 on the “failure” of public schools, but also in how charters have expanded. Similar to how no “norm” exists for charter schools, traditional public schools operate in a variety of ways. By representing a successful charter as “progress”, necessary critiques or evaluations of the costs of such schools, who is or is not included, and how this “progress” is shared with the surrounding schools may become limited. Furthermore, teachers in “successful” charters require the voice to question school norms that can silently push out those who don’t “fit” the school’s profile, thus limiting the staff diversity necessary to teach a diverse student body.

The Teacher Narrative

The life of a teacher is not well encapsulated in research. Longitudinal studies are difficult, especially those comparing teachers across regions and ages. Instead, we rely on quantitative measures of how long teachers stay in the classroom to support a traditional story or narrative of the “life of a teacher”. That is, the typically female teacher who attends college in their home state and begins teaching at the age of 22 somewhere near her home, college, or both. She remains there until she has children, perhaps either leaving the classroom at this point, or remaining until she retires some four decades later. She will teach siblings, even parents and children, be known for a particular curriculum or project, and be engrained in the community. This type of sustainability is not expected in impoverished neighborhoods, with the assumption that the best and brightest teachers are attracted to the wealthy suburbs (Green, 2014). But what happens when the historically impoverished area has a new “successful” school? Was this story
of the static teacher ever a reality, or a unique example in towns across the country that was normalized? How does this “norm” fit in with a new economy, whereby workers move and change jobs at more frequent rates? These questions are especially important in research on teacher subjectivity.

**Teacher Retention**

Teacher retention was one the most pertinent topics when beginning this research project based on my experience working in New Orleans at a school where even the most veteran teachers only had three years of classroom experience. My interest in teacher retention is founded on the assumption that veteran and experienced teachers are more “effective” than inexperienced and untrained teachers. This assumption is supported in literature (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005) but also my time attending “effective” public schools and universities, staffed with veteran teachers holding multiple degrees. If experience and formal education programs were a priority in my schools, why was it not an issue in charters (Stuit & Smith, 2012)? Was I overestimating the importance of traditional education programs in preparing teachers, as purported by Green (2014), who argues schools of education overemphasize philosophy while disregarding the physical practice of teaching? There was also the more human side of teachers leaving my school each year. Students would arrive each fall and find a new cast of mostly White teachers from outside the state in their first full-time job after college. In contrast, I shared many of the same teachers as my siblings. There was an anticipation and excitement of the loud 9th grade Biology teacher who jumped on desks or the quirky English teacher who used differing accents while reading aloud. Were these experiences
valuable? Finally, teacher subjectivity is the voice and stories of teachers are greatly diminished if they can only be understood or studied in a two year window before they leave the classroom for other pursuits.

Dr. Williams prioritized teacher retention when initially designing the school, although he viewed turnover as a part of school design.

You have to make a huge investment in teachers. When you lose a veteran teacher you are really losing something. So I never saw a teacher as a commodity that we just change all the time. I wanted good people and wanted to have an amazing staff and I did and we do and we have longevity among the staff. On the other hand, I knew for a fact that after about ten or twelve years we would lose teachers because we are hiring creative talented people. And after ten, twelve, fifteen years, most creative talented teachers have a desire to move and do something more. So sometimes you can help them internally. So you take them out of the loop and let them teach electives. You take them out of the loop and give [one teacher] half-time, three-quarter time data analysis and teacher support. So you build places internally in the school to keep places. And you lose a certain number of people and that’s ok, that’s healthy. But no, see the whole place is built on teachers. (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017)

Teacher turnover is not inherently problematic for schools if it is limited and the new teachers are both prepared and qualified. “Students and schools benefit if less-effective teachers exit the profession and other teachers make strategic moves to work in school environments that improve their productivity” (Stuit & Smith, 2012). This is echoed when Dr. Williams states, “you lose a certain number of people and that’s ok” (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017).

Alternatively, if effective teachers are not retained, school quality will diminish, especially in low-performing schools (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Therefore, it is expected the school employs systems to retain teachers it deems effective. PHCS self-reports that competency-based assessments are one such system, as is teacher looping, because teachers spend four years workings towards the ultimate goal of student graduation. However, the teacher
retention numbers reported, while correlated with programs such as competency-based promotion and teacher looping, do not prove causation. In the report on looping, the school cites the 31.3% teacher turnover rate in charter schools reported by Miron and Applegate (2007). In comparison, the school averaged a turnover rate of 15.9% between its second and eight years of operation.

**PHCS Teacher Turnover in Practice**

PHCS’s teacher turnover rates correspond closer to national averages of teacher turnover. Annually, schools lose about 16% of their teaching staff each year, with 8% of teachers leaving the profession and 8% moving schools (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). For urban teachers, classroom management, student engagement, and connectedness with colleagues are the most important factors (Shernoff et al., 2011). So while PHCS clearly prioritizes teacher retention, with a turnover rate about half of typical charter schools, it is unclear which variables are responsible. Furthermore, during my year at PHCS, teachers shared concerns with staying at the school long-term while others took more immediate action.

By the end of the four-year loop, it is expected that about half of the original grade-level team members remain with the school. For example, fifteen teachers begin as a freshman grade-level team, by the end of senior year four years later, about seven or eight will still be working as part of that team. Of the eight not in the team, four will have left the school completely, while the other four may have moved into alternative positions at the school, such as working with a different grade-level team. TPSs or charter schools without teacher looping may suffer less

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33 Between the second and eighth years of operation, the school reported the following teacher turnover rates: 11.1%, 22.2%, 24.1%, 10.8%, 17.1%, 19.1%, and 6.6%.
disruption with similar levels of teacher turnover because of the lack of expectation teachers will remain at the school. If students expect their math teacher to loop with them for four years and they abruptly leave after two, they are impacted differently than when a future math teacher leaves a traditional school because they have not yet developed a relationship with that teacher.

Teacher turnover can be especially problematic when it is unexpected, especially in the middle of the school year. At the end of the first trimester of the 2016-2017 school year, two teachers in the sophomore grade-level team left the school. This placed a burden on the remaining members of the team, requiring a sharing of additional staff responsibilities. What was especially surprising was that the two teachers left in the middle of the school year after both being at the school for over five years. The school moved a teaching assistant from a different grade into one of the vacant positions and hired an additional teaching assistant to the staff. It was assumed that the two leaving members had been looking for positions outside of the school and left when they were notified of an available position elsewhere. Barbara also notes family dynamics are relevant to the career decisions of the staff.

We also lose a lot of people because they become new moms. Or they become, one of the people who left was the father but decided to be the stay at home dad. So a lot of people leave, not necessarily for different positions, but because the new family dynamic of their house. (B. Jones, personal interview, April 5, 2017)

Put simply, the ability to have and raise young children while working at the school is a concern. When the two teachers decided to leave, the rest of the staff was notified by email. This surprised the staff and invoked changes in how the administration communicated with teachers about future career plans. Because administration was surprised by the departures, they asked the staff to notify leadership if they were expecting to leave, promising to keep the discussions
confidential. However, one teacher followed the new protocol and the next day their position was listed on the school website as vacant. So while teachers work to balance career and life decisions, there is an ambiguity on how best to discuss their long-term plans with the school’s administration.

Collectively, these systems equate to a unique teacher experience at PHCS. They result in an unspoken discourse that teachers and the school do more for the students than a traditional school, particularly due to the year-round schedule, extended days, litany of teacher responsibilities outside the classroom, and competency-based promotion. As discussed in previous chapters, the internal research reports are written against TPS norms; the school is not looking for the typical teacher, urban high school students today require something different.

Finally, there is once again a disconnect between the school structures in theory and their implementation in practice. By the start of the 2017 school year, Barbara’s grade-level team had already lost half of its members. As previously stated, this usually is the end number after a four year loop, and the team had already reached that level of attrition after only two years. In other words, the lived experiences of this grade-level team was in stark contrast to the ideals set forth by the school’s formal structures.

**Collaboration: Who Looks to the School upon the Hill?**

Participation and communication are central to Dewey’s philosophical views on education. Instead of teachers espousing knowledge onto children, learning is active through the interactions between people. The activities and curriculum are essential to this participation, thus defending the importance of the teacher. Ultimately, people must communicate and collaborate
in order to learn; people do not simply go out and experience the world independent of their relationships. “For Dewey the meaning of the world is, after all, not located in the things and events themselves, but in the social practices in which things, gestures, sounds, and events play a role” (Biesta, 2014, p. 31). However, the participants must have a shared interest or goal.

Any experience, however trivial in its first appearance, is capable of assuming an indefinite richness of significance by extending its range of perceived connections. Normal communication with others is the readiest way of effecting this development, for it links up the net results of the experience of the group and even the race with the immediate experience of an individual. By normal communication is meant that in which there is a joint interest, a common interest, so that one is eager to give and the other to take. It contrasts with telling or stating things simply for the sake of impressing them upon another, merely in order to test him to see how much he has retained and can literally reproduce. (Dewey, 1916, p. 217)

These “connections” were not found in attempts to collaborate with PHCS’s surrounding institutions and organizations. Dr. Williams bluntly stated, “Nobody is interested” (T. Williams, personal interview, February 2, 2017). This stands in stark contrast to the origination of charter schools as academies of institution and the Pennsylvania Charter Law which states charters expansion will “encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods.” If a school is using “innovative teaching methods” but nobody is collaborating with the school, is the system deficient? Moreover, as the charter develops from a small, one-year school to a four-year school, and systems are tried and perfected, does innovation and collaboration waiver?

Collaboration in Practice

Dr. Williams led PHCS for ten years as the founder and CEO. He retired in the early 2010’s and the school was passed on to a new leadership team. He maintains close friendships with members at the school and is revered by many of the remaining staff. For example, one
A teacher who was hired by Williams in his last year at the school spoke of a “break” historically at the school between the original leadership team and second-generation administrators. Put bluntly, Dr. Williams is proud of the school. However, the “beta-site of best practices” never came to fruition, a point of contention for Williams.

Well the beta-site thing, with all due respect, I learned, an idiot, you can publish that, I was wrong. Nobody is interested. Nobody. Even the people who fake interest and visit us, learn about it. As soon as they see that it is doing business, and doing business in completely different ways, they all back off. And then the worst thing that happens to the few people who show up and think the ideas are good but “we will just try one of the ideas.” So they get no synergy, they won’t know how to put it all in place…So no, if I could turn back time, I would have said let’s do it, let’s build it, we will get 5 years of data, we will collect it, and then we will start to spawn off other schools. I just, as cynical as I am, I still held out hope that if you showed people a model that works, they will get excited by it. Nope. Nope.

Dr. Williams’ initial disappointment with the lack of collaboration between PHCS and surrounding schools is reserved generally for k-12 schools, specifically high schools. Of particular interest was an opportunity he offered a neighboring charter network whereby a team of 15 veteran teachers and one administrator would help open a new high school. The team would be outgoing senior year teachers from PHCS and would move in to the new school, looping up each year and teaching the PHCS school model at the new site. The charter network turned down the offer. According to Williams, while the charter viewed PHCS as a successful school, they attributed the success to the leadership team and their 80 years of experience, not the
This was especially frustrating to Dr. Williams because he believed the school had solved the startup challenges.

When you start a charter, you have to come up with a manual and a student handbook and governance and a financial model. I don’t expect the average Joe to understand that. We have got all that. That’s done. You can do this, particularly if we are there to mentor you and help you.

However, he also found reservations from surrounding colleges and universities to work with the school, particularly on a school leadership project.

A few years into running the school, Dr. Williams turned to his strong endowment networks and earned a six-figure grant to run a leadership institute at PHCS. The grant was to collaborate with a local university whereby students working on masters and doctoral degrees and principal certifications could take classes and conduct observations in PHCS. Dr. Williams approached eight private and public universities in the area and was rejected each time. This was baffling to Dr. Williams because the universities viewed the program as a “great idea” but then reneged months later.

Dr. Williams’ sense of disappointment resonated with me throughout my time at PHCS. He had dedicated his life to public schooling, worked diligently alongside his two school founders to begin a school he was proud of, and built what he viewed as a model of innovation. Teacher autonomy was prioritized, decisions were made democratically, and information and data was transparent and accessible. And yet nobody appeared interested. The politics of the charter school phenomenon had built too great a divide between charter advocates and the local

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34 Primary characteristics of the school model are discussed in the following sections and chapters, specifically the teacher ladder, teacher looping, integration of technology and business, and the senior research capstone project.
institutions and academies studying urban education reform. The shining school upon the hill became isolated and out of view.

**Reflection**

I began this project for a simple reason. After reviewing literature on charter schools during my graduate studies, I noticed insufficient research was being conducted inside of charter schools. Moreover, researchers had begun to describe their difficulties accessing charters to conduct research. The topic had become so political that researchers had written charters off as sites of study under the pretense that privatization efforts are detrimental and should not be encouraged and access was too difficult because charters were weary of critical work taking place inside their halls. As a former charter school teacher and, perhaps as importantly, a White male resembling many of the teachers and administrators leading charter schools, I decided to attempt to use my access to study a site other researchers may not find inviting.

In hindsight, it is consistent with my findings that PHCS replied to my inquiries for a research site. As documented, the school has numerous internal research reports on the school website for public readers. On my first phone call with the school leader, he emphasized PHCS as being “open” to researchers. When I interviewed Dr. Williams, he also wished more outside researchers would come to the school and “Produce research, invite people in, have people do their dissertation on it, and really learn about it.” Both teachers I worked with were extremely receptive to my work, allowing me to observe freely and making time in their busy schedules for interviews and to answer questions. Barbara was the first teacher to reach out to me and was in
contact with me from start to finish. Maria had a long history working with higher education institutions and was actively pursuing new ideas and strategies for the classroom.

**The Discourse of Education Reform**

During my interview, I asked Dr. Williams to reflect on the differences in local views towards charter schools between when the school started and today.

It was brand new. Charter schools were a national idea that was running across the country in a massive way. But it was mainly going to places with growth economies. So Arizona went crazy with charter schools. Minnesota went crazy with charter schools. They went to Southern California... We are a shrinking economy. So when you are a shrinking economy, it makes it a little more intense for the charter schools. Because if you are a growth economy, we will just add on charters and you aren’t really taking jobs or money away because you need to open more schools anyway. But you are in [here] and you open a charter school, you are taking money out of the city, so there is attention. Charter schools were not big [here] at all... Not a whole lot has changed. Which is classic [here]. What we need is a hurricane. We need God to bring forth lightning and thunder and monkeys falling from the sky. That probably won’t go well in your dissertation, but you know what I am talking about? Because otherwise we don’t change here.

Language surrounding the need for a disaster to create change is not unique. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan apologized after public reprimanding for the following quote:

> This is a tough thing to say, but let me be really honest. I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina. That education system was a disaster, and it took Hurricane Katrina to wake up the community to say that ‘We have to do better’.

Furthermore, Giroux (2006) chastised Barbara Bush’s comments on evacuees: “So many of the people, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them” (p.48). As a researcher studying neoliberal school reform, I looked like the embodiment of such reform and possibly had access to components otherwise shielded from those critical of the ideology. Another researcher with a different appearance and background may not have the same access.
For example Sondel (2016) was not granted access to charter schools based on her attendance at a university known for its critical work. However, my subjectivity also limits my approach. This is evident in the lack of discussion focused on race, a phenomenon common in schools (Gallagher, 2000) and research (Blee, 2000).

A Researcher’s Debt

I am leaving PHCS with a clear feeling of debt towards both Barbara and Maria. This is not simply a kindness I can espouse in an acknowledgements section. Any criticism of the school or their personas feels as if I am betraying (Islam, 2000) their trust in allowing me into their classrooms, their workplace, and their livelihood. I am sure the kindness they showed me has altered my views of the school.

In many ways, the humanity shown in the school every day for the last year has softened how I see charters. The PHCS staff genuinely cares about education and the practice of teaching; they are not mean or dispirited, beaten down by yearly failures as my charter school peers were. I entered the school seeing charters as a neoliberal tool to disrupt democratic functions, to wrestle power away from disenfranchised populations and place it in the hands of White business people. I leave confused, unsure of how best to explain such a complex phenomenon, a school striving for success in a political environment vitriolic towards public institutions.

PHCS is a school attempting to appease everyone at once, the conservative in favor of charters and autonomy and liberals promoting community partnerships and research based practices, transparency, and accountability. The balancing between the two has resulted in far too many failures in my experience researching charter schools. The successes have been heralded
too much by the right and dismissed too much by the left. The most problematic aspect I can identify though, one of the few conclusions I had before entering the school, was that the research would likely not dissuade anyone on either side. The trenches have already been dug, the ship has sailed. You are either pro-charter or anti-charter; discussions in the middle are moot.

This nihilism brings me to one final point. I cannot feel a sense of inevitability in where I have landed, back at the beginning of my research. My conclusions are in many ways emblematic of myself. It is in my best interest to straddle two groups. Many other researchers, neglecting the political context of the rise of charters, have taken this approach. This dilemma accentuates the need for sufficient background and contextual information I have provided.
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### APPENDIX A. CHARTER SCHOOL DEFINITIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Center for Education Statistics</td>
<td>A public charter school is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state or jurisdiction. The charter exempts the school from certain state or local rules and regulations. In return for flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter. A school's charter is reviewed periodically (typically every 3 to 5 years) by the group or jurisdiction that granted it and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the accountability standards are not met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Department of Education</td>
<td>Schools that operate under a charter are divided into three general categories—charter schools, regional charter schools, and cyber charter schools. Both charter schools and regional charter schools (collectively referred to as &quot;charter schools&quot;) are independent public schools established and operated under a charter from the local school board and in which students are enrolled or attend. These schools are commonly referred to as &quot;brick-and-mortar&quot; charter schools and focus on teacher-led discussion and teacher knowledge imparted to students through face-to-face interaction at the schools' physical facilities located within the boundaries of the school district that granted the charter. A cyber charter school is an independent public school established and operated under a charter from PDE and in which the school uses technology in order to provide a significant portion of curriculum and to deliver a significant portion of instruction to its students through the internet or other electronic means without a school-established requirement that students be present at a supervised physical facility designated by the school, except on a very limited basis, such as for standardized test.</td>
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| National Alliance for Public Charter Schools | Charter schools are unique public schools that are allowed the freedom to be more innovative while being held accountable for advancing student achievement. Because they are public schools, they are:  
  - Open to all children;  
  - Do not charge tuition; and  
  - Do not have special entrance requirements.  
  The core of the charter school model is the belief that public schools should be held accountable for student learning. In exchange for this |
accountability, school leaders should be given freedom to do whatever it takes to help students achieve and should share what works with the broader public school system so that all students benefit.

| Miron and Nelson, 2000 | Charter schools are public schools that operate under a contractual arrangement with a chartering entity such as a state, local board of education, or an independent chartering authority. The chartering contract frees schools from most traditional public school system rules and regulations in exchange for increased accountability. Ultimately, high student academic achievement. Charter schools can be formed by a variety of individuals or groups, including educators, parents, community members, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education. A charter is signed by its founding members and a chartering agency and details what the school expects to accomplish with respect to student achievement and other outcomes. Unlike traditional public schools, a charter school may be closed by its chartering entity if they fail to meet the standards set forth in the charter. |
APPENDIX B. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Gareth Mitchell
Human Sciences and Education

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: August 26, 2016

RE: IRB# E10006

TITLE: Teacher resistance at an urban charter school


Review Date: 8/25/2016

Approved X Disapproved

Approval Date: 8/25/2016 Approval Expiration Date: 8/24/2019

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 1, 2b

Signed Consent Waived?: Yes for Skype interviews, no for in person interviews

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chair

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING — Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb
School leader,

My name is Gareth Mitchell and I am a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University currently working on my dissertation here in []. As a former middle school science teacher at a charter school in New Orleans, I am interested in the lived experiences and backgrounds of charter school teachers in cities where charters are less prominent. Would you be available to participate in my research? I understand the time and energy constraints of classroom teachers and can absolutely work around any schedule. I am interested in classroom observations and teacher interviews, although any and all data sources are useful in such a qualitative project. Your school stood out to me because of the emphasis on project-based learning, a topic I studied during graduate school. Of course, I have Institutional Review Board approval and I am more than happy to answer any and all questions you or your administration may have ahead of time. Furthermore, all names, including the city, school, and teacher will be changed to ensure anonymity.

Please let me know if you are or are not interested in participating, or if you know of fellow teachers who may be available. Thanks for your time and I look forward to hearing from you!

Gareth
APPENDIX D. PROJECT PROPOSAL REQUESTED BY PHCS

Dissertation Proposal for PHCS
2016/2017 School Year

Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between teacher professional identity and classroom pedagogy at an urban charter school. First, an analysis and discussion of teacher professional identity is important. Teacher professional identity is in part influenced by early experiences with school and perceptions of the role of teachers in society. As such, teacher background information and teacher perceptions of their roles in and out of the classroom will be gathered. Often, charter schools have clear guiding principles for how they are constructed and run (i.e. college prep; STEM; project-based learning; leadership). Do these core components of the charter school select particular teacher identities, or do teachers adapt their identities once they are indoctrinated in the culture of the school? In other words, how does teacher professional identity translate to a school with a clear identity and structure? How do professional identities of teachers working closely together (i.e. grade-level teams; co-teaching) interact with the school’s guiding mission? Second, how does this information help us better understand the strengths and weaknesses of classroom instruction and classroom culture at the school. For example, how are differences in teacher identities used to promote diverse learning strategies and experiences for students? Alternatively, how are similarities in teacher identities used to build cohesion among the staff? These may be direct actions, such as purposeful socializing by department members outside of school, or indirect actions, such as disciplinary patterns across a grade level team working with one cohort of students.

Part 1: Background of teacher/ views on being a teacher (survey in part from Weiner & Torres, 2015)

Part 2: Classroom observations: similarities and differences both horizontally (across subjects and literacies) and vertically (across grade levels). These observations will then need to be discussed with teachers to determine causation of the correlation between teacher identity and pedagogy.

Background:

As a former science teacher at an urban charter school in New Orleans, Louisiana, I have experience working in the nation’s first and only entirely charted school district. New Orleans post-Katrina is a stark contrast to Pittsburgh, where charters serve only about 11 percent of students. Furthermore, alternative-certification programs generally do not feature prominently in Pennsylvania, particularly in Pittsburgh. I am greatly interested in the type of professionals who choose to teach at a charter school in an environment where charters are the exception.
The following example represents a possible research topic. Charter school proponents often cite autonomy as a strength of independently run schools. Does this autonomy translate to teachers in a charter school? Are charter school teachers interested in both school autonomy and teacher autonomy? Do teachers work with a similar level of autonomy in the classroom where they are held accountable by standards or student tests while experimenting with pedagogy? Is autonomy able to trickle down from the district level to school leadership to the classroom or is it disrupted along the way? Of course, if autonomy is not important to teachers at the school and it does not come up in interviews, questions may be asked about the conflict. Why do teachers at an autonomous school deprioritize autonomy? How does this strengthen and weaken classroom instruction? For example, less autonomy may make it easier to quickly implement new strategies across the school and to maintain clear student expectations. These are the types of questions I will be concerned with throughout the project.

**Protocol:**

This research is considered a teacher ethnography. I am interested in the culture and lived experiences of charter school teachers. While the culture of the school will serve as necessary background information to the study, school culture, school leadership, and other more comprehensive components of the school will not be directly addressed except in their relationship to teacher culture. This is merely due to logistical concerns.

I will conduct teacher interviews based on the availability of the staff. This will be negotiated, and I am able to meet with teachers before, during, and after school hours. While my preference is to conduct in-person and taped interviews to then be transcribed, written questionnaires may be needed in specific instances. Background interviews should last about 30 minutes and use a semi-structured format.

Classroom observations will depend on the access of the school and the number of teachers able to participate. Put simply, the more time I am able to observe, the more complete a picture I can paint of teacher pedagogy. This will require balancing between the number of participants and the number of observations for each individual, as an increase in the former will decrease the latter.

**Transparency:**

As an outsider, I will do everything I can to limit the influence of my presence on the school. I will work hard to gain rapport with teachers and will follow instructions on how best to interact in the classroom. For example, such instructions could include teachers asking for assistance in small group work or teachers asking me to not interact with students during class.

I will also work to make my data and findings as accessible to the school community as possible. Research in a school that does not provide tangible benefit to the community is unethical. As
such, I will be transparent with my process and findings to ensure student achievement and the
goals of the school are always prioritized. More specifically, I can provide either written or
verbal updates of my research to interested parties once concerns with teacher and student
anonymity are made clear.
APPENDIX E. TEACHER CONSENT FORM

The purpose of this research project is to analyze teaching at an urban charter school. This is a research project being conducted by Gareth Mitchell at Louisiana State University. You are invited to participate in this research project because you are either a current or former teacher at an urban charter school.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this interview, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this interview or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

The procedure involves a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. Follow-up interviews may be requested. Your responses will be confidential and we do not collect identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address. The interview questions will be about your time teaching at an urban charter school. The interview will be voice recorded so that it can be transcribed and coded while omitting or changing any identifying information.

We will do our best to keep your information confidential. All data is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the data will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with Louisiana State University representatives.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Gareth Mitchell (email: gmitch5@lsu.edu) or Dr. Petra Hendry (email: phendry@lsu.edu). This study has been reviewed according to Louisiana State University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB chair, Dr. Dennis Landin (phone: 225-578-8692 email: irb@lsu.edu).

CONSENT: Please select your choice below.
Agreement indicates that:
• you have read the above information
• you voluntarily agree to participate
• you are at least 18 years of age

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by choosing disagree.

_____ I agree to participate in this study     _____ I do not wish to participate in this study.

_______________________________________________     ___________________
Signature                                                                                 date
The purpose of this research project is to analyze teaching at an urban charter school. This is a research project being conducted by Gareth Mitchell at Louisiana State University. As an administrator, your consent is required to grant access to the researcher for classroom observations during the 2016-2017 school year. Administrator consent is voluntary. You may choose not to grant access to your school classrooms. If you decide to grant access to the researcher, you may withdraw access at any time. If you decide not to grant access or if you withdraw access at any time, you will not be penalized.

Researcher observations will typically last one to three class periods per visit. These visits will take place as needed throughout the school year, scheduled in advance with both the teacher and administration. Teacher interviews will be conducted either at the school or outside of school depending on teacher availability. All collected data will be confidential and we do not collect identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address. The interview questions will be about your time teaching at an urban charter school. The interview will be voice recorded so that it can be transcribed and coded while omitting or changing any identifying information. Observations will focus on teacher actions and behavior in comparison to stated school principles. We will do our best to keep your information confidential. All data is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the data will not contain information that will personally identify the school or teacher. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with Louisiana State University representatives.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Gareth Mitchell (email: gmitch5@lsu.edu) or Dr. Petra Hendry (email: phendry@lsu.edu). This study has been reviewed according to Louisiana State University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB chair, Dr. Dennis Landin (phone: 225-578-8692 email: irb@lsu.edu).

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If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by choosing disagree.

_____ I agree to participate in this study       _____I do not wish to participate in this study.

__________________________________________                     __________________
Signature                                                                                 date
APPENDIX G. MARIA SANCHEZ INTERVIEW

1. Briefly describe your background in education. The types of schools you attended growing up from k-12 and just also your experience in college as in what you studied and how you entered the education profession.

2. Can you reflect back on your certification process for becoming a teacher? What was the process like and was it effective? How did you come to work at the school?

3. What kind of curriculum was in place for your class when you began at the school?

4. Can you talk about the internship program at the school? When does it begin, who is it for, and who runs the program?

5. How has the school changed in your time at PHCS, especially in regards to the curriculum and what you are teaching?

6. How has your unique background influenced your teaching?

7. Can you elaborate on the cross-department and cross-curricular collaboration taking place? Is that a priority specific to just your class or the school in genera?
APPENDIX H. BARBARA JONES INTERVIEW

1. Briefly describe your background in education. The types of schools you attended growing up from k-12 and just also your experience in college as in what you studied and how you entered the education profession.

2. Please describe the different schools you taught at. Where were they located and how did they differ? When was this in your career? How long were you at each school? What was their student makeup? What was the teacher makeup?

3. What made you decide to move to PHCS? Why did you leave the previous school? How did you learn about this school?

4. How did your idea of instruction fit in from your previous school to PHCS?

5. What are discrepancies in available resources like between the schools you have taught at? How important are these discrepancies to you?

6. Please discuss the outside organizations and conferences you take part in.

7. How has the school changed in your time at PHCS, especially in regards to the curriculum and what you are teaching? How did the school change after the founders left?

8. Please discuss the relationship between teacher staff and the administration. How and when do they interact?

9. Can you elaborate on the promotion process? What are the expectations of an expert teacher?

10. What are the typical student retention rates like? What are your thoughts on the retention of students at PHCS? How does this relate to school choice in general?

11. What kind of control do you have over your curriculum? Do you feel free to alter the curriculum if you deem it necessary? What stops you from changing the curriculum?

12. Do you envision teaching at the school for a long time? Teaching in general? Why or why not?
APPENDIX I. SCHOOL FOUNDER EMAIL QUESTIONS

Background

I. How did you enter the field of education?
   A. College degree program/ certification
   B. Subjects taught/ school locations
   C. Ideas for starting a charter school

II. School origins
   A. Differences in climate in 2002 vs. today or when you left the school
   B. General takeaways from starting a school which may be unique to [] or Pennsylvania
   C. Foundations for the school’s curriculum and pedagogy and how curriculum evolved

III. Reflections
   A. Charter school vs. charter chain: Why did the school not expand?
   B. Thoughts on a child attending the school and other locations where teachers send their own children elsewhere.
   C. Testing vs. accountability: Charters have expanded in an age of accountability, which has become synonymous with high-stakes testing. How can curriculum deemphasize testing in charters?
   D. General ideas on education reform policy:
      i. Differences between urban education and general education policy
      ii. Charter proponent’s affiliation with the voucher movement, privatization, and for-profit education reforms
APPENDIX J. SCHOOL FOUNDER INTERVIEW

1. Briefly describe your background in education. The types of schools you attended growing up from k-12 and just also your experience in college as in what you studied and how you entered the education profession.

2. What made you think, “I want to start a charter school”?

3. How long did the process take to get the school started?

4. What types of initial funding did you have? Where did those relationships come from?

5. What kinds of preparations did you make to start the school?

6. How did you recruit teachers to the school?

7. How did recruit students to the school?

8. Did the school start one grade per year?

9. Why did you choose the age group that you did?

10. How has the climate changed towards charter schools in the last 15 years?

11. How does the charter climate differ across the state?

12. What were the political maneuvers you had to make to start the school?

13. What were your long-term visions of the school, a stand-alone school or scaling up to new sites? Do you think your long-term vision was correct at the time and now?

14. Is there collaboration between charter schools in the area? Why or why not?

15. Is there collaboration between the school and universities? Why or why not?

16. How are the public schools doing in the area?

17. What are your general views on how accountability is being implemented? How are teachers evaluated at the school?

18. Is the political climate in the city conducive to furthering charter school agendas?

19. How successful is the school? Why?

20. Was teacher retention a priority at the school? Why?

21. Is collaboration important at the school? Why?
VITA

Gareth was raised in New Hampshire, California, and Virginia, where he attended public schools through twelfth grade. Upon graduation, he moved to New Orleans, Louisiana to attend Tulane University, earning a B.S. in Environmental Biology with a minor in Philosophy in 2010. He subsequently enrolled in TeachNOLA, a five week teacher-preparation program, placing recent college graduates and career changers into high needs schools in the city. For two years, Gareth taught fifth and eighth grade science at a newly formed charter school.

In January 2013, he returned to school with a newfound passion for education but lacking a formal background in the field. The following spring, he earned his M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction for Secondary Science, completing a thesis on the state’s “Religious Freedom Law’s” impact on science classrooms. He remained at LSU for his doctoral studies, defending his dissertation in the fall of 2017, entitled “The Shining School Upon the Hill: Teacher Subjectivity at a ‘Successful’ Charter School.”

Gareth’s research predominately focuses on the privatization of urban public schools. Whereas research in this field is often top-down policy analysis, Gareth focuses on teacher and student voice in an attempt to bring a more democratic perspective to debates over charter school expansion. His research currently takes place in Pennsylvania, where he lives with his partner, Meredith.