Rewriting Professional Development: Professional Learning Communities In An Urban Charter School

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Abstract
This study challenges traditional professional development models, in which teachers are positioned as receptacles for knowledge and “best practices.” This type of professional development devalues the local knowledge teachers possess, their theories of practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994), and their ability to reflect on their practice and determine what professional inquiries best serve the school community, their own classrooms, and the students who inhabit them.

In order to implement a more teacher-centered approach to professional development at Aspen Charter School, administrators asked me to spearhead and coordinate the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). In the PLC framework, groups are not mandated to follow a prescribed curriculum; rather, they set their own learning trajectory and ground their study in the experiential realities of their school and classroom contexts. Thus, this dissertation tracks the work of two PLCs, comprised of teachers of all subjects in grades 4-8, who undertook year-long inquiries into the topics of Cultural Competence and Restorative Justice.

As the PLC coordinator at Aspen Charter School, I helped these groups locate resources and design learning activities that would guide their inquiries. I also had the opportunity to participate in many of the PLC sessions. Thus, the research is ethnographic and interpretative in nature, and it follows the long tradition of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Ballenger, 1999; Campano, 2007). Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 1997) revealed insights into the (un)learnings of the participants, and grounded theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) emerged that both inform and critique collective understandings of PLCs, cultural competence, and restorative justice.

Though PLCs hold tremendous potential to help teachers engage in transformative learning, there are several inherent and logistical tensions that challenge the extent to which teachers can adequately develop frameworks that reject dominant discourses and ideologies. Thus, this study examines both the limitations and possibilities of PLCs, as teachers seek to develop praxis in the very complicated spheres of Cultural Competence and Restorative Justice.

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REWITING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN AN URBAN CHARTER SCHOOL

Gregory J. Glasheen

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

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REWRITING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN AN URBAN CHARTER SCHOOL

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Gregory J. Glasheen

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Dedicated to my first, current, and future teachers:

Gloria, Michael, Sarah, and Abigayle
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I extend my sincerest and deepest gratitude to my mother and father, Gloria and Michael Glasheen. From the day I was born, they instilled in me a love of learning, respect for teachers’ impact on society, and the values and work ethic that led me to pursue this degree. While several high school and college peers questioned my decision to become an elementary school teacher, my parents never wavered in their support and recognized that the effect a teacher has on a community can never be measured in dollars and cents, titles, or prestige. Caring, compassionate, intellectual teachers are fundamental to democratic society, and I know my parents are proud that three of their children entered the field of education. And I could not be more proud to call myself their son.

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I also owe sincere thanks to the incredibly hard-working, intelligent, thoughtful, and committed educators at Aspen Charter School. These teachers understand that education is more than skills-based instruction or content knowledge development. They recognize inequities in the world and understand their role as agents of change, as
activists, and as mentors. Despite all the negative media attention regarding education in America, we have every reason to believe that our nation’s youth will emerge as a progressive, critical, accepting, and learned generation. With teachers like these guiding our children, optimism abounds.

Finally, I am truly grateful for the Penn GSE faculty, staff, and peers, all of whom are integral to this dissertation. Whether talking about writing (and Phillies vs. Mets!) with Maria Ghiso over re-steeped tea at Metropolitan Bakery; listening to Vivian Gadsden tell her class, “I don’t have a PowerPoint, but I do have a point with power;” being overwhelmed and intimidated by a meeting with Susan Lytle and Rob Simon in the library of The Inn at Penn; coding endless transcripts with Kathleen Riley; listening to Larry Sipe chuckle as he read No, David! to a group of graduate students; sitting in a circle as Shaun Harper introduced me to Critical Race Theory; discussing schema theory with Maren Aukerman; sharing pictures of Abby with Lorraine Hightower; expressing love for our dogs and daughters with Gerald Campano; or passing Molly Buckley out on the Schuylkill River Trail as we trained for marathons, my experience at Penn was unparalleled. In its own unique way, it taught me to read the word and the world, and to make justice my project. Dr. Campano, Dr. Ghiso, and Dr. Gadsden, thank you. I am honored to have scholars – and educators – of your stature and ability on my committee, and I am deeply humbled to stand alongside you as we work together to support schools, teachers, and the brilliant children they serve.
ABSTRACT

REWRYING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN AN URBAN CHARTER SCHOOL

Gregory J. Glasheen
H. Gerald Campano

This study challenges traditional professional development models, in which teachers are positioned as receptacles for knowledge and “best practices.” This type of professional development devalues the local knowledge teachers possess, their theories of practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994), and their ability to reflect on their practice and determine what professional inquiries best serve the school community, their own classrooms, and the students who inhabit them.

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Chapter I: A Call for Professional Development Reform

_The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line._


Statement of the Problem

With his prophetic statement made over a century ago, Du Bois laid the groundwork for the fundamental tenet of critical race theory: racism is permanent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). While this principle can be both infuriating and demoralizing, it can also be read as a call to action and a rallying cry for those who oppose oppression and bigotry. It is this latter interpretation that served as the genesis for this research study: Aspen Charter School (ACS)\(^1\) resides in an underserved neighborhood that has been consistently victimized by institutional racism and, more recently, gentrification that is raising taxes and displacing members of the community. In this pocket of Philadelphia, 22.9% of residents are unemployed; over 42% of the families live below the poverty line; 99% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and nearly a quarter of the properties are uninhabited (personal communication, 2013). And, in an unfortunate demographic truth that validates Du Bois’s prediction, 99% of the residents of this neighborhood are Black. Though Aspen Charter School had not yet opened its doors in 1903, it reflects Du Bois’s premonition with striking accuracy, and since the problem of the twentieth century pervades into the twenty-first, this study attempts to explore how professional development can be used to combat systemic racism

\(^1\) Pseudonyms are used throughout the research project to protect the anonymity of all individuals and institutions involved in this study.
by offering a positive schooling experience for students who have historically been
denied a quality education.

In many ways, Aspen is a microcosm for larger educational trends extant
throughout major urban centers throughout the country: while 99% of Aspen’s students
are Black, over 75% of the teaching faculty identifies as White, which mirrors the
nation’s broader demographics: the most recent figures list 82% of teachers in US public
schools as non-Hispanic White (US Department of Education, 2016). Yet, according to
the 2010 Census, nearly half of all children under five years old are not White, and “non-
Hispanic whites, who now account for nearly two-thirds of the population, would become
a minority by 2050” (Roberts, 2009). So what does this mean for educators, both at
Aspen and nationwide? As our country – and consequently our schools – grow more
diverse, teachers must become increasingly adept at teaching “other people’s children”
(Delpit, 1995; Ballenger, 1999), which has significant and far-reaching pedagogical,
curricular, and disciplinary implications. And what, if anything, are schools doing to
equip both new and veteran teachers with theoretical frameworks and knowledge
required to teach students with different funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, &
Gonzalez, 1992), values, and linguistic norms?

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995) has researched and theorized the
educational experiences of students of color and found that, while there is no “one size
fits all” approach to effective teaching, certain shared characteristics exist among
effective teachers. In The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African Americans
(1994), Ladson-Billings observed and chronicled the practices of eight exceptional
teachers. The first commonality among all the teachers in her study was experience: each of the eight teachers had no fewer than seven years of experience working with students of color. Thus, the old adage “you can’t buy experience” is relevant in terms of urban education: experiential knowledge matters as teachers form their own identity and learn to be successful in schools that are most likely racially and culturally different from the ones they attended as children. As Lortie (1975) wrote:

Teaching is unusual in that those who decide to enter it have had exceptional opportunity to observe members of the occupation at work; unlike most occupations today, the activities of teachers are not shielded from youngsters. Teachers-to-be underestimate the difficulties involved, but this supports the contention that those planning to teach form definite ideas about the nature of the role (p. 65)

And since the vast majority of teachers are White, middle class, and suburban-raised (Feistritzer, 2011; Zeichner, 2009; Deruy, 2013), there is often a cultural mismatch between the teacher and her students – between the teacher’s own experiences as a student herself and as a teacher of students of color. Because the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) largely fails when teachers work with students who do not share similar backgrounds, Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995) calls for a culturally relevant approach to teaching. With this approach, the teacher carefully considers both curriculum and instruction and does her best to ensure that all students’ lives are reflected in the curriculum and that all students are able to access content and display their learning in ways that lean on their strengths.\(^2\) Thus, Ladson-Billings pinpoints two
essential criteria for successful teachers: they must have thousands of hours of teaching experience (which points to issues of retention to be discussed later), and they must recognize that their own history and schooling experiences cannot predetermine their values and practices as a teacher in a multicultural classroom.

While understanding and appreciating student differences (and subsequently adapting pedagogy and curriculum to align with the students’ knowledge and experiences) is an essential component of multicultural education (Banks, 1995), race and culture play an important role in the teachers’ and schools’ stances towards student discipline. As any teacher knows, education is far more than delivery of academic curriculum. Education is not simply content instruction; education involves the cultivation of the whole child, the development of values, the nurturing of curiosities, and loving support when mistakes are made.

Over the past decade, the school-to-prison pipeline has been studied extensively (Fuentes, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Winn, 2011). “Zero-tolerance” policies and increased suspension rates have systematically excluded students from their educational experience and created a negative perception of schooling for those who are consistently removed from class, assigned detentions, suspended, or expelled (Fuentes, 2011). And as Du Bois presupposed, the students who are taught to dislike school are usually persons of color (Noguera, 2008). As the school-to-prison pipeline suggests, these same students identifying colors, shapes, letters, etc. Story-telling wasn’t institutionally valued by the school until 4th grade, when many of the Black children had already learned their identities as trouble-makers and unsuccessful students. Thus, by privileging certain discourses and cultural norms, White students were identified as intelligent and successful, whereas Black students’ talents and strengths were not seen as valuable in the classroom. Thus, by ignoring the Black students’ cultural norms, the school systematically created an institution that privileged Whiteness and pushed out those whose language and culture differed.
potentially drop out of high school, and before long, are engaging in activities that could result in incarceration. According to the NAACP (2016), “African American and Hispanics comprised 58% of all prisoners in 2008, even though African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately one quarter of the US population.” In many ways, the exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices found in schools nationwide are responsible for the disproportionate rate of imprisonment of persons of color. So, in the same way that teachers and schools must (re)consider issues of diversity and cultural appreciation, they must also reflect upon the ways in which their disciplinary systems contribute to an ideology that further perpetuates White privilege and supremacy. Fortunately, there are a variety of disciplinary approaches available to schools and teachers that do not rely solely on extrinsic rewards, punishment, and deterrence, and many districts and schools have recognized that draconian discipline policies are a contributing factor of the school-to-prison pipeline.

As demonstrated, the challenges facing teachers’ pedagogy and student discipline are both broad and deep. It is not shocking, then, to learn that teacher retention is dipping to all-time lows. Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania estimates that 40-50% of all public and private school teachers leave by the end of their fifth year of teaching (Strauss, 2015), and nearly nine and a half percent resign before completing their first year in the classroom (Riggs, 2013). Ultimately, teachers do not feel adequately

---

3 While the incarceration rates of Blacks and Hispanics are, in part, attributable to exclusionary practices employed by schools, there are other systemically racist realities that result in disproportionate rates of arrest and conviction of persons of color. For example, “five times as many Whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of Whites” (The Sentencing Project, 2016). Thus, persons of color are more likely to be arrested and convicted for engaging in the same activity as a White person.
equipped to meet the demands of the job, or more likely, the realities of teaching do not sync with the idealistic visions that initially call so many individuals to the profession (Strauss, 2015).

This devastating teacher attrition is compounded by another striking and alarming statistic regarding new teachers. In 2015, only 6,215 college graduates sought Pennsylvania teaching licenses, down from 13,361 in 2012 (Palochko, 2016). This 62% decrease in just three years reflects the dominant discourse regarding the current state of teaching: teaching is not as valued or satisfying as it was in previous eras. Thus, this decline of new teachers also points towards the importance of retaining current educators; if the pool of new teachers to fill vacancies no longer exists, then schools must work harder to support veteran teachers, who are constantly faced with new policies and demands, all amidst a student population that is rapidly changing and diversifying. Furthermore, if Ladson-Billings is correct that it takes at least seven years of teaching for educators to become masters of their craft, then it is alarming that the majority of teachers leave the career before they even gain this level of experience. All of these statistics point to a very troubling reality: college graduates are not entering the teaching field, and nearly half of new teachers are out of the profession within five years. This is not sustainable, since our children deserve a highly educated and experienced teaching force.

Thus, American education is once again reaching a crisis point. While new teachers may have the benefit of engaging in pre-service programs that intentionally focus on race, class, culture, and power (Sleeter, 2001), there are fewer and fewer individuals willing to take the plunge into teaching. And the veteran teachers – many of
whom were not required to think about race and culture in their teacher certification programs (this author included) – must attempt to make philosophical and pedagogical adjustments that align with an increased diversification of student population, student culture, and student interests. This amorphous face of education is not one that is easily described or untangled, which is why educators must be offered opportunities to learn about their own positionality and identity, more about their students and their lives, and more ways to challenge the status quo that too often marginalizes students who do not share the same race, language, and values as their teacher. Given the complicating factors inherent in twenty-first century teaching, it is no wonder that teacher retention is both a challenge and a need for schools and districts across the nation.

To shed some light on this crisis, this practitioner research attempts to address and describe a pressing need in the educational sphere: given the increased diversity of our school populations, many talented and passionate teachers crave the knowledge and experiences necessary to connect with students who sometimes talk, think, and act in ways that do not completely align with their teacher’s norms. They recognize that this work is necessary so that the students’ knowledge and experiences are valued in the school walls, and by forging these relationships with their charges, teachers experience the satisfaction that is required to return to the job year after year. Thus, this study rests upon the premise that professional development is a lynchpin that holds the promise to the fostering of stronger student-teacher relationships, more thoughtful and inclusive pedagogical and curricular decision-making, more sensitive and appropriate disciplinary approaches, and ultimately, a level of job satisfaction that repositions teaching not only as
a career, but as a vocation. Indeed, the problem of twenty-first century education remains the color line, but with intentional professional development, the schooling experience can be improved for both students and teachers.

While the mission of this PD is lofty and challenging, it is further complicated by the constraints that face a charter school. Most school districts have large central offices that employ professionals to plan, oversee, and implement professional development in the district’s schools. As an independently operating charter school, Aspen does not have the funding to hire a full-time PD coordinator. As a result, much of the PD I experienced from 2009-2013, my first four years at Aspen, was orchestrated by administrators (who have many other responsibilities), or in certain cases, by teachers themselves – who are unaccustomed to facilitating adult learning and are juggling full-time classroom duties. Understandably, the PD sessions were, at times, a bit piecemeal, since the PD facilitators were planning the sessions amidst their many other day-to-day responsibilities. Additionally, the PD was not thematically organized: one month we worked on differentiated instruction, and the next month we examined classroom management. So while the content of each session was important, there was no opportunity for deep reflection, meaning-making, and sustained inquiry. Assuming this phenomenon is not unique to Aspen, charter school operators need to consider whether their approaches to PD “get the most bang for the buck.” Since budgets, time, and resources are always tight, the PD approach a school adopts needs to be cost-effective and worthwhile for the participants.
With this ambitious mission in mind, I wish to end this introduction with two quotes that synthesize my beliefs regarding the importance of teaching and teachers – that there is no position more important to society, that teachers are responsible for more than can ever be measured on a standardized exam, and that however broken systems may be, the teacher has the power and agency to create a dynamic and transformational learning environment for all the students who enter her classroom. Decisions, behaviors, perspective, and values are all products of beliefs – those deeply held convictions that open our eyes and hearts to certain possibilities and give us direction during the dark times when it is easy to lose hope and compassion – times that we teachers attempt to understand and overcome day after day.

**The most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor.** Effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels, regardless of the level of heterogeneity in their classrooms. (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997, p. 63, emphasis added)

**This is the value of the teacher, who looks at a face and says there’s something behind that and I want to reach that person, I want to influence that person, I want to encourage that person, I want to enrich, I want to call out that person who is behind that face, behind that color, behind that language, behind that tradition, behind that culture. I believe you can do it. I know what was done for me.** (Maya Angelou)

**My Relationship to the Problem**

As a fifth grade reading teacher, my first instructional unit is to introduce the class to the elements of story structure, as I believe it is important for students to have knowledge of literary theory to help inform their reading throughout the year. Before we
cover concepts like characterization, theme, point of view, and mood, I teach my students to understand narrative trajectory. As we started reading *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990), we took a look at the exposition of the text, which we defined as the author’s attempt to “expose” the main character, setting, and background information necessary for the reader to both engage with and understand the tale. In *Maniac Magee*, the protagonist, Jeffrey, is orphaned, and when he is eleven, he runs away from the loveless marriage his aunt and uncle share. Thus begins a long adventure in which he searches for two necessities: a home and a family. He struggles to find a place to rest his head, and without an address or parents, he is unable to register for school. As I read the novel for what seemed the tenth time, it was hard for me not to contrast my childhood with Maniac’s: I was born into everything he yearned for – I grew up in a beautiful home, and my parents continue to fall further in love to this day. I attended one of the top-ranked school districts in the state, played on sports teams, joined clubs, made friends, and consistently earned “distinguished honors” on my progress reports. I enrolled in my first-choice college, and accepted a teaching position a mere three weeks after commencement. Quite simply, I was one of the many blind beneficiaries of White privilege, though I was unaware of the concept at the time.

Like many other American children, I ascribed to the myths that all citizens are born equal, meritocracy exists, and racism was something that ended when the words “I have a dream” were proclaimed over half a century ago (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). I was taught to be color-blind, so that I would not judge people by their race, and in my early years of teaching – in a predominately White suburban elementary school – I shared
the same messages with my students. And so the cycle continued; I contributed to the institutionalization of ignorance.

But, in a well-crafted story, after every exposition comes the inciting moment—the incident in which a character is knocked out of her everyday routine, a problem arises, and the real story begins. For Maniac, it’s the moment Amanda Beale, a Black child, lends him a book, requiring this runaway to remain in a town to return his new friend’s property. For me, my narrative took a sharp turn when I also confronted issues of race and power for the first time: I moved out of the suburbs and matriculated into GSE’s doctoral program focusing on reading, writing, and literacy.

During my graduate coursework, I was introduced to concepts such as institutional racism (Tatum, 1997), critical race theory (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), and racial microagressions (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Awestruck by these theoretical constructs, I eagerly enrolled in courses that would help me understand the political, social, and educational realities that limit the life-chances of students of color. Multicultural Education, Urban Education, Classroom Discourse Analysis, and Critical Race Theory all helped me to make sense of the political, ideological, and historical interface that institutionalize, rationalize, and normalize today’s “savage inequalities” (Kozol, 1991). While empowered by this knowledge and theoretical understanding, I still felt helpless because I was not in a position to effect change for those underserved in and by this country. Thus, when the opportunity emerged to re-enter the classroom, I was determined to apply my studies and create my own theory of practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994).
Located approximately one mile from Penn GSE, Aspen Charter School was chronically categorized as a low-performing institution, with fewer than half the students passing the state’s mandated testing. Despite these testing statistics and the assumptions that are commonly drawn from them, certain intangibles drew me to the school. Since it is a charter, the school is not bound to the operating district’s core curriculum, which opened space for me to design curricula and employ progressive pedagogies. And though it is a charter school, ACS is the neighborhood school, meaning that the school serves all the children from the neighborhood; there were no boundaries to admittance that charters can employ to screen students. At first sight, ACS appeared to be the perfect match: it would allow me to apply all that I learned about urban education and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1997; Kincheloe, 2008) in the context of a neighborhood school. Furthermore, situated in a historic neighborhood visited by Civil Rights Leaders, this section of the city houses a plethora of cultural resources. Churches, mosques, libraries, playgrounds, a pool, and recreation centers abound and provide students opportunities for growth, learning, and enjoyment. Because of the professional possibilities and resources available within the community, I eagerly accepted the position as a fifth grade teacher and began preparations for the first day of school.

And then reality hit. While I possessed the theoretical knowledge necessary to describe and analyze my pedagogy, the curriculum, and students’ choices and behaviors, I did not possess the professional acuity to advance the school’s mission: “to promote the academic, social, and emotional success of each child.” I struggled daily to motivate my students to engage in academic tasks. Whether creating a unit focused on Michael
Jackson’s lyrics or searching high and low for the perfect book for each student to enjoy during reader’s workshop, I worked tirelessly to create a meaningful curriculum and present it in a way that captured the students’ interest and imagination. And while there were some small successes along the way, I was ultimately displeased with the academic, social, and emotional growth of the students under my tutelage. Rather than draw on a deficit perspective (Flores, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991) and blame the students for our collective struggles, I instead grew frustrated by my performance as a teacher. There I was – the hotshot doctoral student who was hired in the blink of an eye, and yet had to break up fights in his “peaceable classroom” (O’Reilley, 1993) and could not create an environment in which students finished novels and yearned to read more. How humbling. How inciting.

Two additional critical incidents occurred that first year at ACS. First, simple observations throughout the school demonstrated that I was not the only teacher who struggled to provide meaningful learning experiences. Frustration, anxiety, and desperation permeated throughout the school as teachers attempted to address the state standards and prepare the students for their high-stakes tests. And yet, amidst all the confusion and anxiety, there existed those few classrooms in which the students were motivated, were enjoying the class, and were growing academically and socially. The ethnographer in me instantly posed the question, “What’s going on here? How is it that certain teachers are able to create a space in which their students are highly motivated and demonstrate the human qualities of compassion, empathy, and inquisitiveness that I yearn for in my classroom?” While I had neither the time nor the opportunity to become a
participant-observer in these rooms, merely asking the question was an important step in bringing me to this study.

A second critical event occurred towards the end of that academic year, when I was asked to conduct an internal review of the school’s professional development programming. I excitedly accepted the responsibility, as I recognized that meaningful professional development could offer the support and learning experiences necessary to help the faculty address the questions that arose from their practice and to create opportunities for the teachers to collaborate and learn. I interviewed teachers from various grade levels, distributed an online questionnaire for the whole faculty to complete, and researched other schools’ PD models. At the end of the process, I generated a report in which I recommended that ACS adopt a Small Learning Community (SLC) model that would allow teachers to engage in practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), lesson study (Lewis, Perry, & Hurd, 2004), descriptive review (Himley & Carini, 2000) and/or book study (Birchak, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Turner, & Short, 1998). More importantly, I posited that SLCs would promote collegiality and allow teachers to form a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which struggling teachers – like me – could learn with and from the teachers who achieved greater success year after year.

I was proud of the report I wrote and recommendations I made, and I was eager to help launch the SLCs. But, like in many organizations, change moved at a glacial pace. For the next three academic years, PD looked the same as it always did: a workshop here, a computer program or tutorial there, and occasionally an “expert” speaker. What we
engaged in was more accurately described as training, and inquiry was nowhere near the building. So I did what I could on my own and improved significantly during those three years: I learned to communicate more effectively with my students, learned their discursive norms, and motivated them to take intellectual risks. However, I – as well as many other teachers – desired authentic professional development and knew that professional isolation would lead to stagnated growth and burnout. I told many colleagues that once my practice plateaued, it would be time to look for a new job in a school that truly supported collegiality and group inquiry. It seemed not to be a question of if, but when.

That brings us to the end of the 2012-2013 academic year. Because the school, as a whole, continued to struggle to achieve its mission, a consultant was hired to comprehensively audit the school. While he uncovered many findings and made many recommendations, one of his three key points was to initiate Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as the PD model. Upon reading this, I did not know whether to laugh or cry! Here we were, three years later, with the exact same suggestion I posited in 2010. Better late than never, I suppose!

Armed with the consultant’s report, I was asked by our school’s administration to spearhead the PD overhaul and design the learning experiences for the faculty. After several conversations with administrators, we decided to focus the PD on three areas, which had been culled from interviews with teachers, teacher evaluations, our school climate report, and administrative needs: student-teacher relationships, curriculum, and data-driven instruction. Excited by this task, I immersed myself in professional
development and learning community literature, and I soon arrived at these three guiding questions for our school’s professional development:

1. How can ACS teachers improve/enhance interpersonal relationships with their students? What are the roadblocks to meaningful relationships, and what can teachers do to forge a bond with every student?

2. How can curriculum be used as a tool and vehicle to foster students’ relationships with their teachers and with the subject matter? In other words, what role can curriculum play in establishing and developing relationships with students?

3. How can teachers create assessments, analyze the data, and share the results in ways that both inform future teaching and support student-teacher relationships?

By design, student-teacher relationships were placed at the center of each of these areas of inquiries, as we were attempting to institute “relationship-based pedagogy” (Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010; Sleeter, 2011) and overturn the dominant beliefs that the challenges of the school stem from the students’ deficits and shortcomings. The rationale for this pedagogical turn partly hinges on the socio-cultural positioning of the majority of the ACS faculty: over 75% of the teachers are White, and none live in the school’s neighborhood. Consequently, we believed it essential that issues of race, culture, language, power, gender, and class be brought to the forefront; otherwise, the dominant ideology and discourse would minimize the salience of these essential components of the students’ identity. By focusing on student-teacher relationships, it then became imperative that curriculum development be shaped as “curriculum-for-whom” and assessments account for the strengths, interests, and knowledge our students bring to the classroom (Moll et al., 1992; Flores et al., 1991; Heath, 1983). Because of the cultural differences between the students and the faculty,
cultural competence, racial awareness, and linguistic sensitivity were braided in an attempt to tie these three guiding questions together.

Thus, the design and implementation of the professional learning experiences for the ACS faculty is the context in which this study is situated, and from the research, I will both theorize and narrate the professional learning process for various stakeholders in the school. While many scholars (e.g., Guskey, 2001) have called for evaluation of PD through the lens of observable changes in teaching practice and content delivery, I focus more on the learning and framework development that does or does not occur among the participants. As Webster-Wright (2009) explains, “a scan of [PD] literature reveals that the discourse of PD is focused on the development of professionals through delivering programs rather than understanding more about the experience of PL to support it more effectively” (p. 712, emphasis added). From this angle, the staff’s learning and theoretical shifts become the units of analysis, rather than the mechanics of delivery of instruction. Webster-Wright (2009) posits that “interpretative research approaches such as ethnography or phenomenology are examples of situated research approaches that maintain the holistic nature of the experience studied and can be useful for research into learning” (p. 714). Ultimately, this study invites teachers and administrators to think deeply about their practice, their interactions with students, and to consider how they can rethink and reframe their relationships with their students – and not simply evaluate the efficacy of PD through "measurable student outcomes."
Research Questions

Through this PD initiative, my responsibility, as set forth by Aspen’s administration, was to challenge the faculty’s thinking, disrupt stereotypes and deficit perspectives, and replace pejorative practices with more humane and culturally sensitive ones. Thus, the sessions that were designed for the PLCs had a political agenda, and the research studies the ways in which the teachers experienced these sessions, learned from them, and attempted to incorporate these ideas and principles into their practice.

To be able to both narrate the teachers’ experiences in the PLCs and to analyze the effects of their learning on their praxis, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What happens when a PLC investigates student-teacher relationships, in which participants are invited to consider issues of power, justice, race, class, culture, gender, and/or inequity? How are these issues taken up by participants? What Discourses (Gee, 1990) are reflected or challenged during these conversations?
   - What happens when teachers in a PLC are encouraged to challenge dominant discourses regarding poor, Black youth? Are counter-narratives written? In what ways are dominant discourses resisted, disrupted, complicated, and/or reinforced?
   - What happens when teachers in a PLC are encouraged to replace punitive disciplinary measures with restorative ones? To what extent are teachers willing to abandon traditional behavior management strategies?
   - How does participation in a PLC influence staff’s collegiality, collective spirit of inquiry, and interpersonal relationships?

2. How does participation in a PLC influence teachers’ praxis, specifically in their efforts to build and foster relationships with students and other stakeholders? In what ways are the learning opportunities offered in PLCs taken up and acted upon by teachers, both in instructional settings and in the “second classroom” (Campano, 2007)?
   - How do teachers theorize relationship-building in light of their learning in the PLC? In what ways are curricular materials and discursive norms designed or adapted to promote “relationship-based
pedagogy” (Sleeter, 2011) and cultural competence (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989)?

- In what ways are other school practices questioned, challenged, replaced, or reinforced, as a consequence of participation in a PLC? More specifically, how are parent-teacher interactions, disciplinary measures, community outreach, and school functions affected by the learning that occurs in the PLCs?

At its core, the professional development “curriculum” I designed and enacted at Aspen was meant to help other teachers (most of whom are White) disrupt the myths and ideologies that continue to privilege Whiteness, promote color-blind thinking, and pathologize students of color, which has become an increasingly prominent issue among teacher educators: “Immersed in the myriad negative data about children in poverty, we are concerned that teachers may adopt and maintain deficit and pathological thinking about the academic potential of students who come from impoverished backgrounds” (Ullucci & Howard, 2014, p. 172). Because individuals are located at different points of their racial identity development (Tatum, 1992), the PD curriculum was intended to cause discomfort, and possibly, guilt, shame, and anger, as can often occur when long-held beliefs are revealed to be mythical and unfounded in reality. Since there was such strong potential for negative emotional responses, it was imperative for the learning experiences to be rooted in well-established theoretical frameworks. In the next section, I will outline the conceptual frameworks that underpinned the curricular designs meant to help teachers rethink some of their suppositions about race, opportunity, equity, and power.
**Conceptual Framings**

*Critical Race Theory: The Myths of Race and Poverty*

“The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). Born in the 1970s as a response to the lack of tangible progress realized during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, CRT seeks to expand the concept of racism beyond individual acts of bigotry and demonstrate how laws, policies, and practices are all overtly and covertly employed to maintain the status quo of White supremacy. CRT is interdisciplinary, encompassing the fields of law, education, literature, and even film. Ultimately, CRT seeks to show how racism has been normalized in society, which subsequently allows individuals and groups to employ hegemonic methods, without recognizing the oppression that results from those policies and practices; Harris (1993) argues that the right to exclude is an essential privilege of Whiteness.

CRT is predicated on six fundamental tenets (Lee, 2008), each of which holds particular importance to the educational field. First, CRT contends that racism is a permanent fixture in American society. Racism has been codified into law and normalized into mainstream culture; as Henry Louis Gates (Gates & Gates, 2009) states, “In America there is institutional racism that we all inherit and participate in, like breathing the air in this room - and we have to become sensitive to it.” Second, CRT unapologetically challenges dominant ideologies of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy. Students across America are bombarded with messages
and stories of “The American Dream”: if one works hard enough and is willing to sacrifice, anything is possible. And, conversely, if a person does not achieve her dream, it is a consequence of an inner failing, not a systemic oppression. This leads to the third tenet of CRT – revisionist history. Examinations of historical textbooks recount the triumphs of White Americans throughout history, frequently position people of color as folk heroes (or criminals), and gloss over (or entirely ignore) the contributions of people of color and the horrific racially-based conflict that has existed for nearly 500 years in America (Loewen, 2007; Zinn, 1980; Christensen, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Thus, children are frequently and unwittingly indoctrinated into a system of belief that presents White Americans as heroes, and through the use of a few remarkable individuals of color who overcame systemic racism, reifies the myth of meritocracy. Fourth, CRT champions the centrality of experiential knowledge and story-telling (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Lived racial realities are just that – realities. Thus, the narratives and perspectives of people of color are not to be diminished or written off – to do so would be a micro-aggression and instantiation of White privilege (Sue et al., 2007; Janks, 1997). Fifth, CRT is interdisciplinary. Because racism infiltrates all aspects of society, CRT analyzes and critiques codified and de facto oppression and marginalization. Finally, CRT advances a commitment to social justice so that subordination of all people will be eliminated. In this

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4 Whether considering the “all white world of children’s books” (Larrick, 1965) or Chris Rock’s scathing monologue at the 2016 Academy Awards, CRT experts argue that there is still unequal opportunity, representation, and recognition for people of color. According to a study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin (2016), just 8% (243 of the 3,200) of children’s books published in the US in 2015 featured Black protagonists, and only 7% focused on American Indians, Asian Americans, or Latinos. Eighty-six percent (2,744 of the 3,200) of the children’s books featured a White protagonist. And in Hollywood, 2016 marked the second consecutive year in which a Black actor or actress was not even nominated for an Academy Award.
sense, CRT is a field that focuses on praxis and calls for knowing-in-action (Schon, 1984, 1995); that is, “our knowledge is in our action. And similarly, the workday life of the professional practitioner reveals, in its recognitions, judgments, and skills, a pattern of tacit knowing-in-action” (Schon, 1995, p. 29). Thus, the practitioner has an opportunity – through knowledge-in-action – to combat the implicit, aversive racism that permeates a school’s curriculum, instruction, and disciplinary policies.

While CRT positions race as the central barrier to overcoming oppression in America, the field also understands the concepts of intersectionality and anti-essentialism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Everyone’s identity is multi-faceted, and these different memberships can either mitigate or exacerbate oppression. During my first graduate-level class on Multicultural Education, Dr. Gadsden had students watch coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As residents of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans sat on roofs and others congregated in the Superdome, Wolf Blitzer of CNN described the victims of this natural disaster: “so many of these people, almost all of them that we see, are so poor, and they are so black” (2005). While this comment caused a backlash at CNN headquarters, it also pinpointed the confluence of race and class in modern day America. Oliver and Shapiro (2006) found that Black family median income is only 62% of White households’, and the median Black total wealth (including property and assets) is only 8% of White wealth. Therefore, many children across our nation’s cities must combat myths and stereotypes not only about their race, but also about their class.

To respond these class-based assumptions, Ullicci and Howard (2014) describe and debunk four commonly held myths about poor families. The first myth rings of
meritocracy: “anyone can pull themselves out of poverty (The Bootstraps Myth)” (p. 175). This myth suggests that the structure of the American economy sufficiently offers opportunities for everyone to make a good living. The next myth blames the victim: “Those who are in poverty are lazy, ‘welfare queens,’ and/or irresponsible” (p. 175). In other words, since America possesses ample opportunity for all citizens, those who remain poor do so either by choice or because of a deep-seated character flaw. The third myth attributes a deficit perspective (Flores et al., 1991) to children living in poverty: “Poor children are not particularly smart or school-ready” (p. 175). The consequence of this ideology is basic and remedial instruction, low expectations, and, consequentially, a self-fulfilling prophecy.5 The last myth described by Ullicci and Howard harkens back to Ruby Payne’s (2013) description of “the culture of poverty”: “People in poverty share a common ‘culture’” (Ullicci & Howard, 2014, p. 175). This theory essentializes the experiences of all poor people and suggests that intergenerational poverty exists “because there are predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors, which are both monolithic and inherent in their culture and their overall way of being” (Ullicci & Howard, 2014, p. 179). Ascription to this myth results in educators’ willingness to write off poor children, since their families are raising them in a way that has predetermined their future. These myths do great harm to children who are poor, so educators would do well to understand

5 Gadsden, Davis, and Artiles (2009) review the research of self-fulfilling prophecies, which explicates the dangers of reliance on deficit-based stereotypes and oversimplified generalizations: Students’ performance was consistent with teachers’ expectations of those who had been identified as high achievers, irrespective of their actual performance. In other words, once an expectation is set, even if it is not accurate, we tend to act in ways that are consistent with that expectation. Aside from the various caveats raised about this study, the idea of self-fulfilling prophecy calls attention to the ways in which strong beliefs are likely to become enacted in classroom practices and interactions such that students fulfill low expectations and, as a result, are placed at risk. (p. vii)
the sources of these myths, recognize the impact they can have on classrooms, and become mindful of instances in which these myths impact their thinking and interactions with students.

Ralph Ellison narrated the challenges of being Black in *The Invisible Man* (1952), in which the intentionally nameless main character tries and tries again to gain traction in the White-dominated society. Yet, for every step he takes forward, he is shoved back two. Though this tale was drafted over a half century ago, Ellison’s experiences still occur today; people of color are hurt and oppressed through overt acts of racism and through harder to see micro-aggressions. Additionally, systems and institutions at large work to maintain White supremacist ideology and maintain the status quo. Thus, being a member of a minority group in America poses a great number of challenges that are not readily overcome – especially when considering that many people deny that the challenges even exist. Compounding the racial inequities expounded by CRT are the hurdles and stereotypes that are attached to poverty. Not only must the poor face the actual obstacles that come with a lack of resources, but they must also combat powerful myths that further trivialize their life chances. It is this set of knotted circumstances that led Howard Stevenson (2003) to coin the phrase “Catch 33”: Damned if you do; damned if you don’t; just damned. According to Stevenson, individuals in this situation often lack agency, because no matter what they do, the oppression is experienced as insurmountable.

I am reminded of a conversation I observed between two college friends, one of whom is a high school principal in Oakland, and the other is a financial consultant in Chicago. Both are White, successful, and were raised in posh suburbs of major cities. The
principal tried to explain the concept of White privilege to our friend through a sports metaphor: “Don’t you think you were born on second base, while others were born with two strikes against them?” The consultant would not accept the metaphor; he claimed he only made it to where he was because of his hard work and innate talents. He believes his race, upbringing, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), opportunities, and safety net did not offer him an advantage over others. And here’s the rub – this consultant is on the diversity committee at his firm. This exemplifies the depths of the challenges we face to eradicate racism, classism, and undo the myths that privilege so few at the expense of so many.

**Schema Theory: The Entrenchment of Prejudice**

First introduced in 1932 by psychologist Frederic Bartlett, schema theory provides an explanation for how people learn and interpret information and make connections among old and new concepts. Bartlett suggests that people possess schemata, which are subconscious mental structures through which individuals categorize, process, and interpret new information and social situations; schema is “the active organization of past experiences (physical and emotional) and past reactions (sensory-motor and cognitive-affective) through which a person apprehends and interacts with incoming stimuli” (Moya, 2015, p. 15). Thus, as a person encounters a new event, piece of information, or scenario, the sensory information gathered then interacts with the individual’s pre-existing schemata to make sense of the data. In other words, the data is typically interpreted in a way so that it fits in with the individual’s preexisting schema:

As structures that have been built up through a person’s past behavior and experiences in specific domains, schemas serve “as patterns for one’s current and
future behavior” in those perceptually-related domains (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 229-230). Schemas are central to cognition insofar as they allow a person to “go beyond the information given,” to fill in the gaps, and to extrapolate from what is known or from what is given to what might be apparent or might not yet have appeared (Bruner, 1973)…They are anticipatory as well as retrospective, even as they orient a person’s behavior in the present. (Moya, 2015, p. 15)

For example, as a toddler walks down the sidewalk with her father, they pass a brown dachshund. The father tells his daughter that they just saw a “doggy.” The daughter gathers sensory information: four legs, brown, pointed nose, and has ears, and uses this information to create a schema for the term doggy. The next weekend, the little girl visits a farm, sees a chestnut-brown horse, points to it, and calls out, “Doggy!” Because a horse shares the same characteristics that the child noticed in the dachshund, the schema she had created for “doggy” allowed her to interpret the horse as a dog. Most likely, the child’s misunderstanding would be corrected, at which point she would create a new schema to understand the word “horse.”

Piaget (1929) explains this learning cycle through the interrelated processes of assimilation and accommodation. When assimilation occurs, new information is incorporated into existing schemata. To revisit the prior example, as the child encounters different breeds of dogs, her schema for “doggy” becomes increasingly complex and accounts for the wide variations that occur among breeds. When a person learns that she holds misconceptions, she will either change her existing schema or create a new schema altogether. When our toddler learned that a horse is not a doggy, she created a new mental structure for horse that allowed her to both compare and contrast her knowledge of these two types of animals.
While schema theory is frequently employed to explain children’s acquisition of vocabulary and comprehension of texts (National Institute of Education, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980), it is also relevant when considering issues in the social sciences. As Rumelhart (1980, p. 41) stated,

Schemata can represent knowledge at all levels – from ideologies and cultural truths to knowledge about the meaning of a particular word, to knowledge about what patterns of excitations are associated with what letters of the alphabet. We have schemata to represent all levels of our experience, at all levels of abstraction. Finally, our schemata are our knowledge. All of our generic knowledge is embedded in schemata.

As discussed, racism has become normalized and institutionalized in American society. Consequently, people possess schemata that allow racism and hegemony to continue without question; these events are assimilated into their pre-existing schema as normal, and possibly even moral: prejudice and racism are examples of schemata that prevent people from objectively and accurately interpreting particular events and circumstances. Judith Butler (1993) has named this phenomenon “schematic racism,” which she used to explain how so many Americans were able to interpret the beating of Rodney King as justifiable and warranted. Entman and Rojecki (2001) studied portrayals of African-Americans in the media and found that the media and pop culture promote a racial hierarchy and does very little to advocate for racial equity. As White Americans, many of whom have little to no significant contact with people of other races, watch the news, they see Blacks portrayed as criminals. And as they watch primetime sitcoms, they see Black people take on the role of the “buffoon” and serve only as acquaintances to the White main characters (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). This is the data that White Americans use to create and support their schema development, and before long, these schemata
support a subtle, yet insidious White supremacist ideology. Moya (2015, p. 18) captures this phenomenon succinctly:

There will always be more stimuli in the environment than one can possibly apprehend. For this reason, perception is not a matter of looking out on the world and seeing what is there. Rather, perception is about filtering the barrage of incoming stimuli so that some small part of it can be observed…Schemas direct the viewer’s attention, thereby conditioning her perception, and so shaping the resulting interpretation.

In addition to helping analyze macro-themes and major events, schematic racism is also a helpful construct to make sense of more common – and seemingly harmless – events. Take, for example, this realistic exchange between a teacher and student:

Teacher (to class): I found this ring on the floor. Does it belong to anyone?
Student: Oh! It’s mines! Thank you!
Teacher: You’re welcome. But don’t you mean, “It’s mine”? Please speak properly in this class.

From this brief exchange, it becomes apparent that the teacher’s schematic framework views African American Vernacular English (Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1977) as inferior to “Standard English,” despite the evidence that AAVE is a fully formed and complex language. Moreover, the teacher diminishes the student’s appreciation and goodwill by labeling her grammar as improper, thus damaging the relationship that exists between the student and her teacher. While this exchange may seem small, it is a racial micro-agression – and one in which the teacher may honestly believe she is helping her student’s grammar, but in actuality is labeling the student’s culture as “less-than.”

Because most teachers are White and have been breathing the air of racism and White privilege their entire lives, professional developers must assume that a significant percentage of teachers hold schema that promote the myths of race and class discussed in
the previous section: “a person who lacks or has a poorly elaborated schema for a given set of stimuli may not even realize it” (Moya, 2015, p. 24). As a result, professional development must offer opportunities for teachers to make their subconscious schema visible, and when necessary, accommodate their interpretations or replace their schema entirely – a feat my financial consultant friend was both unwilling and unable to accomplish, yet one that is of utmost importance for teachers of students of color.

Andragogy: Not Your Typical “Teacher Workshop”

Teachers asked to take on this transformational PD are challenged to both learn new frameworks and to unlearn certain schema that may have been instilled and reinforced from a very young age; they may even be asked to reject systems of belief shared by family and friends. As Moya (2015, p. 24) states, “because schemas form the basis of a person’s self-esteem, they tend to resist information that the person deems threatening or that is inconsistent with her own view of herself as a good person.” As a result, these schemata are deeply entrenched; therefore, adults cannot simply be told they are unintentionally oppressing others and immediately change their worldview and practices. Rather, the adult will defend her thinking, rationalize her point of view, and perhaps, become even more entrenched in her beliefs. CRT refers to this as the “empathic fallacy” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), which suggests that “one can change a narrative merely by offering another, better one” (p. 28), and argues it is a flawed approach to effect personal transformation. Consequently, didactic forms of PD will not exact the level of reflection necessary for educators to shift paradigms about their understanding of
the world. Thus, before explaining the approach to learning utilized in this study, it is necessary to demonstrate why a shift from standard PD practices is required.

Over the past decade, the concept of professional development itself has been challenged: the current discourse regarding PD or professional learning is conflated with the term “teacher training.” With its roots in behaviorism, training implies a rote, mechanized approach to development and pedagogy. Ultimately, in trainings, teachers are expected learn a technique, a “scientifically-proven” curriculum, or a “best practice” that is applicable to classrooms, regardless of context. This conceptualization has led to a top-down approach towards PD, in which administrators determine PD content, and teachers are expected to listen to a “sage on the stage,” participate in a “make-and-take” workshop, or endure a PowerPoint lecture, and immediately transform their practice. While this mode of PD is currently the norm, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that this reactive approach to PD enhances professional knowledge, develops frameworks, or has a meaningful impact on classroom practices (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

To respond to this autocratic PD model – which adheres to the empathic fallacy – many schools and districts adopted a “menu” approach for PD. In this system, a variety of workshops are offered during scheduled PD days, and teachers have the ability to choose which session(s) to attend. While this certainly addresses the issue of top-down decision-making, it ignores two important principles of learning: first, Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley (2007) found that professional development that spans fewer than fourteen hours has no significant impact on teacher learning or practice. Without
regular follow-up and additional inquiry, teachers will likely revert to an “apprenticeship of observation” pedagogy (Lortie, 1975), which, in an increasingly diverse school setting, will ignore the learning styles and cultural backgrounds of many students. Second, the menu approach to PD typically relies on the banking model of education (Freire, 1970): this construct presupposes that teachers lack a particular piece of knowledge, and by the end of the session, their brains will be filled with the facts and concepts needed to “fix” the problem. Adult learning theory, however, argues that effective learning must be self-directed, applicable to current work, and offer opportunities for reflection. In principle, teacher learning must be a social endeavor (Zepeda, 2012), which is too often not the case in traditional PD models.

The last major critique, briefly aforementioned, focuses on epistemology. In the traditional paradigm, university researchers generated theory and knowledge, which was then disseminated to teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Quite simply, teachers were conceived as knowledge-receivers, rather than knowledge-generators. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why schools would spend thousands of dollars to hire a keynote speaker (often from a university) or purchase a “research-proven” reading or math program. This “stupidification of teaching” (Allington, 2002, p. 27) positions teachers as implementers of full-proof curricula, and if the students fail, their lack of success is correlated with a lack of fidelity in the delivery of the materials (Coles, 2003; Larson, 2007). Such a view of teachers in particular, and education at large, diminishes the profession and the significance of socio-cultural context. This ideology ignores the experiential knowledge that teachers have acquired, as well as their ability to engage in
teacher research and to identify the influence of socio-cultural and historical factors embedded in the school’s walls and inhabitants. Thus, for professional development to be meaningful, learning activities must account for teachers’ capacity to generate and share site-specific, local knowledge; teachers cannot rely solely upon outsiders telling them what to do and how to do it.

While somewhat disheartening to learn about the problems that have plagued professional development initiatives for decades, a firm understanding of the history of the field opens space to re-imagine what a professional development model that more effectively accounts for adult learning theory looks like, positions teachers as collaborative knowledge generators, and recognizes that knowledge is often situated within a unique context (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Adult learning theory, or andragogy, was popularized in the 1970s by Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1984, 1990). While there has been some critique (Hartree, 1984; Kidd, 1978) over what counts as an adult or whether the theory is intended to describe or prescribe adult learning, Knowles’s principles for adult learning more effectively account for the intellectual burdens that must fall on the learners: it is the participants of the PD who must engage in the deepest thinking and the knowledge generation, not the “instructor.” With this in mind, Knowles’s five theories about adult learning advance the epistemological shift Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994) advocate – for the advancement of the local knowledge that is relevant for practitioners, and for the self-directed nature of learning and inquiry most enjoyed by adults:

1. Self-concept: As a person matures his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being
2. Experience: **As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.**

3. Readiness to learn. **As a person matures his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.**

4. Orientation to learning. **As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.**

5. Motivation to learn: **As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal** (Knowles, 1984, p. 12)

From these principles of adult learning, effective andragogical choices can be made that position the PD participant as a generator of knowledge, as an expert of her own practice, and as a learner who has agency to choose what to study (rather than be told by administrators). Jarvis (1985, p. 51) created the following chart to contrast child pedagogy and andragogy, as well as represent what Knowles’s principles mean for the learner – and for the designer/facilitator of the learning. And while progressive educators would argue against this depiction of pedagogy, current policies, state-mandated standards, and popularized “best practices” discourses often restrict the broader and more child-centered approach to teaching and learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th>Andragogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The learner</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dependent.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher directs what, when, how a subject is learned and tests that it has been learned</td>
<td><strong>Self-directing.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher encourages and nurtures this movement</td>
<td><strong>A rich resource for learning.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The learner’s experience</strong></td>
<td><strong>Of little worth.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hence teaching methods include discussion, problem-solving, etc.</td>
<td><strong>A rich resource for learning.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Readiness to learn

| People learn what society expects them to, so that the curriculum is standardized. |
| People learn what they need to know, so that learning programmes are organised around life application. |

Orientation to learning

| Acquisition of subject matter, Curriculum organized by subjects. |
| Learning experiences should be based around experiences, since people are performance centred in their learning |

**Figure 1. Pedagogy vs. Andragogy**

When this latter stance towards PD is adopted, the curriculum and learning experiences will directly account for these four principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1984; Pappas, 2013):

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

As Jarvis (1985) states, pedagogy is education from above, while andragogy is characterized by lateral education of peers, each of whom possesses both academic and experiential knowledge that can inform the work of the group. It is not a far leap to see that the vast majority of traditional PD models fit the characteristics of Jarvis’s view of pedagogy, which may explain why there is a general lack of buy-in from teachers. However, by placing teachers’ knowledge, experience, and work-life at the center of the curriculum, transformational learning and knowledge generation can occur.
**Multicultural Education: The Thread that Binds Students to Teachers**

The final component of this conceptual framework is multicultural education, since it weaves throughout all the other topics I have discussed. Ultimately, the efficacy of the PD hinges on teachers’ ability to see their students as individuals who are members of multiple groups, and to consider their culturally-formed positionality when teaching them, redirecting them, and even grading their papers. Multicultural education demands that teachers abandon a best-practices approach and adopt a more nuanced stance, a stance that accounts for the children’s knowledges, cultures, values, and beliefs.

Conscious efforts are made to ensure that curriculum and instruction are tailored to the students in the class, so that marginalization is minimized. While this task can never be fully accomplished, there is progress in the attempt, especially when policy and dominant ideology promote a color-blind approach to instruction.

In the era of high stakes testing, literacy instruction has become increasingly atomized and skill-based (NRP, 2000). Direct instruction of phonics and skills has become the gold standard of education, which opened the floodgates for “scientifically-proven” reading instruction packages (Larson, 2007). These materials – that supposedly transcend culture – have been embraced and adopted by many schools and districts, in hopes that test scores and academic achievement will rise. Unfortunately, these curricular materials have served to confirm cultural biases and reinforce deficit perspectives: when a school purchases a “research-based” program, it is implemented with fidelity, and scores don’t immediately improve, the children themselves are blamed for the stagnated progress. Consequently, schools whose students are labeled “basic” or “below basic”
often become further reactive by offering instruction that is even more simplified and remedial. It is a pattern repeated across the country, year after year.

Rather than adopting a basic skills approach, multicultural education demands a rigorous curriculum that attempts to build academic power from the students’ funds of knowledge, lived experiences, and interests (Lee, 2007). Multicultural education has been theorized and practiced for decades, and many principles have been derived that, when effectively incorporated, improve the schooling experiences for all children, and not just those who float in the center of the mainstream.

Banks (1995) names and describes the five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure. Content integration involves the ways in which teachers use students’ background knowledge, culture, history, and interests to develop curricular content. Many scholars (c.f., Moll et al., 1992; Lee, 2007; Delpit, 1995, 2012; Street, Baker, & Tomlin, 2005) have reiterated the significance of bridging academic content with the lived experiences of the students. The second dimension is the knowledge construction process and focuses on epistemology: much like adults, students need to be positioned as knowledge generators and interpreters, not simply receptacles. The third dimension, prejudice reduction, affects all members in the school community: classroom lessons and PD activities should be designed to increase understanding and appreciation of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, and genders. Equity pedagogy, the fourth dimension, is the antithesis of the “What Works,” “best practice,” and “scientifically-proven” approaches.
Rather than assume that “best practices” in rural Iowa are equally effective in downtown Miami, an equity pedagogy positions the teacher as a cultural and educational guide and mediator; that is, the teacher must create participation structures and learning opportunities that align with the cultural strengths of the students in that particular classroom, while also helping students build social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Finally, an empowering school culture and social structure address the humanization of the students. All students must be treated equitably and with dignity. It is only in this environment that students will feel safe and respected. Kozol (1989, 2007) has repeatedly suggested that if students are viewed as unintellectual, disengaged criminals, then they will often meet these dangerous expectations. But if teachers humanize, dignify, and respect their students and their backgrounds, then children will demonstrate the human characteristics of empathy, compassion, and curiosity. While all these dimensions are essential to multicultural education, currently the two most significant areas to Aspen are content integration and equity pedagogy.

With the inception of the Common Core Standards, schools and districts must devise and revise their curricula to meet the new standards. With this curriculum renewal comes an opportunity to consider the knowledge, experience, and interests of students as the curricular units are designed. Both Delpit (2012) and Lee (2007) emphasize the significance of customizing the content of the class to align with the knowledge of the students. Delpit (2012), in particular, speaks of the importance of relevant metaphors to teach standards-based concepts and skills. For example, she cites the work of an educator who used graphics of cell phone towers and networks to teach about neural pathways and
brain development. Lee (2007) describes how cultural modeling can be used to bridge students’ knowledge and cultural practices with more traditional academic tasks. While teaching in a high school classroom, Lee used the familiar concept of signifying talk – clever put-downs and banter – to analyze several exchanges in Shakespeare’s plays. Thus, students were engaged in challenging and engaging curriculum, but the content was not presented in a cultureless vacuum. This is the promise and potential of multicultural content integration.

While the development of meaningful curriculum is vital to the education of students, the teacher is the medium through which the curriculum is filtered and delivered. Consequently, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995; Tate, 1995; Gay, 2010), or what Banks (1995) calls equity pedagogy, is a necessary component for multicultural education. To embrace culturally relevant pedagogy, a teacher must first become critical of best practices discourses, which presuppose that certain teaching behaviors, techniques, or disciplinary systems work for all students. Rather, a culturally competent pedagogue takes an inquiry stance towards the learning styles and habits of the students in the class, and then creates an environment and experiences that allow students to engage with the curriculum in participation structures that are more natural and meaningful. As Gadsden, Davis, and Artiles (2009) postulate, researchers – and teachers – “are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in developing well-conceived models and interventions that are strength focused, community driven, geographically relevant, and sustainable to influence the life chances and outcomes for all students” (p. ix).
Tate (1995) highlights some of the key differences between traditional instruction and culturally relevant pedagogy in a predominately African-American, urban classroom: whereas typical mathematics instruction relies on textbooks, out-of-context word-problems, and rote memorization of math facts and rules, a culturally competent approach offers students the opportunity to use mathematics to persuade each other, formulates questions and tasks from problematic situations (rather than irrelevant circumstances), and often includes a political component in which students use mathematics to address a social concern. In this sense, curricular content integration and equity pedagogy become two sides of the same coin: the curriculum accounts for the knowledge and skills of the students, and the teacher is responsible for facilitating the class in a way that allows students to utilize their strengths to learn the content and recognize the relevance of their efforts. When multicultural education becomes a cornerstone of a school’s curriculum and pedagogy, the students’ lives and interests are the foundations upon which academic content is developed, and consequently, achievement improves (Gay, 2003). In what can be assumed to be a tongue-in-cheek title for an article describing culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) calls this approach “just good teaching.” Yet, this accessible theory and practice too often fall to the wayside in the absence of meaningful professional learning and collegial support (Lortie, 1975).

Multicultural education is the unicorn that teachers and schools must continue to chase. Language and cultures continuously change, and, consequently, so too must curriculum and instruction. For this reason, the use of the word equity is salient: equality requires providing the same resources and responses to all students, whereas equity
demands that teachers provide each student with what she needs to grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Banks (2004) describes multicultural education as “a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences and particularly from ethnic studies and women’s studies” (p. xii). Quite simply, belief in equality stems from an ascription to the myth of meritocracy, while equity recognizes that individuals need to be treated as such:

![Figure 2. Equality vs. Equity](image)

By recognizing that multicultural education is a process, and not a goal, many students are welcomed into the classroom mainstream, when they may have otherwise spent the year on the margins. It accounts for the individual differences that make each child uniquely brilliant, and it demands that the teacher come to know and respect the

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6 In New Jersey, Governor Chris Christie introduced his educational “Fairness Formula,” which provides exactly $6,599 of state funding for each pupil, which would significantly reduce aid to urban districts while lowering property taxes in many suburban towns (Clark, 2016). This enactment of “equality” further oppresses the most under-served of students, since the poorest districts would receive the biggest decrease in state aid: thirty-seven districts in the state would see their state aid packages reduce by more than 50%. Meanwhile, wealthier districts would receive an increase in state aid, which would result in reduced property taxes for homeowners.
“person who is behind that face, behind that color, behind that language, behind that tradition, behind that culture” (Angelou).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explained the two needs for professional development reform: first, since charter schools often lack the resources and staff that school districts allocate to PD, they must adopt an approach to PD that is cost-effective, meaningful, and sustainable. Since PLCs are run for and by teachers, they are not expensive to launch, and the inquiries each PLC engages in arise directly from the teachers’ practice. Second, I described a specific problem in the field of education and suggested how PD may be employed to curb the issue: nationwide, a teacher shortage is likely to exist because fewer teachers are graduating with teaching credentials, and many who do enter the field leave the career within five years. While the political climate has much to do with increased job dissatisfaction, another contributing factor is the challenges teachers face when working with students who do not entirely share their culture, values, and norms. For this reason, professional development that delves into issues of race, culture, identity, and student discipline can help teachers improve the quality of their relationships with their students and successfully remain in the profession.

I then explained my own journey that led me to this research. As I both experienced and witnessed the pain and struggles of fellow teachers and friends at ACS, I recognized that my colleagues’ energy was being sapped prematurely, and that interventions must occur to help them make sense of their work and improve the quality
of their interactions with their students. Fortunately, the consultant hired by Aspen recognized the same phenomenon, so the door was opened to launch PLCs.

Given the gravity of this work, I understood that the content of the PLCs needed to be grounded in well-developed and compatible theories. Critical Race Theory was the necessary starting point, since it explains how racism infiltrates every aspect of society, and until we are able to identify the oppression that exists, individuals may unwittingly contribute to racial hierarchies. I then turned to schema theory to demonstrate both how seemingly good-willed people can adopt racist attitudes and how these beliefs can be identified and eliminated. To encourage this deep (un)learning, I examined the principle of andragogy, which provides a framework for learning for adults. I implicitly understood that I could not fall for the empathic fallacy and climb onto a soapbox at Aspen, tell the faculty that micro-aggressions were damaging their relationships with their students, and expect immediate and fundamental change to occur. Rather, andragogy suggests that adults must engage in self-directed self-discovery, and through this intentional inquiry, schema, beliefs, and behaviors can slowly change. Finally, I considered the vast field of multicultural education, because it embodies the stance urban educators must adopt in order to be successful with other people’s children. Considering differences in language, funds of knowledge, values, and life-circumstances are all necessary for the teacher to bond with and respect each student. As stated, multicultural education is not a box a teacher can check off; rather, it is a stance that guides pedagogical, curricular, and interpersonal decisions teachers must make. If PD is successful, teachers are willing to take on and grapple with this stance.
In the next chapter, I will position the curriculum and pedagogy of the PD into the three most pertinent bodies of literature. First, I will describe the theory and research about professional learning communities, so that the structure and learning experiences of Aspen’s PLCs are contextualized. I will then turn to the two main fields that participants in this study explored: cultural competence and restorative justice.
Chapter II: Review of Related Literature

We have the ability to achieve, if we master the necessary goodwill, a common global society blessed with a shared culture of peace that is nourished by the ethnic, national and local diversities that enrich our lives.

- Mahnaz Afkhami, Founder and President of Women's Learning Partnership

Introduction

In 1983, the US Department of Education published and disseminated “an open letter to the American people” (p.6) entitled “A Nation at Risk,” which warned the United States’ "once unchallenged pre-eminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (p. 5). The report then lists a series of indicators that suggest American children are performing academically worse than their predecessors. For example, the report cites “a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980” (p. 8-9) in SAT scores and that “some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension” (p. 8). The result of this doomsday report was a “back to basics” movement in education that resulted in a narrower and more skills-based curriculum.

While this report served as the genesis for standards, student accountability, and direct instruction, it also had many effects on the profession of teaching. As schools further emphasized the “3 Rs of reading, writing, and ’rithmetic,” the responsibility – and image – of the teacher shifted from that of an autonomous professional to an implementer of structured curriculum:

The view of a teacher as implementer of ideas is a very popular view of educational research, and has been the overwhelmingly predominant theory as the
basis of teacher competence. By sticking to this view, however, the assessors of educational efficiency are missing the most obvious point: that teachers are being encouraged, systematically and deliberately, to de-skill themselves.... this view of teachers in classrooms denies them a self-image of reflective educators, and turns them simply into highly skilled technicians. (McNiff, 1988, p. xiv)

Quite simply, if students are only expected to master the basics, then the person running the classroom doesn’t require deep levels of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986, 1987); she only needs to follow the curriculum. Furthermore, if education policy-makers “assume students only need to acquire basic skills through routine drill, they will deprive these students of grade-appropriate content and the chance to move up the educational ladder” (Cohen & Lotan, 2004, p. 737). With this move, the potential of teachers and students was effectively undermined, and unfortunately, the negative stereotypes about educators became further entrenched.

Finally, “A Nation at Risk” briefly mentions the achievement gap between White children and students of color: “Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent” (p. 8). Predicated upon democratic principles, the report expresses the need for quality education for all of the nation’s children:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests’ but also the progress of society itself. (p. 8)

Interestingly, the report uses the word “race” only one more time over the course of its remaining 28 pages. Two conclusions can be drawn from this discourse – or lack thereof. First, there is no acknowledgement of the social and educational disparities that exist
between urban areas and their more affluent suburban neighbors. Thus, academic achievement (as measured by standardized tests) is solely determined by the intellectual capacity of the student and her teacher’s ability to deliver the content: environmental and social circumstances are seen as irrelevant to a child’s success in school. Second, the report does not acknowledge that in a diverse nation, students’ histories, backgrounds, cultures, and life circumstances influence both what and how they learn. Ultimately, the report discounts the history of racism and unequal access that inhibits full participation for much of the nation’s citizenry. By doing so, the educational enterprise becomes gaugeable by assessing academic inputs and outputs; the lives of the students are not part of the algorithm used to measure success or failure.

Thirty-four years later, the underlying ideas and discourse of “A Nation at Risk” are still prevalent. Scripted curricula, remedial instruction, and large-scale assessments pervade throughout America’s schools. Nevertheless, an insurgence is mounting, and the professional development at Aspen was intended to feed the flames that are burning hotter: acknowledgment of systemic racism is far more prevalent today than it was in 1983, and, for many, a celebration of diversity has replaced the assimilationist simile of America as a “melting pot.” And as a response to “A Nation at Risk,” which simplified teaching into content delivery and ignored the value of diversity, current progressive ideologies recognize that teaching and learning are situated within historical, political, social, racial, and cultural contexts. Moreover, there is an understanding that teachers

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7 The report uses the word “urban” one time: “In addition, many large urban areas in recent years report that average student achievement in elementary schools is improving” (p. 34), which discounts and underplays the “education debt” that historically exists in under-funded, under-resourced schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
themselves have been shaped by various ideologies, some of which may be harmful to
the students under their tutelage. Teaching and teachers are not neutral entities (Gold,
2016); if the teacher holds pejorative, oppressive viewpoints, they must be uncovered,
deconstructed, and ideally, replaced. To develop a culture of peace in the classroom
(O’Reilly, 1993), teachers may need to begin by interrogating their own beliefs and
practices and “disturb their current environments” (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl, & Lindsey,
2009, p. 6) that lead to conflicts between the students and teachers, among the students,
or even among the faculty.

In many ways, the PD at Aspen was intended to help teachers deconstruct and
question the ideas popularized and sustained by “A Nation at Risk.” It was meant to help
teachers think about their own histories, identities, assumptions, and beliefs. It was
designed to give them space to assume an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009)
and critique their own apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975). It was meant to push
them to reconsider dominant ideologies about students of color, their capabilities, their
backgrounds, and their discipline – and potentially construct counter-narratives that more
fully recount “experiences of racism and resistance from the perspectives of those on
society’s margins” (Yosso, 2005, p. 3). And while the teachers considered the narratives
they hold about their students, the PD also intended to empower teachers to share their
own beliefs, deconstruct them, and, when necessary, revise and rebuild.

To that end, the literature review is situated into three fields that provide the
structure and content of the PD. First, professional learning communities were chosen by
Aspen’s leadership as the PD structure that would best support this transformational
work. Predicated on principles of andragogy, PLCs grant the participants leadership over their own learning. In their genuine form, PLCs provide a space for participants to be vulnerable, honest, and receive constructive feedback from critical friends. While the PD employed the PLC structure, the content of the PLCs was selected by the teachers themselves, so the last two sections of the literature review delve into these areas: cultural competence and restorative justice. Because 75% of Aspen’s teaching staff is White, many teachers struggled with their own racial identity in the context of the school’s population. They experienced breakdowns in communication and relationships that they attributed to cultural difference. Consequently, several teachers opted to study cultural competence in hopes that they would better understand the complicated interface of their own culture(s) with those of their students. Other teachers struggled with Aspen’s traditional approach to student discipline and sought to gain familiarity with a less punitive framework for behavioral intervention. These teachers joined the Restorative Justice PLC to explore ways to improve student accountability and decision-making without relying on a Pavlovian system of rewards and punishments (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015). Thus, this literature review seeks to contextualize the learning structure experienced by Aspen’s faculty, as well as the topics of study investigated by these two focus groups.

**Professional Learning Communities**

*We will fail, as we have failed so many times before, to improve schooling for children until we acknowledge the importance of schools not only as places for teachers to work but also as places for teachers to learn.*

- Smylie (1995, p. 92)
I think it is rare to be immersed daily in the child world and not be deeply influenced by the humanness, vitality, and particularity of that world and of each child within it.

As a result, most teachers and virtually all parents possess a deep and rich knowledge of children. Yet mostly, and wastefully, this knowledge goes largely unacknowledged. For knowledge of children, schools rely almost exclusively on experts or specialists.

- Carini (2001, p. 5)

What happens when teachers are recognized as the “experts or specialists”? From this perspective, not only is teacher experience privileged, but it also can be generative of new knowledge and theory. This is the core of PLC’s epistemological approach: teachers are the experts of their classrooms and schools. As such, they are positioned to challenge traditional notions of objectivity and instead create situated knowledge and theories (Haraway, 1988). While this limits the generalizability of the theory and knowledge, it empowers teachers to recognize the unique context in which their work is set. As such, PLCs encourage participants to inquire into their own practice (and the school’s systems at large) and subsequently create or revise theories of practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994).

On Core Characteristics: Before Learning, There Must Be Community

As research on PLCs becomes broader and deeper, scholars have found particular characteristics that meld the concept of professionalism with those of community. Kruse

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8 To illustrate the significance of teachers’ developing their own theory of practice, I offer the following example: it is a common “best practice” for a teacher to publicly praise a student for complying with a directive – especially when other students are not following the direction. This, however, may not be appreciated by particular students, who wish to avoid the tag of “teacher’s pet” with their peer group or who may perceive the compliment as insincere, since it was used to manipulate other students into compliance (Kohn, 2001). By complimenting the student, the teacher may actually create a rift in the student-teacher relationship or among the student’s social group. This is an example of local, situated knowledge that can only be discovered when teachers assume an inquiry-stance and are critical of the “what works” approach to pedagogy.
and Louis (1993) began this endeavor by reviewing the sociological research that theorizes the elements of professionalism: a technical knowledge base, control over entry to the profession and conditions of work, a strong client-orientation, community (state and national-based, as well as site-based), shared values and norms of behavior, a sense of responsibility for the collective good, and extended relationships of caring. Because these characteristics are present in the teaching profession, this framework was employed in an effort to argue that teachers are professionals, and counter the claim that teachers are “semi-professionals” (Kruse & Louis, 1993, p. 2).

Using the characteristics of professionalism as a framework for analysis, Kruse and Louis (1993) then go on to situate the components of a school-based professional community, which is comprised of five common characteristics: reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collaboration, and shared norms and values. Reflective dialogue offers teachers the opportunity to make sense of their pedagogical decisions and work with colleagues to form “joint understandings related to students, learning, and pedagogical practice” (Kruse & Louis, 1993, p. 10). De-privatization of practice refers to the various ways educators make their practice public, through story-telling, observations, audio-visual recordings, and publication. This is essential for a constructivist approach to learning, as de-privatization of practice “allows teachers to be predictive in their planning and thinking; to reflect in meaningful ways on student effort and achievement rather than content and didactics” (Kruse & Louis, 1993, p. 11). Collaboration – which is distinct from “cooperative and collegial teacher relationships” (Kruse & Louis, 1993, p. 13) – centers on the assumption that teachers possess vast
amounts of expertise that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, in conjunction with
others’ knowledge, to create new learning and “shared understandings from complex and
confusing data, as well as enhance the community in which members work” (Kruse &
Louis, 1993, p. 13). Finally, members of a teaching community share norms and values:

Members of the organization need to affirm, through language and action, their
common belief in values concerning assumptions about children, learning,
teaching and teachers roles, the nature of human needs, human activity, and
human relationships (Schein, 1985) and the organization's extended role in society
and the organization's relationship with the surrounding environment (Giroux,
1988). In schools, such basic assumptions include beliefs about children and their
ability to learn, beliefs about the proper roles of teachers, parents, and
administrators, and beliefs concerning the use of time and space within the school.
(Kruse & Louis, 1993, p. 14)

This final component is of key importance because teachers’ assumptions and beliefs
drive their behaviors: a teacher who holds a deficit perspective towards her students will
employ vastly different curriculum and pedagogy than a teacher who has an assets-based
approach. Thus, organizational and community beliefs, values, visions, and systems must
be clearly articulated so that members of the community are clear about the mission they
are working towards and what counts as valuable contributions towards it.

On the Community’s Mission: Trust, Leadership, and Collective Inquiry

Little’s (2003) study of professional learning posited that, to be transformational,
participants must be able to confront assumptions and beliefs they hold about their
students, their teaching practices, and their curriculum. It is only through such reflection
and assessment that change can occur. In the context of a PLC, this work is possible only
in the presence of an authentic community: participants must be willing to speak
honestly, share struggles, and embrace vulnerability. Consequently, it is fundamental for
a PLC to build trust, a shared vision, and a sense of community. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) define trust as “an individual or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (p. 189), and this belief among a PLC’s participants is a prerequisite for transformational changes to occur.

Consequently, before tackling the intellectual, job-based work of the PLC, intentional efforts must be made to build collegial relationships among the faculty and create buy-in for their work together. Fleming and Thompson (2004) state, “when principals build trust with staff and staff build trust with each other, a culture is created where teachers take collective responsibility for ensuring every student’s success” (p. 31). Thus, the trust is two-dimensional: it must exist between administration and teachers, and among the teachers in the PLC. Because of institutional power dynamics, establishing trust in the teacher-administrator relationship is often more complicated than among teachers, who often feel a natural sense of solidarity and comradery. A functional approach to cultivate an administrator’s trust with her faculty is through employment of distributed leadership.

* Distributed Leadership

Since multiple PLCs operate simultaneously, it is not possible – or necessarily even desirable – for an administrator to facilitate each (or any) PLC. As a result, teacher-leaders are tapped to serve as the facilitators of PLCs, or alternatively the responsibilities of facilitation can rotate from member to member each time the group convenes. This structure – often born of necessity – is entitled distributed leadership and serves three
important purposes. First, it demonstrates administrators’ trust in their teachers: even though an administrator is not leading the session, she trusts that the group will take its responsibilities seriously and work towards its stated goals. This leads to the second outcome – enhanced professionalism. Because the group has been entrusted to engage in certain learning experiences, it must work towards its objectives in order to maintain that trust. As a result, PLC participants report high levels of participation, collaboration, and engagement (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012). The third upshot of this structure is the development of teacher leadership. The traditional career ladder in the educational field often transitions high-performing teachers into administrative positions, which removes effective instructors from the classroom. Opening opportunities for teacher leadership, such as PLC facilitation, creates two benefits: first, it satiates certain teachers’ desires for leadership opportunities and development, and second, it keeps them in their classrooms so that they can continue to work directly with children, inquire into their practice, and laterally collaborate with colleagues. In this way, trust moves both top-down and bottom-up. When administration entrusts teachers to participate in PLCs, teachers take the work of learning and leading seriously (Hord, 2004). This, in turn, proves to administration that the faculty warrants this trust, and teacher-administrator relationships strengthen (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

In addition to the trust between teachers and administration, there must also exist a high level of trust among the participants of the PLC. Hord (1997) argues that teachers will trust the process and each other more if they are actively involved in leading the
PLC. Fullan (2001, 2002) explicates this concept, in which the expertise and leadership of teachers are leveraged to cultivate a shift in the whole school’s culture:

To ensure deeper learning - to encourage problem solving and thinking skills and to develop and nurture highly motivated and engaged learners, for example - requires mobilizing the energy and capacities of teachers. In turn, to mobilize teachers, we must improve teachers' working conditions and morale. Thus, we need leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession itself. The role of the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the weight of the kinds of reforms that will create the schools that we need for the future. (Fullan, 2002, p. 17)

Thus, trust begins with the principal and her administrative team. To transform school culture and position teachers as experts and knowledge producers, the principal must demonstrate trust in her faculty by granting each PLC autonomy. With this vote of confidence in her staff, the members of the PLC become accountable both to the principal and to each other; in order to maintain the principal’s trust, the PLC must work cooperatively to maximize its learning. While this sequence may appear organic and seamless, establishing a PLC does not guarantee the formation of a community: the group must work to transition from a collection of individuals who share an interest to a functional learning community.

*Collective Inquiry as Community Building*

To initiate transformational learning, assumptions, values, practices, and contentions must be challenged and defended (Little, 2003); it is in the “contact zone” where learning occurs (Pratt, 1991). However, simply putting people in the same room does not create a learning community – community-building provides the foundation on which knowledge can be constructed:
Communities of practice initially develop around a shared work objective but they do not automatically operate as learning communities. Learning communities are those that continuously inquire into their practice, and, as a result, discover, create and negotiate new meanings that improve their practice. It takes sustained collaborative engagement in practice and the careful design of social infrastructures to enable a community of practice to develop into a learning community. (Skerrett, 2010, p. 648, emphasis in original)

To move from a community of practice to a learning community, members adopt two complementary stances: learning stance (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003) and inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). When in a learning stance, teachers “are found to focus on learning as opposed to teaching. Their learning serves to inform their teaching and to generate new knowledge and views about teaching and learning” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 14). An inquiry stance entails a reflective cycle, in which teachers pose a question about practice, collect and analyze data, and theorize their findings. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994), “If we regard teachers' theories as sets of interrelated conceptual frameworks grounded in practice, then teacher researchers are revealed as both users and generators of theory” (p. 28). Clearly, this is a major departure from traditional epistemological approaches, which positions teachers as consumers of theory and knowledge, not creators and synthesizers of it.

As teachers adopt an inquiry stance and share the responsibility of leading each other’s learning, a cultural shift occurs in which isolation and judgment are replaced by conversation and problem-posing (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Ultimately, professional learning becomes a shared responsibility, rather than an individual endeavor that is monitored by each teacher’s supervisor, and this shared responsibility of collective learning is articulated through the PLC’s mission statement.
Mission Statement as Inquiry Guide

For a PLC to make decisions and reach consensus, the participants must clearly understand the purpose of the group. For this reason, one of the initial tasks of a PLC is to draft its mission statement. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) state:

The mission pillar asks the question, ‘Why?’ More specifically, it asks, ‘Why do we exist?’ The intent of this question is to help reach agreement regarding the fundamental purpose of the school. The clarity of purpose can help establish priorities and becomes an important factor in guiding decisions. (p. 30)

Though DuFour et al. are describing the purpose of a mission statement for a school, it is also applicable for a small group of teachers who share an interest or curiosity. Williams and Hierck (2015) describe “mission drift,” which occurs when PLCs engage in activities and dialogue that don’t align with the purpose of the group. Frequently, mission drift occurs when teachers use their time with colleagues to complain about the challenges of the job, rather than work toward a component embedded in the PLC’s mission:

While everyone needs a good venting space from time to time, a PLC is not the place for venting and complaining about the frustrations of one’s teaching context, as this can lead to the development of guiding questions that are focused outside of the control of the PLC…PLC work must focus on members’ own classroom practice and members’ own students.” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2015, p. 27)

Thus the mission statement serves two crucial purposes for the PLC. First, it provides a raison d’etre – the driving purpose and focus of inquiry that the group will undertake together. Second, it reminds participants when they are drifting from their stated purpose. This is especially important for groups that focus on student discipline, academic struggles, or cultural conflict, as it is easy for discourse to degenerate into a litany of complaints around students, job requirements, and curricular shortcomings. In this way, the mission statement serves as the lighthouse that guides the PLC in the right direction...
and warns it when heading for dangerous waters. As such, DuFour (2011) advises that collaboration is a necessary but insufficient component of PLCs; if PLCs devolve into complaint sessions, innovation and learning are stifled, while a culture of negativity is reinforced. Conversely, if PLCs maintain committed to their mission and agendas, the learning opportunities open space for teachers to uncover and reform beliefs, habits, and practices.

Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2009) illustrate this phenomenon through their categorization of barrier and breakthrough questions:

Sometimes, members of the group ask questions and make comments that serve as barriers to moving forward. For example, a barrier question might feel like an inquisition or an interrogation. Asking why and how questions may include a judgmental and accusatory voice. Barrier questions usually result in shutting down the conversation and inhibiting positive thinking. Breakthrough questions, on the other hand, disturb the environment in ways that invite positive thinking and encourage new ideas. Breakthrough questions have specific characteristics that reduce anxiety and open one’s thinking toward possibility. Breakthrough questions (a) are open-ended, with no right or wrong answer; (b) use tentative language, such as “how might you”; (c) use plural language, such as “what are some of the ways”; (d) embed positive intention and possibility, such as “Given your desire for all students to be successful …”; and, (e) embed one or more of the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, such as “In what ways might we learn more about our newest students?” (p. 65)

In essence, when a group takes up a barrier question, mission drift is a distinct possibility. Conversely, if the facilitator reframes the barrier as a breakthrough question, the spirit of inquiry burns brighter and productive dialogic conversation ensues; from an epistemological point of view, breakthrough questions engender constructivist learning.
On Epistemology and Pedagogy: Learning from and with Teachers

In stark contrast to traditional forms of PD, PLCs are teacher-driven, inquiry-based, and can take on a variety of forms and tasks, depending upon the interests of the group. As the name suggests, community is at the center of the organizational structure. Inquiry communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), study groups (Birchak et al., 1998), critical friend groups (Curry, 2008), and lesson study groups (Lewis et al., 2004) all fall under the umbrella of PLCs. Barth (1990) encapsulates the connection among all the forms of PLCs by describing a learning community as “a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else’s learning” (p. 9, emphasis added). Similarly, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) define professional learning as “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 11). Thus, professional learning is predicated upon teachers’ identification of relevant subjects of study and intentional inquiry into those questions. In short, teachers are tasked to collaboratively construct knowledge.

Concordant with the distributed leadership embedded in a PLC is a constructivist view of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and leadership (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). According to constructivist theory, knowledge is created in a socio-cultural context, and it is through interaction with others that humans learn and develop. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004)
effectively summarize the five major tenets of constructivism: (1) learning is an active process and knowledge simply cannot be transmitted; (2) learning best takes place when individuals are motivated to learn and have an active role in determining the subject of study; (3) new understandings are built upon prior knowledge; (4) knowledge is constructed through experience, and (5) learning best occurs collaboratively, when set in a context important to the learner. These tenets are completely aligned with the principles of andragogy, yet again, the learning will not occur in a vacuum. Rather, the learning must be orchestrated, which necessitates constructivist leadership, which Lambert (1998) describes as, “learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (p. 5). Thus, it is not the responsibility of the PLC facilitator to disseminate knowledge to the participants; rather, she steers the canoe towards the mission, while the other members do the hard work of paddling. Ultimately, participants and facilitator work in unison to share and create knowledge.

Given the social nature of learning, PLCs must allow for participation structures that promote dialogic discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) and do not position particular individuals as experts or pedants. For this reason, many of the learning experiences are task-related: by building something new – whether a unit, an assessment, a theory, a philosophy, or even a mutual understanding – participants are encouraged to engage with each other and create something original that will later become an “artifact of practice,” and useful for grounded reflection and theory development (Ball & Cohen, 1999). For example, during an August PLC session, each team generated an interview protocol to be used during the first week of school to get to know the students in the class. While the protocol could
certainly include a lot of the “basic favorites” (subject, book, tv show, color, food, etc.), this activity followed from a question-posing brainstorm, in which teachers named assumptions and inquiries they have about students’ culture. Consequently, the protocol included questions not only typically found on a “getting to know you” questionnaire, but also questions of significance that will be incredibly important given the faculty’s goal of improving relationships and gaining cultural competence. Teachers inquired into students’ views on peer pressure, reasons for incomplete homework, efficacy of extrinsic motivators and deterrents, and/or expectations for relationships with their teachers. And since these protocols were actually administered to students, the teaching teams worked together to generate questions that address the issues they are concerned about in a way that is both culturally sensitive and age-appropriate. After interviewing their students, the PLCs then possessed rich data to be analyzed, interpreted, and used as fodder for further inquiry.

Based upon the prior example, it follows that reflection is an integral component of professional learning (Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). Gibbs (1988) describes the reflective cycle as recursive, so that prior experiences can be (re)interpreted and analyzed in order to make meaning and guide future decisions and actions:

![Figure 3. The Reflective Cycle](image-url)
As teachers reflect in this manner, they will be both interrogating their own practice and engaging in action research (Lewin, 1946). This systematic process affords the opportunity to examine many components of the teaching profession, ranging from disciplinary practices, to lesson planning, to instructional techniques, to grade level meetings. As PLCs open space to engage in this cycle, teachers will ideally make this process a habit of mind and consistently exhibit the qualities of reflective practitioners (Serafini, 2002; Schon, 1987).

Conclusion

At Aspen, the decision to implement PLCs was predicated upon two major assumptions about the faculty. First, it was believed that Aspen’s teachers are dedicated, passionate, intelligent, and well-meaning. Given their own backgrounds and available pedagogical frameworks, they were acting in ways they deemed would most benefit their students socially, emotionally, and academically. Despite their best intentions, rifts manifested between students and teachers, as student discipline and classroom management were consistently rated as high needs on Aspen’s annual climate survey. This discrepancy led to the second assumption: to more effectively work with Aspen’s students, teachers need the opportunity to reflect deeply on personal and schoolwide practices, gain more knowledge about their students, and learn about innovative approaches that allow teachers to write counter-narratives that disrupt the dominant discourse on marginalized youth.

Because no one-off PD session could accomplish these lofty goals, a PD structure was required that put teachers in charge of their own learning, provided a supportive yet
critical community, and offered opportunities to reflect on and re-envision their practice.

PLCs, in theory, create space for teachers to deconstruct their apprenticeship of observation and recognize that teaching Aspen’s students effectively requires different pedagogy than they experienced in their own childhoods. Thus, PLCs were selected as the PD model so that the focus of PD sessions would shift from best practices of teaching to professional learning; the objective of Aspen’s PLCs was to offer teachers a participation structure that enables them to “generate new knowledge and views about teaching and learning and the part they play in helping all their students to be successful learners” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 14). In the context of this study, allowing teachers to think about cultural competence and restorative justice seemed necessary to address the assumptions about Aspen’s faculty – that despite their caring and well-meaning nature, there was a disconnect between many of the teachers and their students, which often resulted in high levels of stress for the teachers and reliance on punitive measures to demonstrate to students that they “crossed the line.” But what could happen if teachers had a better understanding of their students’ history and culture, and how might student-teacher relationships shift if punitive measures were no longer the institutionally endorsed method of discipline?

**Cultural Competence & Cultural Proficiency**

*The very climate of schools needs to undergo a critical transformation to make it clear that students of diverse backgrounds are expected and encouraged to learn.*

- Nieto (1999, p. 128)
Rooted in the field of multicultural education (Banks, 1995), cultural competence and proficiency provide burgeoning frameworks that help guide the complicated decisions educators make when working with students who are members of various (sub)cultural groups not fully shared with or understood by their teachers. Seeking more than awareness of cultural differences, “cultural proficiency embodies curricular content, instructional strategies, assessment techniques, and classroom management that all educators must know, do, believe, and respect in order to achieve efficacy” (Gallavan, 2011, p. 1). Cultural proficiency recognizes that all individuals shape and are shaped by culture, and students’ cultural memberships affect their learning styles, communication norms, values, beliefs, behaviors, and even dress. Moreover, this framework acknowledges instantiations of power and oppression – certain knowledges and skills, when left unexamined, are privileged by schools and further reify the hegemonic mainstream (Landa, 2011). In order to disrupt these layered systems of oppression, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to adjust curriculum and instruction to match the student, rather than employ an assimilationist model, which would force the students to adapt to the school’s a priori culture (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Since one of Aspen’s core principles was to “meet children where they are,” cultural competence became a necessary component of the professional development curriculum. But what is meant by culture? And what does it mean to be competent or proficient in someone else’s culture? While these terms are debatable and, at times, problematic, adopting an inquiry stance towards students and their cultures allows teachers to become ethnographers in their own classrooms. Deep observation and thick
description (Geertz, 1973) empower the teacher to observe the students in action, learn from them, and then accordingly adjust instructional practices to align with the students’ discursive norms, learning styles, and funds of knowledge.

So while I will review the theory and research in the field of cultural competence, I do so with the following caveat: uncritical assignment of students to cultural groups (based on race, class, gender, religion, etc.) may result in reliance on stereotypes and essentialism (Banks, 2004). Nevertheless, culture’s complicated nature does not mean it should be ignored. What it does mean is that teachers need to study their students, adjust pedagogy, observe and analyze the changes in student learning and behavior, and then repeat the reflective cycle. Thus, cultural competence begins with ethnography and critical inquiry: teachers take on the observational work needed to describe and analyze student cultures so that the teaching is suited to the learner, and not necessarily to the teacher’s preferences and habits.

Cultural Competence: Terminology and Limitations

A widely used and oft misappropriated term, “culture” has taken on a variety of meanings, and no one, uniform definition has been agreed upon. So that a common understanding among the faculty at Aspen could be shared, we utilized the description offered by Lindsey, Roberts, and Campbell-Jones (2005, p. 22): culture is “the mix of beliefs and behaviors of any group that distinguish them as a group and make them who they are.” There are three main components of this definition, all of which are relevant
when teachers become ethnographers of their own classrooms⁹ (Harding, 2005); this
definition helps the ethnographer address three guiding questions to begin an inquiry into
her students and their cultures. The three questions are (1) What do these students
believe? (2) What are their “normal” behaviors; that is, what counts as valued
participation in this group? and (3) How do these beliefs and behaviors distinguish this
group from other groups? With this data and analysis in hand, the teacher can then
implement experimental pedagogy, participation structures, and curriculum that are based
on students’ cultural assets (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012), and thus the teacher
earnestly attempts to “meet the students where they are.”

Though these ethnographic questions may seem relatively straightforward and
answerable through empirical study, they are further complicated by a multitude of
factors. First, students – as well as adults – are members of multiple cultural and
discursive communities (Gee, 1989). Students maintain memberships in school
communities, sports teams, family units, religious organizations, and clubs, each of which
has its own set of values, beliefs, norms, and expectations – its own culture.
Consequently, to observe a student in a classroom provides only a limited view of the
Most every teacher knows of a student who acts one way in one classroom and a

⁹ The teacher as ethnographer must recognize that culture is not something that can be described after brief
observation of students and utilization of cultural archetypes (Ali, 2013). It is for this reason that Weaver
(1986) uses the metaphor of an iceberg (see Appendix A) to describe culture: certain elements of culture
are visible and readily identifiable: food, clothing, and linguistic norms can be readily traced. Other
elements of culture, however, reside below the surface and require an anthropological approach to
understand. This includes views on gender, faith, morality, truth, justice, and individualism vs.
collectivism. Sole reliance on the “above water” elements of culture result in a “heroes and holidays”
approach (Banks, 1989) to multicultural education that may romanticize, exoticize, over-simplify, and
minimize the significance of fully developed cultures.
completely different way in another classroom (Jones, 2007). This occurs because classroom culture is negotiated among the students, teacher, course of study, and physical environment. As a result, to study a cohort of students in one classroom may yield completely different conclusions than to study them in another class (Jones, 2007). Hanley (1999) refers to this as biculturality, which is “the ability of people in a minority culture to understand and work within the dominant culture in order to improve the economic and/or physical well-being when they interact with that culture” (p. 2).

Biculturality – or, more recently, polyculturality (Rosenthal & Levy, 2010) – allows students to maintain their indigenous values and norms, yet operate in a society where their culture may be interpreted as “less than.” Finally, culture, especially when preceded by the word “classroom” or “student,” is most frequently employed as a singular entity. “Classroom culture” and “student culture” suggest that there is only one operative culture in the room, and if the teacher can fully understand it, then she can leverage students’ cultural assets to create a more meaningful and enjoyable educational experience.

However, in today’s multicultural and increasingly diverse society, assuming that there is a class or student culture will assuredly marginalize students whose attitudes and beliefs do not match the majority’s. Thus, if the purpose of cultural competence is to challenge mainstream ideology and make the classroom more welcoming for students of all backgrounds, the teacher must be careful to avoid “teaching to the middle” and continue to overlook minority student cultures.

Messy and knotted as the concepts of culture, classroom culture, and school culture are, they cannot be discounted, as the alternative is a traditional schooling
experience that unquestioningly privileges Whiteness and hegemonic ideologies (Leonardo, 2009). It is for this reason that teachers and researchers re-appropriated the concept of cultural competence from the medical field to the educational sphere. First introduced by Cross et al. (1989), cultural competence was defined as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (p. iv). Two key ideas are inherent in this conceptualization of cultural competence. First is the recognition that cross-cultural situations necessitate adaptation. In other words, color-blindness or post-racial attitudes result in ineffective care. Second, Cross places the onus of responsibility on the caretakers, not the patients. In other words, patients need not adapt to the culture of the hospital; rather, it is the requirement of the doctors, nurses, and the hospital itself to gain awareness of the patients’ cultures and interact with/treat them in ways that neither oppress nor marginalize. With this description, it is an easy leap to see how the concept is pertinent for educators who value and appreciate diversity. And thus, many educators began the “inside-out process” of changing classroom and school practices by first looking deeply within.

Development of Cultural Competence and Proficiency

Cross et al. (1989), Mason (1995), and Hanley (1999) developed and refined the cultural competence continuum, which offers to help individuals and organizations become more inclusive and culturally sensitive: “with honest self-appraisal, organizations and individuals can determine their present state and measure their change toward
cultural competence over time” (Hanley, 1999, p. 4). This five stage continuum describes attitudes and behaviors that exist in each category so that the individual (or institution) is able both to track changes in cultural competence over time and view a road map for future indicators of growth; she can see where she is and where she should be going. As with any continuum, the indicators are fluid, and a person may move forward or slide backward across time or in different social situations. Thus, the continuum provides a framework for understanding cultural competence and should not be read as a definitive pathway.

The first stage is “cultural destructiveness,” which attempts to diminish or even eliminate non-dominant cultures, as well as ostracize the members of it. Lindsey, Roberts, and CampbellJones (2005) state that cultural destruction is “any action that negates, disparages, or purges cultural practices or expressions of culture that are different from your own; it may be manifested through an organization’s policies and practices or through an individual’s assumptions and behavior” (p. 56). Examples of school-based cultural destruction are English-only policies in schools or teaching literature courses that almost exclusively include White authors – “the canon.” Otherness is not tolerated, and a “less than” ideology results from non-conformity:

The courses, the texts, and the experiences all are aimed at addressing some alleged pathology on the part of the students, their families, their communities, and/or their cultures. The school quickly imperializes the space of normalcy, and any students who do not conform to that space are thought to have abnormalities that emanate from outside of the school in the ‘dangerous, chaotic worlds’ of their families and communities. (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 19)

Cultural competence’s second stage, “cultural incapacity,” is characterized not by malice, but by ignorance. It is manifested through subconscious ascription to “the
superiority of one’s own culture and behavior that enhances the inferiority of another
culture” (Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 116). Individuals in this category do not intentionally
harm others who are culturally different, but they lack the capacity to recognize that their
actions marginalize others. When a school does not translate paperwork into students’
families’ home language, it is demonstrating cultural incapacity. When a teacher assumes
that students who come from single-parent households lack guidance or structure, a
cultural bias exists that affects both the way the teacher interacts with the child and the
expectations she holds for the student. In this way, cultural incapacity is often displayed
through misguided sympathy and paternalism: because of assumed circumstances that
students may or may not face, the teacher pities the student and grants permission to fail
(Ladson-Billings, 1994). Thus, cultural incapacity is laden with aversive racism (Dovidio
& Gaertner, 2004) and micro-aggressions (Sue et al., 2007), as it reinforces the social
hierarchy.

The midpoint of the cultural competence continuum is “colorblindness,” which
adheres to principles of equality. Individuals in this stage contend that race doesn’t
matter; they “don’t see color,” and cultural differences are irrelevant. This is a
particularly troubling stage, since people in this category may believe they have moved
past racist attitudes and achieved a state of enlightenment. Consequently, they will “fix”
students’ language and grammar, will tell children to look them in the eye (even if the
students’ home culture instructs children to look down when speaking to adults), will
assume that the school’s curriculum is a good fit for all students, and will attribute gaps
in achievement to differential work ethics or intellectual capacity. Ultimately, the
colorblind individual believes that society is fair and meritocracy exists, and consequently, everyone should receive equal treatment – and is then possesses the schema necessary to rationalize the reality that equal treatment frequently precipitates unequal outcomes.

Once a person recognizes that race and culture are important elements of the socio-context and create power dynamics, she enters the “cultural precompetence” phase of the continuum. At this stage, individuals recognize their limitations working with people in different cultural groups and begin to make efforts to change both individual practices and structural policies that oppress particular groups. For example, a music teacher might replace a bulletin board championing White European male classical composers with images of musical icons from a variety of backgrounds and musical genres; a school may intentionally hire people of color so that the staff’s racial composition more closely resembles the student body’s, or a teacher may recognize that she assigns more detentions to students of color than to White students. Though individuals in the pre-competence phase realize that there are cultural conflicts, they are not taking all the steps needed to create an egalitarian community. Nevertheless, these are necessary first steps towards cultural competence.

The fifth step in this continuum is “cultural competence,” which is “characterized by acceptance and respect for difference, continuing self-assessment regarding culture, careful attention to the dynamics of difference, continuous expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, and a variety of adaptations to service models in order to better meet the needs of minority populations” (Cross et al., 1989, p. 17). Individuals in this
stage look past food and dress as determinants of culture, and they recognize that people are members of multiple cultural groups who must navigate socio-political contexts. They identify their own biases and seek education to uncover and dismantle their own prejudices. They welcome the perspectives of the community they serve and involve the community in decision-making processes. Importantly, they recognize that hiring people of color is a necessary but insufficient step towards cultural competence; a Latina teacher may or may not develop strong personal and professional relationships with her Black students and their families: integrating races in and of itself does not precipitate cross-cultural appreciation. Thus, culturally competent individuals know what they don’t know, thereby unassuming a patriarchal position.

“Cultural proficiency” is the fifth and final stage of the continuum. Whereas cultural competence recognizes and respects cultural differences, cultural proficiency “honors differences among cultures, views diversity as a benefit, and interacts knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups” (Landa, 2011, p. 13). To become culturally proficient, an educator conducts research and theorizes the affordances and constraints of her pedagogical approach on her students, as both individuals and members of various cultural groups. Through interrogation of her own practice and close inquiry into her students, these educators “seek to understand and adapt to the non-dominant cultures represented among their student body so that students from all cultural subgroups will thrive” (Landa, 2011, p. 13). These teachers are also aware of their gaps in knowledge and schema about their students and their cultures, and to fill these holes, they avoid reliance on assumptions and stereotypes; instead, they
launch action research inquiries to ensure that all students’ heritages are honored and valued in the classroom (Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011).

Cooper et al. (2011) add an additional point on the continuum: “critical cultural competence,” which pushes educators to simultaneously honor students’ cultures and work towards social justice. They lean on Milner’s (2010) five conceptual repertoires of diversity, which disrupt pejorative ideologies frequently held by teachers: colorblindness, cultural conflict, the myth of meritocracy, deficit conceptions, and low expectations for students of color. Since these worldviews are held by teachers and many members of society – particularly those who are members of the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) – they must be interrupted systemically and politically in order for marginalized communities to achieve equity in American society. According to Cooper et al. (2011), critically culturally competent educators “act as agents of change. Instead of being content with using good teaching strategies, educators with critical cultural competence question how they can become better cultural brokers in and beyond the classroom…[They] challenge the status quo and become more critically culturally competent by leading the change in their interactions with curriculum, students, and parents…” (p. 96-97). To these authors, honoring students’ cultures in the classroom, while valuable, is insufficient since the students still must exist in a racist and oppressive society. Therefore, the teacher herself works to identify and dismantle inequities, while simultaneously teaching her students to work within and against a Eurocentric system that privileges Whiteness at the expense of all other races.
Given that racism and prejudice are “in the air we breathe,” it is unreasonable to expect that the entirety of a school’s faculty is culturally competent, proficient, or critically competent. Consequently, professional development must offer opportunities for teachers to examine their own assumptions and uncover the internalized myths (Milner, 2010) that limit their ability to honor diversity and eradicate oppression. As discussed, an adult cannot be told what to think; rather, she must engage in reflection and dialogue, and through self-discovery, transformative change is possible. Systemic and organizational change begins with individuals, so teachers must look inward before they are equipped to critique and adjust classroom and schoolwide policies and practices.

*Eliminating Oppression from the Inside-Out: Assumption Hunting*

Because student-teacher relationships are the cornerstone of Aspen’s professional development and at the heart of cultural proficiency, reflection must be carefully designed in order to avoid confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), which suggests that people pay attention to information that confirms their beliefs while disregarding data that challenges their preconceived and archetypal notions (Moya, 2015). Because the majority of teachers at Aspen are White in a predominately Black school, the dominant discourse regarding the school’s population (Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Barrett & Noguera, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2006) cannot be left unquestioned. For example, the neighborhood’s demographics can be used to affirm many stereotypes about the working poor: high levels of poverty and unemployment; above average teenage pregnancy rates, and percentage of births to unwed mothers can confirm the biases held by many individuals and perpetuated by popular media. Yet, for Aspen’s teachers to confirm these
common racial and socioeconomic stereotypes and deficits, many important counter-narratives need to be ignored or rationalized. For example, a common stereotype surrounding urban families is that the parents are not invested in their children’s education. To confirm this bias, I would have to discredit the fact that during the past three years, over 90% of my students’ parents attended parent-teacher conferences and answered my phone calls during school/work hours almost without exception. Additionally, I had many students who went months at a time without missing a single homework assignment. Thus, for teachers to avoid confirmation bias, they must develop critical consciousness; that is, participants in the PLCs cannot solely rely on data and stories that align with the dominant discourse’s assumptions regarding students and their families who live in neighborhoods with demographics such as Aspen’s. Instead, teachers must actively seek data that actively disrupt and disprove the dominant narrative. Doing so locates teachers in the cultural precompetence stage, which opens opportunities for further critical inquiry.

But how does one begin the difficult work of uncovering internalized biases? Brookfield (1995) posits that critical reflection begins with “assumption hunting”; in other words, individuals must articulate their beliefs before they can challenge these ideas. To clarify what counts as assumptions, Brookfield creates three categories: paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal. Paradigmatic assumptions, the deepest and most ingrained worldviews, are defined as the basic structuring axioms we use to order the world into fundamental categories. We may not recognize them as assumptions, even after they’ve been pointed out to us. Instead, we insist that they’re objectively valid renderings of reality, the facts we know to be true… Paradigmatic assumptions are examined
critically only after a great deal of resistance to doing so, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them. But when they are challenged and changed, the consequences for our lives are explosive. (p. 2-3)

Paradigmatic assumptions, similar to schemata, guide individuals’ understanding of racial and cultural dynamics, so it is these beliefs that must be hunted, located, described, questioned, dismantled, and potentially overturned.

Brookfield recognizes that confirmation bias works powerfully to uphold paradigmatic assumptions, so it is unreasonable to believe that one conversation or reading will negate the years of selective data-gathering that reinforces the individual’s ideological beliefs. Consequently, critically, culturally conscious PD must begin with an understanding that, at times, other people’s assumptions and instincts are inaccurate—which is a much easier idea to cope with than confronting one’s own racist tendencies. To accomplish this, Berlak (2008) draws upon the concept of the adaptive unconscious (Wilson, 2002; Gladwell, 2005), a brain function that, on a subconscious level, absorbs and analyzes tremendous amounts of data and “selects, interprets, and evaluates incoming information, directs our attention, filters our experience, and influences all of our second-by-second responses. Thus, the adaptive unconscious is much more influential in teachers’ daily classroom performance than most of us are aware of, and we exert less control over our classroom actions than we are aware of” (Berlak, 2008, p. 18). This understanding can be used to explain why people will act in ways that contradict their conscious, public beliefs. For example, many educators who are aware of the school-to-prison pipeline condemn the efficacy of punishments to colleagues, yet they will assign detentions to students who must learn “that’s the way ‘the real world’ works.” And when
people are asked to explain these idiosyncratic decisions, confirmation bias is employed to rationalize their actions in ways that are consistent with the individual’s conscious, politically-correct belief system; they are able to disregard the reality that their behaviors defy their beliefs (Wilson, 2002). To illustrate this phenomenon, Berlak (2008) describes an individual who consciously recognizes the negative stereotypes that pathologize African-American men, but still experiences fear and increased heart rate when a group of Black men pass by on the sidewalk. In this case, Berlak argues that the adaptive unconscious has subliminally internalized the daily news reports, statistics, and anecdotes that unfairly categorize Black men as criminals, and as a result, an emotional and physiological reaction occurs; despite the individual’s anti-racist desire, an archetypal assumption (Brookfield, 1995) has been constructed that equates Black men with criminality. Thus, much like schemata, the adaptive unconscious provides an analytical lens and a pedagogical tool through which behaviors can be deconstructed and analyzed, opening space to recognize that human beings will act in ways that differ from their espoused ideologies. Gaining cultural competence, then, starts with a consciousness that an individual’s actions are not always in tune with her stated beliefs, so these discordances can become sites for reflection and inquiry.

Once this awareness is achieved, it becomes possible for teachers to have honest dialogue about racial realities and inequities. Understanding deficit perspectives (Flores et al., 1991), White privilege (McIntosh, 1988), institutional racism (Tatum, 1997), and the school-to-prison pipeline (Christensen, 2011; Winn, 2011) all become issues of focus that not only exist elsewhere, but also on Aspen’s campus. Recognition of a problem is a
necessary precursor for addressing it, and ideally, through this inquiry work, teachers not only locate and eliminate their own negative biases and archetypal assumptions, but they also recognize and adjust classroom and school-wide policies that marginalize students, their histories, their knowledge, and their cultures. To do so mandates that teachers “make the familiar strange” and carefully analyze the relationship among Whiteness, education, and society.

**Critical Whiteness Studies, Allyship, and Student-Teacher Relationships**

Howard Stevenson (2014) referred to the achievement gap as a relationship gap between minority students and the (predominately White) adults in schools. Because of teachers’ assumptions and schema about their students, they can unintentionally sabotage relationships with students, thereby inhibiting academic and social growth. Teel (2008), a White educator with little experience teaching persons of color, describes her challenges in the classroom as “the ghost of racism”:

> My total ignorance of African American people and their cultural characteristics contributed a great deal to my students’ sometimes disruptive behavior and their resistance to me as a mentor… I learned that my ignorance and preconceived notions about African American people and culture led me to say things, react in certain ways to my students, use materials that were not particularly supportive of their culture, and design curriculum that was sometimes insensitive and offensive based upon my students’ history and culture. (p. 144)

Because of the predominance of Whiteness both in Aspen’s faculty and in the teaching profession at large, Teel’s experience is not an isolated incident; educators alienate their students not out of malice or anger, but by simply not knowing – by being ignorant.

Ignorance is dangerous, because when “teachers and administrators remain unfamiliar with the places and the ways in which their students live their lives outside the
school walls, they often fill the knowledge void with stereotypes based on what they see or hear in the media” (Barrett & Noguera, 2008, p. 105). Due to the criminalization of African Americans, Barrett and Noguera argue that, through schematic racism, the knowledge void is often filled with fear, which permeates throughout the classroom community and can be exploited by savvy students. It may seem obvious, but Teel (2008), and Noguera and Barrett (2008) make the point that teachers can only build positive relationships with students in the absence of fear.

To remove fear from the relationship, White teachers must attempt to become “allies” (Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1994; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997) of their culturally- and racially-different students. In the first of two phases of the process of becoming a White ally, Whites begin to abandon racism by moving from the contact stage (colorblindness and belief that they are free of prejudice) to the disintegration stage. In the latter stage, Whites actively deconstruct many of the societal myths that permeate throughout the adaptive unconscious. They challenge American axioms, such as ‘everyone is equal’ and ‘America is a meritocracy.’ Unseating these beliefs is mentally and emotionally challenging work, as it is in this stage that individuals come to realize that they may have friends and family who uphold and benefit from the tenets of institutional racism. Consequently, the third stage – reintegration – is extremely important, because there is an opportunity for Whites to revert to systems of belief that reify White supremacy: “Race-

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10 Recent political movements have sparked a call to replace the term “White ally” with “White activist” or “White accomplice” (Hackman, 2015; Masoom, 2016; McKenzie, 2014), since an ally “stands with” and doesn’t necessarily “act with.” Thus, one can be an ally who stands with the cause but does not engage in wholehearted efforts to undo oppressions. Linguistically, “White activism” presupposes more agency and involvement than “White allyship.”
related negative conditions are assumed to result from Black people’s inferior social, moral, and intellectual qualities, and thus it is not unusual to find persons in the Reintegration stage selectively attending to and/or reinterpreting information to conform to societal stereotypes of Black people” (Helms, 1990, p.60); clearly, entrenched schemata, the adaptive unconscious, and confirmation bias are hard at work in the reintegration stage. The dominant discourse and ideology regarding Black culture and race are so pervasive that it is possible for the White individual to discard any feelings of guilt and accept the racial hierarchy at face value. Clearly, this stage is the lynchpin for White educators, because should they push past reintegration and continue to challenge the status quo, they next enter the pseudo-independent stage, in which they move past blaming the victim and begin to create a positive conception of Whiteness. With the help of people of color, Whites grapple with issues of race, culture, history, and politics; they assume an inquiry stance and recognize the limits of their knowledge. In this stage, Whites commonly experience feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment, and must attempt to redefine their own Whiteness as a source of pride – which can be very complicated. Once past feelings of White guilt, an ally is able to view her position in society more positively and optimistically. This feat is accomplished during the final two phases of the process.

Immersion and independence, the last two stages, are characterized by a White’s ability to actively confront racism with the help of friends and mentors. She rejects irrational fears and emotions, and exhibits a complete willingness to learn about other cultural groups and norms. While independence is the “last stage,” the journey never
finishes: there are missed steps and steps backwards, but with critical awareness and thoughtful reflection, a White teacher can position herself as an ally to her students of color, and with this level of trust, meaningful relationships can be forged with all the students in her charge.

While racial awareness and allyship – and potentially activism – are necessary components of student-teacher relationships, they do not describe the impacts of positive student-teacher relationships on the students themselves. In a study of behaviorally at-risk African American students, Decker, Dona, and Christenson (2007) describe the quality of student-teacher relationships from the perspectives of the students (grades 1-6) and their teachers. The researchers’ first significant finding was that the “misbehaving” students expressed a desire to be closer to their teachers, even though the teachers perceived their relationships with those students negatively. Thus, the students identify their teachers as people who are worth knowing and interacting with, but linguistic and cultural barriers can inhibit the types of interactions the teacher values. Second, when students perceived a positive relationship with their teacher, the students demonstrated higher socio-emotional functioning. A cycle then ensued in which the teacher provided positive feedback to the student, thereby boosting the students’ self-image and self-esteem. The study also correlates the quality of student-teacher relationships with suspension rates: “teachers are less willing to tolerate the behavior of students that they have negative relationships with and are more likely to refer those students to an administrator for suspension” (p. 103). Punitive measures such as suspension serve to strain the student-teacher relationship even more, contribute to the criminalization and marginalization of students, and inhibit
academic progress (Noguera, 2008; Stevenson, 2009). This creates a dangerous cycle that contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline (Fuentes, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Winn, 2011). Conversely, when students perceive a positive relationship with their teacher, behavioral incidents decrease and academic engagement increases (Decker et al., 2007). Though there are many potential benefits for students when teachers deconstruct Whiteness, its unquestioned norms, and subsequent privileges, the road to cultural proficiency and anti-racist pedagogy is fraught with potholes and detours; barriers must be overcome to ensure that a school and its teachers actively monitor their own practices to guarantee that cultural diversity is welcomed and valued in the school community.

**Barriers to Cultural Proficiency**

Challenging adults’ deeply held beliefs is a serious, potentially painful process. When personally confronted with the history and permanence of racism in our country, I was devastated that I had spent nearly three decades in a state of blissful ignorance, where I believed my achievements were solely attributable to my talents and efforts. I was upset and disappointed that I was a champion of colorblind ideology, and was actively teaching students – Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian – that skin color is irrelevant. I was also frustrated that I was nearly thirty years old before I became an advocate for social justice. I didn’t want to believe that I had lived a third of my life as an unknowing beneficiary of White privilege. These painful truths were neither unique to my experience nor easy to confront; many well-meaning citizens must face and overcome the three barriers to cultural proficiency (CampbellJones, CampbellJones, Lindsey, & Tillman, 2010).
The first barrier is resistance to change. Accepting the need to change carries with it an admission of guilt: the person needs to change because she is part of the problem. Well-meaning teachers who work in under-resourced schools justifiably believe that they are part of the solution, not the problem. Nevertheless, these teachers may implement a basic skills curriculum that limits the life-chances of the pupils or may hold a deficit perspective towards the students’ families and community. For these reasons, teachers may resist change, thinking that the real change must take place within the students’ families, for they are the ones who are imposing the difficult circumstances that the teachers must endure and overcome; blaming the victim becomes an easy rationalization to employ.

The second obstacle is acknowledgment of systems of oppression. As CampbellJones et al. (2010) state, people must recognize and understand “that racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of oppression are real experiences” (p. 20). This is challenging because it requires the individual to abandon the myth of meritocracy, which causes self-doubt and angst: (White) individuals want to believe that they achieved their personal position in society through a combination of hard work, intelligence, and strong moral fiber. Acknowledgement of systems of oppression forces the individual to admit that her societal position was realized, in part, because others were suppressed.

A sense of privilege and entitlement is the last barrier to cultural competence. With group membership in the culture of power, individuals become accustomed to preferential treatment (McIntosh, 1988); they never have to worry about racial profiling or assumptions that they cannot afford to pay for high-end items. It may be hard for
individuals to admit that, because of the color their skin, their life has fewer obstacles than others’. Additionally, it may be challenging to disrupt privilege when personally receiving the benefits. Finally, if the person ascribes to the myth of meritocracy, she may believe she is entitled to her preferential treatment: she earned it through hard work and determination, after all! Recognition of an unfair society casts doubt upon the genuineness of the accomplishments the individual perceives as merit-based.

Undoubtedly, asking teachers to undergo this work will cause various amounts of internal and external discord, since they may face the reality that their position in society was made possible, at least in part, through an interwoven set of laws, policies, and ideologies that removes hurdles from a White person’s lane and places them into a person of color’s (Bell, 1987). This is a hard reality for people who benefit from privilege, but a necessary understanding if the teacher is serious about creating equity inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion: Towards Critical Cultural Consciousness

Cultural competency among a teaching faculty is a long-term endeavor that requires careful planning and execution: the staff must recognize and appreciate differences in language (Labov, 1972; Smithermann, 1977; Ballenger, 1999; Delpit, 1995, 2012); they, as warm demanders, must expect excellence from all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Bondy & Ross, 2008); they must construct cultural bridges that help students travel between their home cultures and “mainstream” norms (Lee, 2007) and learn academic skills and discourse (Delpit, 1995; Lea & Street, 2006); they must understand the students’ ecology in schools and in the neighborhood; they must separate
cultural stereotypes from responses to oppression (Delpit, 2012); they must build bonds with students that transcend the cultural differences that often prevent students from trusting their teachers, and they must use their agency as educators to actively dismantle systems of oppression.

Can these objectives be fully and consistently achieved? In an ever-changing, policy-driven educational context that demands more from its diverse students and over-worked teachers, cultural proficiency should be conceptualized not as an objective, but as a stance. For this reason, *critical cultural consciousness* (cf. Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Dantas-Whitney & Waldschmidt, 2009) may be a more fruitful and realistic approach than cultural proficiency, since proficiency suggests that the goal has been achieved and the mark has been met. Critical cultural consciousness, however, requires constant reflection, evaluation, and maneuvering.

Throughout this portion of the literature review, I have attempted to complicate the concepts of culture and cultural proficiency; since culture continuously changes, all we can demand from practitioners is a learning/inquiry stance and a pedagogy that is as nimble and malleable as the students’ language, habits, interests, and cultures. Moreover, teachers who work with underserved populations benefit from a critical awareness, so that principles of social justice and equity can be promoted in the school and outside community. This is the potential promise of critical cultural consciousness: teachers who take deep interest in their students’ lives and knowledges, and use these assets to recognize and address injustice – starting from the inside, and working out into the larger communities.
Restorative Justice

RJ [Restorative Justice] is a broad term that encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalize peaceful and non-punitive approaches for addressing harm, responding to violations of legal and human rights, and problem solving...In the school setting, it often serves as an alternative to traditional discipline, particularly exclusionary disciplinary actions such as suspension or expulsion. RJ proponents often turn to restorative practices out of concern that more exclusionary disciplinary actions tend to be associated with harmful consequences for children.


Garnering bipartisan support, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002 – more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – sought to close the “achievement gap” between White students and students of color. Ushering in the accountability era, NCLB prompted districts and schools to revise curriculum, instruction, and disciplinary policies so that students would be equipped to excel on the annually-administered high-stakes assessments. Because school’s data would be disaggregated into sub-groups categorized by sex, race, and special education services, schools could no longer average all students’ scores and avoid scrutiny for certain groups’ outperforming others. Thus, one of the stated intentions of NCLB was for schools to allocate additional resources to under-performing students or groups so that the school would achieve “adequate yearly progress” towards the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014.

Even if the intention of NCLB was to guarantee academic success for all students, the realities resultant from the policy were far less altruistic. Knowing that the school’s status, reputation, autonomy, and funding hinged on students’ achievement on the high-stakes assessments, schools realigned their policies and practices to maximize testing
performance. As Monty Neil, executive director of the nonprofit Fairtest, stated, “NCLB has led to the dramatic narrowing and weakening of curriculum. Because so much of the school day is focused on test preparation instead of well-rounded instruction, more students become alienated, making the jobs of teachers even harder” (quoted in Advancement Project, 2011a). And as academic engagement waned, student disciplinary concerns increased. Ultimately, NCLB incentivized the use of exclusionary discipline, such as suspension or expulsion, since it meant those students’ scores would not be included in the school’s AYP profile:

By focusing so heavily on standardized testing as a metric for accountability, and by attaching high-stakes consequences to the results of these tests, NCLB creates an extremely narrow definition of educational success. As a result of mandates to raise student test scores, districts, schools, administrators, and teachers are under enormous pressure to produce results. This pressure has actually given schools a perverse incentive to encourage or facilitate the departure or removal of lower-performing students. Unfortunately, many schools across the country have done just that by assigning such students to alternative schools, encouraging or coercing them to drop out or enroll in General Educational Development (GED) programs, removing them from attendance rolls, or improperly using exclusionary school discipline methods such as suspension, expulsion, and arrest. (Advancement Project, 2011b)

Unfortunately, there is ample empirical data to support this trend in exclusion. In a report published by the US Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC, 2014), it was determined that “during the 2011–2012 school year, schools referred approximately 260,000 students to law enforcement, and approximately 92,000 students were arrested on school property during the school day or at a school-sponsored event” (Redfield & Nance, 2016, p. 14). Additionally, the CRDC found that “approximately 3.45 million students were suspended at least one time during the 2011–2012 school year, and
approximately 130,000 were expelled from school during that same time period” (Redfield & Nance, 2016, p. 14).

Such widespread usage of exclusionary punishments – particularly for offenses that did not inflict significant physical or emotional harm on another student or teacher – have come to be known as “zero tolerance” policies. In a task force commissioned by the American Psychological Association (2008), the interpretation and efficacy of such policies were reviewed. The report begins by describing the history and underlying rationale for such extreme use of punishments:

Originally developed as an approach to drug enforcement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006), the term became widely adopted in schools in the early 1990s as a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context… Zero tolerance policies assume that removing students who engage in disruptive behavior will deter others from disruption (Ewing, 2000) and create an improved climate for those students who remain (Public Agenda, 2004). (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852)

Through a research review, the APA task force found that few studies fully interrogate the efficacy of zero tolerance policies in schools; consequently, there is minimal evidence correlating zero tolerance policies with safer schools. However, the evidence that does exist suggests that these policies are antithetical to child/adolescent development and create an adverse relationship between students and authority in schools (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

One of the initial appeals of zero tolerance was that it promised to be objective and remove bias from disciplinary decisions (Casella, 2003); offenses of all levels mandated prescribed punishments, so equality was guaranteed. Nevertheless, schools
reliant on exclusionary practices to deter future misbehavior disproportionately punish students of color. Even though Black students comprise only 16% of public schools’ population (51% is White), they account for 42% of students who have been suspended multiple times and 31% of school-related arrests. Furthermore, Black students are three times more likely to be expelled than their White counterparts (CRDC, 2014). Len Rieser, the Executive Director of Education Law Center of Pennsylvania, summarizes the outcome of zero tolerance policies in this way: “Racial disparities in school discipline have actually gotten worse. Our education system is becoming less equitable than it was only ten years ago” (quoted in Advancement Project, 2011a). This phenomenon is referred to as “disproportionality” (Redfield & Nance, 2016, p. 15), since students of color – particularly Black students – are punished at a rate and severity that neither correlate with their demographic make-up of the nation’s school population nor the severity of the infractions committed:
Do suspensions and expulsions truly precipitate convictions? And how is this connected to race? According to the US Department of Justice (2003), 68% of State prisoners did not earn a high school diploma or GED, whereas only 18% of the US’s total population aged 18 and older had not completed high school. Thus, there is a clear link between educational achievement and incarceration: those who complete high school are significantly less likely to be imprisoned than those who drop out or do not complete graduation requirements. Moreover, 37% of America’s prison population is Black (US Department of Justice, 2014), even though only 12.3% of the nation’s population
identified as Black on the 2010 US Census. When these statistics are synthesized, it can be concluded that NCLB and zero tolerance policies have disproportionately pushed students of color out of schools, and those who do not graduate from high school are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and incarcerated.

The reality of the school-to-prison pipeline serves as the call-to-action to reimagine and reinvent school disciplinary approaches; zero tolerance has served to reify a racial hierarchy and does not match its intention of providing fair treatment for all students. As schools and leaders come to realize that both high-stakes accountability and zero tolerance punitive measures fall short of their intended purposes of creating a positive school climate and deterring future misbehavior, they have shifted their approach from one that focuses on punishing the perpetrator to one that centers on repairing the harm done to particular individuals and to the community at large. Commonly referred to as restorative justice, this innovative approach focuses on repairing harm, engendering empathy, and offering support to both the victim and the offender.

Restorative Justice: History and Underlying Conceptions

Restorative justice’s roots are traceable to indigenous cultures of the Americas and South Pacific (Fronius et al., 2016). These groups’ assumptions regarding justice deviate from traditional Western beliefs in two significant ways. First, when an offense is committed, the focus of the community centers on repairing the relationship between the offender and the victim; it is not sufficient to simply punish the offender and assume that further conflict will not arise between the two parties. Second, a restorative philosophy of justice separates the person from the harmful act: “Individuals who commit harm are not
conflated with the ‘destructive act that sundered’ their relationship” (Wadhwa, 2016, p.10). Because the person is separated from the action, it is unnecessary to exile the person from the community. This belief translates into the practice of reintegrating offenders into the community. In other words, justice has not been accomplished until the offender has recognized the harm committed, made amends with all affected members of the community, and been welcomed back into the community – with the support needed to prevent future transgressions from occurring.\textsuperscript{11}

In the US, restorative justice was first implemented in the criminal and juvenile justice system (Fronius et al., 2016), so that victims could “participate in the punishment of individuals by verbalizing how they were impacted by crime and what they needed to feel like justice would be served” (Wadhwa, 2016, p. 11). This was meant to help offenders recognize that their actions deeply affected individuals, and weren’t just “victimless” crimes against the state or society at large. While punishments often remained punitive, it was a significant turn to include the victim’s perspective – not just as a witness, but as a person who has experienced harm and has ideas for how the harm can be addressed.

From this theoretical background, certain practical concepts emerged as necessary to operationalize the beliefs embedded in restorative justice. Johnstone and Van Ness (2007) discuss three major components that weave together to constellate restorative

\textsuperscript{11} Many restorative practitioners resist the term “offender,” since this descriptor pathologizes the person, and not the action. Instead, using the term “offense” condemns the behavior without criminalizing the individual. Additionally, the victim/offender binary does not fully account for the reality that offenders have been, at times, victims, and most victims, at some point, have been offenders (Wadhwa, 2016). For ease of communication, however, I will employ the terms “victim” and “offender” in this study, even though “one who committed the offense” and “one who experienced harm” are more accurate descriptions.
justice: encounter, reparation, and transformation. An encounter is an experience in which all those affected by the offense are able to discuss what happened, the effects of the event, and how the problem can be addressed:

Rather than remaining passive while professionals discuss their problem and decide what to do about it, victims, offenders and others affected by some crime or misconduct meet face to face in a safe and supportive environment and play an active role in discussion and in decision-making. For instance, with the assistance of a facilitator, they speak openly but respectfully to each other about what happened, express their feelings and have a say in what is to be done about the matter. Such meetings are intended to be democratic experiences in which the people most affected by a problem decide among themselves how it should be dealt with. (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007, p. 9)

This is a stark departure from the typical US justice approach, where judge and jury meet in private to discuss the fate of the offender. By involving all affected parties in a dialogic discussion, several positive outcomes become possible – outcomes that are unlikely to occur when exclusionary punishments are inflicted: rehabilitation (discussion with others changes the offender’s attitudes towards her actions), deterrence (the encounter is a difficult process that the offender will not desire to repeat), and the reinforcement of norms (understanding the harm done accentuates the necessity of the societal norm). In this approach, the victim is also empowered to become more engaged in the justice process: the victim may be able to seek restitution that satisfies her need for justice; she may gain understanding about the offender’s circumstances and rationale that precipitated the action, and as a result of this empathy, she may ameliorate her fear and resist stereotyping others. Thus, the encounter component of restorative justice offers benefits to all parties that are typically unavailable in traditional justice protocols.
The second fundamental concept of restorative justice, reparation, also differs strikingly from traditional views of justice:

Conventionally, we assume that if a person commits a serious wrong against another, a state of injustice arises which needs to be corrected. It tends to be further assumed that, in order to correct this state of injustice, the perpetrator of the wrong must undergo pain or suffering in proportion to the seriousness of the offence. Once the offender has suffered, according to his or her just deserts, the equilibrium has been restored and justice prevails. (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007, p. 12)

This “eye-for-an-eye” approach presumes that when an individual harms another, the logical consequence is for something painful to happen to the offender; for centuries, this has been the foundation of the US’s penal system. This stance ignores the reality that the harm committed cannot be corrected by inflicting more pain; the physical and psychological damage endured by the victim is not addressed by punishing the offender, and for the offender, the alienating effect that follows from committing the wrong is only further exacerbated through exclusionary punishments. Consequently, a reparative approach mandates the needs of the victim and offender be addressed in the process. Punishment alone cannot right a wrong, but a collaborative approach among the members of the community may begin to account for and heal the various and diverse wounds of all the affected parties.

Finally, Johnstone and Van Ness explain how and why restorative justice seeks transformation from individuals and society. As described, dominant American culture, ideology, and discourse demand retributive justice when a wrong occurs. Phrases such as “lock him up and throw away the key,” “give him the chair,” or “he got what he deserved” are tethered to deeply held notions of justice – notions and beliefs that need to
be interrogated if America is to *transform* from a retributive, vengeance-based society to a restorative one. To do so, people necessarily broaden their conceptions of justice beyond individual criminality; societal ills and economic injustices cause harms that lead to an individual’s offenses, so separating an individual’s behaviors from the systems that produce them creates a false dichotomy:

In such a context, we would probably not make sharp distinctions between crime and other forms of harmful conduct, but simply respond to all harmful conduct (from crime, to economic exploitation, to the use of power in everyday life) in much the same way – by identifying who has been hurt, what their needs are and how things can be put right. (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007, p. 16).

By articulating the three pillars of restorative justice – encounter, reparation, and transformation – Johnstone and Van Ness explicate the theoretical framework necessary to design participation structures that embed these three conceptual underpinnings. As these restorative practices were developed and refined, educators recognized that these practices and structures were readily applicable to school settings. As suspensions and expulsions rose, certain schools and teachers sought an approach that would serve to build community, common humanity, and empathetic accountability. So they turned to restorative justice.

*Restorative Justice in Educational Settings*

When immersed in the context of schools, restorative justice is “... an innovative approach to offending and inappropriate behavior which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment. A restorative approach in a school shifts the emphasis from managing behavior to focusing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships” (Hopkins,
In many ways, this is an antithetical approach to zero tolerance, as it hinges upon reintegration instead of exclusion. As a relationship-based discipline, the practice of restorative justice necessarily involves communication and collaboration; its power resides in the collective community, and not in the hands of an authority figure. Since schools typically rely on their institutional power to address behavioral infractions, adopting a restorative stance requires teachers and administrators to assume a democratic position that carefully considers the relationships between punishment and repair, exclusion and reintegration, and physical and emotional harm done to both victims and offenders (Teasley, 2014).

**Responses to Behavioral Infractions**

For practitioners to embody and democratically implement restorative justice, they must first differentiate among the various types of consequences that are assigned to students when they commit an offense – and from where the power to assign such consequences derives. Responses to student disciplinary infractions can be described along a continuum, in which punishment is both the harshest and least logical option (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Punishments are frequently arbitrary and offer little support or guidance for the offending student. The assumption is that the offending student will desire to avoid subsequent punishments, so she will engage differently the next time a similar situation arises; fear of punishment deters behaviors that break rules or violate norms. The two major flaws in this thinking are that deterrence is effective in and of itself (when it often simply teaches students problems only occur when caught) and that the student is entirely capable of changing their decision-making processes without any extra
support or guidance. The latter flaw explains an exasperated teacher’s complaints of a student assigned detention three times for the exact same offense. While certain choices students make cannot be ignored, expecting punitive measures alone to “fix” student behavior is misguided (Wachtel & Mirsky, 2008).

The next phase on the continuum is logical consequences (Dreikurs & Grey, 1990; Skiles, 2006), known more commonly by the phrase “you break it, you fix it.” Rather than assign a detention or suspension for breaking a rule, the student is responsible for repairing the damage done. In certain cases, this is completely intuitive and gibles perfectly with restorative justice. For example, if a student writes profanity on the walls in the bathroom, the student must remove the writing by erasing it or painting over the text. Logical consequences are often complicated to determine, and thus, not always readily implementable. When a student repeatedly interrupts others in class, thus disrupting instruction and learning, the logical consequence may be for the student to sit on her own or take a break in another classroom. This consequence, however, does not address any resentment other students – or the teacher – may harbor towards the offender, nor does it make up for the lost instructional time. So while logical consequences may make sense for the offending student, it often does not fully account for the harm and frustrations experienced by other members of the community (Amstutz & Mullet, 2008).

12 Note that while this logical consequence repairs the physical damage inflicted in the bathroom, it neither considers the students who were offended by reading the profanity nor the emotional health of the custodial staff, who works hard to maintain the cleanliness of the restroom, only to have it defaced. Thus, logical consequences may create a hierarchy in which the person assigning the consequence has power, but the thoughts and feelings of those victimized by the offense are trivialized.
The third leg of the continuum, often referred to as positive discipline, focuses on solutions (Nelson, 2006). In this school of disciplinary response, the offending student is provided with the support needed to avoid the same pitfalls. Solutions are often given to the student by an adult or co-constructed with the student. To revisit a prior example, the student who wrote on the walls may realize she can avoid the temptation to write on bathroom walls if she leaves her pencils at her desk when going to the restroom. The student who talks throughout instruction may wish to have her seat moved or keep a journal at her desk so she can write her thoughts, instead of orally sharing them. Again, solutions-oriented thinking is an important component of restorative justice, but like logical consequences, it does not account for the victims’ perspectives and the steps needed to repair relationships between the offender and victims.

What truly separates restorative justice from the other three realms of the continuum is the required encounter between the offender and the victim(s) (Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). Both parties are encouraged to explain their thinking and attempt to gain empathy for the other’s position. Often, when the offender understands the consequences of her actions on her class and community, she is more thoughtful and reflective about the impacts personal choices can have on others. This positive use of peer pressure not only welcomes the offender back into the community, but it also frequently allows all parties to begin to repair the damage that was done to the relationships.

Restorative justice is an approach towards student discipline that transcends punishment and logical consequences. Rather, it focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and
experiences of the offender and those affected by the incidents. By narrating experiences, reflecting, and actively considering others’ viewpoints, students gain greater awareness of the constant interplay between personal decisions and the significant impact they have on the larger community. In schools today, several common restorative structures are implemented, each of which places an “emphasis on respect, accountability, repair of harm, and restoration of the community rather than on punishment and exclusion” (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010, p. 4).

Three Restorative Practices: Affective Dialogue, Circles, and Youth Court

For the purposes of this literature review, three commonly utilized restorative practices will be discussed, since they were the most influential among the teachers in Aspen’s restorative justice PLC. The three structures vary in formality, with affective dialogue as the least formal and Youth Court as the most formal. Despite their varying levels of formalized structure, all three embody the concepts of encounter, reparation, and transformation. Furthermore, they all gaze backwards so that the community can move forward: they provide opportunities for affected parties to share what happened, how it impacted them, what harm(s) exist, how those harms can be addressed, and how the community can be made whole again.

In an informal affective dialogue or conference (Wachtel & McCold, 2001; Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009), the teacher may meet one-on-one with a student who has violated a norm or expectation, or with a small group of students that include those who committed the offense, and those who were affected – physically, emotionally, socially, and/or academically – by it. Such conferencing is common practice for
educators, but when taking a restorative approach, the line and tone of questioning focuses on harm, community, and repair – not on the aggressor and the punishment. For example, in a more traditional, adversarial approach to misbehavior, the teacher may ask, “Who did it?” and “What should your punishment be for this?” In such a line of questioning, the teacher has positioned herself as the arbiter of truth and the wielder of power; context and mitigating factors are irrelevant, since the person who committed the act needs to be appropriately punished for the transgression. A restorative dialogue, however, replaces the adversarial approach with a community-based focus. Instead of inquiring, “Who did it?”, the teacher might ask, “What happened?” or “How did that action affect you?” This simple turn opens space for students to narrate a sequence of events, which quite possibly may reveal mitigating factors and depict the “offender” in a more positive and sympathetic light. Once the context is established, the informal dialogue may begin to uncover the harms that occurred and solutions that could make amends with the community and prevent a similar event from occurring.

More structured than affective dialogue, restorative circles follow particular protocols so that all community members’ voices are heard and considered, which becomes necessary when an offense impacts a large portion of the community. Borrowed directly from American Indian ritual, circles can be employed to both build community and heal wounded relationships (Bintliff, 2014). During a circle, the teacher acts as a “keeper,” and it is her responsibility to ensure that all members of the circle keep the agreements that had been previously decided, such as one speaker at a time, positive language only, usage of “I statements,” etc. Traditional circles also employ a talking
piece, which a participant must hold to address the group. The talking piece ensures participation opportunities for everyone, in a space in which the speaker will not be interrupted or cut off. When an issue is being addressed, the talking piece is passed in one direction, and all members of the community are able to share their thoughts about what the harm was, how the community was impacted by it, and specific ways the offending student can repair the harm, rebuild the community, and effectively reintegrate into it (Wadhwa, 2016).

The final restorative approach utilized at Aspen was a Youth Court, a student-run restorative program. As of 2006, the US housed 1,250 Youth Courts, 36% of which exist in schools (Cole & Heilig, 2011), signifying that its role has expanded well beyond the youth justice system. Youth Courts are highly formalized structures in which a student is represented and adjudicated by peers, effectively removing adult authority from the restorative process. The ultimate objective of a Youth Court is its attempt to prevent the criminalization of students by directing them away from the formal intake of the juvenile justice system. With Youth Court, they will not have a criminal record nor be subjected to the more constraining conditions imposed by a real court of justice. Youth Courts create a different pathway for addressing student misconduct. In a sense, they reject traditionally held views about the management of student behavior and more importantly, the superiority of the teacher and administrator to determine appropriate consequences for students. (Cole & Heilig, 2011, p. 7, emphasis added)

To be eligible for Youth Court, the student must first accept responsibility for the offense; youth courts do not determine innocence or guilt. Once taking accountability for the offense, the student may opt to appear in Youth Court in lieu of traditional disciplinary measures, such as suspension or loss of privilege. Upon agreeing to appear in the Youth Court, the offending student is assigned representation, who helps the offender
best tell her side of the story and publicize mitigating factors. Prosecuting students, who represent the school and the victim(s), cross-examine the offender and attempt to demonstrate to the jury how her actions violate classroom, school, or even familial values and affect others in the community. Both sides may call witnesses, who can speak to the harm that occurred, its effect on the community, and how the tears in the community can be mended. The task of the judge and jury, then, is to synthesize all the information received through opening statements, witness accounts, and closing statements, and determine which restorative consequence(s) will repair any broken relationships, provide solutions so that the infraction does not reoccur, and promote successful reintegration of the offender back into the community.

Though the primary focus of the Youth Court proceeding is on the student who committed the offense and those impacted by it, a secondary benefit of the Youth Court is that its members become proficient at identifying and implementing restorative practices and solutions. Over time, then, a growing cohort of children may shift their ideological approach to behavioral infractions from the need for punitive retribution to a desire for relationship- and community-based repair. The third pillar of restorative justice, after all, is personal and societal transformation, and these student-leaders could spark a generational shift in conceptions about justice.  

When Aspen first launched its Youth Court in the 2012-2013 academic year, the jury frequently wanted to assign punitive and exclusionary consequences to the defendant, such as lunch detention or in-school suspension. Over time, however, the students became much more adept at assigning solutions and actions that would encourage reparation and reintegration. Thus, with repeated practice, children involved in running Youth Courts may undergo a schematic shift, and replace principles of retribution with principles of restoration.
With this array of restorative approaches, Aspen’s teachers had options available to promote restoration in the classroom and school community. Based on a previously-discussed assumption about Aspen’s faculty, administration believed that the teachers were well-meaning and were making the best decisions possible, given the frameworks they had available to draw upon. Therefore, none of Aspen’s teachers aimed to contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, yet heavy reliance on punitive measures unintentionally pushed many students out of the school community and towards the pipeline. And though many teachers believe restorative justice offers the possibility of a more humane and effective approach to discipline, its implementation and sustenance faces many challenges.

**Barriers to Implementing and Sustaining Restorative Justice**

Aspen’s teachers readily admitted that the traditional punitive disciplinary system was ineffective. Students would be suspended, often return to school with a negative attitude, and would sometimes even be suspended again before making it through one full day. The damage inflicted on class culture(s), school culture(s), and learning was palpable. It logically followed that teachers desired systemic change, but such change does not and cannot come quickly and without obstacles.

**Transitioning from Punitive to Restorative Culture**

Morrison, Blood, and Thorsborne (2005) examined the roadblocks that occur when a school attempts to replace retributive justice with restorative justice. They rooted their analysis in a framework that describes the five stages of organizational change. The first stage, “Gaining commitment: Capturing hearts and minds” requires admission from
the faculty that the current system is ineffective and requires overhaul. Through the use of stories and statistical data, key stakeholders persuade the faculty at large that change can wait no longer. Once the staff buys in, the second stage is “Developing a shared vision: Knowing where we are going and why,” which is characterized by the articulation of short-, medium-, and long-term goals, indicators of progress, and a shared language that promotes understanding among the faculty and students. With this crystallized vision, the school enters the third stage – “Developing responsive and effective practice: Changing how we do things around here.” During this phase, teachers and administrators learn about and gain comfort implementing restorative practices, and simultaneously, the students learn that harmful actions mandate responses different from what they are accustomed. To be successful, the staff engages in thorough professional development that equips them to “respond effectively to classroom disruptions, playground incidents and conflict in a way which minimizes the need to refer to a third party, often a more senior authority. The embedding of restorative practices aims to empower classroom teachers…” (Morrison et al., 2005, p. 349). Once individual practitioners become proficient with restorative practices and dilute their reliance on punitive approaches, the school is equipped for the fourth stage, “Developing a whole school approach: Putting it all together,” which “must be thoughtfully managed such that restorative practices are not just tacked on to existing school policy, but become integrated into whole school policy” (Morrison et al., 2005, p. 351). Restorative justice cannot be used when punitive measures fail, or vice versa. Rather, the school commits to a restorative philosophy that eschews the usage of exclusionary and demeaning consequences. Once the school
achieves total allegiance to restorative principles, it can commence the final stage: “Professional relationships: Walking the talk with each other.” For the change to be lasting, faculty must lean on and support each other as dilemmas and failures arise. Additionally, the faculty uses restorative practices among each other when interpersonal conflict occurs. When restoration is embedded throughout all dialogue and conflict, the school completes this painstaking transition and becomes a restorative culture. Through their study, Morrison et al. (2005) anticipate this shift to span 4-5 years, which is a commitment schools may be unwilling to take, knowing that, as the transition occurs, behavioral issues may get worse before they get better, which will negatively impact testing scores and teacher morale. Furthermore, given the nationwide trend of teacher attrition and turnover, how can such a full implementation be realized when the faculty at year five is vastly different than the faculty that launched the initiative? Because punitive ideology is so pervasive and deeply sewn, teachers who enter the process in the second or third year of implementation may not readily buy in to a full adoption of restorative practices. Consequently, all stages of change will face resistance, and for some teachers, the changes will be unwelcome, causing them to resign their post and seek an institution whose philosophy more closely mirrors their own – one in which the teacher is bestowed the authority to control and punish students who refuse to comply; thus, the distribution of authority is the second major barrier schools and teachers must face when implementing restorative approaches.
Releasing Authority

In this high-stakes era, student compliance is often conflated with teacher effectiveness. When students are sitting upright and tracking the teacher, it is assumed that the teacher is “in control” and the students are learning. This premise was popularized by the “I do, we do, you do” model (Levy, 2007), which positions the teacher as the primary knower (Aukerman, 2007; Berry, 1981) and students as receptacles to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1970). The ontological and epistemological authority that this model places in the teacher translates to beliefs about discipline; not only is the teacher the primary academic authority, she is also primary moral authority. The teacher is judge of what (and who) is right, so she has the power to assign consequences that align with her culturally-developed views of truth, morality, and punishment. Relinquishing this authority – academic and moral – can be difficult (Goodman, 2002), since teacher performance ratings are often predicated upon the extent to which the teacher controls her students’ learning and behavior.

McCluskey, Kane, Lloyd, Stead, Riddell, and Weedon (2011) explore this phenomenon in a research study that examined teachers’ responses to the implementation of restorative approaches in a Scottish school. Despite numerous studies that point to the efficacy of restorative practices in UK schools and initial buy-in by teachers adopting restorative approaches, the adaptive unconscious causes teachers to default to allegiance to punitive measures: “Yet, even in schools where there has been considerable success, findings also reveal evidence of resistance, ambivalence and ambiguity; a continuing commitment to the use of punitive sanctions and a concern about [restorative approaches]
McCluskey et al. go on to quote an educational psychologist, who effectively encapsulates the deeply held belief in the power of punishment:

> There’s always the risk that when the going gets tough, restorative is an easy target in any school . . . you’ve got a kind of default setting among teachers saying ‘well that’s all very well but we’re not punitive enough, we’re not scary enough. The kids aren’t frightened of us’.

(Kane, Lloyd, McCluskey, Riddell, & Weedon, 2007, p. 43, quoted in McCluskey et al., 2011, p. 106)

Other teachers go on to discuss children who don’t respond to restorative approaches, and how “they get away with things more than they used to” (McCluskey et al., 2011, p. 112). Restorative approaches are also far more time-consuming than punitive ones; whereas a lunch detention can be doled out in a matter of seconds, a restorative conference may take several minutes – which interrupts teaching and learning. Finally, despite the schools’ promotion of restorative approaches, surveyed teachers responded positively to the following statement: “People who cause harm should be punished” (p. 112). This inculcated belief cannot be instantly overturned, which is why implementation of restorative justice is a challenging, multi-year endeavor that mandates complex negotiation between two seemingly incompatible paradigms.

*Whole School vs. Add-On Implementation*

Understanding that teachers’, students’, and parents’ ascription to a punitive ideology is a reality, schools must consciously and carefully consider the path to implementation and select the restorative practices that make the most sense for the socio-context of the school (Liebmann, 2007). For example, a school may begin by implementing a peer mediation program that helps students address interpersonal conflicts, and traditional disciplinary measures are utilized for all other behavioral
incidents. The school might then endorse the use of restorative circles, to both proactively anticipate future problems and reactively resolve a harm done to the class community. Morrison et al. (2005) allocate two years for staff to learn, practice, and embed restorative practices into their teaching repertoire.

While this “phasing in” is necessary – since it is unrealistic for a teacher to implement numerous and initially foreign restorative approaches all at once – danger lies in partial implementation. Because the roots of behaviorism are so deeply entrenched in both individual beliefs and school policy, it requires a remarkable leap of faith for a school and its faculty to abandon punitive approaches and remove suspensions as a possible consequence for all but the most serious and threatening infractions. Nevertheless, partial, or “add on,” implementation creates ideological confusion among the faculty and student body: at times, the students are the arbiters of repair and morality, yet, at the deepest level, the adults still hold the power – the power to punish, the power to exclude, the power to enable “an eye for an eye.” When this occurs, the students are not existing in a fully democratic context; their perspective is only taken into consideration when they say or do the “right” things (Goodman, 2002).

Unfortunately, traditional beliefs about the necessity of punishment, and limitations of restorative justice, are linked to race, institutional racism, and implicit bias. In a troubling study, Payne and Welch (2015) found that usage of restorative justice was negatively correlated to the number of Black students enrolled in schools; in other words, schools with higher populations of Black students were less likely to adopt a restorative approach to discipline, and even if a school utilized “add-on” restorative practices, Black
students were less likely to be offered access to them. Denying these students an opportunity to engage in restorative practices unnecessarily places children into the school-to-prison pipeline, thus creating a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies: because dominant ideology constructs these students as criminals, they are treated as such in schools, so they consequently disengage academically, thereby limiting their life-chances (Kozol, 1989; Cardenas, 2015; Giroux, 2003). From this study, it can be concluded that students who may benefit the most from non-punitive disciplinary measures are subjected to severely draconian principles and practices; moreover, at a multi-racial school, an add-on approach to restorative justice further reinforces a racial hierarchy, as Black students are not afforded the same opportunity to engage in restorative practices as their White peers.

**Conclusion**

Even though NCLB was designed to make schools more accountable to the most underserved and vulnerable populations, in actuality, it has spurred schools and teachers to revert to the most archaic of educational paradigms. Standards provided the genesis for scripted curricula, and the testing culture has placed extreme pressure on teachers to fill their students’ brains with as much academic content as possible. Consequently, the socio-emotional learning of students has been set aside, since kindness, compassion, and cultural appreciation are not part of a state’s “eligible content.” And from this policy-driven context, teacher-as-knower and zero tolerance attitudes gained traction, since student-driven inquiry may not address tested skills, and misbehavior and lengthy restorative practices consume irreplaceable instructional time. Consequently, schools
remove students who challenge adult authority and disrupt the learning of other children. And while this exclusion may seem fair or even deserved, there is no evidence to suggest that schools who rely on suspensions outperform schools that take a less punitive approach (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; APA Task Force, 2008), and, ironically, that racial disparities are exacerbated by the zero tolerance policies NCLB helped to instill (Hoffman, 2014).

Punishment doesn’t work. And from this understanding, a number of alternative approaches to discipline have been born: logical consequences, positive discipline, and restorative justice. Restorative justice is unique from all other approaches in that it privileges the impact of behavior on relationships, uses dialogue to achieve empathic understanding, rights the wrong, seeks to deter future wrongdoing, and fully reintegrates the offending student back into the community. Quite simply, this is a relationship-based philosophy and approach to behavioral intervention, and there is ample evidence to suggest that schools that have fully adopted restorative approaches have seen decreases in suspensions and improved school climate (Schiff, 2013; Gottfredson, 2001). Despite the empirical knowledge that punishment is ineffective and restorative justice has the opportunity to retain students who may have been otherwise pushed out, implementation is a long, slow, obstacle-ridden process.

While initial buy-in may be achieved relatively quickly, asking teachers and administrators to abandon beliefs held from childhood cannot be achieved quickly or without conflict. Consequently, organizations that wish to adopt a restorative stance must be prepared for struggle, discord, backlash, resentment, and resignation. And though
there are success stories from schools around the globe, it doesn’t mean that a teacher will have an easy time working with a student who disrupts class day after day, doesn’t seem invested in the community, and seems to enjoy frustrating the teacher. Every bone in the teacher’s body shakes for punishment for this student – for vengeance, since she has shown no respect for the teacher, the teacher’s authority, and the classmates whose learning is interrupted. But punishment doesn’t work, and reverting to it suggests that the teacher believes repair is insufficient or impossible. However normalized the urge for punishment may be, it is the teachers’ responsibility to humanize children, not criminalize them, so now more than ever, our dedicated educators need and deserve professional development that equips them to help the students most negatively impacted by basic-skills curricula and punishment-based discipline.

Chapter Summary

Professional development is integral for in-service teachers. As the field changes, grows, and responds to policy, teachers must be in conversation with policy-makers, researchers, and theorists. Importantly, top-down professional development that tells teachers what to do and how to do it both de-professionalizes practitioners and ignores the knowledge that is developed and theorized within their classrooms. For the teachers to understand the significant role they play in shaping the field, professional development structures must offer opportunities for teachers to study their practice, learn more about areas of interest, and share their knowledge with colleagues, administrators, and policy-makers. Professional learning communities strategically place the teachers’ questions and
knowledge at the center of their inquiry, so that their own practice becomes a research site from which theorizing and future inquiry are born.

Because three-fourths of Aspen’s faculty is White (including 100% of administrators), cultural conflict impacts classroom discourse, community, and learning. Consequently, a group of teachers sought to study cultural competence. They recognized that their own racialized and culturally-based upbringing constructed their language, values, beliefs, and worldview, and in order to best serve their students, they wished to learn more about race, culture, and their own students. They recognized that without a better understanding of their students and their cultures, conflict would limit the social, emotional, and academic growth the school promises its students. Thus, they entered their PLC with a common purpose and worked to broaden their understanding of race and culture – the students’ and their own.

Another cadre of educators was concerned about the efficacy and effects of punitive consequences to address student misconduct. And since that was Aspen’s only institutionally endorsed system for behavior modification, they wondered what else the school could do to help students who had harmed others and strained the classroom community. Because of its widespread success and more humanistic approach, they rallied around the concept of restorative justice, in the hopes that restorative practices would provide a different avenue to work with students who harmed others.

Even though these two PLCs met and operated independently, I wished to study them in conjunction, since they both fit so closely together under the umbrella concept of student-teacher relationships. I was curious as to what themes would emerge, what
similar ideas and theories would arise, and what tensions would surface as teachers – with the help of critical friends – narrated and challenged beliefs held throughout their lives. The teachers’ difficult work in the PLCs warranted close and systematic study, and in the next chapter, I will contextualize the setting, provide background knowledge to situate the study, and describe the methodology used to make meaning from this unique professional development phenomenon.
Chapter III: Study Design and Research Methodology

There never has been such a need for the teaching profession to go public, either in a political sense, with appraisal, accountability, disputes about pay and conditions, all contributing to present the image of a profession afraid and weak; or in a moral sense, when we are poised on the brink of great sociological changes, such that the teaching professional could take a vigorous lead in determining the future....the greatest revolutions start with individuals, and this teaching revolution must start with individual teachers in their own classrooms who are attempting to make sense of their own practice.

– Jean McNiff (1988, 52-53, emphasis added)

Introduction

For many decades, educational research has been dominated by the positivist research paradigm, which considers students and teachers as subjects to be studied. Consequently, researchers would enter schools to “objectively” investigate a particular aspect of the educational field and report their findings through peer-reviewed research reports. The positivist paradigm of research has gained even more traction in the past decade, when The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) named the randomized control trial the “gold standard” of educational research and the only methodology that could be submitted to the WWC for review. Through careful analysis of these “scientific” studies, the WWC provides “education consumers with high-quality reviews of the effectiveness of replicable educational interventions (programs, products, practices, and policies) that intend to improve student outcomes” (What Works Clearinghouse,

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14 In 2010, the WWC expanded acceptable methodologies to include regression discontinuities and, at times, single case studies (Sparks, 2010). Even though the WWC broadened its definition of scientific study, most qualitative research does not meet the research criteria required by the WWC. This, in turn, continues the tradition of top-down research that ignores both the situated, local nature of knowledge and the significance of teacher experience to the development of theory and praxis.
Overview). Though appearing to be politically neutral, and by employing double-blind methodologies that supposedly remove bias from the research process, the WWC proclaims that it effectively vets “well-designed studies, trustworthy research, and meaningful findings to inform decisions and improve student outcomes” (What Works Clearinghouse, What We Do). Beneath this seemingly innocuous statement is a series of beliefs, ideologies, and assumptions that are neither objective nor neutral. For example, there is no uniform consensus around the ideal way to measure reading achievement or writing capacity. So, if, as an educational field, there are competing views of what counts as achievement or growth, we cannot simply search a website to find “what works” – “what works” is predicated on what the evaluator counts as success! Nevertheless, even though the concept of neutrality is fundamentally flawed in social science fields, language and policy have been enacted to promote a colorblind and culture-blind approach to teaching and learning.

Furthermore, with this epistemological framework, the WWC – and US Department of Education – reinforces particular assumptions that many teachers and scholars are working to disprove: that teachers are consumers and technicians of knowledge and practice, not generators; “what works” is divorced from context, and student outcomes can be accurately and holistically assessed through quantitative measures. And just as Aspen’s PLCs sought to give voice to teachers and help them find language and build frameworks to talk back to dominant discourses regarding urban students, this study argues against the power of the positivist tradition and seeks to demonstrate the meaningful knowledge and theory that can be produced through
“systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 3). Though this study will not provide a template for “what works” across all educational settings, it can and should be a useful resource for teacher-leaders who are considering the implementation of PLCs, who recognize the impact of cultural differences on the classroom community, and who are leery of the extensive use of punitive measures on many of our nation’s most vulnerable children. I will not claim that Aspen’s story definitively tells others what works; I do hope, however, this study sparks conversation, causes reflection, precipitates further inquiry, and persuades schools to take seriously the development and learning of their teachers.

**Methodological Framework**

Aligned with the epistemological framing of a PLC, this study is a qualitative inquiry employing methodology consistent with the teacher researcher framework. It presupposes that teachers generate theory and knowledge of and from their practice, which should be studied, documented, and made public (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999, 2009). Because this study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 58) in the PLCs, it is phenomenological in nature, and it “develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of ‘what’ they experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 58).

While the work of the teachers in the PLCs is worthy of phenomenological study, so, too, is the process of transitioning the school from traditional PD structures to more organic and teacher-centered learning opportunities. In other words, this study
simultaneously investigates the implementation process of PLCs at Aspen and the ways in which Aspen’s faculty took up these learning experiences. Since I conceived the PLC roll-out and learning sessions, my personal history and my education at GSE had profound influences on both the learning experiences I planned for the faculty (as the curriculum co-designer) and the ways in which I make meaning from them (as a researcher). Consequently, the research methodology must consider my subjectivity, as both the creator and interpreter of this PLC phenomenon. Thus, to guide the research design, data analysis, and meaning-making processes, I constellated three compatible methodological frames that provide a clear view of the data and contextualize my history, politics, and worldview: the ideological model of literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Street, 1984), critically conscious research (Willis, 2007; Willis, Montavon, Hall, Hunter, Burke, & Herrera, 2008; Milner & Howard, 2014), and teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, & Waff, 2009).

The Ideological Model of Literacy and Critical Discourse Analysis

Given my roots in the Reading, Writing, and Literacy program at GSE, this study is situated within the socio-cultural framework of literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Street 1984), which views language as both ideological and powerful (Gee, 1989). Language usage is never a neutral act: it supports or challenges systems, power dynamics, worldviews, and policies. For example, in Chapter I, I presented the case of a student whose language was “corrected” by her teacher:

Teacher (to class): I found this ring on the floor. Does it belong to anyone?
Student: Oh! It’s mines! Thank you!
Teacher: You’re welcome. But don’t you mean, “it’s mine”? Please speak properly in this class.

Though I used this scenario to illustrate the importance of schema development to cultural competence, analysis through an ideological lens provides further insight. It can be reasonably assumed that the student has heard other people – her White teachers, at a very minimum – use the word “mine” instead of “mines.” So by choosing to say the latter, this student is intentionally resisting the usage of “Standard English” and is asserting the importance of maintaining her home culture and linguistic norms (Delpit, 1992). Thus, from an ideological frame, this student, in this particular situation, does not wish to completely assimilate into the discourse community endorsed by the school and this teacher; rather, she wishes to demonstrate membership in her primary discourse community (Gee 1989). But what about the teacher’s response to this student? What ideology is embedded in this retort? By telling the student to “speak properly,” the teacher implicitly endorses a cultural deficit model and a racial hierarchy: Black people, when using AAVE, are speaking improperly. Since they learned this dialect from their family, there is a problem with the home culture and the way the parents raise their children. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the school to undo the flaws instilled at home so that the child has a better opportunity in life. In this hegemonic train of thought, the issue is not only the mainstream’s lack of appreciation for and acceptance of linguistic diversity, but also that the student’s speech does not align with the language of power. As Smitherman (2006) writes, “In the minds of everyday people (and, unfortunately, even among some of my non-linguist academic colleagues—hello!), languages have high status, but dialects do not” (p. 15). Ultimately, this is an
assimilationist approach to education that few would consider culturally sensitive and many would consider patriarchal and colonial.

As the previous example shows, the ideological model of literacy urges a researcher to take a closer look at language and identify the Discourses (Gee, 1990) and belief systems that are embedded in literacy events (Heath, 1982; Street, 1984). Careful examination of these literacy events grants access into the speaker’s worldviews and, when problematic statements are made (such as the teacher’s in the previous scenario) and left unchallenged, provides an instantiation of dominant ideology and discourse. Fairclough (1995) refers to this analysis of language as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and given that a major purpose of Aspen’s PLCs is to assumption hunt, identify, and dismantle problematic dominant discourses and cultural myths, CDA is an integral analytic tool for this study.

Janks (1997) states that CDA “stems from a critical theory of language which sees the use of language as a form of social practice” (p.1), and that “texts are instantiations of socially regulated discourses” (p. 2). Janks argues that it is not difficult to read a text critically when the reader disagrees with it, but “ideology is at its most powerful when it is invisible, when discourses have been naturalised and become part of our every day common sense” (p. 22) – that “domination can only do its work when veiled” (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 2; quoted in Moya, 2015). Consequently, CDA calls for the researcher to engage in a three-pronged approach to analysis: text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation) (Fairclough, 1995). This can be challenging, since the researcher has been shaped by various histories, ideologies, and
frameworks that make only certain interpretations available. Thus, to enact CDA, the researcher must be both estranged from and engaged with the text (Janks, 1997). She must continuously ask herself, “How is the text positioned or positioning? Whose interests are served by this positioning? Whose interests are negated? What are the consequences of this positioning?” (Janks, 1997, p. 1). Though the researcher may not have access to all possible interpretations, this level of consciousness promotes analyses that recognize ideological maneuvers in texts and identify language uses that are, for example, paternalistic, sexist, racist, colonial, or classist. Janks ultimately suggests that if a researcher refuses “to leave the confines of [her] own subjectivity” (p. 4), then perhaps she has not read the text at all: “The theory and practice of CDA suggests strategies which enable this deliberate move and argues the need for reading against the text to counterbalance reading with the text” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

Janks (1997) also describes another inherent challenge of CDA, which she refers to as hybridity. This concept recognizes that texts typically do not embody one particular, readily identifiable discourse: rather, they draw on different discourses that can obfuscate analysis and interpretation. This is particularly important in this study, since it is possible Aspen’s teachers and administrators are both progressive and shaped by discourses that criminalize Black youth; they yearn for student success and operate from deficit perspectives; they love their students and are afraid of the neighborhood. This concept of

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15 For example, if a researcher is unfamiliar with modern instantiations of colonialism, she may have difficulty interpreting a “misbehaving” student’s decision to argue about the appropriateness of assigned school-based disciplinary measures. She may label the student disrespectful or immature, rather than interpret the “back talk” as a response to oppression (Delpit, 2012) and form of self-advocacy. Thus, a cultural deficit discourse will be employed to analyze the exchange, rather than utilizing a “critical model, which requires [researchers] to both engage with and question these positions” (Janks, 1997, p. 4).
hybridity is essential for my analysis, as it forces me to consider the multiple ideologies that can exist in any conversational turn, without essentializing both the utterance and the person who authored the text.

Ultimately, the ideological model of literacy is foundational for this study, since we think, present our beliefs, and change through the use of language and narrative (Bruner, 1986). Thus, under the surface of the lesson plans I created for the PLCs, the questions I wrote for the teachers to ponder, and the stories the teachers told are “ideologies in action” (Fine & Sandstrom, 1993). By identifying the systems of belief inherent in literacy events, both affirmations of and challenges to dominant ideology are revealed. And since challenging the status quo and promoting social justice are stated objectives of the PLCs, the research must, to complement critical discourse analysis, employ critically conscious methodology.

**Critically Conscious Methodology**

Critical consciousness and the ideological model of literacy are complementary frameworks. According to Willis et al. (2008, p. 5), “What makes a person critically conscious is challenging the underlying assumptions that work in the internal and external worlds to privilege some while disprivileging others.” As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) theorized, schools are deeply implicated in the reproduction of inequities. To explain how education can maintain a societal hierarchy, he critiques and reframes economic theory: Bourdieu argues that cultural – and ultimately racial – hegemony is maintained by careful allocation of the *three* forms of capital – economic, cultural, and social – which are produced and transmitted in inequitable ways. Bourdieu
warned against a sole focus on monetary capital as the only “currency” people employ to gain wealth, power, and esteem in society. Instead, Bourdieu argued, people utilize social and cultural capital – professional networks, educational degrees, habitus (culturally approved ways of being, thinking, communicating, and acting), and shared knowledge – to attain status, economic wealth, and positions of power. Like any commodity, social and cultural capital can be controlled and denied to others. Ultimately, Bourdieu was interested in the way the educational system (re)produced inequitable distribution of capital, thereby disprivileging certain peoples and maintaining a socially, racially stratified status quo.

Though Bourdieu’s groundbreaking theory is still read and contributes to the field thirty years later, there is a fundamental flaw in his thinking. From his perspective, White elites were misers of capital who were reluctant to share their economic, cultural, and social capital with those who would challenge the social order, and therefore, created systems and institutions that effectively preserved the status quo. Basically, these elites were “rich” with all three forms of currency, and non-Whites were poor and had little opportunity for social mobility. Yosso (2005) points out that this is another instantiation of deficit perspective, as Bourdieu conceived the non-Whites as lacking or deprived of cultural and social capital. The reality, Yosso argues, is that all cultural groups have capital and wealth; it’s just that certain currencies are not exchangeable (or the exchange rate is very poor) in American society. To promote a more nuanced view of capital, Yosso describes the six forms of wealth all students bring with them to school, and if acknowledged and valued, can translate into academic success: aspirational, familial,
linguistic, navigational, resistance, and social. Once it is recognized that all students have capital, the responsibility of educators – and society at large – is not to provide social and cultural capital to students; instead the school must offer more favorable “exchange rates” to the students’ six forms of wealth.

But what does this social theory have to do with research methodology? In the previous section of this chapter, I demonstrated the ways in which teacher ideology and language are inextricably linked. This is certainly true, but as Bourdieu surmised, the educational field at large is responsible for the maintenance of social stratification: there are policies, handbooks, and rules that the teachers mediate and enact, but do not create or control. Thus, this research must account for the nested federal, state, and local policies that set parameters for teacher action. As Edmonson (2002) states, “rather than focusing on solely on the question of what is, the critical policy analyst asks, among others, what has been, why, and what might be?” (p. 114; quoted in Willis et al., 2008, p. 59, emphasis in original). Edmonson (2002) then goes on to explain that “educational policy and educational practices are never objective, technical matters. Instead, they are always evaluative and political” (p. 118; quoted in Willis et al., 2008, p. 59). In other words, the historical and political landscapes in which this PD is set are variables that must be considered throughout the analysis. Consequently, a study of teacher language and ideology must be situated in the political context of the school, city, state, and country. For example, ascription to punitive ideology cannot definitively be ascribed to a teacher who assigns a detention for a student who cuts class, when that is the school-mandated response for the offense; ignoring that policy has many potential negative
social and professional ramifications for the teacher, and she may not be in a position where she is capable of resistance. So, to fully account for the competing ideologies at play, a critical analysis, in part, unpacks the ways in which teachers interpret policy and work within and against a system that assumes a deficit perspective towards children and may (un)intentionally devalue the resources they bring to school (Yosso, 2005).

Because of the study’s focus on capital, power, and social change, critically conscious data analysis is a necessary pillar of the research methodology. In this inquiry, school policy and teacher actions/language are analyzed to identify and “challenge barriers to social change, inequality, and democracy [in order to] resist the reproduction of the ideas and values of privileged and dominant groups” (Willis et al., 2008, p. 12). To accomplish this brand of research, it is necessary to recognize that Aspen’s faculty is not operating in a vacuum, free of politically shaped and endorsed ideas about education and the students in the system. Consequently, data analysis cannot cull teacher comments that align with particular ideologies; rather, it is necessary to locate themes in the data that represent the ways in which the teachers ascribe to, question, or refute the systems that enable the social reproduction Bourdieu warns against. In a segregated neighborhood like Aspen’s, many of the inequities are race-related, and though critical race theory is a theoretical framework, it is also a developed research methodology that requires the researcher to “dismantle the discourse” that is “used to disguise racial/ethnic bias through descriptions and assumptions about people of color” (Willis et al., 2008, p. 57).
Critical Race Theory and Counter-Narrative

Because of my position as a coordinator/participant/observer of and in the PLCs, there are many considerations and variables that must be accounted for throughout the study, as the conversations and data points are filtered and interpreted through my own analytic lens. My personal history, political views, experiential knowledge, and professional responsibilities all influenced the learning experiences I planned for the groups, the questions teachers were expected to discuss, and the meaning I make from the data collected. Thus, as a practitioner-inquirer, I remain critically conscious (Willis et al., 2008) and continually examine my assumptions and biases, and the effect they have on the PLCs and this research study.

As discussed in Chapter I, I grew up in an almost exclusively White, suburban, upper middle-class neighborhood, so I rarely interacted with people of other races or socioeconomic statuses. School came naturally to me, as my values, language, and interests aligned squarely with my teachers’. My grammar was never questioned, and school did not threaten my culture, habits, or worldview (McIntosh, 1988). Both of my parents hold college degrees, and there was an assumed understanding that all members of the household would succeed in higher education as well, so hard work and unquestioning compliance with teacher directives were inculcated in me from the onset of my schooling experience. In addition to complete allegiance to the educational system, I fully ascribed to many of the liberal myths that critical race theory debunk: America is a post-racial society; meritocracy exists, and all Americans have equal opportunities to succeed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Despite my efforts to expand my worldview and
gain empathy for the politically and socially created challenges my students face, I currently and will always lack the experiential knowledge that my students possess of what it means to be underprivileged and Black in a discriminatory society. And while I can talk to them, listen, empathize, and synthesize, I cannot fully experience. Therefore, I must remain constantly aware that the PLCs’ focus of discussion and inquiry is a group of children that are culturally different from me (as well as the majority of the teachers), so I must maintain self-reflexivity and resist the temptation to draw conclusions prematurely and essentialize the student population. Additionally, the students cannot be viewed as a singular group, since family cultures (Gadsden, 1998) often create nuance and variation from popularly held cultural norms.

Ultimately, my Whiteness and cultural upbringing influence all aspects of this study: the PLC topics of study, the curriculum designed for each group, the ways in which I participate in the groups, my analysis of the data, and the findings I report. Thus, my positionality deeply affects this study: I am a White teacher-researcher studying an underserved school whose student population is nearly all-Black. Consequently, it is vital that my analysis does not gloss over seemingly innocuous statements that, in reality, disprivelege certain students, their ways of being, and the capital they bring to school. Thus, an analytic framework is required that allows me to notice and make sense of racially-based comments that many White people – like me – have been raised to believe are normal, politically-correct, and progressive.

In *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America*, Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that the civil rights “victories”
prompted a popularized belief among Whites that institutional racism ended with the passing of laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Bonilla-Silva, however, argues that systemic racism and racist ideology remain pervasive and have simply mutated since the close of the civil rights era. This contemporary racism is traceable through the four frames of colorblind ideology that subtly permeate throughout society and bastion a racial hierarchy. The first frame is “abstract liberalism,” which advances notions of equal opportunity and self-determination for all Americans, and as a result, people who look through this frame see social programs such as Affirmative Action and public housing as doing little more than engendering learned helplessness and a sense of entitlement:

The frame of abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity,’ the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism in an abstract manner) to explain racial matters. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear ‘reasonable’ and even ‘moral,’ while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality. (p. 28)

Thus, abstract liberalism depends on confirmation bias – the ignoring or rationalization of data that disrupts the dominant narrative about people of color. For example, this frame allows White people to see Affirmative Action or college scholarships designated for non-White racial groups as unnecessary “preferential treatment” but ignore the fact that “people of color are severely underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities…” (p. 28, emphasis in original). Therefore, by ignoring institutional racism, people looking through the abstract liberal frame see those who are struggling as having both equal opportunity and preferential treatment, so they just need to work harder and
pull themselves up by their bootstraps; political and individual intervention are unwarranted.

Bonilla-Silva’s second frame, “naturalization,” provides the dominant group language to explain racial disparities in ways that seem normal – or natural. This frame colors reality so that problematic phenomena, such as segregation, are biologically driven by all groups of society. People peering through this frame claim individuals naturally want to be surrounded by those who are like them, so segregation is a product of personal choice, not a series of policies that preclude certain races from living in certain areas and deny access to the resources that spur social and economic promotion. Users of this frame go on to argue that since it appears minority groups also opt to self-segregate, this behavior cannot be racist (Tatum, 1997). Such a view ignores the cultural and power differences that often exist among different races, and consequently, this frame blindly assumes that it is the responsibility of the minority cultural group to assimilate the norms and practices of the group of power: “whiteness is the ubiquitous norm against which students of color are judged” (Lee, 2004, p. 121). Consequently, crossing racial boundaries requires people of color to perform a secondary discourse (Gee, 1989), and this cultural sacrifice may not be desirable for many people (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Clearly, the naturalization frame oversimplifies complex sociological phenomena, and eliminating this frame means recognizing that “few things that happen in the social world are ‘natural,’ particularly things pertaining to racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 37). Therefore, what is normal cannot be conflated with what is natural, because sociology and biology rarely intertwine.
“Cultural racism,” Bonilla-Silva’s third frame, aligns with deficit perspective and cultural deficiency models: “Cultural racism is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (p. 28). From this viewpoint, it is not the color of the skin (the biology) that has created the inequities, but rather, “minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values” (p. 40). This frame is often concealed under the blanket of liberalism, where a family’s circumstances (poverty, multi-family housing, single parent, etc.) are used to explain a lack of educational and economic advancement; according to this frame, if these individuals simply made better choices, their lives would turn around quickly. Furthermore, people who use this frame employ successful minorities’ stories to reinforce the cultural deficiency myth: since there are many examples of people of color who “overcame the odds” and found success in America, society at-large cannot be racist, so the only remaining factor that prevents success is culture. This “racial cherry-picking” is particularly toxic, as it simultaneously critiques others’ cultures and generalizes a specific case study to an entire population without any examination into the particular nuances that precipitated an individual’s life path.

The final frame, “the minimization of racism,” “suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (p. 29). From this point of view, the significance of race decreases as time passes; race mattered less in 1980 than it did in 1965, and race is less significant in 2017 than it was when Obama was elected in 2008. Thus, this frame suggests people of color don’t get hired for a position because they lack
the necessary credentials, which is a more comfortable idea than the reality that it is more likely that this person was denied equal opportunity to the credentialing process. Thus, people employing this frame minimize or deny the existence of discrimination, so when people of color make claims of discrimination, a White person interprets this claim as “playing the race card,” racializing a situation that has nothing to do with race, or looking for “another hand-out.”

By centering these four frames on my data analysis, I attempt to remain critically conscious of the effect my Whiteness has on this study. The four frames provide the tools needed to dig deeply into the teachers’ comments, stories, postulations, and beliefs – and not to allow “racism without racists” to go unnoticed or uninterrogated. This researcher subjectivity is important as I introduce the final component of this critically conscious methodological framework: counter-narrative as methodology and analytical framework (Milner & Howard, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Milner and Howard (2013), two critical race theorists, advance “the idea that the counter-narrative be used as an analytic tool and method through a CRT lens in knowledge construction and deconstruction to complement, nuance, disrupt and counter storylines in teacher education” (Milner & Howard, 2013, p. 536). To complete this study, the researchers identified six prominent narratives about preservice teacher education, such as, “It is appropriate to recruit teachers into teaching for a short period of time to teach in a high poverty, ‘high-need’ environment,” and “Curriculum and instructional practices should mainly focus on subject matter knowledge to the exclusion of other aspects in learning to teach” (p. 537). The authors then go on explicate the
implications of these narratives on the field, on teachers, and, ultimately, on the students themselves. For example, the proponents of programs such as Teach for America argue that bringing “the best and brightest” college graduates to low-income neighborhoods offers those students access to a brilliant mind for two years – and not some “regular” teacher who lost her passion, isn’t nearly as smart, and has been jaded by years in a broken system. Milner and Howard argue that this dominant narrative is pejorative because it simplifies teaching into a practice that can be learned in a six week “boot camp” the summer before the teaching begins. Secondly, this narrative assumes that recent college graduates are equipped to work with students whose race and cultures vary significantly from their own. Darling-Hammond (1994) found that these college graduates viewed their experience as “mission work”; that is, they enter an impoverished community for a predetermined period of time, do their best to “fix” the kids that the “regular” teachers could not improve, and then move on to take their “real” place in society. Clearly, this narrative has many negative ramifications for the field, so Milner and Howard harvest facts and research to compose a counter-narrative that posits teacher education programs are most effective when they “seek teacher candidates from low income and communities of color, who seek a long term investment in the profession, and place a particular focus on teaching and learning in diverse contexts” (p. 546). In other words, a Black college graduate who studied urban education for four years and returns to her hometown to teach will have a longer, more profound impact on her students than the Yale graduate who flies to a new city to teach in a foreign neighborhood for two years. While this counter-narrative is intuitive, it is rarely told.
In this study, there are many dominant narratives to which teachers ascribe with varying levels of commitment – narratives regarding the role and structure of professional development, the prominence of student and teacher culture in the classroom and school, and the most efficacious methods of student discipline. Since one line of the research questions asks, “What happens when teachers in a PLC are encouraged to challenge dominant discourses regarding poor, Black youth? Are counter-narratives written? In what ways are dominant discourses resisted, disrupted, complicated, and/or reinforced?”, the research study must recognize what the dominant discourses are, if they were interrupted, and what new counter-narratives were drafted. And importantly, the research must conceptualize the potential impact of the counter-narratives. For example, if a teacher rewrites a narrative but uses one of Bonilla-Silva’s four frames of colorblind ideology (2006) to do so, the counter-narrative – while different from the original – does not promote social justice.

Critically conscious methodology, including critical race methodology, is essential to this study for three reasons. First, it offers a lens to view capital and the ways the students’ wealth and humanity are valued or eschewed in classroom and whole-school levels; the ways power is wielded to (dis)empower students is central to the study. Second, this methodological frame helps account for my Whiteness and the analytical errors I would make if I allowed my subjectivity to go unquestioned and un-critiqued. A decade ago, I ascribed to colorblind principles, so without Bonilla-Silva’s framework, my analysis would overlook significant data points. Finally, narratives and counter-narratives are integral to determine whether Aspen’s professional development is indeed
transformational, or if it simply enables the replacement of one colorblind ideology with another. Undoubtedly, the critically conscious framework is vital to this inquiry, but the backbone of this study is the third and final research methodology: teacher research.

Teacher Inquiry

School-based research has long been essential to the advancement of the field and continuously offers refinements and advancements to theory, pedagogy, and curriculum. Overall, the research has been dominated by a process-product approach (Shulman, 1986), which views the teacher as a technician who implements “the research findings of ‘outside’ experts…In this transmissive mode teachers are not expected to be problem posers or problem solvers” (Dana & Yendel-Hoppey, 2014, p. 6). Rather, knowledge, curriculum, and instructional practices all come top-down, and the teacher’s primary responsibility is to learn the new knowledge/curriculum/practice and implement it with fidelity in the classroom. This is a very limited view of teachers and does not acknowledge or value the expertise and cumulative experience the teacher may be able to contribute to a particular research study or to the field at large (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992).

University-based researchers who seek to productively complicate the processes of teaching and learning beyond the linear process-product paradigm employ qualitative research designs that are more ethnographic and sociological in nature. Careful observation, rich description, and thoughtful analysis lead to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning. This interpretative research paradigm recognizes the roles that setting and context play in inquiry, so teachers and
students are closely observed and interviewed, and the voice of the teacher is an integral component of the study. However, the resulting theory and knowledge are ultimately generated by an outside researcher, so the teacher is not completely involved in the intellectual and imaginative work that becomes a part of the academy.

Thus, a third research tradition emerged that privileges the knowledge, experience, and intellectual capacity of those with the most intimate knowledge of classrooms – the teachers themselves. Referred to as teacher research, teacher inquiry, or practitioner inquiry, this research begins with a dilemma or question that organically emerges from the teacher’s practice. In this inquiry paradigm, the teacher is the primary investigator who collects, analyzes, and shares the data and findings.

What most significantly separates teacher inquiry from the first two paradigms is the location of the researcher. In process-product and interpretive research approaches, the researcher typically studies and attempts to understand a phenomenon in someone else’s community, someone else’s school, and someone else’s classroom. This etic approach allows for a more “birds-eye” view and may remove a certain set of biases. The teacher-researcher, on the other hand, occupies an emic position in the classroom and school, so she is able to add significant amounts of relevant context, historical background, and institutional knowledge to which only an insider has full access. Additionally, the teacher researcher has a level of agency to shape the study that does not exist in more “objective” and ethnographic inquiries: because the teacher can adjust teaching practices, redesign lesson plans, and alter assessments, she is able to engage in the reflective cycle, refine the inquiry as the study develops, and can, in the moment, alter
teacher practice and influence the data that subsequently emerges. In this format, teacher research is a form of action research: it does not proclaim to be politically neutral, wholly objective, or universally true; instead, teacher research adopts an epistemic stance that accounts for and analyzes the ways in which social, political, ideological, and cultural vectors impact the daily life of a classroom and the workings of the school at-large:

Instead of equating objectivity with detachment, impartiality, and absolute certainty about a fixed and unchanging “Truth,” I work with a fallibilistic conception of objectivity that accounts for the role of perceptual bias in the practice of interpretation. (Moya, 2015, p. 28)

In essence, the teacher (or school) has advanced a vision of success, and teacher research provides a platform to inquire into “what works” in that particularly situated moment, class, or school.

Because of the incredible power the teacher-researcher has to shape the study and influence the data, Orland-Barak (2009) theorizes practitioner inquiry as a paradigm for change:

Practitioner inquiry as a paradigm for change seems to respond to global educational reforms towards privatization and high-stake accountability of processes and outcomes. Within these controlling shifts, practitioner inquiry frameworks in their various forms function as valuable means for enhancing and sustaining a motivated professional community that can stand up to these pressures and challenges. Their socio-cultural embedding creates authentic spaces for practitioners-as-researchers to collaboratively and supportively examine their roles and practices as shaped by accountability systems and often competing political agendas of educational reforms. (p. 114)

Orland-Barak proposes that teacher-researchers take their responsibility seriously to contribute to the field’s knowledge base, as practitioner inquiry can be transformed from “concrete, detailed, specific, problem-based knowledge into professional (powerful) knowledge that can be made public, storable, represented and evaluated, shared amongst
teachers and tested out in different contexts” (p. 114). In addition to shaping educational policy, Orland-Barak calls for teacher researchers to “re-examine forms of practitioner inquiry through questions that consider moral, political and ideological implications” (p. 117), which is exactly what this study seeks. By using my institutionally granted power to challenge dominant assumptions and stereotypes, this inquiry aligns with both of Orland-Barak’s objectives for teacher inquiry: a contribution to the field that legitimizes the theory and knowledge generated from and by teachers and a critical objective that empowers individuals and systems to consider their role in creating a more equitable, democratic school and society. It is through inquiry into their own practice that teachers become agents of change in service of their students, contribute to the field at large, and in so doing, contest the pejorative stereotypes that trivialize the talent and intellectual capacity of America’s educators – and students.

**Site Description and Research Context**

Located in the Aspen neighborhood of West Philadelphia, the school is unique in that it is both a charter school and the neighborhood school: while any student in Philadelphia may apply to Aspen Charter School (ACS), it predominately serves the children who live in the surrounding blocks. In fact, all of the students who travel to the school from outside the catchment area were once residents of the neighborhood. Thus, the composition of the school mirrors the demographics of the neighborhood: over 98% of the students are Black, and 99% qualify for free or reduced lunches. The majority of the students are raised in single-parent households, though extended family members
frequently reside within the neighborhood (Fremstad et al., 2006) and actively participate in child-rearing.

Though the neighborhood is often characterized from a deficit perspective (as referenced by the statistics offered in Chapter I), those of us who are embedded in the community cannot ignore the strength, resilience, and intelligence of the inhabitants of Aspen. Churches and mosques provide religious and spiritual guidance; community centers house multiple sports and drill teams; the choice of after school clubs and activities is almost overwhelming, and the White House’s recent designation of Aspen as one of the nation’s five “promise zones” (Gammage, 2014) reflects the potential that we teachers witness in our students each day. While teaching is challenging, there is a nearly palpable sense of purpose and hope in each member of the ACS community. As one Aspen teacher so brilliantly stated, “Every day, every kid is an opportunity.”

The ACS charter is predicated upon two major tenets: class size and holistic services. All classes in Aspen are capped at twenty-two students, and it is not uncommon for classes to contain fewer than twenty children. ACS also employs three social workers who help students and families navigate financial, medical, emotional, behavioral, and/or domestic issues. Finally, a new partnership between ACS and Temple University established a wellness center on campus, in which nurse practitioners have the capacity to diagnose medical problems and write prescriptions for the students’ maladies. Thus, the school attempts to serve the students academically, physically, and emotionally, as stated in the mission: “Our purpose, in partnership with the Aspen Community, is to promote the academic, social, and emotional success of each child.”
As a charter school, ACS is not mandated to follow the School District of Philadelphia’s Core Curriculum; the school has autonomy to design and enact a curriculum that is tailored to the interests, strengths, and needs of the population it serves. Though ACS has operated since the 2002-2003 academic year, no official curriculum has been drafted or adopted, thereby leaving teachers with a great deal of freedom to design lessons and units throughout the year. This has been both empowering and frustrating for the faculty: while many teachers relish the opportunity to devise units and follow the children’s interests, there is often little understanding of what had been taught from year-to-year, resulting in gaps or redundancies in the students’ education. In the summer of 2012, however, a curriculum-writing team gathered weekly to begin to draft a curriculum using the Understanding by Design framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) for literacy and mathematics. The curriculum aligns with the Common Core State Standards, thus ensuring that the students possess the knowledge and skills mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. While the curriculum is not scripted or formulaic, it does offer teachers the “big ideas,” “essential questions,” assessments, and concept maps needed to effectively construct units, lesson plans, and learning activities. The curriculum is unfinished, though efforts continue to complete scope and sequence charts, as well as units of study for math and literacy. These curricular documents will detail the “what” and “when” of instruction, but it will remain under the teachers’ prerogative to determine the “how” and “why.” It is the faculty’s hope that these documents provide continuity between classrooms and across grades and make possible unit plans that are engaging and culturally aware.
While this curriculum design holds great potential and promise, the most significant change at ACS for the 2013-2014 academic year was a shift to a small school model. The school was divided into three cohorts (grades 1-3, 4-5, and 6-8), with each cohort possessing the autonomy needed to make curricular, procedural, and policy decisions. The supervisor for each cohort is an academic coach, who provides curricular and instructional support. A teacher cohort-chair acts as liaison between the teachers and administration, and grade-level chairs are responsible for ensuring that day-to-day and long-term objectives were met. During the 2013-2014 academic year, teachers were placed in PLCs within their cohorts to study “student-teacher relationships,” with each session specifically tailored to interests and questions that organically emerged from each group’s previous session. There was no set curriculum, learning trajectory, or guiding focus of study; rather, each PLC was free to wander from topic to topic. My PLC, for example, studied black boys’ interest in reading one month, and then we delved into engaging empathy in students the next. While this approach was interesting for the groups, it made it very difficult for me to plan subsequent sessions, since I had to research many topics simultaneously. Furthermore, the nature of this design promoted dabbling in various topics of study, but did not encourage the deep understanding that is necessary to truly affect pedagogy and ideology.

Consequently, in 2014-2015 the model was refined, and, over the summer, teachers self-selected a PLC group within a band of grades (PK-3 or 4-8) that investigated one of five topics that influence student-teacher relationships: cultural competence, restorative justice, gender in education, family and community involvement,
and trauma-informed practice. Each PLC had 6-10 participants, which included teachers, administrators, social workers, and behavioral support employees. These cross-grade, cross-disciplinary groupings were intended to provide the faculty with opportunities to meet with colleagues with whom they might not regularly interact, thereby promoting collaboration among teachers of different grades, subjects, areas of expertise, and levels of experience.

After signing up for their PLC in early August 2014, the staff returned to Aspen at the end of the month for a series of PD and planning days before the students began their academic year, and during three of those days, the PLCs convened for ninety-minute sessions. In addition to the three professional learning days in August before the students arrived, seven PD days were scheduled for PLCs throughout the academic year. Furthermore, the students had a delayed opening every other Wednesday, occasionally offering PLCs an additional time to meet. When the 2014-2015 academic calendar was finalized, the PLC groups were scheduled to spend approximately 20 hours together, surpassing the minimum threshold of fourteen hours for meaningful learning to occur (Yoon et al., 2007).

While learning is the primary objective of each PLC, it was important for each PLC to make its knowledge and theory public, which is why the last day of professional development in June convened all the PLCs for an internal conference, in which each PLC was scheduled to present its learning, findings, and recommendations to the faculty at large, thereby adding to the wealth of individual and institutional knowledge living within the ACS faculty. In addition to presenting their knowledge and findings, the PLCs
were also tasked to share lingering questions, tensions, and future lines of inquiry. With these openings, the PLCs’ final presentations embedded launching points for the following year’s studies; a PLC need not be a “one year and done” operation, but instead, an ongoing process in which teachers continue to follow their interests and situate their research questions into the context of the school. This was the overall vision for the sustenance of the PLC model, but major administrative obstacles limited the success of the PLCs and threatened the long-term commitment to this initiative.

*Logistical Limitations*

Despite the administrative guarantee that professional development was an organizational priority and the PLC time would be “untouchable,” the PLC calendar was modified and trimmed as the year progressed. The first four sessions (three in August and one in September) occurred as planned, but then the October session was canceled by administration, leaving six weeks between the September and November sessions. Due to Winter Break, no PD days were scheduled in December, and then the January session was also canceled, meaning a full three months passed between the November and February sessions. Due to PSSA testing, no time was available in March for PLCs, so two months passed between the February and April sessions. Since the May session was allocated to plan for June’s presentations, the learning opportunities effectively stopped in April, after only six scheduled sessions – and only three in the six months between October to April.

Canceling the October and January sessions drastically impacted the PLCs’ continuity and time for learning, and this issue was compounded by faculty members who
were called out of their PLCs to attend other meetings or training sessions. For example, for their April session, the Cultural Competence PLC was preparing to dive into Whiteness and its impact on teaching and learning. Of the six original teachers in the group, four were required by administration to attend different meetings. Only three members remained available to meet (a new hire was scheduled to join the group for the first time that day), so Jennifer, a White member of the PLC, emailed her group to request a different meeting time:

Hi all,

I know that we are scheduled to have our PLC meeting today, but I wanted to see if there was any way that we could reschedule - maybe for the next 2-hour delay? I'm asking because I know that there are several people who can't be at the meeting - either in part or in total - due to other obligations. I feel like, in a school with a predominately white staff in a predominately Black neighborhood, this conversation about white power is incredibly important. But with a group of as few as three people, one of whom is new, I don't think the discussion will be as productive as it should be.

And, from a selfish standpoint, I'd really like to be a part of it! (personal communication, April 17, 2015)

In an attempt to push group solidarity around the issue, I responded to the group and urged them to advocate for administrative support of their PLC:

Jennifer,

Thanks for this. I agree with you 100% and actually complained to [the principal] about her willingness to allow others to schedule events on top of PLCs -- administration sees these conversations as low priority, and consequently, so do some teachers. This is unfortunate, so I would love it if you would forward your previous email to her. I'm completely on board with rescheduling… I know this isn't ideal, but I really want this dialogue to begin, because all of our administrators and central office personnel are White (and only one male), as are the vast majority of the teachers (as you said). For some reason, this phenomenon is not a topic of conversation or an area of concern. So who better to start the
dialogue than my cultural competence group?! (personal communication, April 17, 2015)

Jennifer did request permission for the PLC to meet at an alternate time, but no accommodations were made for the group to begin their inquiry into the issue. So without the April session, the cultural competence PLC had only their February session between November and May.

The final major logistical challenge surrounded the closing PLC session, in which each group presented their learning and questions to the faculty. Originally scheduled for two hours, each group was to be allotted 15-20 minutes to present, lead a discussion, and solicit feedback from colleagues. However, administration cut the session to one hour, leaving no more than ten minutes per group. The result was a relay race of presentations, with no time for questions, comments, or synthesis among the groups; the cultural competence group did not even have time to make their presentation.

Though I anticipated bumps in the road due to snow days or unexpected occurrences, I underestimated the resistance that administration would pose in regards to both honoring the time that was committed to PLCs and ensuring that all staff would be available to attend the sessions. Despite these limitations, the cultural competence and restorative justice generated rich data, worthy of analysis and sharing.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

To completely address the research questions, it was necessary to draw from multiple sources, and consequently, various types of data were collected from different locations throughout the 2014-2015 school year. The primary source of data is the PLCs
themselves, comprised of teachers in grades 4-8, that serve as the focus of the study: the cultural competence PLC and the restorative justice PLC. From these groups, field notes, audio recordings, work samples, and written reflections were gathered and catalogued throughout the course of the year. And to better understand the experiences of the faculty, I observed and participated in sessions and informally interviewed teachers, in which I asked respondents to focus on the experiences of the PLC, their learning, and the opportunities for meaning-making.

While machinery aided in the collection of audio data, my position as PLC coordinator offered certain affordances not accessible with technology. Though it is often eye-opening to write a thick description (Geertz, 1973) while observing from the back of the room and occasionally interact with study participants, a PLC coordinator has power to directly influence the data generated. For example, the gender PLC was interested in improving the schooling experience for disengaged boys – how they can best address “the trouble with Black boys” (Noguera, 2008). As the PLC designer, I was able to create a set of experiences (readings, guiding questions, and meaning-making activities) focused on the topic and subsequently observe how the issue was taken up. Therefore, the data created was done so in response to the curriculum and lessons I had designed, thus allowing me to better access the relationship between the learning I expected to occur and what actually happened in the PLC. Furthermore, as the sessions were analyzed, I was equipped to explain the reasoning behind particular pedagogical decisions, rationales for choices made before, during, and after the sessions, and the motivation for particular curricular and pedagogical selections for the PLCs. Consequently, my field notes offer
insights, rationales, and descriptions that an outsiders’ cannot; this is the “inside-outside” epistemological stance Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) so cogently advance.

After all data was collected and transcribed, a hermeneutic approach was employed to make sense of and analyze the data. Hermeneutics calls for the interpretation of the “texts of life” by engaging in six research activities (van Manen, 1990; Cresswell, 2007): “commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole” (Kafle, 2011, p. 191). Thus, the teachers’ experiences, stories, jokes, and commentaries are all “texts of life” that can be critically analyzed using the previously described methodological frameworks and tools (i.e., critical discourse analysis, critically conscious methodology, and practitioner inquiry).

To begin the analysis, I used open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (p. 61) in an effort to address the research questions. Though coding can be employed to sort and simplify data, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that “coding is much more than simply giving categories to data; it is also about conceptualizing the data, raising questions, providing provisional answers about the relationships among and within the data, and discovering the data” (p. 31). In this sense, the coding prompts more complicated connections to emerge, from which grounded theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) are formed to help explain practice or provide a framework for future research (Cresswell, 2007). Thus, throughout the data analysis and (re)writing, three interrelated
objectives became present, each of which guides a chapter of this dissertation: first, I synthesized the data to narrate the experience of launching and operating the PLCs at Aspen: the teachers’ voices, views, learning, and confusion take center stage as I document and describe the ways they took on and took up this professional responsibility and endeavored to form a learning community. Second, I analyze and present the data to discuss the strengths and limitations of cultural competence as both an individual and school-wide undertaking. Finally, I examine the learning and complications that exist as a group of teachers explore restorative justice and attempt to incorporate it within and among institutionally endorsed disciplinary approaches that possess varying levels of compatibility with restorative practices.

**Conclusion**

Qualitative in nature, this study is both constructivist and critical. I understand that the employees of the school are shaped by and shape ideological beliefs, discourses, and (popular) culture. Therefore, throughout the PLCs, culture, mainstream ideologies, and discourses were interrogated, deconstructed, and – ideally – reintegrated in a way that resulted in improved student-teacher relationships, thoughtfully crafted curriculum, and meaningful shifts in policies and practices. I fondly recall Dr. Susan Lytle, a professor and mentor, frequently asking her charges, “Research for whom? Research for what?” I am very fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to study something I worked hard to create – to position myself in an awkward liminal space in which I deconstruct and critique the PD I so carefully planned and implemented. But this is the work of a teacher-researcher, and perhaps this research will support the efforts of others
who wish to pilot PLCs, who work in schools that lack the resources for expensive PD packages, who are curious about their relationships with their culturally different students, or who wish to replace punitive policies with restorative practices. Because of this unique intersection as teacher, professional development coordinator, and researcher, this study may not specifically address the circumstances in which other practitioners find themselves. But that’s not for whom this research is designed. That’s not what it is for. Ultimately, this research seeks to support teachers, researchers, theorists, and professional developers who are dissatisfied with the status quo, who believe in the intelligence and imagination of teachers and their students, who seek ways to eliminate prejudice and oppression in and out of school, and who believe that “what works” is something that is as unique and nuanced as the children who sit in each and every classroom. May these readers not seek definitive answers from this study; rather, may they learn from my errors, be inspired by the strength and passion of my colleagues, find new ways to promote social justice, and “begin to envision alternative configurations of human and material resources to meet the needs of culturally diverse groups of students, teachers, and administrators” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 80). In other words, if they have not done so already, may they commit to joining, strengthening, and continuing the powerful and impressive lineage of teacher-researchers.
Chapter IV: Setting the Stage for Transformational Learning

This week of Professional Development has been jam-packed with trainings and info sessions and something called a PLC. Sooo much PLC. It stands for Professional Learning Community, I think haha, and it’s probably the closest I've been to attending a college course since... well... college, I guess!

These first few days have been quite the jumpstart for my brain. PLC is nothing but case studies, and statistics research, and so much more, all applied directly to the school I'm working at, Aspen Charter, and the community it is in. I come home at the end of every day mentally exhausted but thoroughly fulfilled in how I felt challenged to actually think - it's been awhile since I've had that, and it feels great.

- Fred, Aspen’s technology teacher

Introduction

The process of planning and launching the PLCs at Aspen was long and complicated, and in this chapter, I will detail some of the major events and findings that illuminate the key considerations and learnings that emerged from analysis of the data. Though written as a narrative, this chapter does not include all the events that occurred prior to and during the launch of the PLCs. Instead, it narrows its focus on critical incidents that shape my understanding of the possibilities and tensions that arose during the initial phases of the PLCs. Additionally, some key events that occurred in the early stages of the PLCs will be addressed in subsequent chapters, as they more closely align with the subjects of cultural competence and restorative justice. So while the chapter is written sequentially, it should not be viewed as a strict timeline of events.

Because the study is situated in an independent charter school, many variables exist that make Aspen both similar to and different from other schools in our educational system. As charter schools continue to expand throughout the country – and particularly in urban areas, it is crucial to consider both the ideological and educational background
of the schools’ founders and administrators. Business leaders, philanthropists, and, to a lesser extent, entrepreneurs are now seeking charters and operating schools. And as the CEOs and vision-setters for the school(s), their ideas and beliefs cannot be discounted. Though a school’s mission statement is clearly articulated, the “how” to achieve it and how to evaluate success towards it may involve many possible avenues. Consequently, conversations with administrators must not assume common language and shared understanding, since different fields – that use the same terms in different ways – are all converging in charter schools (and in some traditional public schools, for that matter). Thus, the first part of my story focuses on building a shared understanding around PD in an organization that was founded and operated by individuals from the business sector.

In the second part of the chapter, I contextualize and discuss some of the preparatory work I did to prepare for the launch of the PLCs. This leads to the bulk of the chapter, which describes and analyzes the initial PLC sessions at Aspen. It is in these PLCs that conceptual frameworks were introduced, and ideally, the foundation was laid to engage in the intellectually challenging work that results in transformational learning.

**The PLC Genesis Story**

*PLC Seeds Planted, But Not Watered*

As referenced in Chapter I, Aspen’s path to PLCs began during the 2009-2010 academic year, when a School Improvement Committee was formed to audit various components of the school and provide recommendations for growth. The committee was divided into various sub-committees, which were tasked to study the school’s technology, operations, facilities, quality assurance, parent and community involvement, and, of
course, professional development. After researching professional development models, interviewing staff, and administering an anonymous online survey, I was able to determine several trends and make some specific recommendations for bolstering the professional development experience for Aspen’s faculty. Excited about my work and findings, I scheduled a meeting with the school’s principal and CEO to present a vision for PD at Aspen.

To launch the meeting, it was essential to differentiate between what counts as professional development and what does not; in the charter school era, an increasing number of school founders and leaders lack degrees and prior experience in the field of education. For example, Aspen’s founder is a real estate mogul who, on his daily drive from the suburbs to Center City, passed through the Aspen community and desired to create a school that would help disrupt the cycle of inter-generational poverty. After receiving the charter to launch Aspen, he hired the CEO of Aspen, who possesses an MBA and has significant experiences in finances. This tale is not unique to Aspen: the largest charter school network in Philadelphia was founded by a former General Foods employee who earned an MBA from Yale. Thus, principles of business and education are collapsing on each other, and with this convergence, certain business terms are being co-opted and re-appropriated to apply to schools: fiscal years, quarterly meetings, pay for performance, and PTO (paid time off – not sick days!) are all common terms that have changed the language and policies of public education. Another common business term –

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16 The 2017 appointment of Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education is the ultimate instantiation of this phenomenon. During her Senate confirmation hearing, she acknowledged that she never attended a public school; her children were educated in private schools, and she never worked in a public school other than as a mentor.
training – is frequently substituted for professional development, so it was imperative to make this distinction abundantly clear, since many school leaders may conflate trainings with professional development and learning, when in reality, these two concepts are mutually incompatible.

So how was professional development explained to business leaders? To best exemplify the difference between PD and training, I presented these PowerPoint slides sequentially:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is PD?</th>
<th>What PD is NOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Professional Development is any activity that encourages further understandings of pedagogy and the practice of teaching  
  — Reading/conducting research  
  — Reading/discussing philosophy and theory  
  — Curriculum/lesson planning  
  — Classroom artifact review  
  — Recursive observation, reflection, and demonstration  
  • Ultimately, PD is an INTELLECTUAL and ACADEMIC endeavor, rooted in practice |
| • PD is not to be confused with the “day-to-day” work of running a classroom  
  — Learning to administer and grade AIMSweb  
  — Faculty Meetings  
  — Learning new special education laws or mandated reporting policies  
  • Activities in which teachers are passively consuming information should, as a basic rule, not be considered PD |

**Figure 5. What is PD? What PD is NOT Slides**

My main objective was to debunk the assumption that Aspen offered high-quality PD to its faculty. Whereas there were many trainings at Aspen (overviews of computer programs the school purchased for students, careful review the student and staff handbook, learning how to use Smartboard technology, running reports on student achievement data, mandated reporting of child abuse, school emergency protocols, etc.), the opportunities for PD were few and far between. Thus, before making the case to implement PLCs, it was necessary for school leadership to concede that the business-like trainings and meetings did not actually impact pedagogy or engage the intellectual capacity of the faculty. Consequently, something different had to be offered to the
teachers so that they would have the opportunity to reflect upon, learn from, theorize, and revise their own practice.

Like many charter schools, Aspen did not have the budget to hire a full-time PD coordinator or contract outside service providers to operate on-going PD throughout the year(s). Consequently, I proposed that, beginning with the 2011-2012 academic year, the faculty divide into small learning communities (SLCs), which would meet regularly in order to study an area of interest or need. This model met two significant criteria: it is both interest-driven and differentiated. Based upon my interviews and the online survey, the faculty invariably expressed frustration with attending virtually the same sessions year after year, and that Aspen’s veteran teachers were engaging in the same sessions as novice teachers and new hires. These sessions were facilitated by administrators, so all faculty, regardless of strengths or experience, were receptacles to be filled with “new” strategies or best practices, as determined by administration. Thus, the feedback was given that far too many “PD” sessions were redundant or inapplicable, and, conversely, SLCs offered potential to initiate learning experiences that were relevant and made sense:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Small Learning Community</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Interest driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sustained and ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fosters collegiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Promotes knowledge generation and sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Allows for the development of expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- More depth and focus than can be afforded than in a one day “workshop”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers Need Differentiation too!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Tenured teachers attend similar summer sessions annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Opportunity to push thinking in new directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PD should be cumulative, not a series of one-stop-shops</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6. The Small Learning Community and Teachers Need Differentiation Slides**
In my view, the SLC model addressed both the concerns of interest and differentiation. Because the SLC’s focus of inquiry is determined by its members, teachers have autonomy to think deeply about areas that directly concern them and logically follow from their reflections on and questions about their own practice. Additionally, I proposed that Aspen take seriously its teacher induction process and form an SLC for all the new hires, which would have a two-fold effect. First, it freed veteran teachers from the “Teaching 101” sessions (classroom environment, progressive discipline, classroom policies and procedures, and school operations) and allowed them to select areas of focus that were relevant and stimulating. Second, the new hires would be carefully and thoughtfully introduced to readings, learning experiences, conversations, and practices that disrupt dominant ideologies and stereotypes surrounding poor, Black communities. As I framed it, our teacher induction program should not just shape teachers, but should support and inform “Aspen teachers”:

![Teacher Induction & Mentoring Slide](image)

Through this presentation, I hoped to achieve many goals. First, I aimed to conceptually separate training from PD, and persuade administration that the latter is essential to teacher growth, satisfaction, and, ultimately, retention. While certain trainings
are necessary and helpful, effective leadership ensures that opportunities for PD are present and prioritized. Second, I offered SLCs as a model that suited the Aspen community, since they would not incur significant expense; they follow principles of andragogy, and they offer teachers a voice in what will be studied. Additionally, they differentiate the learning priorities for those who have been teaching at Aspen for years from those who are new to the school or career.

As the meeting came to a close, it was clear that these ideas were well-received, and I was confident that changes to the PD program were imminent. Nevertheless, this genesis story did not end in the promised land. Rather, nearly two additional years were spent in PD purgatory.

*A Mounting Tide: The Aspen School Improvement Plan*

After presenting to Aspen’s administration, I was eager to participate in the planning and implementation of these recommendations. Since the report and presentation occurred in late spring of 2010, I was not surprised that no changes to Aspen’s PD were in place for the August PD in 2010; only two months separated the end of the school year in June from the teachers’ return for the August meetings, trainings, and PD. Despite my repeated attempts to effect change to the school’s PD platform, the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 years began without any significant changes to the PD content and structures.

During those years, the staff continued to struggle with pervasive issues: teacher retention, student discipline, low standardized test scores, unclear salary structures, burdensome workload, and general discontent. In fact, in 2012, the staff petitioned to
unionize and served the petition to the administration. Though the unionization ultimately did not occur, it did open a forum for staff to voice their concerns about and dissatisfactions with their posts.

Administration responded to these concerns in a variety of ways, and one of their initiatives to improve staff morale, working conditions, and job satisfaction was to hire an educational consultant to completely audit the school, pinpoint high impact reforms, and make recommendations for implementable changes. Beginning in the winter of 2013, the consultant reviewed curricula and policy, observed teachers, observed faculty meetings, interviewed staff, conducted focus groups, and talked to students. After months of data-gathering, analysis, and synthesis, “The Aspen Charter School Improvement Plan” was distributed to administration and a group of teacher-leaders in June 2013.

The report identified four major areas for reform: Domain I: School Leadership: Structure, Routines & Culture; Domain II: Instructional Leadership, Curriculum Development and Classroom Management; Domain III: Professional Development Planning & Preserving Institutional Memory, and Domain IV: Human Capital: School Climate, Staff Motivation & Morale. The report names the implementation of PLCs as a strong way to address Domains II, III, & IV: “At the heart of instructional leadership is the goal of developing professional learning communities (PLCs) at our school, where social and intellectual connections are built between teachers and administrators.” Through the PLCs, collective inquiries would develop personal and institutional knowledge, and in the process, improve motivation and morale through the collegiality and connections forged in the community.
On the final day of the 2012-2013 academic year, I was approached by the CEO and principal and was asked to spearhead the launch of PLCs for the upcoming school year (2013-2014). At this meeting, I was told that the focus of the PLCs would be on student-teacher relationships – a broad umbrella concept that encompasses issues of classroom management, discipline, curriculum, language, culture, and race. Excited that my vision was finally becoming a reality, I eagerly began, as Dr. Gadsden once told me, to “Read! Read! Read!” I immersed myself in PLC literature – everything from the how-to books, to qualitative research, to critiques. Once I had a foundational understanding of the various PLC structures (and most common hindrances to success), I then attempted to distill the term “student-teacher relationships” into various sub-fields, each of which could potentially become an area of inquiry for a PLC. Because each group would be driven by its own interest, I understood that I would have to “live in the gray” – that I would not be able to gain expertise in every possible line of inquiry a group might pursue. What I did hope to accomplish, however, was to create a catalogue of topics and potential resources I could lean on when groups’ discussed and selected their area(s) of curiosity. Despite the impossibility of closely studying every potential topic or field, it was important to develop pedagogical content knowledge; for this to occur, I needed to understand both the conceptual underpinnings of PLCs (and andragogy) and the content that the teachers would study throughout the year. As the summer moved on and I gained familiarity – not expertise – with the fields of PLCs and student-teacher relationships, I articulated the purpose and objectives of the PLCs by drafting a mission and vision, inquiry questions, and goals:
**Mission and Vision:** Professional development is a career-long process that requires focused and sustained commitment from both the faculty and the administration. Professional development at Aspen Charter School will promote the inquiry and learning necessary for teachers to reflect upon, analyze, and ultimately improve their pedagogical craft. Teachers will be positioned as knowledge generators, rather than consumers, and the knowledge they create will be shared for others’ benefit. The ultimate goal of professional development is improved student learning, as evidenced through multiple indicators – both qualitative and quantitative. Well-planned and executed professional development will result in attracting and retaining top-caliber teachers, and along with teacher growth, student satisfaction and learning will continually improve. (See Appendix B for complete document)

With this document – which was shared with administration – I reiterated the epistemological stance that teachers, when offered the opportunity, are able to generate local knowledge that can be effectively shared with colleagues. I also attempted to document the significance of administrative support: PD must remain a priority, even as the day-to-day responsibilities mount and consume the time of teachers and administrators. My experience at Aspen taught me that faculty members were often simply trying to keep their heads above water: lesson-planning, grading, and family communications were so time-consuming that teachers rarely had a moment to spare. When this is the case, undivided focus on professional development is difficult to achieve, and may be perceived by the teachers as a “back-burner” priority.

Though I intended to best serve the teachers of the school in this document, critical analysis calls into question the placing of empirically measurable student learning at the center of the mission. While academic achievement is an essential endeavor for a school, it is not the primary purpose of a professional learning community; rather, collegiately, a spirit of inquiry, and membership in a community are the foundational elements of a PLC. By stating that student learning is the “ultimate goal,” I
unintentionally ascribed to neoliberal principles that suggest all achievement is measurable, and that schools do whatever it takes to boost scores. Instead of placing student achievement in the center of the mission, “teacher learning,” “faculty connectedness,” and “increased empowerment” should have been integral to this mission. When regarding PD, doing what is best for teachers is most likely best for students, but doing what is best for students’ “measurable” achievement may be harmful for all.

Despite the flawed mission, it became necessary to transition from a vision statement to enactable curricula. And since new hires would be entering Aspen for an orientation before veterans returned, I collaborated with another veteran teacher, Kacey, to launch a new teacher PLC intended to disrupt dominant discourses and stereotypes about West Philadelphia.17

**Welcome to Aspen: The School, the Neighborhood, the Community**

The first day of work for a new hire is incredibly exciting, anxiety-ridden, and often overwhelming. Entering a new building with a new principal, a new curriculum, a new classroom, and new colleagues can be physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting. Consequently, the first PLC session was meant to be a supportive experience

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17 Aspen’s new hires began their academic year three days before returning faculty. During those three days, Kacey and I organized an intensive PLC experience that provided the teachers context about the school, its community, and began the first steps towards critical cultural consciousness – which entailed direct challenges to stereotypes, deficit perspectives, and dominant discourses. After this three-day PLC orientation, the new hires then joined the rest of the faculty in other PLCs for the remainder of the year. This chapter recounts significant findings from both the new hire orientation and the initial PLC sessions of the entire faculty, as they are both representative of the framework development we hoped would occur at the onset of the year. Several of the learning activities discussed in this chapter were shared among all the PLCs, regardless of each PLC’s subject of study, since they were viewed as foundational to the more specific learning that would occur throughout the year. Thus, data for this chapter was drawn from across a variety of PLCs, each of which took up the learning activities in its own unique way.
that offered social interaction and a sense of comradery. For this reason, after quick introductions, Kacey and I decided to send the new hires out of the school!

Kacey and I titled this initial session “Whose community are we a part of?” Our intention behind this framing was twofold: first, we wished to express to the teachers that ACS exists inside a vibrant and functional community that continually responds to legacies of segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and more recently, gentrification. There is a resilience in Aspen that cannot be ignored or overlooked; rather it must be celebrated and appreciated. Furthermore, this historical marginalization understandably engenders wariness towards governmentally sanctioned institutions, such as schools and police. Thus, new hires cannot see themselves as benevolent “white knights” when entering an impoverished community that has been too long overlooked and underserved. Second, the question presupposes that it is the responsibility of the school to complement the community, and not the other way around. To illustrate this concept, we tasked the new teachers to take a community walk, talk to people they encountered, and photo-document images they found to be revealing, striking, or interesting:

Greg: So, we're doing just a little introduction to the Aspen community and the Aspen neighborhood. I don't know if we have native Philadelphians here or not, but we're all probably relatively new to this area. So, we're just going to take a little bit of time this morning to let you guys physically explore the neighborhood a little bit. We're not going to over-introduce this too much but we do have a couple of objectives for you guys.

Kacey: Our guiding question is, whose community – what community are we as Aspen part of? Where do we fit in?

Greg: Mm-hm and our relationship with the community. A couple of objectives for today are relatively easy. One, we're just going to explore the community, actually get outside and take a walk around our neighborhood and try to
understand a little bit more about where you go for certain things, and what the houses are like, and just the physical geography of the neighborhood. The second one is that after we've looked at the neighborhood, to try to start to think about the stereotypes that might be extant in this neighborhood and West Philadelphia in general so that we can understand, whether fact or fiction, how people see us and how the kids might see themselves, and all those complicated images or stereotypes that definitely affect how we think about our teaching, and then how these kids might think about themselves and their jobs in school. So, those are our quick objectives for today. Without any further ado, Kacey…

Kacey: So, what you're going to be doing is, with a partner, we're actually going to send you out for about 20 minutes to walk around… You're going to photo-document a few images of things that stick out to you, something that strikes you as interesting, something that strikes you guys as inspiring, or concerning, and you're going to bring those photos back.

With this, we asked our teachers to break frame and step outside the typical responsibilities of a teacher. We understood the risk of positioning the teachers as voyeurs, but thought that without any empirical disconfirming evidence, then they would have no choice but to use stereotypes and assumptions to fill gaps in knowledge (Brookfield, 1995; Wilson, 2002).

Kacey and I were wary during those twenty minutes, as we did not know what the teachers would photograph: if they desired to portray Aspen as a neighborhood filled with litter, abandoned homes, broken windows, and cracked sidewalks, they could have done so. And while some of the teachers’ photographs depicted these images of blight, the majority of photographs they shared represented the community’s strength and beauty: pictures of parks, churches, mosques, children playing, community gardens, and murals were routinely shared with the group. This provided an important opportunity to witness and identify evidence that challenges common stereotypes of West Philadelphia. On the other hand, it would have been misleading to focus solely on these neighborhood
and cultural assets; Aspen’s community struggles with high unemployment, poverty, and homelessness (a shelter exists in the school’s catchment). So while Kacey and I wanted to present some of the challenges our students and their families face, we also desired to contextualize them in the vast and varied support systems offered by the neighborhood.

This concept was quickly recognized by Shakira, a new third grade teacher at Aspen:

I saw a lot of very nice things in the neighborhood, as far as all we've been talking about the greenery. A lot of things are very beautiful and there are a whole lot of parks. Because almost everywhere when you're looking at this beautiful scenery on this side and then you pin your eyes to the left and there’s some kind of blight going on over there… you kind of get the feel for what these kids are seeing in this community, and I think it brings to mind the idea that if you don't come from this neighborhood or from that environment, you may think ‘That area may look like this’ or we expect this when we're talking about stereotypes and things. Just that visual gives you the idea that you have to remember that this is not all there is because you see beauty in the midst of things that are indicative of the problems that may be going on.

With is conceptualization, Shakira takes an important first step to confronting the deficit perspective that can be formed when relying on stereotypes and generalizations about the neighborhood. Consequently, Shakira – and potentially her colleagues – more carefully investigate and consider what the community offers the children and the strengths the students bring with them to the classroom, rather than just what they are missing or lacking – their so-called “deficits.”

Though the community picture walk was primarily intended to offer teachers the opportunity to challenge stereotypes, it also served to build bonds among the new teachers and instill a sense of comradery and fellowship. While, at times, teachers feel as though they are “on an island” in their classroom, they often enjoy and need the company and support of their colleagues, which the PLC structure inherently offers to the
participants. Thus, as the teachers reflected on their new-hire orientation, they commented on their own learning, their own thinking, and the bonds they made as they entered the ACS faculty. As one fifth grade teacher, Cathy, reflected:

I really enjoyed having a chance to walk around the neighborhood for two reasons. First, by getting out of the classroom and walking around with a partner, it stimulated good conversation with a new colleague and helped forge bonds that will hopefully carry into the school year. Second, it served as a powerful and humbling reminder that as a new staff member to Aspen, I am entering a community about which I have much to learn. While I did feel a bit uncomfortable taking pictures, it was a really helpful exercise for thinking about my relationship to the community and was a good reminder to stop, slow down, look carefully, and be observant. The activity highlighted the need to be a careful observer rather than a “jumper to conclusions.”

From this commentary, Cathy effectively encapsulates the dual-pronged objective of her PLC: to build personal, enduring connections with colleagues and foster an inquiry stance towards the community, the neighborhood, and its children. She recognizes that it is easy to draw conclusions prematurely, even especially when lacking sufficient data. In a sense, we can see Cathy verbalizing the stance of an ethnographer; she seeks to understand a culture other than her own, and knows that this cannot be accomplished without careful “looking” and “observation.” She fundamentally understands that rich description yields deep understanding, and snap judgments can mislead – they only reveal the surface of the iceberg (Weaver, 1986). So, to simultaneously promote the teacher-as-ethnographer stance and avoid unfounded judgments, after the new hire PLC concluded, all ACS PLCs were tasked to read from two seemingly unrelated texts: the first chapter of Blink by Malcolm Gladwell (2005) and Fish is Fish by Leo Lionni (1970).
**Hunting – and Challenging – Assumptions**

As part of my conceptual framework, I outlined two complementary theories that deeply influenced my curricular choices for Aspen’s PLCs: the adaptive unconscious and schema theory. Ultimately, I wanted the faculty to better understand how the brain develops stereotypes and assumptions, and then provide a process to challenge them. To accomplish this, the faculty engaged in two shared readings that served as the foundation for the PLCs.

First, the faculty read Chapter I of Malcolm Gladwell’s (2005) *Blink*, which explores the power and (in)validity of snap judgments – those that are made in the blink of an eye. Because of the plethora of decisions each person must make each day – and the urgency with which many must be made, it is not possible to stop, think, and consciously consider all the plausible choices and their respective outcomes before settling on a decision. Instead, our brains operate as “a kind of giant computer that quickly and quietly processes a lot of the data we need in order to keep functioning as human beings” (p. 11). Known as the adaptive unconscious, this “automatic pilot” (p. 12) makes decisions with little or no input from the conscious parts of the brain. Gladwell celebrates the adaptive unconscious, and its remarkable ability to instantly make sense of the world. Without it, indecision and inaction would reign supreme.

On the other hand, Gladwell is equally concerned with the moments and times when our instincts betray us, when the adaptive unconscious gets it wrong: “Our unconscious is a powerful force. But it’s fallible. It’s not the case that our internal computer always shines through, instantly decoding the ‘truth’ of a situation…So, when
should we trust our instincts, and when should we be wary of them?” (p. 15). Like Gladwell, I wanted the ACS faculty to become cognizant of the times when snap-decisions belied espoused beliefs, when misguided assumptions were used to inform action, and when stereotypes and worldviews push educators to think, act, and speak in particular and pejorative ways. Ultimately, I sought to help the faculty realize that the brain is constantly gathering data from a variety of sources with varying levels of credibility, synthesizing it, and using it to make decisions that may result in micro-aggressions, deficit pedagogy, or cultural racism. As I wrote in the lesson rationale:

In order to effectively analyze relationships with students, adults must first investigate their own assumptions and beliefs. Because all adults have cultural gaps with the students (generational, racial, socio-economic, religious, political), knowing their own “icebergs” (deeply held beliefs and values that control behavior and operate below the surface of conscious thought) promotes the possibility of building bridges with the students. By making beliefs explicit, adults can then search for discrepancies between their espoused beliefs and their actions/behaviors.

I intended this first session to be relatively innocuous: I simply wanted the teachers to recognize that we all hold assumptions based upon the information we have at hand. Usually, these assumptions are correct, and we are happy with our decisions. Occasionally, however, the sensory data our adaptive unconscious utilizes to form assumptions and make decisions can be inchoate or simply wrong.18 When this occurs, we act in ways that contradict our beliefs, and potentially will do harm to the students.

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18 This phenomenon is often referred to as implicit bias: associations individual’s brains hold beneath the level of consciousness. Popularized by Project Implicit (2011), people can participate in an online psychological experiment that reveals whether they hold particular associations and biases about race, gender, sexual orientation, weight, etc. Currently, 68% of the participants who have taken the test demonstrate an association between Whiteness and positive qualities, whereas only 14% connect Blackness with positive attributes. These implicit biases affect actions, language, decisions, and body language (Michael, 2015). Left unquestioned or unchallenged in the subconscious realm of thought, these biases work to perpetuate stereotypes, racism, and supremacist ideology.
with whom we work. When this occurs, it is imperative that teachers reflect on the events that occur, uncover the assumptions that were leveraged to make those decisions, and where necessary, fill in the gaps with knowledge and ideas that will prevent subsequent errors in judgment:

When our powers of rapid cognition go awry, they go awry for a very consistent and specific set of reasons, and those reasons can be identified and understood. It is possible to learn when to listen to that powerful onboard computer and when to be wary of it. (Gladwell, 2007, p. 15)

To illustrate the adaptive unconscious at work, PLC participants were handed an article titled “Reacting to the poor – negatively” (Lubrano, 2013), which explains the results of a study in which people’s brains were imaged while viewing photographs of poor and homeless people. The imaging process concluded that people “responded as though the photos depicted things, not humans – a sign of revulsion” (Lubrano, 2013). While most people would never publicly state that the poor and homeless are subhuman, their brains process the poor in a way that makes neglect morally acceptable. This article was relevant for two reasons. First, since the majority of the Aspen community is poor and houses a homeless shelter, the article raises the issue that this type of subconscious thinking exists in the school community, and recognition is necessary to undo this type of thinking. Second, the article suggests that members of the Aspen community are commonly looked at and treated in a dehumanizing way. How does this impact their worldview? Their community? The way they understand themselves and society at large? Certainly, these are not readily answerable questions, and a major foundational endeavor of the PLCs was to instill the premise that with incomplete and uninterrogated information about the Aspen community, injurious actions and behaviors – whether
intended or not – are likely to ensue. So, to help the teachers understand both how misconceptions occur and offer a process for correcting the adaptive unconscious’s errors, we turned to a classic picture book that clearly illustrates schema theory and the misconceptions that can occur when the brain operates without sufficient data.

As discussed in Chapter I, schema theory explains how individuals incorporate or disregard new information that enters the brain. After receiving sensory input, the brain organizes information into a series of categories, and as new data is encountered, the data is inserted into an existing category, used to create a new category, or the data is disregarded as invalid. As schemata develop and strengthen over time, the brain easily assimilates information that supports an existing schema. Additionally, the brain is equally adept at overlooking or ignoring information that does not conform to the entrenched schema – a process known as confirmation bias. For this reason, it can be very difficult for people to change their belief systems, since the brain is accustomed to heavily attending to data that confirms beliefs while diminishing the significance of data that challenges preconceived notions. Quite simply, people have a strong and innate desire to be right, so they must be presented with an abundance of information and logic in order to dismantle an existing schema. The dangers of not changing, however, can be very costly, since the schemata may be creating a version of reality that inaccurately represents others and serves to further oppress the marginalized.

To demonstrate what happens when schemata go unchecked and operate with limited information, each PLC engaged in a read-aloud, in which the facilitator shared *Fish is Fish* (Lionni, 1970) with the group. *Fish is Fish* is the story of two friends – a frog
and a fish. When the frog is a tadpole, she and the fish are bound to the water and share a
great many experiences. As they both grow older, however, the tadpole transforms into a
frog and is able to venture onto land. Curious about what exists outside the pond, the fish
asks the frog to describe all that she sees. Eager to share with her friend, the frog
describes birds, “who had wings, and two legs, and many, many colors” (p. 16), and cows
“that have four legs, horns, eat grass, and carry pink bags of milk” (p. 18-19). Though the
frog did her best to describe these animals, the fish’s schema does not allow her to
accurately visualize these other animals; as the illustrations show, the fish adds all of the
frog’s descriptions onto the body of a fish:

![Figure 8. Fish is Fish “Bird” and “Cow”]

This misconception occurred because the fish lacked the knowledge and information
necessary to fully incorporate the frog’s description into his own understanding.
Therefore, the fish used what he knew to fill in the gaps; the fish assumed at that all
creatures share his core body. What he knows became the center of all his assumptions.
But why would he think this way? Because he never ventured out of the pond himself and
simply doesn’t know what the bigger world looks like. Consequently, he created an
inaccurate version of these animals, based upon the information he had available. As I
described it in the rationale for this learning activity:
In order to make sense of the world, the human brain uses assumptions and theories to fill in gaps where data is missing (schema theory). To address this issue, two related processes can occur: first, people can gather more information, thereby reducing the need to rely on assumptions. Second, people can “dig up” assumptions, analyze and critique them, and recognize how these assumptions may lead to misinterpretation of individuals, groups, and events. (See Appendix C for the full lesson plan.)

In the lesson design, I asked each PLC to “join the frog,” get out of the water, and use qualitative and quantitative data to form a more accurate and robust understanding of the students, neighborhood, and community. To do so, participants were then asked to understand and interpret a piece of quantitative data, recognize the negative stereotype that could be derived from it (if dominant discourse and stereotypes are used to create “the body” of the image of the community), and finally reframe the statistics to promote assets-based thinking, offer a counter-narrative, and ultimately improve student-teacher relationships. For example, one partnership was presented with the following statistic:

“Of all occupied housing in the Aspen neighborhood, 57% is occupied by renters, and 43% is occupied by homeowners”\(^\text{19}\) (See Appendix D for sample think sheet). The group was shocked by this information, as they did not realize that nearly half of the

\(^{19}\)The other statistics the groups analyzed were:

1. 24.6% of all land in the neighborhood is vacant. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society has implemented their Vacant Land Stabilization Program in the neighborhood.
2. 88% of births in Aspen are to unwed mothers.
3. There is no significant difference in health quality or disease in Aspen compared to the rest of West Philadelphia. As a community, Aspen has fewer health problems than [an adjacent neighborhood].
4. 38% of Aspen’s residents possess a high school diploma. The city average is 33%.
5. 18% of Philadelphia residents possess a college degree, and 5% of Aspen’s residents possess a college diploma. 16% of Aspen residents have enrolled in college.
6. Numbers of arrests have decreased in Aspen since 1998 in the following categories: robbery, assault, burglary, and narcotics. In the same time period, the number of domestic abuse arrests has more than doubled.
7. The average household income in Aspen is less than half that of the Philadelphia city average, $16,645 per year compared to $36,957.
8. 22.9% of Aspen’s residents are unemployed.
neighborhood’s homes were owned: as one participant stated, “We thought that given the level of poverty in the neighborhood, there would be very little home ownership.” And armed with this knowledge, they were able to change their stereotypical image of the students and their families; instead of seeing Aspen’s residents as renters of low-income housing with no pride in the neighborhood, they instead recognized that nearly half of the community own their homes, and, therefore, are very invested in the long-term success of the school and neighborhood. Combining this statistical reality with the community’s investment in parks, gardens, and other green spaces, a completely different picture of the residents emerges, one in which there exists a level of pride and commitment to the neighborhood’s future. In other words, when they metaphorically got out of the pond, the group was able to see the neighborhood differently from when they relied solely on stereotypes and deficit-based thinking.

Even though this particular tandem was able to interpret statistics in a way that could challenge deficit perspectives, many other teachers – both new and returning – found that the statistics reified their perception of how poor and depressed the neighborhood is. One teacher wrote, “We saw in person [during the community walk] how many struggles the community faces, and today we confirmed that with stats and learned even more struggles (graduation rates, etc.),” and another said that the statistics “solidified and gave numbers to what I saw.” This was surprising for two reasons. First, just the day before, the group of new teachers was commenting on all the beauty of the neighborhood and the resources they located. And yet, just a day later, when asked to interpret statistics in a way that could challenge stereotypes and deficit perspectives, both
new and returning teachers instead returned to the cultural deficit worldview. I was particularly surprised by a conversation I shared with Carl, a special education teacher who was facilitating his PLC that day. When I asked him how the group responded to *Fish is Fish*, he said that the group saw the students as the fish, and the teachers as the frogs – the opposite of what I saw and planned! This group of teachers interpreted the neighborhood as the pond, and the students as a group of fish who rarely leave and have little experience and exposure to the world outside of West Philadelphia. Consequently, this PLC viewed teachers as the frogs whose responsibility it is to bring outside knowledge and experience to the students of Aspen. This “savior” mentality, while well-meaning, only further supports culturally racist and deficit-based ideologies.

Thus, the attempt to get the faculty “out of the pond” yielded limited change, which reinforces the idea that schemata are deeply entrenched and very difficult to alter; these ideological changes cannot be accomplished after a single session of professional learning. Certainly, some teachers, like Cathy, readily embraced the idea that the teachers are the fish who must get out of the comfort of the water to be able to truly see and understand the students and their cultures. They recognized that numbers can be used to tell multiple stories, and as the interpreters of these statistics, they have the power to write counter-narratives that ultimately portray the students in a way that highlights their talents, knowledges, and resiliency. Nevertheless, other teachers used certain pieces of data (while ignoring others) to depict the Aspen community as decrepit and failing. Though I was discouraged by some of the results of the PLCs, I had to remain realistic and recognize that an entire faculty could not change its collective worldview after four
hours of professional thinking and learning. The adaptive unconscious is far too powerful for that.

**Conclusion**

After dedicating countless hours studying both the organization of PLCs and an approach to challenge deficit thinking and improve student-teacher relationships, I was very excited about the two guiding theories presented to the staff (adaptive unconscious and schema theory) and the learning activities I planned and prepared for the PLCs. By design, there was a great emphasis placed on both community-building and academic inquiry, so that each letter of the acronym PLC felt embodied throughout the experience. And as expressed throughout the chapter, the initial feedback from the teachers was very positive: they enjoyed working collaboratively, being positioned as experts in their field, and engaging with topics that matter. As Rakita, a fifth grade teacher, stated:

> The past three days of our Professional Learning sessions…have been novel and provided me with a few enlightening moments. We were told that the goal of PL this year is to enhance student-teacher relationships. The route we seem to be taking to achieve this goal is to begin by providing information about some of the biases that exist surrounding educating students of color in the urban setting, statistics about the community, and identifying key elements of black culture. I feel that the topics that have arisen and conversations that have erupted during our sessions have been beneficial to our entire learning community. The topics they have chosen to take on the task of guiding us through during PL are very bold due to the fact that the root of many of the issues we have discussed is very researched but still yet to be determined. I look forward to more PL discussions and hope the information is being absorbed by all.

Though Rakita has clearly adopted a learning stance and is eager to continue conversations with her PLC around race and culture, not all her colleagues recognized the transformational potential of this work; despite having unpacked the adaptive
unconscious and schema theory, some teachers struggled to push back against the stereotypes attributed to poor Black youth. Instead, the adaptive unconscious showed why other people hold racist beliefs, and *Fish is Fish* (alongside the neighborhood statistics) was interpreted as a way to reify the “less-than” nature of the Aspen community. While this finding was discouraging, it was not surprising. After all, changing a person’s – or group’s – thinking does not typically happen overnight, not when a lifetime of images, messages, and stories have created very powerful schemata. But to what extent could this “bold” type of PL affect or change thinking over the course of the year? Can sustained focus on a particular subject alter ideology and practice? Can it help teachers hunt and replace assumptions? Will it push them to jump out of their own pond and see that not everyone is a fish like they are, that there are completely different ways of being, ways of knowing, and ways of participating in this world? The next two chapters explore these questions by chronicling the experiences of two PLCs: Cultural Competence and Restorative Justice.
Chapter V: Culturally Competent Praxis – The Entrenchment of Dominant Ideology

There are elements of our students that the economic exteriors of their lives cannot tell us. We can know what’s in their hearts only if they trust us enough to show us. My adolescent memories still act as a reminder that people not only survive in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, but they live as well.

- Jennifer Obidah (2008, p. 56, emphasis added)

In working with students of color, more teachers need to exhibit culturally responsive caring... This style of teaching is anchored in caring, commitment, cultural competence, and an understanding that school performance takes place within a complex sociocultural ecology and is filtered through cultural screens both students and teachers bring to the classroom.

- Geneva Gay (2010, p. 69, emphasis added)

Introduction

The Cultural Competence PLC was comprised of six thoughtful, passionate, and dedicated educators. Two White women, two Black women, and two White men worked collaboratively to better understand their own cultural and racialized histories, the cultures of the Aspen community, and how different cultures interfaced in Aspen Charter School. This is very complicated work that poses significant intellectual and emotional challenges. Nevertheless, these six individuals recognized that the conflicts, tensions, and misunderstandings that existed between students and teachers were, at least in part, attributable to differences in language, values, worldview, expectations, and normalcies – in other words, differences in culture.

This chapter investigates the work the Cultural Competence PLC undertook in the 2014-2015 academic year. As discussed in Chapter III, logistical limitations prevented this group from meeting at all scheduled PLC sessions, so while this story is unfinished,
it is still compelling and worthy of study. The narrative will begin with the group’s first session, in which the members describe their reasons for joining the Cultural Competence PLC. Throughout the chapter, the group’s areas of interest, objectives, learning, and calls to action will be described, unpacked, and when necessary, critiqued.

**PD Roots: How Did We Get Here, and Where Are We Going?**

Two weeks before the staff was scheduled to return to work for the 2014-2015 year, I sent a blast email to the faculty and administration, inviting them to sign up for a PLC that appealed to their interests and professional curiosities. Some topics (trauma-informed practice and gender in education) were extremely popular and quickly exceeded capacity. Others – like cultural competence – garnered little interest; though each group had capacity for 8-12 members, only six individuals expressed interest in joining this inquiry group. This, in and of itself, is significant, for it either reflects individuals’ discomfort in discussing issues of race and equity, or it reflects Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) frame of minimization of racism. In other words, the fact that far more teachers chose to study gender in education than cultural competence suggests that, at Aspen, teachers identified an investigation of differences between boys and girls as more pressing – or perhaps more comfortable – than the differences between Black students and a predominately White staff. Moreover, all five of the school’s administrators are White, and none of them opted to join this PLC. Ultimately, this PLC garnered far less interest than I had anticipated, yet its small size did not impact the significance of the findings that emerged from their work towards their mission.
To launch the first session, each group member was asked to sketch a picture of an object or scene that represented her/his reasoning for joining the Cultural Competence PLC. As with many PLC learning experiences, the intended outcome was for the teachers both to think deeply about the content area and build collegial relationships; teachers would share a personal story that reflected their rationale for joining the group. Thus, the teachers would both learn about each other and better understand their interest in cultural competence.

Interestingly, both White women, Jennifer and Ricki, drew pictures of themselves inside bubbles. As Ricki stated:

So I drew a picture of me, and me in a bubble. Because I grew up mainly in the suburbs, and I'm told on many, many occasions that I live in my own little bubble and don't realize the things that are actually happening around me at all. And it's true. And over the summer actually, anybody ever watched Drug Inc. on National Geographic? Well they had the Philly one all about Kensington. And the whole, all the drugs and everything that's happening there, and I was like, 'I have to watch this,' because I don't know anything that's going around. And just how much it relates to our kids, and the things that they go through on a daily basis that I'm just like, 'That happens in the world? No way!' So I saw this, and just getting to know more of their culture and everything that's happening. It really just, made more sense for me to kind of get that aspect of it so. Me and my bubble.

This commentary connects closely with Fish is Fish (Lionni, 1970) because Ricki identifies herself as a fish who rarely adventures out of the pond, and as a consequence, is ignorant of the realities Aspen’s students navigate and live through. Ricki recognizes that to build strong relationships with her students, it is insufficient to invite them into her pond. Rather, she must venture out of the water – out of her comfort zone, and work hard to understand her students’ lived realities, strengths, and challenges. By saying “getting to know more of their culture,” Ricki places the onus of learning and adaptation on
herself. Conversely, Ricki conflates the “drug culture” represented on the television show with the lived experience of Aspen’s students. While some students at Aspen have family members who have been connected to illegal substances, in reality, this is the overwhelming minority of the students. So while Ricki demonstrates a willingness to learn more about Aspen’s families and cultures, at this point, she was still relying on dominant discourses about West Philadelphia to make generalizations about the community; just like the fish in *Fish is Fish*, she relies on assumptions to fill in gaps of knowledge, and consequently, creates an image that doesn’t accurately reflect the group she is describing. While this is not ideal, it is clear Ricki possesses a learning stance, and is invested in the work that will “pop the bubble,” leading to more genuine understanding of her students and their cultures.

I shared my picture next, which reaffirmed Ricki’s insecurity about working in a neighborhood and culture different from her own. I drew a picture of a cell phone with a question mark above the “call” button, which represented my anxiety and unwillingness to make calls home to the families of my students:

I definitely have anxiety, and I'm very easily able to talk myself out of calling home. Not even necessarily if it's bad news…But I do think it has to do with some sort of this cultural difference, that deep down I feel like maybe even though I know I'm trying my hardest, and I'm doing the best I can, maybe the parents don't like me or they don't appreciate what I'm doing. There's this gap there, and I'm afraid of what's going to happen if I try to step across. So, one of the reasons that I wanted to be here and I'm probably going to spend a lot of my time in the cultural competence group is to get over some of my own anxieties by better understanding that I share more similarities with the people in this neighborhood than differences. Like we have a lot more that overlaps than we have that divides. So I want to explore those, understand those, and have a little bit more self-confidence when working with them and talking to the parents and the kids themselves.
Jennifer, another White teacher, shared my struggles to contact families, though she recognized that she found it far more challenging to talk to parents than to the students:

I totally understand what you're saying about feeling nervous about calling home even if it's a good thing. Even if I should be excited to call, I get serious anxiety about doing it. I want to find ways to bridge those because I developed great relationships with the students. So I don't feel hesitation with that. I feel more hesitation with developing relationships with their families because of cultural differences.

After the session ended, I followed up with Jennifer to talk more about our shared challenge. We wanted to figure out the root of our anxiety, and at the heart of our concern were issues of power, our country’s unresolved legacy of slavery, and the fact that both of us harbored insecurities around the fact that neither of us are native Philadelphians, which unearthed concerns around colonialism and Whites using power to discipline and control Black students. We understood that part of our professional responsibility was to enforce rules and discipline students who broke them, but when it came time to inform parents of the events, we felt extremely uncomfortable telling them that we, White teachers who benefit daily from White privilege, are using our institutionally granted power to discipline and punish Black children. We recognized that parents need to know what is happening in school, but our own consciousness created a barrier to communication. And we admitted and recognized that without an honest, open dialogue with students’ caretakers, the home-school connection and mutual trust is strained.

Thus, as White teachers, Ricki, Jennifer, and I all used this opportunity to show how our own backgrounds and histories prevented us from understanding and interacting with students and their families in ways that were fully transparent and culturally
competent. Coincidentally, Rakita, a Black fifth grade teacher, also drew a phone. Her rationale, however, was far different from mine:

So my story was that I went to Hilltown College. At the time, they had not recruited [people of color], and there weren't a lot of different cultures in Hilltown. I could count the Black people or different cultures on two hands, and I ran track and one day, there was a message on my room answering machine that said, ‘All black people are stupid and they are only here because they got recruited; they got scholarships; they're taking away money from the sports and you should f’ing leave.’ All of it was really, really mean and racially motivated.

And so, you know how in college you can track the phone number back to a room. So the room that it was traced to was the quarterback for the football team. And I was like, ‘I thought we were friends,’ because he was like the top player and I was like the top girl, and we were supposed to be cool. And we were sweet all the time so when I took it to public safety, they said, ‘Oh, well send the message to us and we'll handle it.’ The message ‘disappears,’ and they're just like, ‘You know, well the person, it was somebody who was a friend of his, he said he was drunk, but he wrote you this letter and said he was sorry and so you have to accept this letter…’

With her story, Rakita explains the other side of the coin that Jennifer and I were struggling to come to terms with – institutional racism and patriarchy: White teachers and administrators who tell students of color both what work they have to do, what punishments they have to accept when violating policies, and when they have been victimized, what counts as justice. Hearing Rakita’s story was powerful for the group, as it reminded all of us that power and authority can be very dangerous when wielded unfairly. All group members, regardless of race, were concerned that they might be complicit in similar oppressions against Aspen’s students, which further motivated everyone to commit to studying cultural competence, better understand the impacts of our language and actions, and make changes to the school community and policies so that patriarchy and institutional racism do not go unchecked. With these stories, the group
then began to explore the concept of cultural competence by engaging in a shared reading.

*Intro to Cultural Competence: Bridging Cultural Divides through Compassion*

To launch the PLC’s inquiry into cultural competence, I asked the participants to read Chapter 7 of Malcolm Gladwell’s (2013) *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. This chapter weaves together several case studies, each of which demonstrates the consequences of abuse and misuse of power. One of the case studies highlights the work of the New York City police department and its work with juveniles who reside in the underserved Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn and had been arrested at least one time in the previous twelve months. After cross-referencing databases, the police officer in charge of the program, Joanne Jaffe, enrolled 106 youths into J-RIP (Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program). She told the children:

> You’re in the program. And the program is that we’re going to give you a choice. We want to do everything we can to get you back in school, to help you get a high school diploma, bring services to your family, find out what’s needed in the household. We will provide job opportunities, medical – everything we can. We want to work with you. But the criminal conduct has to stop. And if it doesn’t stop and you get arrested for anything, we’re going to do everything to keep you in jail. I don’t care how minor it is. We are going to be all over you. (p. 210)

With this declaration, Jaffe establishes a zero-tolerance response to misbehavior by guaranteeing “dire consequences” (p. 211) for J-RIPpers who break the law. As a construct, zero-tolerance has been demonstrated to be ineffective – more on that in Chapter VI – but Jaffe “also did things that don’t sound like typical policing strategy. She spent a lot of time, for example, finding the right kind of officer to serve on the task
force. ‘I couldn’t just put any cop in there,’ she said, sounding more like a social worker than a police chief. ‘I had to have a cop that loves kids…’” (p. 212).

Her choice of personnel was of paramount importance, due to the community’s long-standing lack of trust towards the police. Jaffe would set up meetings with the families at churches, but no one would attend. She and her staff went door to door, and the families would respond by saying, “Fuck you. Don’t come into my house” (p. 212). Jaffe’s breakthrough didn’t occur until months later, when the day before Thanksgiving, the officers in the program chipped in to buy Thanksgiving dinner for one J-RIPper’s family. Inspired by this act of generosity from her staff, Jaffe then asked NYC police headquarters for the funds to buy turkeys for the families of all the J-RIPpers, and her request was approved. She and her team went from house to house and, while delivering the turkeys, would tell the families, “I know sometimes you hate the police. I understand all that. But I just want you to know, as much as it seems that we’re harassing you by knocking on your door, we really do care, and we really want you to have a happy Thanksgiving” (p. 214). This act of compassion, kindness, and generosity was followed by a Christmas toy drive, basketball games played between the J-RIPpers and the police officers, driving J-RIPpers and their families to doctors’ appointments, and hosting a large Christmas dinner for all J-RIPpers and their families. Thus, it was not the zero-tolerance policy and threat of incarceration that gave the program traction; rather, it was the empathy that Jaffe and her team demonstrated that turned the tide. In other words, this program was doomed for failure until Jaffe won the trust and support of the youth’s
families. And once the families became invested in the program, the results were astounding (p. 216-217):

![Graphs of Crime Reduction in Brownsville](image)

**Figure 9. Graphs of Crime Reduction in Brownsville**

While this case study is not based in a classroom or educational context, many parallels can be drawn. First and foremost, in underserved communities, families may view schools in the same way they view the police: as institutions that effectively maintain a social hierarchy and serve to oppress the children who are mandated to attend them (Freire, 1970; Bourdieu, 1974, 1986). When the longstanding issues of mistrust are fully considered, many common myths and stereotypes about poor, Black families are debunked: whereas dominant discourse suggests that parents aren’t involved with the school because they don’t care about their children’s education, a more accurate explanation of the rift accounts for the ways in which schools have been complicit with the maintenance of racial hierarchies. Nevertheless, this cultural deficit perspective perpetuates the mistrust between school and community, and until these walls are broken down, the home-school connection can never be fully and honestly achieved. As Gorski
(2015) suggests in his theory of equity literacy, effective teachers and schools “draw upon the resiliencies and other funds of knowledge accumulated by poor and working class communities, reject deficit views that focus on fixing marginalized students rather than fixing the conditions that marginalize students, and understand the structural barriers that cheat some people out of the opportunities enjoyed by other people” (p. 2, emphasis added).

Ultimately, this reading was intended to help the participants draw three fundamental conclusions. First, it is the responsibility of the teachers (and the school), as the holders of the institutional power, to establish legitimacy in the eyes and hearts of the community; thus, outreach and inquiry into the community are necessary components of cultural competence. Moreover, cultural competence is not something that can be accomplished solely within the classroom; student-teacher relationships are necessary but insufficient: J-RIP was not successful until the families supported it, and the same principle can be applied to schools. Second, the school, like the police force, cannot be seen as infallible: parents and families – particularly in a segregated neighborhood – have decades of history as evidence to fuel skepticism of the educational system at large, and Aspen in particular. Therefore, common assumptions and deficit perspectives must be identified and challenged in order for the faculty to view parents as partners, and not as adversaries to the school’s mission. Third, just as Jaffe knew a particular kind of police officer was necessary to promote J-RIP’s success, certain teacher beliefs and qualities (compassion, caring, empathy, and generosity) are prerequisites for cultural understanding and improved trust between the school community and the families it
serves. In summation, the work of the cultural competence PLC must encompass four overlapping domains: internal work among the participants to identify pejorative beliefs and assumptions that contribute to deficit perspectives; outreach that builds trust in the community and demonstrates genuine compassion and empathy; critical work that rewrites the policies and systems that strain the relationship between school and community; and collegial work that both supports and challenges faculty members, as they interrogate their own schema, burst their bubbles, and climb out of the safety – and blissful ignorance – of their own culturally determined ponds (Tatum, 1994; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997). With this reading to lean on, the PLC was tasked to create its mission statement, which would guide its learning, inquiry, and responsibilities for the academic year.

The PLC Road Map and Mission Statement: Where are we going? What are we doing?

After using *David and Goliath* (Gladwell, 2013) to start the process of developing grounded frameworks for and fundamental tenets of cultural competence, the group turned its attention to more specific questions and concerns that would guide the group’s work throughout the year. Each member was invited to jot down inquiries, topics, and (mis)understandings on post-it notes, which were then discussed, elaborated, and organized into a “road map.” In a sense, the group began to develop its own curriculum: it named the areas most important for study, so that student-teacher, family-teacher, and school-community relationships would strengthen. Jennifer succinctly framed this task to the group:
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The project of the community is ready to begin! So again, we are kind of going to talk about why we're here, what we'd like to learn about, and what our ideal outcome for this learning is. So while we're thinking and talking, everybody's going to have a couple of post-it notes so that you can write down questions that you have about our topic or things that you'd like to learn more about. These are going to go on another poster that we have, that's the PLC road map. So this will sort of give us guiding ideas for our discussions.

Jennifer’s phrasing effectively invites the participants to become invested in the work and the learning. The curriculum was not prescribed by school or administration, and the focus of the studies would meet the learners where they were and move them in the direction they deemed most significant. After a couple of minutes of thinking time, the group shared and discussed their inquiries and focuses for study. Significantly, the stories shared by the group at the beginning of the PLC heavily informed the “intersections” on the road map. Eager to share my area of interest, I began the conversation by referencing Rakita’s story from Hilltown College:

Rakita’s story, it really resonated with me. My first question is, are we doing anything like that to the kids? Inadvertently, are we ignoring their problems or making it a place where they feel like they aren't heard? We know most of the people here and all of the administrators are White. So there definitely could be this 'you're not listening to me because I'm Black thing.' I know that's not exactly what happened to you [Rakita], but that's one of the things I want to look at is at sort of a systemic institutional level.

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The rationale for this activity was predicated on Knowles’ (1984) four principles of andragogy delineated in Chapter I: (1) Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction; (2) Experience provides the basis for the learning activities; (3) Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life, and (4) Adult learning is more problem-centered than content-oriented. Though providing a preset curriculum to the group may have provided a linear route with a clear sequence and destination, doing so could have prompted disengagement, as the top-down nature of the curriculum would have removed the teachers’ personal interests and questions from the inquiry.
Jennifer was also affected by Rakita’s story, because she gravitated towards institutional racism and wondered in what ways she might be complicit in the oppression of the students and their families:

That sort of goes into mine because mine is what can I do to work to stop systemic institutional racism because we talked about it in things like this. We talk about it in school. You read about it. I feel like I don't perpetuate it, but am I actually doing anything to make the situation better?

Her comment is particularly important, because by asking, “Am I actually doing anything to make the situation better?” she theorizes that activism is a necessary component of cultural competence. In other words, a person cannot be culturally competent if she is passively working inside a systemically racist institution; instead, she must “work within and against the grain of policy mandates, curriculum narrowing, and the pervasive effects of neoliberalism” (Riddle & Cleaver, 2015, p. 1). Jennifer encapsulates this perspective with her next comment: “Am I doing anything to reverse the damage or just putting a band-aid on things while the kids in my room are suffering?”

Jennifer’s inquiry into her role prompted Ricki to consider another tenet of cultural competence: introspection and “assumption hunting,” in the service of promoting both internal and external changes. To do this, Ricki turned a critical eye towards social media. In the summer of 2014, three major events dominated posts on social media: the death of Robin Williams, the ALS “Ice Bucket Challenge,” and the death of Michael Brown, who was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Ricki piggybacked on Jennifer’s inquiry by referencing a posting on Facebook and applying it to her goal of educating herself and “popping her bubble”: 
Ricki: There's one article [on Facebook] that I was reading about, it's something about becoming a White ally and what you can do to not perpetuate things like that. I was reading it and I found it very interesting. Again, like because I try to educate myself because I do feel I live in this bubble. It's not something that I’ve discussed at like dinners or anything like that, but I’m trying to be more aware of it. Again, that's a reason of why I'm doing this is just trying to push myself.

Greg: The part that hit me was how everybody could post a million things when Robin Williams died, but Michael Brown? ‘Well, I don't know if I could say anything about this.’

Ricki: Exactly. It's just kind of like ‘what do you say?’ Like what message are you sending about the whole thing because not saying anything is agreeing with what they're doing, but how to go about it in a way that I don't know, it doesn’t feel comfortable… everybody being open about the differences that there are, because there obviously are differences, and how that's okay. So just I'm thinking as we're talking about this, I was thinking of that article.

This exchange further highlights two critical components of the work of the PLC. First, silence is assent to the status quo. It is for this reason that Black Lives Matter have suggested that White allies are no longer needed, but White accomplices are (Kohn, 2015). Allies can disapprove of the oppression and privately condemn those who subjugate peoples, but an accomplice acts and is essential to the movement. Ricki recognizes that, to be culturally competent, she needs to be an accomplice – an activist – but she admittedly lacks the language to engage and confront others who think and act in oppressive ways. Second, Ricki and I worked together to recognize that, for many people, racial injustice is something that is easier to ignore than to engage in, echoing Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) frame of minimization of racism. While Ricki seeks to become an accomplice, many people turned a blind eye to death of Michael Brown, and earlier that summer, Eric Garner. Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) frame of “minimization of racism,” in conjunction with confirmation bias, allows many people’s minds to interpret these deaths
as tragic, but just as isolated incidents that in no way reflect a deep-seated racism that has been woven into the American quilt. Thus, Ricki seeks to develop the conceptual tools and critical discourse necessary to confront the status quo and demand that the police shooting of an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, receive more thought and gravity than the suicide of comedian Robin Williams. Consequently, Ricki’s desire for social justice, and the role Aspen’s teachers can play in it, also are essential to the work of the PLC.

The third and final thematic stop on the road map deals with the significance of anger. As Audrey Lorde (1984) stated, “Anger used, does not destroy. Hatred does.”

When it was Dave’s turn to share his road map intersection, he said:

When we’re talking about institutional racism and how that is definitely an obstacle – how do you make [Aspen’s students] aware of it without making them resentful of it, or how do you make them realize the challenges they’ll have because of where they come from and their race without making them hate the system and hate what opportunities are actually there.

Dave, as a social studies teacher, wants to incite anger among his colleagues and students without devolving to hatred. This challenge is compounded, because due to the pervasiveness of American myths of liberalism, many students aren’t fully aware that the Civil Rights movement was not fully achieved with the March on Washington and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As Jennifer explains:

[Students] think things are a lot more equal than they actually are because I’ve said it like ‘Okay, here are things that we are working towards in the Civil Rights movement. Do you think we've gotten there?’ So many of them are saying, ‘yes, things are equal now,’ and it's like but they’re really, really not all the time. So I feel like I agree with what [Dave] said about making them aware of that without making them just give up before they even give it a try, and making them want to work towards justice without becoming angry in an unproductive way.
Thus, for faculty and students alike, this PLC seeks to incite and harness anger. If students and teachers have bought into the sanitized version of history that presents America as a meritocracy and colorblind society, then there would be no reason to be angry. On the other hand, however, if they see the Michael Brown case not as an aberration, but as a manifestation of a much deeper and insidious ideology, then action is critical. Ultimately, Ricki postulates that *cultural competence is social justice*:

> You’re angry but what are you going to do about it? Are you going to write a letter? Can we write a letter to the people in Missouri or to the family in Missouri who are affected? Just show them how to enact change.

“Anger used, does not destroy. Hatred does.” From this conversation, the PLC determined that part of its mission must be to enlighten the school community to the injustices that exist and provide courses of action so that the anger can be harnessed and utilized to effect change, both in the Aspen school community and in the larger society. To more specifically guide the group’s curriculum, learning activities, and projects, the PLC then was asked to elevate the road map into a clearly defined mission statement.

To provide the proper context for the mission statement, I offered the group this premise:

Mission statements are valuable for several reasons. First and foremost, they establish an overall purpose and rationale for the group. They also verbalize the values and culture of the team. Finally, they provide a level of focus so that members can recognize whether a certain line of inquiry or work will contribute to meeting the mission.

From the road map, the PLC identified, articulated, and discussed particular areas of focus that would guide the group’s inquiry and provide purpose for their collective efforts. Specifically, they discussed the need to develop the conceptual and discursive frameworks necessary to identify and challenge systemic racism; they recognized that
they needed to “go public” with their learning so that all members of the school community were “popping bubbles” and breaking barriers, and they sought to channel the anger that arises from oppression and injustice so that students and teachers alike could combat oppression in the local community and larger society.

To initiate the process of concretizing these abstract goals into more tangible “missions,” the group began by brainstorming answers to the following questions and recording them on a poster:

- What does our team want to be known for?
- What do we want to achieve as a team?
- What unique contributions can we make to the school?
- How will we know if we are achieving our goals?

These questions were meant to help the group conceptualize and enact several principles of andragogy. Most importantly, they offer the PLC autonomy to carve out their own pathway to learning, and the third and fourth questions help the group to consider how their work will be both action- and project-based. As the group discussed these questions, the following eight ideas were recorded on their poster:

1. Better understanding of trials/tribulations of students
2. Start a discussion [about culture, race, and racism] that seems not to happen
3. Make this topic part of our regular school discussions
4. Get first-hand accounts of neighborhood culture/Aspen culture
5. “Breaking the bubbles”
6. Connecting cultures of teachers/staff to students/families
7. Enlarging students’ worldviews
8. Continuing to expose students to new opportunities

This list is the culmination of the first three learning activities that the group took up: sharing personal stories, the reading about the J-RIP program, and the creation of the road map. For example, Ricki’s assertion that silence is assent to the status quo is reflected in
the second and third goals, and her desire to “pop her bubble” and self-educate is clearly represented in the fourth, fifth, and sixth objectives. What is more concealed is the group’s desire to incite anger and promote activism, though they are implied in the seventh and eighth intentions, since these objectives would push students to consider the idea that society is neither as fair as mainstream discourses suggest, nor as many students have been pushed to believe. As Jennifer expounded in the road map conversation, she seeks to make her students “aware of [institutional racism] without making them give up.” To this, Rakita responded, “I think anger is the natural reaction.” Therefore, the final two objectives can simultaneously prompt the natural reaction – anger – and offer opportunities for the emotion to guide social activism.

After brainstorming this list, the group was asked to prioritize, refine, and (re)group these purposes and in doing so, to pay particular focus to the verbs selected: since the verbs will govern the actions and objectives of the group, this diction is of utmost importance. As a group, the PLC decided that “exposing, connecting, and bridging” were the essential actions of cultural competence. Ricki, through her deep convictions, made it abundantly clear that this exposure cannot take on a patriarchal mechanism: exposure does not solely mean transporting Aspen’s students out of the neighborhood and allowing them to experience different geographic and socio-cultural contexts. Instead, the majority of the weight of the exposure rests on the shoulders of the faculty: until the teachers and staff invest in an understanding of the students, their families, their values (and the historical context that shaped their ideology and systems of belief), and the families’ insights into the educational and schooling experiences of their
children, racial and cultural tensions are likely to continue. Aptly, Ricki and Dave effectively challenged the myth of cultural deficiency:

Ricki: And I also think, it has to just not be about like, if our mission statement is to enlarge their world views I also think, it needs to include us, because we don't all have...

Dave: Yeah, because I would be concerned about saying, ‘expanding their world views,’ because that to me, sounds like a deficit. Like, ‘Well, there's something wrong with their worldview so we've got to make it bigger.’

Jennifer followed this statement by counter-intuitively critiquing a major deficit of White culture – its privilege. Because of the undertones of racial superiority and the many visible and invisible advantages offered White people because of their skin tone, Jennifer postulated that many White people have significant blind spots that do not allow them to see how their Whiteness has contributed to both their own personal successes (large and small) and to the suppression of people of color. In other words, the myths of meritocracy and a colorblind society are easily sustainable when evaluated from a position of power and privilege. Consequently, the PLC agreed that the mission statement must not focus solely on exposing students to new contexts, but must also demand that teachers understand their own role – and possible complicity – in a racially stratified society.

The final two actions, connecting and bridging, serve two complementary functions. By connecting, the group referenced the J-RIP outreach and the many opportunities the program offered for police and families to come together and interact in a social, non-threatening context. This harkens back to Jennifer’s and my fear of calling students’ homes: we lacked the personal connections necessary to feel comfortable reaching out, regardless of the reason for the phone call or note home. And without this personal connection, bridging cultures is a virtual impossibility. The term bridging is apt,
since there is no insinuation of assimilation.\textsuperscript{21} By definition, a bridge is a structure that connects two separate tracts of lands and allows people to travel from one side to another. With this metaphor in place, neither students nor teachers need to deny nor be ashamed of their own cultures, but through a better mutual understanding, can “border cross” (Anzaldua, 1987), get out of the pond, and seek to understand each other without reliance on assumptions and stereotypes.

The final phase of this activity was to collaboratively draft and publish the PLC’s mission statement. While the group continued to discuss verbiage and tell stories of burst bubbles and White privilege, Jennifer quietly drafted a mission statement to share with the group: “As a professional learning community, we will work to expose our Aspen community to each other’s cultural identities, construct bridges between staff, students, and families, and continue to enlarge our overarching worldviews.”

After hearing the statement read aloud, a new debate emerged about the use of the word “expose.” Dave contended that the word holds a negative connotation, and that the word “integrate” might be more appropriate:

Dave: You guys tell me. Is it like – ‘expose’ is one of those things? I don't know, for me it just sometimes has a negative connotation. ‘Integrate’ like to integrate the various cultures.

Rakita: Of our Aspen community. I like that.

Ricki: Don't you mean ‘expose’ by open up?

\textsuperscript{21} Before agreeing on the verb “bridging,” the group debated whether or not to use the word “merging” in the mission statement. Ultimately, it was not included, since merging references a “melting pot” approach to assimilation and acculturation. The PLC wanted to capture the idea that cultural differences are extant and acceptable, so there is no need to conglomerate the cultures into a hybrid that causes all individuals and groups to sacrifice components of their own cultural norms and systems of belief.
Jennifer: Yeah, that's true, though. I mean like, there's so much about their culture
that we don't know and there's a lot about our culture that they don't know. So,
integrate's not necessarily what we mean.

Dave: No, it is different. And ‘expose’ might be fine.

This dialogue reveals the group’s deep level of thinking and commitment to inquiry.

Whereas “integration” references a legal precedent that requires equal access to public
locations, it does not mandate different racial and cultural groups to learn about each
other and seek appreciation for diversity; all integration dictates is co-occupation of a
physical space. Still Dave’s objection was noted, and after bouncing around several ideas,
the group opted to replace the word “expose” with “enlighten.”

Finally, Rakita quickly noticed and took up Jennifer’s use of the possessive
pronoun “our.” Jennifer easily could have written “the Aspen community,” but by
replacing “the” with “our” she denotes a shared ownership – the teachers and staff are a
part of the community. While this may be interpreted as problematic, since asserting
membership in a group may be an act of White privilege – it is important to remember
that this is a mission statement: a series of objectives that the group is working towards.

Jennifer – and the group – agreed that ACS cannot be what Martin Luther King, Jr.
(1966) referred to as a “beloved community” without the teachers first becoming
members of the community. With this sentiment in mind, the PLC session concluded with
the posting of the group’s newly minted mission statement: “As a professional learning
community, we will work to enlighten our Aspen community to each other’s cultural
identities, construct bridges between staff, students, and families, and continue to enlarge
our overarching worldviews.” Fortified with its newly minted mission, the PLC was
equipped to begin the process of converting its vision into a reality.
A Case of (In)Action: The Deep Pervasiveness of Racism’s Permanence

The third session of the Cultural Competence PLC occurred on August 29, 2014 – four days before the students returned to school on September 2nd. Because Eric Garner’s police encounter resulted in his death on July 17th and Michael Brown was shot and killed on August 9th, we expected students to return to school thinking about and discussing these events. And since it was part of the mission of the PLC to enlighten themselves (and others) to different viewpoints and build bridges to student culture and community, a large chunk of this PLC session was spent considering these current events and how they might be taken up with the students and their families, both in official curriculum and in the second classroom (Campano, 2007).

To open the session, participants read articles about the victims and their fates. Each presented a White supremacist viewpoint, highlighting the “troubled” history each victim had with the law and defending the use of force implemented by the responding police officers. The first article depicted Michael Brown as a “racist and thug” (Scott, 2014), since he posted music videos in which he used inappropriate language and was seen smoking marijuana. The second article (Dietl, 2014) staunchly defended the police’s actions with Eric Garner, stating that the officers followed protocol to a “T,” even when Garner was on the ground, stating, “I can’t breathe.” Dietl (2014) goes a step further and claims, “Nor was this tragic accident a racial incident. Police officers have no color. They’re not black, white, Hispanic or whatever: They’re a cohesive group of men and women who put their life on the line every day for the protection of the law-abiding citizens of this great city” (emphasis in original). Drawing on colorblind discourse, Dietl
attempts to portray police officers as people who are, somehow, unaffected by the socio-cultural and historical context that has segregated the country and stratified society; they are free of all prejudice and bias. After reading these two pieces, Dave, Jennifer, and Rakita recognize the paternalistic and racist nature of this mode of thinking:

Dave: Is the point of cracking down on small crimes like selling weed to keep the neighborhood from going further down that road? Tell officers not to enforce minor laws and the surrounding community would grow more dangerous? And I think about relating it to our situation and it’s not necessarily true.

Jennifer: I just feel like there's not respect for life as much in situations like these. It seems acceptable for someone to die because then you can go back and dig through and find all this other stuff that they've done wrong: ‘So it really is a benefit to society that we no longer have these people on the street.’

Rakita: And you can say whatever you want about the Garner case. There is no one that can make the case for the Michael Brown thing for that not just being totally fucked up from the get-go. I don't care if he smokes weed. I don't care if he stole a few cigarettes, because he was unarmed, either back turned, hands up, shot six times, twice in the head and then his body left on the street for hours in the sun. There's nothing that is okay in that scenario or that can be put back on, ‘Well, the cops were unsafe or this was that or whatever.’ And then like the New York Post, this one says, ‘Police officers have no color.’ That's bullshit.

Dave’s comment effectively captures the cultural deficit thinking popularized in America: without laws and constant vigilance by the police, chaos is guaranteed to ensue, since certain individuals and groups (usually poor and of color) lack both self-discipline and respect for society. He further extends the analogy to consider whether the same ideology pervades ACS: if teachers aren’t “tough” on all behavioral infractions, will students completely disregard all rules and authority? Dave states this isn’t “necessarily true,” but many zero tolerance policies – Aspen’s included – have stemmed from this logical fallacy.
During the same exchange, Jennifer’s and Rakita’s insights explicate the next level of this problematic thinking – that since Michael Brown had “dirt” dug up on him, the police are somehow vindicated for the shooting of an unarmed teenager. This line of logic, while popular, discredits the value and sanctity of human life, and it was not lost on the PLC that Aspen’s students had to both process and make meaning from the tragic events and the disturbing “blame the victim” responses that followed.

To that end, the group was charged with designing a curriculum experience that would offer an opportunity for students to think through their understandings and emotions about the subject, while simultaneously advocating for change – so that relationships between students and authority (whether teachers or police officers) would be rational, non-violent, and productive.

The group’s first idea was to invite police officers into the building – in plain clothes, to remove the symbolic aspect of power and authority. They wished to establish the type of relationship children in the J-RIP program had with the officers in Brooklyn. Ultimately, the PLC contended that if the officers saw the humanity in the children, and vice versa, then the potential for conflict would be minimized. Dave connected this idea succinctly:

Why don't they [students and police officers] have these types of conversations in a small group, how do you feel about? And not in the badge and the blue, just dress normal. The uniform is a show of authority and it puts a guard up to a lot of people. I will say to a lot of our kids, for me it does. Unless I know the cop, I'm not just going to have a normal conversation with a cop about normal things when he's in his uniform. So how they're portrayed in people's minds is a big part of their job and maybe that's something that as a society or a culture, whatever you want to say, needs to be addressed as well…That was what was interesting about the person who was running that J-RIP program like a social worker; she wasn't
This traditional cop. She just thought about things differently… This might be some kind of cool function at the school, which could build healthier relationships with authority outside the school, which actually might help build relationships with authority inside the school.

This proposal completely aligns with both the principles of andragogy and the group’s mission statement: they are designing the learning experience themselves; it arose from the knowledge and experiences of the participants; it is project-based, and it accomplishes the objectives of enlightening, connecting, and bridging. This type of interaction—much like the J-RIP program—holds the potential to shift the thinking of both the police officers and the students: students may begin to form positive relationships and question certain stereotypes about the police, and officers can better understand the fear and anger that many youths experience as they witness interactions between police and people of color. As Dave says, “And understanding what the kids’ idea is of cops, and cops’ idea is of the neighborhood and what their job is and what they are actually trying to do, and what the kids are being told what to do.” In this way, Dave is proposing that the PLC, and ACS at large, serve as cultural mediators who help students and police officers engage in an honest dialogue, step out of their respective ponds, and empathize with each other. Excited by Dave’s proposal, the PLC spent more time considering how the events of the summer may have impacted the students, and what the school’s response to these tragic events could be. Simply, the PLC “popped the bubble” of the notion that the school’s sole responsibility is to provide academic knowledge and skills. Instead, this PLC identified the complicated and often contentious relationship that exists between marginalized communities and institutional authorities. And by brokering this conversation between students, police, and potentially parents, the
teachers will gain valuable insights into the students’ cultures and their views towards authority. Since cultural competence necessitates inquiry, these types of discussions are fundamental to build connections and bridges across various cultural groups.

Before the session ended, discursive space was opened for group members to pitch other ideas they had to help students make meaning from the summer’s events, build positive relationships with authority (including their teachers), and impact change in the larger community. With this invitation, Jennifer proposed an idea that gained a lot of energy:

Jennifer: This might not be here or there, but I don't remember if we talked about this in here, but I wasn't talking about it at lunch about how the ice bucket challenge is driving me crazy because everybody is talking about that and no one is talking about stuff like this [Brown and Garner]. So what if we created some sort of Aspen challenge?

Rakita: Oh! I love it!

Greg: To raise awareness. Social, racial.

Jennifer: Yes!

Rakita: So how do you nominate? What’s the challenge? I think that idea’s awesome!

Jennifer: And then what if we also did – because for the ALS challenge, you raise money for a particular thing. If we were in addition to raising awareness, if we wanted to do some sort of fundraiser, would we donate money to the ACLU?...If we did, because I’m thinking, I’m trying to incorporate community involvement too...We could invite police officers, firemen, the whole community.

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22 The ALS ice bucket challenge stormed across social media in the summer of 2014: A person would dump a bucket of ice on her/his head, donate $10 to ALS, and then nominate another person to do the same. The challenge was completed by millions of people, and over $115 million was raised for the ALS Association. While the PLC was in no way condemning this successful fundraising effort, they wished a parallel effort existed to raise awareness of and to fight against the racial inequities in American society. Thus, this Aspen challenge was conceived as a way to harness anger and promote social justice.
With this seed of an idea planted, the group began to discuss the logistics of the challenge: who would be involved, whether would people have to pay to be part of the challenge, and, importantly, what people would actually dump on their heads! The group’s concern with the ice bucket challenge was that the connection between ice and ALS was unclear, so the teachers would want all participants of the Aspen Challenge to recognize the symbolic significance of the behavior required in the challenge. Ricki suggested “plants of peace”: “Plant the idea in people’s heads about peace by planting a plant in every patch of grass around the neighborhood.” Rakita proposed that the challenge could be to wear glasses for the day, to promote the idea that people can “see” the injustices in the country. Jennifer, a literacy teacher, then proposed an academic twist to the challenge: “What if they [students] wrote something on a piece of paper, like they wrote about racial barriers and they ripped it apart?!”

The group unanimously supported the idea, and proposed that this challenge begin as a class activity: Each student would write down a personal or systemic racial or cultural injustice they identify in the world, such as having grammar publicly corrected or disproportionate incarceration rates. On camera, students would share their issues, rip up the papers, and dump the shreds over their heads. At the end of the video, the class would then nominate another class in ACS to take up the challenge. Ideally, through social media, other teachers (or families) in other schools would hear about and take up the challenge, creating a groundswell movement in which children across the city, state, and country productively express their anger and become spokespeople for change. To better
According to Hardy (2013), this type of experience helps youths address and heal “the wounds of racial trauma” (p. 24). Hardy explains:

Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche. Without a clear and descriptive language to describe this experience, those who suffer cannot coherently convey their pain, let alone heal. (p. 25)

To mend these “hidden wounds” (p. 27), Hardy offers a series of steps that can help youth cope with trauma incited by racial oppression. First, the children’s racialized experiences need to be affirmed and acknowledged; the adults in the children’s lives must accept “the premise that race is a critical organizing principle in society” (p. 27). Once racial trauma is acknowledged, the second and third steps are to create space for race and offer opportunities for racial storytelling, which “enables [children] to develop their voices and begin to think critically about their experiences growing up as youth of color” (p. 27). After giving children room to consider and narrate their racialized experiences, Hardy insists that adults validate the children’s experiences, and help them to externalize the devaluation that society imposes on them: “the process of externalization…helps youth of color exhale and expunge the societal toxins regarding who they allegedly are” (p. 28). The final step is titled “rechanneling rage” (p. 28), which is closely connected to PLC’s goal of “harnessing anger.”

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23 Hardy (2013) differentiates rage from anger: “Rage builds up over time as a result of cumulative suppressed emotions and voicelessness. It is distinguishable from anger, which is an emotion connected to immediate experiences. Rage is a very complex emotion that can appear as anger, explosiveness, sadness, and depression. Youth of color are often prescribed anger management interventions, while rage from the
insistence that children need not accept the status quo; rather, they find agency and empowerment to alter the social and historic norm:

Those who have rage are often enraged for good reasons. Thus, *the goal... is not to rid them of their rage but instead to help them be aware of it, gain control of it, and ultimately to redirect it. Rechanneled rage can be a powerful energy source helping youth of color to discover and cultivate what is great in and about them. It drives them to stand again after they have been knocked down, to try again after not succeeding, and to believe in themselves when all others around them fail to do so.* (p. 28, emphasis added)

Though no member of the PLC had read about racial trauma or the steps to ameliorate it, the group designed an experience for students that effectively addresses all of Hardy’s (2013) processes for uncovering, understanding, and resisting the racialized trauma imposed by society on children – a perfect example of ways teachers are able to synthesize their knowledges and experiences to generate theory and praxis.

As the session ended, the PLC members knew they had generated several proposals that would promote cultural understandings both within and beyond the Aspen community; their excitement and energy were palpable. Thus, their objective for the next session was immediately apparent – to specifically plan and coordinate these experiences for the students and school community. The problem was that the next session was scheduled a full four weeks later; over the course of the month, the momentum faded, and dominant discourse and ideology reigned in the group’s eagerness and willingness to transgress (hooks, 1994).

hidden wound of racial oppression remains unaddressed” (p. 26). The PLC was unaware of this conceptual differentiation at the time, but, in retrospect, given the students’ lifelong experiences with racism and oppression, the goal of the challenge was more aligned to the concept of rechanneling rage than of harnessing anger.
On September 26, 2014, the Cultural Competence PLC reassembled with the intention of creating and drafting a proposal to bring to administration.24 Four weeks prior, they eagerly discussed inviting police officers to talk informally with small groups of children. They brainstormed the idea of a Halloween trunk-or-treat, which would provide community members an easy opportunity to interact positively with service providers (police, firefighters, and EMTs). And they worked hard to conceptualize the “Ripping Up Racism Challenge,” which would begin at ACS but, through social media, could potentially “go viral.”

The group’s discussion started productively. They did not want to assume that all students have a functional definition of racism, so before beginning the challenge, they suggested having grade-level assemblies in which racism was defined, its history was delineated, and its current iterations presented. As they began to further discuss the content of the assemblies – and how they would look different in order to be developmentally appropriate across grade-levels, doubt unseated much of the group’s prior conviction. In a previous session, Jennifer discussed how many students believed that civil rights and equality had been achieved in the 1960s and, consequently, fully ascribed to the myth of meritocracy. During this session, Ricki wondered whether or not it is the school’s prerogative to proverbially pop this bubble:

I'm wondering, should we just change our approach? Because it's like if the kids are not even aware of racism, and I think maybe it's like we're bringing a subject to them that it doesn't seem necessary. They can say it affects them. You know what I mean? And I'm not saying that it shouldn't be brought up, but I wonder if this is something that – should this be staff and teacher with parents, or should we take a different approach completely with kids? Because if they don't feel like

24 Due to another commitment, I was not present at this session, but I did previously discuss with Jennifer the purpose of this session, and we talked through what should be included in the proposal.
they're discriminated against, is it something we should tell them? To bring
racism into the equation might not be the best thing for them.

Rakita pushes back on this proposal, arguing that the purpose of the PLC is not to ignore
racial injustices, but rather to help members of the ACS community empower themselves
to promote social and racial justice:

But isn't part of what we're doing trying to prepare [students] for what happens outside of Aspen... I also feel like they should also be aware that it's happening in places. Maybe not used to define their situation, but it is happening so that they can deal. Because I thought our overall goal was to get them to prepare themselves and arm themselves with knowledge, like if they get into a confrontation, they're able to speak their way out, instead of getting angry and not thinking through things, just say, ‘Oh, maybe make a connection, we talked about this in school and we met these police officers and we said, “This is what it may look like, and this is what I should do.”’

Despite Rakita’s resistance, she was ultimately overruled, and no proposal was created for administration’s review. Ultimately, the majority of the group determined that both teachers and students were too uncomfortable taking on issues of race and inequity, so inviting in officers and starting the challenge would place many teachers and students in compromising positions. Instead of enacting their ideas from August, Dave suggested a new tack for the PLC:

I think maybe meeting with teachers first. The other teachers who feel uncomfortable, because the whole reason why we’re meeting is to make people more comfortable in any way. And that's what I'm saying, a lot of people won't admit they're uncomfortable with it, but they won't wanna do it. And the reason is they're uncomfortable with it, but they won't admit they're uncomfortable with it because then they're – you're admitting a lot of things about yourself.

With this, Dave proposes that the group limit its mission to working with staff in the 2014-2015 year; he suggests that before teachers can take up issues of race and culture with their students, they must first be more aware of their own racial identity
development (Tatum, 1992). While this is a valid argument, the transience of Aspen’s faculty means that there will always be teachers on the faculty who are uncomfortable talking about race or who ascribe to dominant myths about equality in America.

Consequently, when I checked in with Ricki after the PLC session ended, I was disheartened to hear that neither the police roundtables nor the Ripping Up Racism Challenge would be taking place during the school year. Instead, the PLC decided to chunk the mission statement, and approach its components sequentially:

Jennifer: I feel like we have these really great ideas, but I think the reason that we feel like we’re kinda stuck today is ‘cause all of our goals seem really huge. Even our mission statement is really huge, so it says it's about connecting these things, right? Connecting and enlighten about cultural differences, right? So, why don't we sort of take our mission statement step-by-step? So our first piece of our mission statement is, ‘we will work to enlighten our Aspen community to each other's cultural identities.’ So why don't we start with that? Why don't we create a survey for students at various levels, ‘cause obviously little kids aren't going to fill out the same survey as big kids. Create a survey for staff and create a survey for families and start there… We don't even know each other's cultural identities. We know each other's [in the group] because we've talked in here, but what do our families consider their cultural identity? My idea of their cultural identity is not necessarily what they see themselves as, and it's their identity.

From my activist lens, this maneuver, while understandable, was a step in the wrong direction. Instead of taking calculated, intellectual risks and placing police officers at a table with students, and placing students at the center of a social media movement that plants seeds of doubt about our nation’s priorities, the PLC chose a “safe route” – an anonymous survey that, at best, could provide topical insights into the family’s systems.

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25 Many Aspen students had previously studied the Children’s Crusade of 1963 in Birmingham, so they were fully aware of the power children have when engaging in political activism and nonviolent protest.
of belief and worldviews. Nevertheless, this is a potential outcome of peer led PLCs: since they are responsible for determining their own path, they may not always follow the path that the coordinator expects or prefers. What was particularly troubling about this turn of events was the way Rakita’s objections were quickly overruled by three White members of the PLC. To Rakita, an essential element of the PLC was dialogue with and instruction of the students; to her, racial justice is a matter of life-and-death. For the White teachers, however, creating discomfort among children and staff was viewed as a larger concern than Rakita’s worries about student tensions with authority, and particularly police authority. And since consensus is a vital component of PLCs, Rakita’s objections were respectfully noted, but they were not acted upon. Ultimately, the work of the Cultural Competence PLC ended with the creation and collection of a family survey, and as would be expected after reading about the initial phases of the J-RIP program, few families participated, and likely many were wary about the reason the school was asking for such information.

Conclusion

Aspen’s cultural competence PLC can be read as a cautionary tale: these educators present the possibilities and limitations of both the PLC as a construct and the (mis)steps of studying issues as sensitive and complex as race and culture. While their work had minimal impact on the school, its students, or the surrounding neighborhood,
their time together was far from wasteful; they illuminated many important principles that will be introduced now and more fully discussed in Chapter VII.

Cross et al. (1989) define cultural competence as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (p. iv). Through their dialogue of the J-RIP program, the police officer roundtables, and the Ripping Up Racism Challenge, the PLC took up the project of imagining what Cross’s definition might look like both within and beyond a school predominately serving poor Black youth. The PLC envisioned ACS as a community hub that would provide safe and common space for all members of the neighborhood: parents, police, service providers, religious leaders, and, of course, students and teachers. Additionally, they recognized that integration is insufficient; open dialogue about identity, values, history, and socio-cultural context are necessary to “connect, enlighten, and bridge.” These three actions will not occur automatically when different groups are pushed into the same room (Tatum, 1997).

To create this educational setting – this hub – that fully honors, values, and respects students’ polyculturalities, teachers must necessarily fully interrogate their own blind spots, assumptions, values, and ideologies: prejudice is born of ignorance, so self-consciousness and personal edification are fundamental to building a democratic educational environment. For this reason, Dave made a strong point by saying that the group’s first step should have been to work with the teachers, so that they are more comfortable when engaging students with this challenging work. Nevertheless, comfort is
not the objective of activism; social justice is. Harnessing anger (or rage) before it turns to hatred – or perhaps worse, complacency – is.

As the PLC coordinator, I could have anticipated that the minimization of racism would rear its ugly head, cause paralysis, and persuade the group to take a safer route. After all, I knew that cultural competence was the least popular of the PLCs, which I interpreted as the staff’s collective unwillingness to talk about the elephant in the room. And I know that schemata as deeply as entrenched as Bonilla Silva’s (2006) four frames do not change and adapt without a serious struggle. Furthermore, no administrator was in the group supporting the PLC’s vision and reassuring them that making others uncomfortable is an acceptable part of the process; administrative absence spoke volumes. So while I was disappointed that the group canceled all its major initiatives, upon reflection, I am not surprised. From a position of power and privilege, it is easy to rationalize how introducing the Rip Up Racism challenge forces (mostly White) teachers to do something they may not want to and to enter conversations they may not be prepared to moderate. Thus, Rakita’s plea to engage students in the dialogue was overlooked, and consequently, the school did little to help students make sense of the summer’s events, advocate for themselves, and drive towards institutional change. While Audrey Lorde is right to be wary of hatred, a more silent killer may be complacency: Anger used, does not destroy. Complacency does. Cultural competence cannot exist when the status quo is critiqued, but not changed: cultural competence is activism. And therein lies the difference between an ally and an accomplice.
Just as the myths of meritocracy, colorblindness, and equal opportunity are woven deeply into the American ideology, so, too, are principles of punitive behavior modification: the entire criminal justice system is predicated on a system of deterrence. In other words, if the severity of the punishment outweighs the benefits of the infraction, rational people will choose not to commit the offense. However, incarceration and suspension rates show that there is a racial and cultural flaw to this theory. With that in mind, we turn now to a concept different from, but related to, cultural competence: Restorative Justice.
Chapter VI: Restorative Justice as Humanistic Discipline

People respond in accordance to how you relate to them. If you approach them on the basis of violence, that’s how they will react. But if you say, we want peace, we want stability, we can then do a lot of things that will contribute towards the progress of our society.

- President Nelson Mandela (2005)

All I’m saying is simply this: that all mankind is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be – this is the interrelated structure of reality.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1965)

You are going to be successful at influencing people if you are understanding of their circumstances and you are relating to them as equal. We’re all humans; we’re all in this together, kind of, so it’s not sympathy, so much as just being able to relate right, as a human being, as a fellow human being, and that it’s not a mystery how to do that, you know; it's not mysticism; it's not magic; it's simply relating to people and getting along with them, and then you are going to build relationships.

- Jaimie, Restorative Justice PLC Participant (2014)

Introduction

From the time I joined ACS’s faculty in 2009, student conduct and discipline were widely considered the most significant and challenging issues facing the school and its teachers. Fights in the schoolyard, cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms were all too common. Instances of profanity, insubordination, and disrespect exhausted and frustrated teachers, and, unfortunately, these behaviors prompted many excellent teachers to seek employment elsewhere. Thus, the impacts of student behavior were far-reaching and immeasurable: teachers spent significant amounts of time on behavior and discipline, which reduced the time available for academics – or fun! A downward spiral frequently
ensued, which ultimately resulted in academic underachievement for the students and professional frustration for the teachers.

ACS administration recognized that student behavior was negatively impacting morale, student achievement, and teacher satisfaction, so in the 2011-2012 school year, a merit-demerit system was instituted. In this disciplinary framework, students would carry cards with them, and when they committed a small behavioral infraction, they would be assigned a demerit. Conversely, when they exhibited one or more of the school’s values (growth, respect, and responsibility), they would receive a merit. Merits and demerits were attached to a consequence system: while merits could be redeemed for privileges and prizes, five demerits resulted in a recess detention and phone call home; ten demerits meant the school’s disciplinarian would write a letter home to the parents, outlining the infractions, and fifteen demerits (a full card) automatically resulted in a one-day suspension. Furthermore, if a student filled three demerit cards in a year (45 demerits), she would face a pre-expulsion hearing with the CEO of the organization.27 In addition to using demerits to attempt to deter small infractions, the school also listed “Level II” and “Level III” infractions in the Student Handbook. These behaviors, such as physical aggression, theft, sexual harassment, or bringing a weapon to school, would carry a minimum of a one-day suspension and could even result in police arrest or expulsion from the school.

27 The practice of pre-expulsion hearings for 45 earned demerits was quickly abandoned, since many students were surpassing this threshold by December. Consequently, students with many demerits continued to be suspended as they filled each demerit card.
So while it was never named as such, ACS was trending towards a zero-tolerance policy. Suspension rates were high, and while some teachers were satisfied that the school “was finally doing something about behavior,” there was no hard evidence to suggest that the usage of harsh punishments was effective: the students with high suspension rates in fourth grade were too frequently suspended in fifth grade. Moreover, there was anecdotal evidence indicating that the punitive measures were counterproductive; the students with behavioral issues often struggled academically (or is it vice versa?), so missing class time only further disenfranchised them from the school. One student, DaShaun, specifically expressed to me his feeling that the teachers didn’t care about him; if they did, they wouldn’t punish him so much. And since they didn’t care about him, he stated he didn’t care about them and was not concerned about disrupting their classes or following their rules. By hijacking a class, DaShaun was able to assert his own power and push back against the oppression he felt at the hands of the school. Without realizing it, this student was accurately describing the school-to-prison pipeline.

Knowing that Aspen’s discipline policies were doing more harm than good, I began to search for a different – and hopefully more democratic and humanistic – approach to student discipline. Clearly, zero-tolerance deterrence was at best ineffective and at worst destructive. Then, in the summer of 2012, I attended a seminar titled “Poverty and the Impact on the Classroom.” One of the speakers, Kevin Baker, represented the Physicians for Social Responsibility, and he talked about how he instituted Youth Courts in Philadelphia high schools to promote mental health and positive relationships among students, their peers, their teachers, and their academic
experience. Though the program existed only in high schools, I spoke to Kevin after the seminar, and we discussed the possibility of launching a Youth Court with my fifth graders at Aspen. He agreed, given the disciplinary struggles at Aspen, that a Youth Court might positively affect disenfranchised students, so the following fall, we worked together with my class to teach the roles of the Youth Court, the procedures, the principles of restoration, and the differences between punitive consequences and restorative ones. And by January of 2013, our Youth Court was “open for business”!

As discussed in Chapter II, the key difference between restoration and logical consequences is the encounter: the moment in which the person or people affected by the offense get to explain how the action impacted them. This opportunity for the offender to experience empathy is of key significance, since she may not fully consider how her choices disturb others’ schooling experience. In addition to this community-building component, Kevin and I ensured that each offender’s “lawyers,” when cross-examining a teacher, would ask questions that would force the teacher to compliment the student, and say what she likes, admires, and respects about the child. Another key element of restoration is reintegration, so the offending student had to know that the teacher was not an adversary, but an ally. To me, this necessary aspect of restoration directly connected to my conversation with DaShaun, who truly believed his teachers disliked and disrespected him, and thus, his response to talk back and disrupt was a logical response. By mandating, through clever questioning, that the teachers compliment the offending student, the disenfranchisement felt by certain students could begin to atrophy. And as that occurs, reintegration, restoration, and counter-narratives are possible.
Our Youth Court experiment had strong success that first year. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to address disciplinary issues in a more positive venue, and students expressed that they were empowered by the fact that, during the hearing, they were fully able to tell their side of the story – without being interrupted or immediately countered by a teacher or administrator. Kevin and I agreed that Youth Court and its accompanying principles of restoration were completely developmentally appropriate for elementary age students. What we quickly came to understand, however, was the Youth Court was the only legitimized platform for restorative justice at Aspen: demerits, detentions, and suspensions were still frequently employed, because teachers were not equipped with the knowledge, conceptual tools, and institutional backing needed to incorporate restorative justice into their daily classroom practices and, consequently, were still reliant upon dominant ideology regarding disciplinary practices. With this readily apparent need, the Restorative Justice PLC quickly filled to capacity and began their studies in the summer of 2014.

**Initial (Un)Learning: The Myth of Excessive Force**

When Aspen initiated its harshly punitive, zero-tolerance policy, many teachers were pleased that the disciplinary system finally had some “teeth.” They felt that the students had been able to get away with too much, and now that there were serious penalties assigned for infractions, students might not be so quick to “cross the line.” This was a completely natural response, since it mirrors the American penal system and dominant discourse, which proposes that if punishments are swift and severe, people will logically avoid behaviors that precipitate significant consequences. Thus, serious
offenses, such as fighting or cursing at a teacher, were met with harsh responses such as suspension, athletic probation, or loss of privileges (such as school dances or field trips), with the hope that the student would not repeat the behavior, since she would want to avoid a similar or more severe punishment.

To begin the Restorative Justice PLC, it was immediately necessary to challenge this dominant ideology – the same ideology that bastions zero tolerance policies. While many teachers readily admitted that punishments don’t effectively curb misbehavior (since the same students were repeatedly suspended), their adaptive unconscious and schema were hard at work, nudging them to believe that if consequences were just a bit more severe, students would stop breaking school and classroom rules. To debunk this myth, I asked the PLC to begin their inquiry by reading the same chapter from *David and Goliath* (Gladwell, 2013) that the Cultural Competence PLC perused; it was not surprising that the chapter was relevant to both PLCs!

In addition to describing the J-RIP program, how Jaffe’s threats proved ineffective, and how the program only gained traction when the participants and their families truly trusted the officers and the program, this chapter also discusses the relationship between authority and resistance by analyzing the events in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when tensions among Catholics and Protestants peaked.

To quell the violence in Belfast, the British Army placed the Catholic neighborhood of Lower Falls under curfew, and soldiers searched homes for illegal weapons. As one citizen stated, “The Brits, they’ll turn on us. They say they’re here to
protect us. They’ll turn on us – wait and see” (p. 201). With this sentiment, this individual expressed the tenuous nature of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The former experiences fear and anxiety, while the latter understands that it yields the power and the authority necessary to subjugate peoples. The comparison to schools should not go unnoticed.

As the strife in Northern Ireland intensified, two economists, Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, Jr., published a report titled *Rebellion and Authority* (1970), which studied insurgencies and drew this conclusion:

> Fundamental to our analysis is the assumption that the population, as individuals or groups, behaves ‘rationally,’ that it calculates costs and benefits to the extent that they can be related to different courses of action, and makes choices accordingly…Consequently, influencing popular behavior requires neither sympathy nor mysticism, but rather a better understanding of what costs and benefits the individual or the group is concerned with, and how they are calculated. (Leites & Wolf, 1970, p. 30)

Basically, Leites and Wolf argue that if the cost of a behavior is too expensive, then a rational human will not engage in the behavior: “If you were in a position of power, you didn’t have to worry about how lawbreakers felt about what you were doing. You just had to be tough enough to make them think twice” (Gladwell, 2013, p. 202). In other words, if the consequences are stringent enough, then insurgency and misbehavior will cease. Compassion is irrelevant, and it does not matter how the citizens view those who hold the authority. As Gladwell puts it:

> The British Army went to Northern Ireland with the best of intentions… to serve as a peacekeeper between Northern Ireland’s two warring populations…In Northern Ireland, the British made a simple mistake. They fell into the trap of believing that because they had resources, weapons, soldiers, and experiences that dwarfed those of the insurgent elements that they were trying to contain, it did not matter what the people of Northern Ireland thought of them. (p. 203)
This cost-benefit analysis, however, ignores the reality that people do not always make decisions based on simple economic principles. Rather, people – including students – respond to authority in different ways. If they see the authority as legitimate, they will often respect it and follow expectations. If, however, the authority is seen as illegitimate, then “disobedience can be a response to authority” (p. 206). Moreover, Gladwell draws on a classroom example to postulate that “if the teacher doesn’t do her job properly, then the child will become disobedient” (p. 206). Thus, one way to interpret misbehavior is as a legitimate response to illegitimate uses of authority (Delpit, 2012). So what makes authority legitimate? The principle of legitimacy (Tyler, 2006) has three tenets:

First of all, the people who are asked to obey authority have to feel like they have a voice – that if they speak up, they will be heard. Second, the law has to be predictable. There has to be a reasonable expectation that the rules tomorrow are going to be roughly the same as the rules today. And third, authority has to be fair. It can’t treat one group differently from another. (Gladwell, 2013, p. 207-208)

In the context of a school, this means that teachers (and other disciplinarians) must be concerned about what students think of them. If the child believes she is not being heard, that expectations are unpredictable, or certain groups are being treated differently from others, then insurgence is to be expected: “When the law is applied in the absence of legitimacy, it does not produce obedience. It produces the opposite. It leads to backlash” (Gladwell, 2013, p. 222).

As criminologists Doob and Webster (2003) concluded, “A

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28 During the August 29th PLC session, one participant theorized that Aspen’s administration was at least partially responsible for delegitimizing teachers’ authority, since there was a perception of administrative unfairness among the students and teachers: “I think sometimes our admin is de-constructive to our restorative justice. They have favorites, and their relationships [with certain students] are too tight…” Another teacher questioned the predictability of administration’s expectations and use of disciplinary measures: “I felt like last year some fifth graders were occasionally treated more like when they were little, like a kindergartner, in that they were given way more chances on certain behaviors than I think a child
reasonable assessment of the research to date – with a particular focus on studies conducted in the past decade – is that sentence severity has no effect on the level of crime in society” (p. 143), and “there is no consistent and plausible evidence that harsher sentences deter crime” (p. 190). Thus, despite the British Army’s overwhelming presence, strict guidelines, and institution of martial law, the violence and animosity only grew in Belfast: “In 1972, there were 1,495 shootings, 531 armed robberies, 1,931 bombings, and 497 people killed” (Gladwell, 2013, p, 223). Quite simply, the stricter the laws and punishments the British Army imposed, the more “unruly” the citizens of Belfast became; the costs were irrelevant when their civil rights were at stake. For many of Aspen’s students, avoiding punishments was also irrelevant, since, in their eyes, the policies and their enforcement lacked legitimacy.

While I knew that one reading would not dispel decades of messaging regarding the efficacy of punishments, it did plant the seed for a counter-narrative – one that suggests that poor Black children do not need more rules, harsher punishments, and impersonal, “objective” treatment. Rather, the school must focus its disciplinary practices on legitimacy: opening space for students to be heard, ensuring that the guidelines and expectations are predictable, and that there is trust that power and authority will be wielded fairly. It is hard to argue that Aspen’s zero tolerance policies follow the principles of legitimacy, since due process did not exist, and children in first grade were being suspended for disrespectful language. But perhaps the same students who resisted

who is eleven needs. Or, there was a lot of like, reflecting and remembering how cute a child was when they were in kindergarten, which isn't helpful to a child when they're in fifth grade.” Therefore, the teachers contended that, at the school’s highest level of authority, illegitimate practices were apparent, which would, in part, explain why students’ responses to authority were unpredictable.
zero tolerance policies could respond positively to more restorative approaches. With this reading as kindling for the fire, the Restorative Justice PLC set off on their project to make Aspen’s authority more legitimate and to welcome back students who were in danger of entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Uncovering and Understanding the Principles of Restorative Justice

Much like the Cultural Competence PLC, the Restorative Justice group spent their initial time together considering their questions, areas of concern, goals, and mission. As the group discussed the avenues they wished to pursue, they quickly recognized that a restorative justice approach is a community-based approach. In other words, would restorative justice be optimally effective at school if punitive measures are utilized at home? Can Aspen’s disciplinary system *legitimately* function if some teachers are implementing restorative practices, while others rely on more traditional approaches? Would it be possible for students to initiate restorative approaches on their own, without the prompting of an adult? As the group considered these questions, they named and recorded four specific goals they wished to incorporate into their mission statement:

1. “Increasing the students’ ability to become more self-aware, to know what they’re saying, and how they’re saying it.”
2. “Teaching staff to facilitate restorative agreements.”
3. “…Providing information to the families about incorporating restorative justice at home.”
4. “Relying less on punitive consequences…not to be in a culture of punishment, but in a culture of restoration.”

The Restorative Justice PLC was comprised of nine teachers: three men and six women, all of whom are White. They taught a variety of subjects: fourth and fifth grade general education, fifth grade special education, middle school math and science, middle school special education, and physical education. Like Cultural Competence, no administrators opted to join this PLC.
Equipped with these goals, the PLC recognized that restorative justice’s success is predicated on buy-in from all stakeholders: the students, the teachers, the administration, and the community. When the stakeholders agree that restorative justice is a more humanistic and effective approach than punishment, a culture shift (Goal 4) becomes a distinct possibility. To that end, Ted drafted a succinct mission statement that captured the group’s priorities: “We will research concrete strategies, empower teachers to facilitate restorative agreements, and explore pushing our model out into the community.” As in the Cultural Competence PLC, verb selection was stressed, and these three – research, empower, and explore – all align with principles of inquiry and andragogy. It was of key significance that the third clause (explore pushing our model out into the community) was hedged. Simply “pushing the model” is an act of colonialism, as it communicates to the community that their disciplinary methods are somehow inferior, so the school is instructing them to adopt this new/better approach. And even though the group was hopeful that restorative justice would become part of the home-school connection, to immediately insist upon it would be patriarchal and culturally insensitive.

Although their first objective was to explore concrete restorative practices, the group had many questions about the nature of restorative justice, and how it is similar to and different from other disciplinary approaches. To illuminate restorative justice in action, the PLC reviewed the true story of “The Turkey Prank,” (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005) in which a group of five graduating high school seniors decided to release turkeys into their school at night. However, the prank quickly got out of hand, and a terrible mess was made in the school, which placed a tremendous burden on the custodian. As the case
traveled through the legal system, a judge determined that “the small community had huge wounds the legal system could not handle, so the case was referred to a local restorative justice program for conference” (p. 5). A restorative conference was scheduled, and 35 individuals attended, each of whom was in some way impacted by the events of that evening. Each participant was afforded an opportunity to speak, and the boys were able to explain their errors and beseech forgiveness from the community. At the end of the conference, the custodian – who originally was reticent to attend what he called a “kumbaya” meeting – addressed the five boys and said, “The next time you see me in the street, you should look me in the eyes, because I will remember you for who you are tonight, and not for what you did last week” (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 6).

When asked how Aspen’s administration would have responded to this sort of offense, Anne immediately stated, “I think it probably would have been a suspension, and there would be no discussion.” In other words, Anne speculates that the school would take a zero-tolerance, criminal justice approach to this offense: the offenders did something wrong, so harm needs to be inflicted on them in return. Conversation is unnecessary, and they do not need to think deeply about how their choices impacted others in the community. Jaimie, however, picked up on the significance of the students having to encounter and apologize to the custodian: “I was particularly touched when I heard the story about the custodian. I feel like our kids tend to see them [the custodial staff] as invisible a lot, and when the school gets messed up a lot, somebody has got to clean that up, and I feel like, maybe our school, we’re not that specific.” To Jaimie, the encounter between the offenders and victim was critical, since the relationship between
the boys and the custodian could not be repaired without it. With the mess cleaned, 
apologies offered and accepted, and empathetic statements made by affected parties, this 
incident came to a close and the community was made whole again, which would not 
have occurred had the boys been fined, placed on probation, or incarcerated. To close this 
discussion, the PLC was shown this chart (Zehr, 2002, p. 19), which summarizes the 
major philosophical differences between criminal justice and restorative justice:

![Two Different Views](chart.png)

**Figure 10. Two Different Views: Criminal Justice and Restorative Justice**

After analyzing the “Turkey Prank,” the group then sought a more local example 
and discussed a specific case that occurred at Aspen. While upset, a male student 
punched out two interior windows, shattering glass and requiring the windows to be 
replaced. At first glance, this appears to be a “victimless crime,” since no one was 
injured. As per Aspen policy, the student was suspended for this behavior, but the group 
wondered what a restorative approach to this violation would look like. Cathy asked, 
“from the restorative justice perspective, what do you think, do you think that it should be
like, ‘At 3:15, you're going to go with [the custodian], and pry out the molding, and put the windows back in’?

Since the central focus of restorative justice involves an “effort to put things right,” the student’s involvement of the repair of the window is completely appropriate and attuned to the restorative approach. Moreover, Melanie recognizes that working alongside the custodian is insufficient, as it does not address the harm that was inflicted on the children and adults who observed this violent outburst: “But just fixing it, just physically fixing it, is definitely appropriate, but the damage is more than just physical, affecting all the people who witnessed it.” This conversational turn is crucial to the conceptual development of the group, as it confronts traditional beliefs that a wrongdoing typically has only one victim – the person who was directly affected by a wrongdoing. As Martin Luther King (1965) expressed time and again, “What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” By broadening the conception of what counts as victimization, the teacher can more fully account for the needs of everyone who was impacted by the incident.

In addition to making amends with the victims, Cathy theorizes the growth that could occur in the child who rebuilds the window alongside the custodian:

I think what Earl said earlier was about the kid not wanting to look people in the eye because they felt ashamed, right? So it can feel cool for a second to punch out a window but at the end of the day, you're ultimately going to feel better about yourself and more proud for having built a window than having broken one. Like that's just going to feel better inside. And so if that kid now every day walks past that window that he knows he built with [the custodian], he has a sense of pride and if anyone else tries to mess with that window, he's going to be like 'Don't touch that window. I built that window.' So now he's in the best state with his pride. He now not only learned a new skill which is awesome and kids take pride in like 'I did something.' Like 'I was successful.' Every kid wants that feeling. You learn something new, working with tools is fun; it's cool; it’s fun and now he has a relationship with…another adult in the building who he has a connection with
outside the classroom, who when something goes wrong, he knows he can go to them and talk.

Cathy is able to imagine all the possible outcomes that can occur when restorative justice is executed properly. In addition to repairing the harm that occurred, the student may learn new knowledge and skills, increase pride in her school, and create bonds with adults that she may have previously looked over or looked past. As Melanie, speaking as a true educator, summarizes, “They learn way more from that than just staying home for the day.”

With this group case study complete, the facilitator transitioned the group to the session’s closing activity, which aligned to the first clause of their mission statement: uncovering concrete strategies. To do so, the PLC looked over three common classroom scenarios, and had to think what the traditional punishment would be, and how restorative practices could be used to replace punitive measures. The following think sheet aligns to the continuum of disciplinary approaches delineated in Chapter II: punishment, logical consequences, solutions, and restoration. The group was able to use common scenarios to see how the final three approaches are all compatible and can work together to help offending students repair harm, prevent future infractions, and grow from the restorative experience.
From Punitive to Restorative

Look at the following common occurrences, and try to brainstorm what the most logical punishment, consequence, solution, and restoration would be for each infraction.

1. A student arrives late to class and disrupts the lesson. When the teacher asks for a pass, s/he responds, “I don’t have one.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Restoration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The student looks away and continues on with a side conversation.

2. A student talks during a test. The teacher makes an announcement to the class that there cannot be any talking during an exam. A few minutes later, the student talks again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Restoration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. Unbeknownst to the teacher, two students are gesturing at each other and name-calling under their breath. A fight erupts in the classroom, completely catching the teacher off-guard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Restoration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Figure 11: From Punitive to Restorative Think Sheet**

Without any difficulty, the PLC was able to describe what the school sanctioned punishment would be for these offenses. And when envisioning what restorative steps could be taken to hold the child accountable for her/his choices, the members excelled!

For example, in scenario 1, the school-sanctioned punishment for tardiness was a demerit, which may or may not prompt the student to argue about the validity of the punishment. The PLC determined the logical consequence was for the student to go back to the previous class to retrieve a pass. However, since the student has already missed instruction, Melanie suggested, “I would say that you don’t send them back during class…by the end of the day, or something. On their own time,” which offers the student the opportunity to prove she had a valid reason to be late to class, but does not result in missing additional learning or further exclusion from the classroom community. A possible solution would be for a friend to walk with the student the next day to make sure
they both arrive on time. And to restore the wrong, the student will need to make up the missed work, and quickly apologize to the class for disrupting the lesson. When mapped onto the three principles of legitimacy, it is clear that this approach to the infraction allows the student to be heard (she can retrieve a pass later and explain why she was late), is predictable (apologizing for disruptions can become normalized), and fair (no punitive measures are enacted upon the child).

In just three PLC sessions, significant (un)learning and framework development occurred among these educators. Through Leites & Wolf’s (1970) misconceptions, they learned that sheer power and force are unlikely to engender adherence to rules, and that the severity of punishments enacted may, in reality, be negatively correlated to compliance. Since the group was so focused on practical usages of restorative justice, a case study approach was adopted that allowed the members to analyze the true “Turkey Prank,” unpack a similar incident at Aspen (the window punching), and reframe three common classroom scenarios, each of which could be effectively addressed through restorative practices. Clearly, these teachers adopted a believing stance towards restorative justice, and as the year progressed, they would have more opportunities to advance their mission and resist the temptation to revert to traditional disciplinary measures. Nevertheless, some old habits die hard!

Entrenched Schemata at Work: Reversion to Punishment

A month-long gap existed between the third and fourth PLC sessions, and when the group reconvened, the participants were given time to discuss their past month’s disciplinary practices. More specifically, they were asked to reflect upon both their
incorporation of restorative practices and times when traditional punishments were employed:

Ted: Were there times when you used punishments? Remember when we were talking about punitive practices, in this case – to address misbehavior? I will start and say that yes, in the last three weeks, I've chosen many times to issue punishments and have even managed to take a restorative practice of taking a break from our responsive classroom and turn that into a punishment almost completely accidentally.

When Anne pushed Ted to consider why he was employing punitive measures, he responded:

Because it satisfied my need for vengeance…I’m mad. I did not go to teaching school to break up fights or to stand between kids when they are kicking their desks. So I was really upset. I was like, ‘You’re really going to waste the $40,000 [for tuition] and the two years of my life? I will make sure you don’t get recess!’ That’s my life.

Ted, in his satiric way, pinpoints a very common, socially-endorsed, and often unaddressed response to student misbehavior – revenge. And while punishments do not repair harm or restore the relationship, they do satisfy the desire for vengeance, which is an unspoken pillar of the criminal justice system: “Justice requires the state to determine blame (guilt) and impose pain (punishment)” (Zehr, 2002, p. 19). Thus, Ted was simply reflecting and enacting dominant ideology, even though he was fully aware that his decisions defied his conscious belief that punishment is counter-productive.

Melanie also reflects upon her usage of punishments and how her entrenched schemata allow her to reinterpret the punitive measures as restorative:

It's so funny because I've been a parent to my kids who are older than almost everybody. I feel like I can -- what's a day without justification? So I could almost justify any punishment and my mind twisted into a restorative practice. So one of my favorite ones is, ‘You waste my time, I'm going to waste your time. You're
going to understand how meaningful time is and blah, blah, blah.’ So I've done a couple of lunch detentions! Melanie interprets “wasting” a student’s time as a logical consequence to disrupting class, but, with this move, she conflates consequences with restoration. The intention of a lunch detention is to do harm to the student’s social life and remove joy from her day, not to repair the wrong and fix both student-teacher and peer relationships. What is missing in this anecdote is the encounter: the moment where the offender faces those affected by the behavior, and all stakeholders are afforded the opportunity to discuss the impact of the event. This cannot occur in the context of a lunch detention, so it became clear that the group needed to further advance the first two components of its mission: “To research concrete strategies and empower teachers to facilitate restorative agreements.” Since ACS’s Youth Court was already operational and available for utilization by all faculty and staff, the PLC sought to gain familiarity with the model and advise other teachers of its purpose and function. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of ACS’s Youth Court program was the next logical focus of their inquiry, so the group requested that Kevin Baker, a Youth Court expert, attend the next session.

**Youth Court: Formalized Restorative Justice**

As mentioned, Kevin and I launched Aspen’s Youth Court in the fall of 2012, so by the time the Restorative Justice PLC congregated, Youth Court was beginning its third year at ACS. Beginning in 2013-2014, there were two youth courts available for teachers to employ: the first was for the fourth and fifth grade cohort, which my class promoted and operated. A second court, for middle school students in grades 6-8, was primarily run
by my “Youth Court Alumni” – former students of mine who excelled in Youth Court in fifth grade and wished to continue to participate throughout middle school.

Despite efforts to publicize and familiarize the faculty with Youth Court, many teachers remained unaware of the capacity of Youth Court and how it could be used as an alternative to punishment. Therefore, Kevin agreed to attend the September PLC session and provide an overview of the process, the types of offenses that are readily handled by Youth Court, and its level of efficacy for the children who participated in it – both as defendants and as participating members of the court.

Kevin began his overview by providing a rationale for the program and, again, reiterating the ineffectiveness of traditional discipline:

Most of our kids who are getting into trouble in school, are getting in trouble because they don't want to be in class. They don't want to be doing their homework. They don't want to be working. So they’re walking, wandering, doing something that gets them out of class, like they curse out a teacher. They are wandering in the hallways, and what we do is we punish them by saying, "Okay, now you go home." And for a lot of our kids especially at the high school level, there are no consequences when they go home. It's they sleep in, or watch TV; they go play Xbox. They are not learning. We're rewarding their misbehavior and then from a restorative angle, are they really learning anything about their actions and consequences?

So they cursed out a teacher, they were sent home for the day, has that relationship been restored between the teacher and the student when that kid comes back? Nine times out of ten, no. It's they were gone for the day; the teacher gets a break; the kid gets a break; they come back and everything resumes as it was. So we looked at what are some alternatives and Youth Court was one that we thought would be a way to do that. So Youth Courts don't deal in suspensions. They don't deal in detentions. They don't deal in in-house suspensions. They look at alternative and restorative consequences that can help repair the harm that's caused.

After describing the inefficacy of suspension and why Youth Court holds more potential than punitive measures, Kevin talks the group through the three key differences between
ACS’s Youth Court and traditional criminal courts. First and foremost, “Youth Court is not a fact-finding court...All students who have come before the Youth Court have admitted to the offense. They might argue with some of the circumstances or the facts, but it’s a sentencing court, not a fact-finding court.” From a distributed leadership point of view, this is incredibly powerful, as it removes any potential retaliation towards the judge, prosecutors, or jury: the students are not the arbiters of truth who are finding a peer “guilty”; rather, they constitute a community whose task is to help the offender make amends. Moreover, the onus of punishment is removed from the teacher’s prerogative, and since relationships are strained when punishments are doled, the student-teacher relationship is not further severed by the sentencing. Second, Youth Court is entirely voluntary. At any point during the process, the offender may opt out and return to the school’s disciplinarian to allow her to handle the infraction. But as Kevin tells the group, “We rarely have a student saying, ‘You know, I’d just rather be suspended.’ It’s a voluntary process. They agree to participate. They agree to complete the consequence that’s given by students.” Finally, Kevin discusses the power and influence that youth have when helping and addressing the offending child, not through punishment, but by building empathy and offering supports:

So we look at helping the student. We look at holding the student accountable; we look at having their peers help them hold themselves accountable, and when we think about young people, after a while, they tend to tune adults out, but they still really value their peers’ opinions. So when we have someone whom I might be in class with eight periods out of the day saying, ‘Don't you realize that you’re disrupting my work and everyone else in the class when you're throwing stuff across the room?’ They think a little bit more than they would if it was just me as an adult saying, ‘You need to stop doing that. It's been disruptive.’
As Kevin’s introduction to Youth Court is overlaid onto the principles of legitimacy, it is clear that the three criteria are met. The offending student has a forum to be heard and tell her side of the story; she is even assigned counsel to help shape her narrative and reveal mitigating factors. Next, it is predictable: since the student has already admitted to committing the offense and knows she will be held responsible for repairing the harm, she can reasonably anticipate what her consequences will be. In fact, counsel for the defense often asked the offending students what had to be done to make the community whole again, and the offending students were routinely honest, thoughtful, and reflective.30

Though the benefits of the process to the offending students were clear, one hidden outcome focuses on the students who comprise the court: with each case, they are resisting the dominant ideology that punishment fixes problems. Instead, they are carefully considering how to hold the offender accountable for her choices, while helping to ensure that all involved parties are made whole again and reach closure with the incident. In the incarceration era in which we live, these students hold the potential to question the establishment and propose a different conception of justice (Brasof, 2016). Simply exposing students to this path is significant, as it provides them the perspective to compare, contrast, and critique the two diametrically opposed systems of justice.

30 One student who participated in Youth Court had a particularly tenuous relationship with one of her teachers. When asked how the bond could be strengthened, she responded, “I will eat lunch with the teacher in her classroom for a week. While I’m there, we can talk, and I can help her with her chores.” The teacher was readily amenable to this self-assigned consequence, and the hard work of building a solid relationship ensued. Thus, the Youth Court platform can grant offending students the creative space needed to reflect, problem-solve, and identify courses of action.
After the benefits of the program were deeply discussed, the group ended the session by considering the measurable and immeasurable effects of Youth Court. Aligned with neoliberal principles, many current behavior modification systems require careful tracking of specific behaviors, in order to see if the frequency, duration, and intensity of the target behaviors are diminishing or exacerbating. Anne and Jaimie, however, recognize that the seeds Youth Court sew may not be immediately visible or measurable. Rather, being part of the process provides humanistic and community-based benefits that cannot be immediately captured on a checklist:

Kevin: We think about what would have alternatively been a suspension, and I don’t know – maybe you guys have a better sense – of whether the students’ behavior changed at all. I am not saying that the Youth Court is 100% effective. I would say that no program is a 100% effective, but it is about starting to try to change behaviors and getting kids to think about the consequences of their actions.

Anne: And I think it has changed…, but I think even if they don’t that it is still a really good experience to have to be up against your peers and have all this feedback, and you may not change your behavior for a very long time, but it still can, and I think the exposure, you know, you might not immediately see the fruit of it.

Jaimie: I think one of the differences from the kid’s point of view when they are given a suspension it is like, ‘We are sending you away,’ and [Youth Court] is like we are devoting a lot of attention. She [the offender] was the center of what happened in the room for a half an hour at least, and so I think it makes you feel like your community cares about you. They are giving you a chance, and they are giving it to you because they want things to be better for you, and I think psychologically that will feel so much better as a kid than just a punishment. I know it happened for me with one of my students. Every time she got suspended, and it happened every month, and it was like, ‘Oh okay, you won’t be here tomorrow; we can all get some more work done.’ You know what I mean? Like this feeling like we just send you away, so we will to be able to move on.

Kevin: To move on, yeah and their questions can be tough but they’re good questions, and you get the sense that they are asking these questions because they really want to see the student change what they are doing, and it looked genuine.
During this PLC session, the group further investigated the foundational principles of restorative justice and their application in the formal process of Youth Court. They were able to identify both immediate and long term effects of the program, both for the offenders and for the members of the court. Additionally, they saw how the process reflects the community’s investment in the offending child: rather than being told to go home for a day or two so the rest of the class can get some work done, the restorative consequences suggest to the offender that both the teachers and her classmates recognize positive qualities and earnestly believe that the student can make the changes needed to be a consistently valuable member of the community. Despite all the benefits the PLC identified in Youth Court, the teachers recognized it could not be the sole – or even primary – method of restoration upon which they relied. ACS’s Youth Court convened only two times a week, so the PLC also needed to investigate readily implementable, in-class restorative practices. The most common in-class restorative practices are affective questioning and the Restorative Circle.

“A Slumpy Time of Year”: Balancing Standards-Based Instruction with Humanistic Endeavors

To equip the teachers with implementable, classroom-based strategies that support the principles of restorative justice, the next PLC session was designed to foster the group’s understanding of affective questioning and restorative circles. Resources were developed and provided, and the objective for the session was for each participant to feel comfortable enough with these restorative processes to be able to employ them, in some form, in class.
The session started, and the group dug into the work; they described the various types of circles: talking circles, circles of understanding, sentencing circles, community-building circles, re-integration circles, and honoring circles. Thus, they began to see that restorative practices need not solely be implemented when a wrong has been committed against the community, but when an individual needs to talk through a concern, when the community needs to re-connect, when a member needs to be welcomed back after an absence from the community, or when an accomplishment warrants celebration. When Cathy asked the PLC, “Do you think it would be easy or difficult to get student buy-in to using talking circles?”, there was nearly unanimous agreement that students would benefit from this restorative process:

Anne: I think they would; they would totally buy in.

Melanie: My experience has been they would totally buy in.

Ben: I think most of our students want to be heard.

Despite the agreement among the PLC that circle processes and affective dialogue would benefit Aspen’s students, the vast majority of the session was spent discussing the relative importance of restorative justice in the school’s list of priorities, and where and when space could be made for these lengthier conversations to occur. Kristen first voiced the concern when she asked, “With all this work that we have to do here, when are we going to find time to do a circle, like if you do have someone coming back from [the disciplinarian]?” To this, Ted, tongue-in-cheek, responded, “After the PSSAs are done.”

Teachers shared concern that the circle process detract from academic time, and since the school is ultimately judged by its performance on standardized tests, reducing
instructional time to convene a circle did not fully jibe with the school’s priorities. Anne and Melanie, however, argued that implementing circles may actually increase instructional time (Winn, 2016), since proactive use of circles could diminish the distractions and disruptions that are typically embedded in the class period:

Anne: There's a couple kids who I would imagine, in every class, are not fully accessing instruction because whatever is going on is making it hard for them to behave. If those kids, two days a week, weren't in their academic class but were doing this kind of restorative circle stuff, it might be beneficial for everyone, because it could help them focus on the issues that would make them be able to go back to the class and really be in tune to their academics, instead of whatever else is going on.

Melanie: It comes down to the jamming information down your throat kind of thing, like the standards that we’re supposed to be like achieving which – and we all are falling – I mean, yes, we’re great teachers, but we are falling short. We are not hitting every standard in the book, and you can chalk that up to reality, then what's one more [missed standard] for the sake of a healthier relationship? And a healthier child?

Several teachers then started to propose times and places in which these restorative conferences could occur, without sacrificing academic time. Some suggested after school, in lieu of detentions; others suggested during their enrichment periods, and Melanie even offered to hold circles during her lunch period: “I would totally give up that 15 minutes of my day just because it would make the rest of the day feel so much smoother.” What this indicates is a belief that these restorative practices hold great promise and will ultimately benefit the school community and lives of the students. However, there was a lack of clarity about the extent to which administrative support would bastion the initiative.

Cathy recognized the confusion, conflict, and tension between academic performance and other unmeasurable roles of educators. She referred to it as a “slumpy
time of year” and recognized that spirits were low: teachers were being pulled in different
directions, and it was unclear which of the school’s many and varied initiatives were
prioritized. Was the skills-block and RTII period a top concern? Was it the computer-
based skills program that the school purchased and all students used twice a week? Was it
the extra programming, such as the classroom theater lessons, offered weekly by the
Walnut Street Theatre? While none of these initiatives, in and of themselves, are
overwhelming, in conglomeration, they are very time-consuming and reduce a teacher’s
time to introduce new concepts, reinforce old ones, and support the school’s mission of
developing social and emotional health. Thus, Cathy expressed that, for restorative justice
to take hold and gain momentum at ACS, administration must make it a priority. And the
way that administration demonstrates that it is a priority is through more judicious
scheduling and ensuring that teachers have the time to orchestrate a circle, without
feeling the stress that the students are “falling further behind” when engaging in a
restorative practices:

Cathy: I think if we had more honored and uninterrupted academic time, I would
feel like I had more flexibility, but ... on days when I have FLIP [intervention
block] and Acuity [skills-based computer program] for two periods, like a period
each of the day, it is a real struggle to get all academic instruction in. So I don't
feel like there's wiggle room for my kids to be like, ‘Let’s sit and talk for twenty
minutes.’ Whereas, I think if I had either one or two of those periods back with
my kids, I could do all the academics, and then I would feel a little more like,
‘You know what, it seems like a lot of things bubbled up at recess today. Let's sit
and talk about it for fifteen minutes, and then we can move forward and have a
productive rest of the day.’ But, everything right now, I guess because they go
from lunch, to recess, to FLIP, so it's an almost two-hour block where I don't have
my own kids. And then they come back after being gone at noon and come back
at a quarter to two. And it's like, ‘Oh shoot, now we only have an hour until the
end of the day, and we got to get all this stuff in.’
It is often said to follow a business’s priorities, simply follow the money. Similarly, a school’s currency is time. Cathy makes the salient observation that, in the current structure of the school day, restorative justice cannot be a valued initiative. In an interesting turn, the group actually thought that the administration would benefit from a circle, in which they evaluated current programming, prioritized initiatives, and responded to teacher feedback and requests:

Jaimie: We need to be heard. I think we need to figure out what our priorities are, and to do that, everybody needs to get a chance to explain why what they do is valid…I just think we have to figure out what we want and prioritize that.

Ted: How can admin use talking circles to make sure that we as a faculty know each other’s roles and responsibilities?

Though this suggestion was never specifically posed to administration (though it was alluded to in their closing presentation), it does identify, as Ben surmised, that Aspen is still both “searching for an identity” and priorities that align to it. Of course, academic development is of utmost importance to any educational institution. Yet there are many routes, philosophies, and visions for how this can and should be achieved. At Aspen, where behavioral issues rank as teachers’ top concern, discipline and academic excellence cannot be viewed as separate spheres. Rather, they are intertwined, and the ACS teachers must navigate the difficult decisions about time-management, classroom management, and curriculum:

Anne: I don’t know the statistics, and I don’t know the numbers to correlate test scores since we’re such a data driven school, but as one of my colleagues so poetically put it, we have to recognize that we are a behavioral school also. That if we are not addressing behaviors and really focusing on restorative justice, nothing’s going to drive the data. Like we are, I feel, just tripping over ourselves with all this stuff and not really taking in part and focusing on something else that needs more time. We need more time with the students to hash these things out to
get a little bit more into them, instead of just cramming information into them, just like you said, ‘I’m going to squash [an argument] because I got to teach.’ And I know that we're driven by the test, but I feel that we are really looking over or missing something,

Jaimie builds off this idea and postulates that the community-building elements of restorative justice can be renamed “preventative justice.” In other words, squashing a misbehavior – through a punishment or threat – does not repair the harm or mend the relationship. Consequently, the rift remains and another incident is more likely to occur. On the other hand, if time is properly allocated – and the three principles of legitimacy are achieved – compliance with classroom rules and expectations could potentially ensue.

In the end, the teachers sought more ownership over their own classrooms. Unfortunately, many school-wide initiatives and reforms were both top-down and untouchable. This left, as Cathy called it, minimal “wiggle room” to make pedagogical decisions that advance the “academic, social, and emotional success of each child” – Aspen’s mission. As Ted encapsulated, “I think we often are told what to do to solve behavior problems, but we're very rarely asked what we think we can do to help prevent behavior problems, and I think that's restoring justice.” So while the members of this PLC are optimistic about replacing punitive discipline with restorative practices, they recognize that there must be increased administrative support for the initiative, and they must be invited to the decision-making table, where schedules are drafted, time is allotted, and priorities are set.
Conclusion

Because part of the mission of the PLC was to share their learning with faculty and “empower teachers to facilitate restorative agreements,” the Restorative Justice PLC presented to the faculty on the last day of the 2014-2015 academic year. They broke their presentation into several sub-topics, each of which represents the important learning, thinking, and grappling they undertook throughout the year. There is no more apt way to conclude this chapter than to allow the group to share their own conclusions and the next steps they identified from their year-long study of restorative justice and restorative practices.

Ted began the presentation by defining restorative justice for the faculty, many of whom lacked familiarity with the concept:

It's a chance to transform the relationships between individuals in the communities. It's a chance for people who have done something wrong to make reparations, and it's also a chance to really look at what took place and make sure that you're including everybody who's involved in it. It's also a chance for us to start to understand where kids are coming from by hearing them talk about it as opposed to guessing what's going on in their head.

To frame restorative justice within a discourse of “chances” is effective and powerful, as it implies hope and positive outcomes. Given that they were still in the early stages of their inquiry, the group lacked “hard data” to prove that restorative justice is overwhelmingly more effective than traditional discipline, but they also recognize that the impacts of restorative justice on a classroom and school community cannot be readily measured or tracked. Ted also promotes the idea of equity, suggesting that not every child should be treated with heavy-handed punishments, but rather that restorative consequences be tailored to the precise circumstances of the child. Well before I searched
for images about equity and equality for Chapter I of this dissertation, Ted presented this image to the faculty, which encapsulates the predictable – yet unique – approach to restorative practices:

![Fairness Poster](image)

**Figure 12. Fairness Poster**

After discussing the conceptual framework, the group then alarmed the faculty by sharing several statistics and observations about the effects of suspensions and other exclusionary practices:

- African American students are 3.5x more likely to be suspended than Caucasian students.
- Students who are suspended are 3x more likely to drop out.
- At Aspen, the same students face the same consequence and we see the same behavior.
- Teachers and families may disagree on the appropriate consequences.
- Consequences are not always linked to behaviors or communities.

**Figure 13. Slide from Restorative Justice PLC’s Faculty Presentation**

With this, the group intended to debunk the prevailing belief that zero-tolerance policies are the most effective systems to curb misbehavior, and if Aspen were to become even more stringent with its punishments, then the conduct concerns would cease. Ted also
references the third part of the PLC’s mission: reaching out to families and the community so that students experience restorative practices both at home and at school. Thus, the PLC implores teachers not to assign detentions for kicking a bookshelf, and they’d like to begin a conversation with family and community members about employing logical and restorative consequences with their children at home. For example, Ted tells the faculty that when a child cheats on a test, parents’ taking away her electronics for a week does not repair the harm or address the hurt of the victims; retaking the exam, apologizing to the teacher and class, and studying with a peer-tutor for the next exam hold the potential for repairing the harm and prompting personal growth.

In the final two components of the presentation, the group discusses next steps for teachers and administrators. Ted suggests, that unlike punishments – which require neither sympathy nor mysticism – restorative practices prompt the teacher to be self-reflective and consider her own role in the event:

[Restorative justice] gives us a chance to reflect on our teaching and our actions. I feel like that's important for me because I always end up punishing kids, and then I'm just moving on to the next thing, but I think that when you go with restorative justice, you can really start to think about that in a different way. I think it also empowers students to admit that they made mistakes or to admit that they've been victimized and to work to find a solution. If you want to solve a problem, you cannot solve it if you continue to think the same way you were thinking when you created it.

In this commentary, Ted expounds the positive effects for teachers and students: educators will become more careful and reflective with their disciplinary measures, and since punishments are not a possible consequence, students are more likely to be honest about their actions (rather than lie to avoid the punishment) and work towards restoration. With this rationale firmly intact, the group then provides four action-steps for teachers,
each of which is helpful for those wishing to implement restorative practices in their classroom:

![Introduce The Concept](image1)

1. **Introduce The Concept**
   - Have a discussion with students about why we have rules, what happens when we break them, and what we can do to try to follow them.

![Plan for It](image2)

2. **Plan for It**
   - Set aside a specific time of the week to have a mediation circle.
   - Friday afternoons might be nice, or possibly as a part of morning meeting.

![Plan It](image3)

3. **Plan It**
   - Just like any other lesson, find resources and procedures that work for your class and your age group.

![Follow Through & Troubleshoot](image4)

4. **Follow Through & Troubleshoot**
   - Touch base with students about the effectiveness of the circle.
   - Be prepared for failed meetings and laundry lists of complaints.
   - Don’t give up, do give in (i.e., let the students own it, even though it’s unlikely to be pretty or focused.)

**Figure 14. Action Steps for Teachers**

With step one, the group suggests that restorative justice is something that happens *with* students, not *to* students. In other words, leadership, problem-solving, and even execution of the restorative processes are distributed among the students. The PLC also effectively tempers staff expectations by telling the faculty to “prepare for failed meetings.” Aspen has a history of failed initiatives, partly because they are abandoned before they had ample time to fully launch. Restorative justice is new – to Aspen, to teachers, and to the students, so it would be unreasonable to expect a seamless transition from punitive measures to restorative ones. If transitioning to restorative approaches is a
two- to five-year endeavor, then the faculty cannot expect instant gratification and immediate success.

Finally, the presenters offer four suggestions to administration, all under the heading of “Priorities,” which clearly refers back to the PLCs’ discussion about administration’s lack of clarity around the school’s academic, social, and programmatic priorities. It also references Jaimie’s demand that the teachers “need to be heard”:

1. Make Youth Court the primary way to solve ongoing interpersonal conflicts.
2. Create a framework to track and update Youth Court sentences.
3. Make conflict resolution a part of cohort and grade level meeting time.
4. Set a school-wide goal to lower suspensions.

These statements are impressive for two reasons. First, they display a commitment to restorative justice and towards the minimization of exclusionary practices. Second, the community and conviction forged in this PLC throughout the year empowered the members to stand in front of the ACS faculty and administration and clearly state that this, restorative justice, is a priority and needs to be seen as one by administration. Since students who are suspended are three times more likely to drop out of high school than students who remain in school, and Aspen issues hundreds of suspensions per year, the PLC demanded that this practice end. Prior to the 2014-2015 academic year, one of the school-wide goals, as named by administration, was to reduce the number of conduct referrals to the school’s disciplinary office; there was no stated goal to reduce the actual number of suspensions. Ted, along with the rest of the PLC, recognized the flaw in this goal: if teachers are not asking for support for “smaller” infractions, but the overall number of suspensions remains high, then little progress is actually occurring. In the
presentation, Ted specifically challenged administration’s goal of reducing the number of referrals:

We need to set a schoolwide goal to lower suspensions as opposed to referrals [to the disciplinarian]. I know that we’ve been working on referrals, and I think that admin says we have a lot of success with that, but I think when you keep in mind that they’re 3.5 times more likely to drop out of high school, then maybe what we really need to focus on is getting rid of the suspensions as opposed to getting rid of the referrals.

If PLCs can be conceptualized as levers for change, then this mandate for realigned priorities exemplifies the power and potential inherent in PLCs. Not only did the PLC inform administration what their upcoming goals should be, but they also explicitly confronted administration’s previous priorities. As the PLC gained knowledge about the far-reaching effects of exclusionary practices, they demanded that administration better understand their own role in the school-to-prison pipeline and make major adjustments.

Children’s lives are in the balance.

To conclude the presentation, Ted shares the following anecdote and theory:

I was reading about a teacher who said that he's been teaching for 35 years, and he can't remember a single PD that he ever went to where anybody talked about character and making our children better people. And I feel like Aspen’s really lucky, and we all do deeply care about the kids, but I do think that sometimes with all the academic demands that we get lost and aren't able to actually talk about what is working or not working to help them become better people.

In 2017, where standards, testing, data-driven instruction, and measurable results dominate discourse and policy, it is essential for educators to remember Ted’s statement—that educators are responsible for the lives of children and that for every PD session about “boosting student achievement,” there can and should be one about supporting student character, confidence, happiness, and satisfaction. Amidst all the top-down policies and
directives, it is often up to the teachers to remember and actualize the Deweyian (1916) objective of education: to raise children to actively and effectively participate in a democratic society. Winn (2013) supports Ted’s and Dewey’s theory and adds that teacher education and professional development have failed when “we send new teachers to schools and communities without any knowledge of the policing, surveillance, and exclusion of particular youth and without strategies to reintegrate youth back into classroom communities through restorative practices” (p. 133). This “outcome” is not measurable on standardized tests, but it remains a primary concern and motivator for educators – like Ted and his colleagues – who believe fostering a beloved community is a more pressing need than students’ ability to solve one more decontextualized math problem, and who seek a society in which its members are treated equitably and compassionately. As Jackie Robinson said, “The right of every American to first-class citizenship is the most important issue of our time,” and through their inquiry, this PLC developed a strong conviction that restorative practices more effectively sustain the first-class nature of our children.
Chapter VII: Conclusions and Future Implications for our Human Family

Human Family

I note the obvious differences in the human family. Some of us are serious, some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived as true profundity, and others claim they really live the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones can confuse, bemuse, delight, brown and pink and beige and purple, tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas and stopped in every land, I've seen the wonders of the world not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women called Jane and Mary Jane, but I've not seen any two who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different although their features jibe, and lovers think quite different thoughts while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China, we weep on England's moors, and laugh and moan in Guinea, and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland, are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,  
in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences  
between each sort and type,  
but we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unalike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unalike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unalike.

- Maya Angelou

**Introduction**

Teaching is an act of hope. As educators enter the field, they do so with a sense of optimism for the children they will serve, for the communities in which they live, and for the society that is responsible for the well-being of all its members. In my experience, very few teachers enter the profession because of their love of the content areas they will teach. Rather, they become educators because of their love *for children*. Our political climate ignores this reality: that in the process of maximizing student achievement and closing performance gaps, we ignore the developing humanity that resides in all children, as well as in their teachers. For this reason, I was deeply committed to the professional development initiative launched at Aspen, since we were not researching “best practices” and “scientifically proven curricula.” Instead, we were studying humanity – our own, and our students’.

I know that the ACS PLC initiative fell short in many ways, that I was “building the plane while flying it.” Yet, this is the reality for many independent charter schools:
without the resources a central office provides or the budget to employ a full-time PD coordinator, the “do more with less” attitude must be adopted and enacted. And while mistakes and missteps were made along the way, the PLCs were, and remain, a worthwhile endeavor. As educators, we act; we reflect; we talk; we theorize; we learn, and we adapt. And yes, we err. Thus, this final chapter will share lessons, principles, theories, and implications that emerged throughout the research cycle. And though these learnings may not be generalizable across all contexts, one principle stands true: schools serve children, who, by nature of their humanity, deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and equity; as Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, “The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil.” Professional development that takes this educational endeavor seriously is valuable, and in today’s era of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010), a far more salient need than PD sessions that introduce a new textbook series or best practice.

To fully explicate my learning and subsequent recommendations, this chapter will address the three major areas this study investigates: PLCs as a PD model, cultural competence, and restorative justice. Hermeneutic analysis of the data revealed findings that both address the study’s research questions and move beyond the limits of those lines of inquiry. Therefore, Chapters IV, V, and VI very much focused on the research questions, and this chapter seeks to explicate grounded theories that may more broadly inform others’ thinking about PLCs, cultural competence, and restorative justice.

**On PLCS: Administrative Support, Curriculum Design, and Sustenance**

The ACS administration deserves much credit for pinpointing a significant challenge the school faced and implementing a progressive solution to address it. Since
behavioral infractions were the faculty’s primary concern, administration could have siphoned funds away from student programming and towards all-too-common initiatives that create a “police state” in the school: security guards, hall monitors, increased camera coverage, or even a school police officer could have been employed to more closely supervise student behavior and swiftly employ consequences when infractions occurred. While this is a widespread approach to increase school safety, it further entrenches the criminal identity of students in the school-to-prison pipeline. Therefore, investing in student-teacher relationship PD was a far more humanistic solution to this problem than tightening security and stiffening penalties.

What is clear from this study, however, is that administrative support is required not just at the beginning of the PLC launch, but throughout its entire process. Promises were made, such as labeling PLC time as “untouchable,” providing 15-20 hours a year for PLCs to meet, and guaranteeing that all teachers would be available to attend every session. As the months passed, these assurances were hedged, and many teachers interpreted administration’s lack of commitment to PLCs as an indicator of their diminished importance to the school’s success. Consequently, teachers would skip sessions; other meetings were scheduled on top of PLC times, and some sessions were outright cancelled. For PLCs to have the lasting, multi-year longevity necessary to truly initiate paradigm changes and transformative learning, administration must – through

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31 In the PLCs’ first year, the initial August sessions were allocated two to three hours. By the beginning of the second year, sessions were trimmed to 90 minutes, and by the end of the second year, only 45-60 minutes were granted for PLC sessions. The fact that administration allotted one hour for all the PLC groups to share their work at the end of the 2014-2015 year signifies the level of institutional importance attached to the teachers’ professional development and the local knowledge and theories developed from their work.
both words and actions – reiterate the significance of PD and PLCs to the faculty. Administration’s institutional authority holds tremendous gravity, and the faculty will invest in the initiatives that the administration deems most significant.

Should administration commit to the promise and possibility afforded by PLCs, two additional factors significantly contribute to their sustainability in a school. First, coordinating and designing the curricula for the various PLCs was an enormous undertaking: planning a single session took approximately two hours. Since I had multiple PLC lessons to plan for each session, many nights and weekends were consumed designing the lessons and preparing the materials for each and every group; in fact, I would often arrive at school at before 6:00 a.m. just to make and sort the copies for each group! This additional workload (which was carried on top of all my regular teaching duties) was possible only because I was young(er!) and not yet a parent; I am no longer capable of completing all these tasks, given my current life circumstances.

Consequently, some ingenuity for planning and preparation will be required to ensure that PLCs engage in meaningful sessions, with high-quality learning activities and resources provided. One common option is for each group to take charge of its own curriculum development and lesson design. One person could assume a teacher-leadership role, or the responsibilities could be passed from participant to participant. This more evenly distributes the additional workload, but there are two inherent issues in this model. First, there is little guarantee of quality assurance: amidst all the other priorities and responsibilities a teacher must navigate, it is easy to see how planning a PLC session could be moved to the back burner, and then hastily planned at the ninth
hour. By designing all the PLC sessions myself, I knew that the materials and readings were ideologically aligned with our school’s mission, and that the learning activities would be both meaningful and consistent with the principles of PLCs and andragogy. Thus, without engaging in significant research about the conceptual frames utilized when planning PLCs, it is unreasonable to expect that teachers would be immediately capable of planning sessions that meet the criteria of adult learning and advance the missions of the PLC and school. The second major concern stems from the first: the readings, videos, and activities that teacher-leaders utilize and create may unintentionally reify deficit perspectives and subtly racist ideologies. Having had the benefit of three years of theoretical and methodological coursework at Penn GSE, I became fairly adept at identifying the Discourses in-use (Gee, 2015) in texts. If, however, a teacher-leader is operating from a deficit perspective and unquestioningly “breathes the air of racism,” there is no guarantee that the materials employed in the PLC effectively stimulate the composition of counter-narratives to pejorative dominant discourses. It is for these reasons that schools must be very careful and conscientious as they decide who will be responsible for the curriculum and design of PLCs: the task is likely unsustainable for an individual carrying a full teaching load, and there are several potential hazards when well-meaning – yet overwhelmed – teachers plan the sessions, as it is possible they lack

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32 An excellent case of this phenomenon is the Gender PLC. Currently, the biological argument for differences between sexes is gaining increased prominence (Sax, 2005; Gurian, 2010), especially in educational settings. While “research-based,” the ideologies inherent in these texts are troubling, as they are used to reify stereotypical differences between boys and girls, as well as promote narrower views of masculinity and femininity, which can marginalize individuals who do not “fit the mold.” Thus, if a PLC teacher-leader is not fully savvy to the ideologies inherent in the texts, and subsequently shares them with the group, the PLC may actually drift towards a more limited worldview regarding gender and employ practices that alienate children who may not think, act, or learn like a “normal” boy or girl.
the time and/or the critical frameworks necessary to create engaging and progressive learning experiences.

With these considerations, I recommend one of two options for schools considering the implementation of PLCs. First, and ideally, a full-time PD coordinator be hired as a member of the administrative team. With ample time and resources to manage all the school’s PLCs and work alongside teacher-leaders, this individual would ensure that each group’s activities are both mission-aligned and consistent with the ideology the school wishes to advance. Furthermore, such a hire is symbolically important: it messages to the teachers that PD is a school-wide priority, and the PD coordinator’s voice is present at all administrative meetings and decision-making processes. Despite the many benefits a full-time professional developer could offer an independent school, the monetary cost of such a position is likely too high for many organizations. In this case, the expertise of the faculty can and should be leveraged. Every school in which I have worked brims with teachers seeking graduate degrees and leadership positions (like I was at ACS). Rather than stifle or look past the teachers’ intellectual capacity and curiosity, schools can embrace them! Teachers could readily incorporate leading a PLC into their graduate coursework, therein gaining access to professors’ and peers’ expertise. For this model to work, however, these teacher-leader(s) must be afforded additional release time during the workday to complete their PLC obligations. Whether removing lunch/recess monitoring duties or granting an additional prep period each week, the success of the model is dependent upon the extent to which the PLC workload is job-embedded (DuFour et al., 2010). Current teachers’ daily responsibilities exceed the time they have
available during the workday, so PLC planning cannot be placed into the “night and weekend” category: eventually, the quality of the work will suffer, or as life circumstances change, the individual may no longer be capable of completing the intense challenge of orchestrating PLC sessions.

If this latter model is employed, it is still important for there to be oversight from an administrator or teacher-leader. For school and staff growth to be maximized, each PLC must engage with theories that are compatible with the other PLCs’ work and the school’s espoused ideology. For example, conflict would arise if one PLC were investigating ways to enhance a progressive discipline system, while another considered avenues to increase student voice, leadership, and governance. Thus, no matter what organizational system is selected, a school must employ a “gatekeeper,” who ensures that each group’s line of inquiry aligns with the school’s worldview and takes a birds-eye view of all the PLCs to guarantee that one group’s work is not antithetical to another’s.

Despite the many challenges that arose during my years as Aspen’s PLC coordinator, I firmly contend that PLCs offer a strong framework for teachers to engage in meaningful, critical, and transformational learning. Epistemologically, a PLC centers the teachers as the holders and developers of knowledge and truth, while simultaneously challenging the status quo by opening space for new local knowledge and critical theories to emerge. As such, PLCs are fundamentally different from the vast majority of the PD I attended early in my career, where I was viewed as a novice who “had so much to learn.” It’s true; I did have a lot to learn. Nevertheless, taking charge of my own learning – with
the support of diverse and experienced colleagues – is far more powerful, provocative, and sustaining than listening to a lecture offered by the proverbial “sage on a stage.”

**On Cultural Competence: Terminology, Entrenched Beliefs, and Paralysis**

When I presented my dissertation proposal to the committee, Dr. Gadsden advised me to be both cautious and critical of cultural competence: “Question everything!” she implored, and so I did. We all agreed that cross-racial, cross-cultural communication, respect, and understanding are worthy and significant goals for the teachers in the PLC. Yet, as Chapter V demonstrates, the group experienced a “failure to launch.” And some of the stagnation is attributable to the title I assigned to the group: cultural competence.

Competence is, quite simply, defined as “the ability to do something successfully or efficiently,” which sounds like a word attached to a person’s ability to ride a bike or complete long division. Competence then, linguistically, connotes a finish line, an achievable goal, or a measure of success. As history has shown, however, interracial and cross-cultural harmony is rarely so simply accomplished. Competence, then, cannot be the goal of the PLC. Instead, I have suggested that critical cultural consciousness (CCC) far more accurately captures the intended work of the PLC; an inquiry stance is the intended outcome, not proficiency at a skill. Thus, competence implies an endpoint, whereas critical consciousness assumes a state of un-knowing, with a sharp eye towards

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33 As a teacher, I am often required to fill out behavior surveys which are used by physicians to determine if a child has ADHD. To receive that diagnosis, a child must present at least six symptomatic behaviors for at least six months; there is no one test that is used to definitively determine ADHD. The same approach can be taken when considering the concept of cultural competence: if a person (or organization) commits to certain principles and behaviors and exhibits them across time, then she (or it) is viewed as culturally competent and meets the mark for success. This view minimizes the complexity of culture(s) constantly in-flux and what the responsibility truly is for a member of the institution (school, hospital, governmental agency, etc.) as she develops theories about and interacts with people who are culturally different.
power differentials, oppression-in-action, and subconscious assumptions and biases.

Consequently, the goal for an individual is not to achieve competence; rather, she should seek to recognize her own biases and gain critical consciousness for the moments in which bias might be at work. Ali Michael (2015) brilliantly captures the essence of CCC, as she considers the ramifications of her “failed” implicit bias test (Project Implicit, 2011):

Recognizing that I have bias will influence how I respond if a friend or a student thinks I’ve done something racist. It will influence my consciousness about my interactions with students. It will lead me to second guess negative and consequential judgments that I make. It is incredibly valuable to KNOW that I have this implicit bias because it is at work, regardless of whether or not I recognize it. But it gets its power from me [sic] not recognizing it…How might we change things in this country if White people were aware and honest about the fact that our racial socialization has conditioned us to have an implicit bias in favor of White people? How might our courts, cops and schools look different if we recognized that bias is part of who we are?

Had the group sought cultural critical consciousness – not competence – significant ideological moves may have occurred, since critical awareness is a state of mind, not an endpoint. Through coding and analysis of the transcripts, the following theories emerged: CCC as project-based learning; CCC as activism, and CCC as social justice, with each of these theoretical constructs aligning far more closely with critical consciousness than with competence. For project-based learning to have occurred, the group would have had to do more than administer and analyze a survey. Instead, they would have had, as Dr. Susan Lytle was apt to say, to “do work in the world.” Organizing the police officer roundtable or the Ripping Up Racism Challenge qualify as project-based learning; survey development does not. The final two tenets of CCC – activism and social justice – are closely aligned. The members of this PLC would have had to move
past allyship and towards the risks and discomfort that accompany activism and open
disagreement with dominant ideology. Had the group been more willing to accept these
risks and make justice their project (Edelsky, 1999), the paralysis might not have
occurred.

In addition to project-based risk-tasking, CCC as a theoretical construct also
would impact the PLC’s discourse. For example, before the decision to overrule Rakita
and cancel the Ripping Up Racism Challenge reached consensus, critical cultural
consciousness could and should have caused a member of the PLC to become aware that
three White individuals had effectively shut down the dissenting Black participant,
thereby discounting her experiential reality – one in which children and adults of her race
are suffering at the hands of institutionally-sanctioned police and legal protocols. Though
not explicitly expressed, it can be surmised that Rakita was not concerned about making
White teachers uncomfortable during the challenge. After all, don’t consciousness and
discomfort often go hand-in-hand? Isn’t activism intended to challenge the status quo
and provoke conflict? Perhaps White-dominated society, including Aspen’s faculty,
needed a little prodding to wake it from its blissful slumber. Perhaps, the implicit biases
needed to surface.

Critical cultural consciousness describes a stance educators can assume while
designing lesson plans or considering student (inter)actions, while another theoretical
construct, racial literacy (Guinier, 2004; Moya, 2015; Twine, 2010), explicates the
attitudes and actions that result from CCC. Twine (2010, p. 92) defines racial literacy as
“an analytical orientation and a set of practices that reflect shifts in perceptions of race,
racism, and whiteness. It is a way of perceiving and responding to racism that generates a repertoire of discursive and material practices” (quoted in Moya, 2015, p. 33). To provide clarity around the discursive and material consequences, Twine (2010, p. 92) offers the following explication of racial literacy:

The components of racial literacy include the following: (1) the definition of racism as a contemporary problem rather than a historical legacy; (2) an understanding of the ways that experiences of racism and racialization are mediated by class, gender inequality, and heterosexuality; (3) a recognition of the cultural and symbolic value of whiteness; (4) an understanding that racial identities are learned and an outcome of social practice; (5) the possession of a racial grammar and vocabulary to discuss race, racism, and antiracism; and (6) the ability to interpret racial codes and racialized practice. (quoted in Moya, 2015, p. 33)

In essence, Twine offers a curriculum for developing both CCC and racial literacy – to gain knowledge, acquire analytical frameworks, and engage in activism. Each of these six components are areas of inquiry to unpack, discuss, and incorporate into both mental schema and daily practice. However, as I framed and developed the Cultural Competence PLC, I lacked the schema and language to design a PLC that could push the participants towards critical consciousness and racial literacy. The responsibility of a teacher is to create an environment and series of circumstances that promote growth and learning, and in this instance, my work fell short.

Indeed, hindsight is 20/20. Had I known what I know now, I would have changed both the description and expectations of the Cultural Competence PLC. First and foremost, I would have titled the group Critical Cultural Consciousness, so that awareness of power dynamics and racial literacy became the focus of the group, not the theoretically unachievable goal of “competence.” Additionally, in the description of the
group, I would have incorporated the terms project-based learning, activism, bias awareness, micro-aggressions, and social justice. With this, the whole trajectory of the group would change, since there would be a call-to-action, a rallying cry for social justice, and a consciousness of the ways in which racism exists in tiny day-to-day interactions. Ideally, the group would have then harnessed their own anger – or rage – and joined their students as accomplices for the continued fight for Civil Rights.

On Restorative Justice: Issues of Time, Terminology, and Commitment

Whereas the Cultural Competence PLC stunt ed itself by canceling its own initiatives, the Restorative Justice PLC’s momentum was primarily halted due to outside constraints. They recognized that punitive measures were neither effective nor educational, so they sought to implement a framework that recognized two fundamental beliefs about humans: they make mistakes, and with the correct support, they can learn from them. Consequently, the teachers in the PLC utilized Youth Court heavily, and when possible, they opted to disregard the school’s endorsed progressive discipline system and instead engage in restorative practices. From their collective work, certain learnings emerged about the challenges in adopting restorative approaches in a school that is, by measure of standardized assessments, underperforming.

The group unanimously agreed that restorative approaches are far more time-consuming than the quick second it takes to assign a demerit or detention. Thus, transitioning a school’s disciplinary system from punitive-based to restorative-based does not solely depend on the staff’s willingness to “take the plunge” and remove exclusionary practices for all but the most serious offenses. In addition to this change of mindset, the
school must fully commit to staff PD about restorative practices and provide the time required to facilitate such protocols. At Aspen, Youth Court was my class’s social studies period; I squeezed in geography, history, civics, and sociology wherever I could, but the vast majority of our social studies time was spent learning restorative concepts, Youth Court protocols, and actually hearing the cases. For the other teachers, however, in-class restorative practices would result in decreased instructional time.\(^{34}\) The group argued that, ultimately, restorative approaches may increase academic time, since repeated behaviors and offenses could be eliminated: “Restorative justice circle processes are often used in place of suspensions which, in many regards can be good; however, restorative justice theorists and practitioners would like to see schools use restorative justice circle processes to build and sustain relationships in hopes to preempt conflict” (Winn, 2016, p. 11.) This, again, is where administrative support plays a crucial role.

For both teachers and students, there were mixed-messages about whether the school was punitive or restorative in nature; Aspen was, as Ben stated, still “looking for its identity.” At ACS, it was possible for a student to be suspended for a combination of tardiness,\(^{35}\) uniform infractions, and missing pencils (an “unprepared for class” demerit). This countered the logic and beliefs of the teachers, who intuitively knew that the academic success of their students was linked to the amount of time they spent in class.

\(^{34}\) Grades 6-8 at ACS follow a departmentalized model, so class start and end times are predetermined. Consequently, a math teacher’s usage of in-class restorative practices necessarily results in decreased mathematics instruction. Without explicit administrative support for this time reallocation – and a subsequent understanding that certain curricular concepts may not be fully developed, teachers are more unlikely to invest the significant time needed to implement restorative practices.

\(^{35}\) Arriving late to school or to a class resulted in an automatic demerit, and upon the 15\(^{th}\) demerit, a suspension was assigned. Thus, students who were chronically tardy were suspended multiple times a year, causing them to miss even more academic and instructional time.
However, the faculty was expected to utilize these punitive systems, because consistency across classrooms was important so that certain teachers weren’t labeled by the students as “soft” or “mean.” So how were teachers supposed to navigate their desire to be restorative inside a system that was primarily punitive? Moreover, could teachers willingly sacrifice class time to engage in a restorative practice, such as a circle, that was not officially endorsed by the school? This tension remained unresolved, which explains why, in their closing presentation, the PLC told administration that two of the school’s priorities for the following year should be to reduce the number of suspensions schoolwide and lean on Youth Court to address ongoing behavioral concerns. This would represent an institutional shift away from punishments and towards restoration. Youth Court, however, has its own idiosyncrasies that warrant address.

When I first learned of Youth Court, I was eager to introduce it to Aspen. Concerned about the school-to-prison pipeline and my complicity in it, I initially viewed Youth Court as a way for students to reflect carefully upon their choices, consider their impact on others, and make amends with the community. At this level, Youth Court completely aligns with my educational philosophy. Upon further analysis, however, it has become clear that the terminology is flawed: how does sending a child to “court” dissociate her from the school-to-prison pipeline? How does having a jury assign consequences teach the offending student to initiate restorative practices on her own? So while Youth Court is a far more democratic approach to discipline than exclusionary practices, two changes should be made to remove the shadow of criminality from its workings. The first change is simple: alter the name. Children should not be sent to courts
*in schools*, even if the function of the court is restorative. Instead, offending students should have the opportunity to speak with the *restorative community*. The process could be similar to Youth Court’s: the offending student has peers help her tell her side of the story; the victims also have representation that push the offending student to think through the impact of her decision; and there can even by a group of students who assist the offending student as she and the victim(s) decide what actions are needed to make the community whole again. In the current Youth Court model, the jury mandates a sentence and tells the offender what she must to do to right the wrong, which is still an instantiation of consequences imposed *on* an offender, rather than being co-constructed *with* her. And this leads to the second change: increased authority of the offending student to determine the necessary steps to fully make amends. Throughout the day, students are bombarded by directives – academic and behavioral, and I contend that restorative practices should not be another setting in which offending students are told what to do by others who are granted institutional authority, thereby further straining these children’s already tenuous relationships with authority. With this shift, children would actually be taught to think restoratively for themselves, with the help of their peers. Furthermore, when offending students name their own consequences, the specter of punishment is removed: a jury’s assignment of a restorative practice, such as writing an apology letter, can be interpreted by the offending student as a punishment. On the

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36 Even if the process remains similar, there is a definite need to alter the physical environment. In a Youth Court, the classroom is set up to mirror an actual court: a bench for the judge and bailiff (who escorts the offender in and out of the room – as though she is a criminal who cannot be trusted on her own), a panel for the jury, tables for the prosecution and defense, a stand for witnesses, and chairs in the back for the gallery. Thus, the mirrors between the offending student in a Youth Court and an alleged perpetrator in a criminal court are obvious.
other hand, if the offender assigns the same consequence to herself, it’s not a punishment; it’s a solution. As stated in Chapter VI, offending students were often asked what steps were needed to fix the problem and prevent its reoccurrence, and their responses were both thoughtful and appropriate. So why not trust these students to determine for themselves what needs to occur to heal the community and then hold them accountable for their decisions?

As Kevin told the PLC, there is not one disciplinary approach that is 100% effective. What is certain, however, is that current zero tolerance policies contribute to increased dropout rates and incarceration, particularly among students of color. Consequently, a different, more nuanced and sensitive approach is necessary. Though time-consuming and demanding, restorative practices hold the potential to further reveal the humanity that resides in all members of our human family. Melanie recognized the significance this paradigm-shift holds, when she asked the group whether teaching one more academic standard was more important than helping a student become a happier, better, more-whole human being. And through careful implementation of restorative practices that are modified to each unique school context, the human ability to experience empathy may displace the socially-constructed desire for vengeance.

**Implications for Research and Researchers**

To make meaning of PLC structures and design – and the ways in which teachers experienced and participated in the PLCs – this phenomenological inquiry employed critical and hermeneutic analytic methods. While the grounded theories that emerged are both meaningful and practical, the limitations of the research methodology prevented a
more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the PLCs influenced teachers’ theory and practice.

As a teacher-researcher with a full teaching load and other leadership responsibilities, I lacked both the time and opportunity to gather data that could more closely connect the teachers’ work in the PLCs with their classroom practice, their lesson-planning and curriculum design, their responses to infractions, their participation in faculty meetings, their contributions to school policy, or their interactions with families and community members. Consequently, I cannot correlate participation in PLCs with altered praxis. While it is clear that many Aspen teachers developed new frameworks and acquired language to talk about deficits, culture, and restoration, I lack the data to explore the ways in which access to these frameworks and discourses affected their day-to-day practice. If the adaptive unconscious (Gladwell, 2013) is as powerful as he suggests, then it could take months – perhaps years – for these frameworks to become internalized to the point that they override previously held schema and ideologies and become manifest in the daily life of the classrooms and school.

An inquiry that investigates the oftentimes subtle and far-reaching effects of PLCs on teachers and their practice lies outside the scope of practitioner inquiry: data would need to be gathered from classroom observations of multiple PLC participants; faculty meetings would need to be recorded and analyzed; artifact analysis would constellate the work of multiple teachers; interviews with students and their families would demonstrate if the stakeholders are experiencing school differently or if their relationships with the school and its staff have changed, and school policies (document analysis) would reveal
the ways in which the PLCs’ learning and recommendations are becoming institutionalized. Ultimately, a longitudinal study that triangulates data from these many sources could both theorize and problematize the translation of learning in PLCs into teaching practices, curriculum development, interactions with students and families, and school policies.

When PLCs are studied in isolation, the teachers’ narratives and perceptions account for the majority of the data. As has been demonstrated throughout this study, however, people’s perceptions and interpretations are filtered through a series of biases, schemata, and frameworks. Consequently, what teachers report to their colleagues in PLCs cannot possibly tell the “whole story” – our brains will selectively focus on particular sensory inputs that are deemed most salient. As a result, ethnographic and sociological research methods can add the context needed to more fully describe and analyze teacher behavior and schoolwide systems.

Ultimately, a research study that takes seriously the learning of teachers and the ways in which the learning manifests throughout classrooms, conversations, and policies could be designed as participatory action research. I firmly contend that teachers and administrators work alongside university-based researchers so that they can learn with and from each other; it is insufficient for researchers to study the teachers and draw conclusions without allowing the emerging themes and findings to shape educators’ future work and behavior. One possible way to organize this study is to actually form a PLC comprised of teachers and university-based researchers, whose mission is to study the efficacy and impacts of PLCs on micro and macro levels. Such a construct would
continue to honor and privilege teachers’ knowledge and theory development, while simultaneously making available data and analytical techniques to which university-based researchers have access.

**Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the educators participating in these PLCs possess the experiential knowledge and desire to learn the critical frameworks needed to buck dominant ideology and envision a schooling experience that more fully accounts for the cultures of the students and seeks to develop the human traits of respect, understanding, compassion, generosity, and empathy. Throughout the academic year, the teachers in this study investigated the concepts of cultural competence (or critical cultural consciousness) and restorative justice and began to plant the seeds needed for these concepts to become woven into the fabric of Aspen’s policies and systems of belief. The study concluded before the seeds had the time and nurture needed to sprout; nevertheless, the early stages of PLC implementation revealed several significant findings.

Much of the literature on PLCs discusses phenomena that occur when they are instituted in a school, such as increased teacher motivation, opportunities for leadership, lower rates of attrition, investment in student success, boosted morale, and improved collegiality. However, the extent to which PLCs are agents for organizational change is under-researched and under-theorized. Frequently, PLCs are organized as data-analysis groups, book clubs, or lesson study teams. These are excellent uses of time, but I suggest that PLCs can serve a more necessary function for the school: grassroots organizations that are levers of change for school improvement. The Cultural Competence PLC
envisioned ACS as a community hub that brought together members of the community with various service providers, cultural organizations, governmental services, and non-profits. Doing so would demonstrate to the community that ACS cares for the well-being of all the neighborhood’s residents and would begin to soften the distrust that so many marginalized citizens rightfully experience. The Restorative Justice PLC quickly determined that punitive measures are harmful to the students and school, so they spent many hours researching various restorative approaches, testing them in their own practice, and considering how they could be fully incorporated into the school community, especially when school policy endorsed a punishment-based approach. Future research and practice, therefore, should conceptualize PLCs as action research pilots for school improvement. Both PLCs yearned to institute changes in the school that they identified as necessary and valuable for the betterment of the school community. What is needed, then, is administrative and university-based support that encourages these initiatives by affording the PLCs the leeway to think big, start small, and grow. This addresses the longevity issue and prevents the “paralysis by analysis” that Jennifer described when considering the group’s goals and vision: “I feel like we have these really great ideas, but I think the reason that we feel like we're kinda stuck today is 'cause all of our goals seem really huge.” By taking the long view and starting small, the PLCs can generate the data needed to initiate the recursive action research cycle, and it is worth investigating the extent to which this approach to PLCs can generate multi-year initiatives that slowly, carefully transform the policies, practices, habits, and beliefs of an entire school.
In addition to studying the capacity of PLCs to operate as levers for school reform, the interface between restorative justice and critical cultural competence warrants further research. In particular, I am most interested in the ways these compatible constructs can be used to reframe the discourse around “classroom management.” In both universities and K-12 schools, classroom management is often discussed as its own discipline in the field of education.37 Conversations on room arrangements, distinctions between rules and procedures, minimally invasive responses to misbehavior, and use of rewards and punishments are talked about universally, regardless of the subject students are learning, their engagement in the curriculum, or the socio-cultural context of the classroom and school. Given the common “best-practice” approach to classroom management, I wonder what changes could occur in schools if classroom management were both embedded into teaching methods classes and framed around critical cultural consciousness and restorative justice.

In other words, what could happen if the marble jar that gets filled when students behave well is replaced with celebratory circles? What happens if a teacher takes an inquiry approach to addressing minor infractions, instead of assuming that proximity, redirection, or narrating the positive are culturally-sensitive and aware maneuvers? What would result when offending students’ parents and grandparents were invited to participate in the restorative community dialogue? How would teachers’ practices change if they learned from the onset of their careers that the apprenticeship of observation will

37 In my undergraduate coursework, “Classroom Management” was its own class, taught by an adjunct professor who also taught fourth grade. Classroom management was divorced from methods and content-area classes, thereby reifying the distinction between classroom management and pedagogical content knowledge.
ultimately result in an educational system that promotes the status quo? What would it mean if preservice teachers were taught in a social studies methods class that restorative justice is both a civics lesson and an approach to classroom management, and that students would have an opportunity to practice a brand of justice that rejects entrenched beliefs? How would music class change if none of the “great composers” studied descended from Europe? These are some of the questions that can be theorized and researched, as K-12 and university-based educators place culture and restoration at the center of classroom management and relationship-based pedagogy (Beaty-O’Ferrall et al., 2010; Sleeter, 2011).

Maisha Winn (2013, 2016) has begun this work by calling for “Restorative Teacher Education.” Leaning on O’Reilly’s query in *The Peaceable Classroom* (1993), Winn (2016, p. 6) wonders, “How do we teach Math in a way that people stop killing? How do we teach Art and Music in a way that people stop killing? How do we teach Science in a way that people stop killing?” Ultimately, Winn resists ubiquitous “methods” classes, in which teaching content is divorced from the context in which the learning occurs and the lives of students who compose the class. Instead, Winn seeks opportunities for preservice and current teachers to “interrogate their own beliefs, practices, and histories that shape their identities as a teacher and learner” (p. 8); with this assumption hunting, she fosters critical consciousness among preservice and novice teachers. By emphasizing restorative approaches across all aspects of teacher preparation programs, Winn implores teacher educators to “signal to the next generation of educators that subject matter or disciplines do not matter as much as the human lives teachers will
impact throughout their careers” (2016, p. 10). When this message is accepted and internalized, educators are empowered “to move away from the question, what works, and toward the journey of what is the work” (Winn, 2016, p. 7). According to Winn (2013), the work is “to encourage youth to be civic actors and engage in a process that promotes a literocracy” (p. 133). Civic engagement and critical readings, however, are not something that should be confined to urban classrooms; all children must recognize the ways power and language are implemented to support or disrupt dominant ideology and discourse.

In addition to promoting CCC, racial literacy, and humanizing disciplinary practices among teachers who educate people of color, this work and framework development is also indispensable for teachers who will enter or currently teach in predominately White schools. As stated in Chapter III, “domination can only do its work when veiled” (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 2; quoted in Moya, 2015), and racial hierarchies are more likely to be masked in segregated schools.38 Such schools may lack the voices of students who have experienced racial or cultural oppression, and consequently, have the schema and intellectual frameworks necessary to challenge dominant ideologies and change their peers’ (and possibly their teachers’) thinking. Janks (1997) describes the necessity of non-standard interpretations to highlight instantiations of oppression:

Readers who do not share the codes of the text are an important CDA resource in teaching and in research. These readers, for whom dominant discourses are not naturalised, usually because of their marginalised position in the society, can

38 In my childhood schooling experience, I have no recollection of any Black peers until high school, and I only had one teacher of color in my entire K-12 educational experience. Given the segregated nature of my childhood and wholesale belief in colorblind ideology, it is not surprising that race was not something discussed in classes, and the question was never posed, “How is it possible that in a post-Brown v. Board society that over 95% of students and teachers in a large suburban school district are White?”
assist those readers who do share the text’s codes to read against the grain. Often these readers are the very people who are labelled as disadvantaged or lacking the cultural capital for dominant literacy, that is for producing dominant readings of a text from the position of the ideal reader. This labelling implies an assimilationist model of literacy, where readers are expected to identify with the textual positionings, rather than a critical model, which requires them to both engage with and question these positions. (p. 4)

Students who live in predominately White and affluent neighborhoods may need help to read “against the grain,” so teacher preparation and professional development programs must equip teachers of all levels of experience to effectively take up issues of race, class, and power with their White students. Many of these students (will) possess material, institutional, and cultural capital, so they will be in positions to challenge the status quo and combat oppression. While much current research and work is justifiably focused on White teachers working with students of color, a logical next step is to theorize and study the ways in which preservice and current teacher education programs – including professional development – equip educators in predominately White schools to filter the “air of racism.” To that end, Winn (2013) advocates for a Restorative English Education, which “can be messy and will be uncomfortable because it is an ‘unquiet pedagogy’ that demands that English educators explicitly address mass incarceration, juvenile injustice, and the policing and silencing of youth, and return to English education as a site for imagination and creativity” (p. 133). White students, in spite and because of their racial privilege, need to be part of this conversation, and part of the solution. But if they are not asked to take up these issues and develop antiracist schema, the air they breathe will continue to contain the particles of oppression that maintain the status quo and racial hegemony; schemata will strengthen, and like several of the teachers at Aspen,
unlearning becomes an increasingly arduous and lengthy undertaking. In short, these White students, like I was at Penn GSE, need to be taught to transgress (hooks, 1994), and they need to understand that silence makes them complicit with racial hierarchies. As such, they play an essential role in creating a more just, equitable society: “All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them” (hooks, 1994, p. 87).

As PLCs, critical cultural consciousness, and restorative justice are considered, teachers and researchers alike should be excited to consider them both independently and in conjunction. All three hold promising potential for the betterment of the educational field, the professionalization and advancement of teachers and pedagogy, and improved schooling experiences for all students, especially society’s most vulnerable youth. The color-line remains our nation’s most significant problem, and teacher education programs and PLCs that question dominant ideology through inquiries into race, culture, and justice will, perhaps, more fully recognize the shared humanity in us all, close the school-to-prison pipeline, and open opportunities for otherwise marginalized children.

**Final Thoughts: Identity, Passion, and Action**

During my first year of coursework at Penn GSE, I was simultaneously overwhelmed and inspired by the Ethnography in Education Forum. Not only was the content of the presentations thought-provoking, but the participation structures were representative of GSE’s epistemological stance and its respect for practicing teachers. In one session, K-12 educators were thoughtfully listening and taking notes as renowned
university-based professors shared their latest theories and research. And in the next session, the same professors were captivated as K-12 teachers discussed their own innovative practices, curricular designs, and emerging theories. And in a third session, K-12 teachers presented alongside their university-based partners, exemplifying the powerful work that occurs when educators from all contexts share a seat at the same table and look each other in the eye. Throughout the Forum, no one’s knowledge was privileged more than another’s, and a spirit of communal inquiry and wondering permeated throughout 3700 Walnut Street’s walls. The proverbial “ivory tower” was nowhere to be seen, as teachers and professors talked as equals, as partners. That weekend, I could not have been more proud to be a member of the Penn GSE community, as that Forum embodied my beliefs about the value of teachers and school-university partnerships.

The first night of the Forum, it was a privilege to attend Gloria Ladson-Billing’s (2007) keynote address, entitled “The Ethnography of Misery.” During her talk, she spoke passionately about her study of Black children and their challenging experiences in schools. She shared a modern remake of Kenneth Clark’s Doll Test, entitled “A Girl Like Me” (Davis, 2005), in which young Black children are shown two dolls – one Black, one White – and asked, “Which doll do you want to play with?”; “Which doll is the nice doll?”; “Which doll is the bad doll?”; and “Which doll is the pretty doll?” Invariably, the children attributed the positive qualities to the White doll and negative qualities to the Black one, bringing to light their own socially constructed biases. Ladson-Billings, in an incredibly powerful moment, paused the video as a Black child identified “the bad doll”
as the one who looks like her. Her sorrowful eyes and troubled facial expression can be read one way: misery.

Figure 15. “A Girl Like Me”

The pain this child felt as she identified the “bad” doll as the one that shared her skin tone still haunts me, still drives me. As a member of the human family, no child should experience this agony, and consequently, I am determined to use my own White privilege, cultural capital, and social resources to fight within and against the many and varied systems responsible for this oppression – for this child’s pain; I share hook’s (1994) sentiment, “My commitment to engaged pedagogy is an expression of political activism” (p. 203). In many ways, my experience at the Ethnography Forum led to this study, since it not only demonstrated the power and necessity of teacher research, but it also lit a inextinguishable fire to fight for racial justice, an end to oppression, and a recognition by all members of society that “we are more alike, my friends,/ than we are unalike” (Angelou, 1994). While celebrating differences is essential, finding commonalities is the more logical starting point.
Pedagogy – and research – begin with beliefs (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009), and these beliefs guide our thoughts, our words, our questions, and our actions. If we truly believe that “all mankind is tied together, all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (King, 1965), then we must all – as professors, as researchers, as theorists, as fifth grade teachers, as human beings – use every cultural, intellectual, and academic resource available to rewrite the narrative for marginalized children in order to afford them the rights, privileges, and dignity promised to all members of the human family. An altogether compelling, but undoubtedly formidable, step towards this, my friends, is to rewrite professional development.
Appendix A: Cultural Iceberg Model

(Weaver, 1986)

**Iceberg Model**

Culture can be compared to an iceberg, because so much goes undetected. So that within our lives and work it is often ignored. The influence of culture on the elements of communication need to be explicitly explored rather than taken for granted or ignored. The list below shows some of the cultural issues that impact on our interactions:

**Surface Culture**

- LANGUAGE
- ARTS, LITERATURE
- RELIGIONS, MUSIC, DRESS
- DANCE, GAMES, SPORTS, COOKING

**Folk Culture**

- Notions of Modesty
- Concepts of Beauty
- Education
- Child Raising
- Rules of Descent
- Cosmology
- Relationship to things, animals & plants
- Courtship practices
- Concept of Justice
- Motivation to Work
- Criteria for Leadership
- Decision Making Processes
- Deities
- Death
- Ideas of Cleanliness
- Locus of Control
- Theory of Disease
- Physical Space
- Definition of Sanity, friendship, love, murder, life, gender, facial expressions
- Roles in relation to status by age, gender, class, kinship, occupation, religion
- Conversational patterns in various social contexts
- Conception of time & space
- Preferences for competition, cooperation, individualism or group norms
- Sin, grace
- Notion of Adulthood
- Notion of logic and validity
- Physical space arrangements, life odors
- Handling of emotions
- Acceptance of frustration or pain
- Concept of Faith
Appendix B: Aspen PLC Mission & Vision Statement

Mission and Vision: Professional development is a career-long process that requires focused and sustained commitment from both the faculty and the administration. Professional development at Aspen Charter School will promote the inquiry and learning necessary for teachers to reflect upon, analyze, and ultimately improve their pedagogical craft. Teachers will be positioned as knowledge generators, rather than consumers, and the knowledge they create will be shared for others’ benefit. The ultimate goal of professional development is improved student learning, as evidenced through multiple indicators – both qualitative and quantitative. Well-planned and executed professional development will result in attracting and retaining top-caliber teachers, and along with teacher growth, student satisfaction and learning will continually improve.

The Three Areas of Inquiry:

1. How can ACS teachers improve/enhance interpersonal relationships with their students? What are the roadblocks to meaningful relationships, and what can teachers do to forge a bond with every student?
2. How can curriculum be used as a tool and vehicle to foster students’ relationships with their teachers and with the subject matter? In other words, what role can curriculum play in establishing and developing relationships with students?
3. How can teachers create assessments, analyze the data, and share the results in ways that both inform future teaching and support student-teacher relationships?

Goals:

- Teachers will form cohort-based professional learning communities (PLCs). These PLCs will operate as inquiry groups that will systematically investigate the issues and challenges teachers face when forming relationships with Aspen students. The inquiry will rely upon theory, research, and experiential knowledge as teachers reflect upon their interactions with students and attempt to build positive relationships with them. Key areas of focus will be culture, language, gender, power, and context.
- Grade level (elementary) and department (middle school) teams will comprise different, but related PLCs. The goal of these PLCs is to work closely with the curriculum and data in order to design effective instruction, create project-based assessments, and review and analyze assessment data. Assessment data is to be thought about as more than standardized test results: while important, these tests do not offer the insights into student thinking that other day-to-day work provides. At the heart of these PLCs remains the focus on student-teacher relationships. Since relationships are built and tested during instructional time, divorcing the curriculum and assessments from the relationships would be erroneous. Consequently, the PLCs will be asked to consider how various lessons,
pedagogies, curricular materials, assessments, data analysis, and sharing of results will influence the teachers’ relationships with individual students and classes as a whole.

- PLCs will establish mechanisms to collect data about the three areas of inquiry, so that patterns can be uncovered and understandings shared. It is easy to focus on effects (e.g., the kids didn’t learn the material even though I taught it to them twice) without giving equal weight to the causes (e.g., what was it about the lesson I taught that prevented the students from accessing the content or skill?). This recursive cycle amongst colleagues promotes careful reflection and refinement of practice.

- At the core of PLCs is mutual respect and collegiality among team members. Thus, a goal of professional development is to further enhance the relationships among teachers.

- Though the majority of the PD will take place in the small group SLCs, the knowledge generated within each group can and should be shared with the faculty at large. Consequently, there will be opportunities throughout the year for SLCs to make public their learning, so that the rest of faculty can benefit from each group’s findings.

- In concert, this intentional focus on interpersonal relationships, curriculum, and assessments/analysis will improve both student achievement and student and teacher satisfaction in Aspen Charter School.
Appendix C: Sample PLC Lesson Plan Design

Session Objectives:

1. To continue to build community by understanding different contributions individuals make to group dynamics
2. To learn the typical phases of group dynamics
3. To explore demographics of the Aspen neighborhood and consider how this information can be used to better understand students and build relationships with them
4. To generate an interview protocol used to better understand students and their culture
5. To reflect upon today’s learning experiences and consider how this information may help when staff first meets new students

Materials:

- Desks/chairs arranged in a circle
- Chart paper and markers
- Copies of “Group Roles”
- Descriptions of the 5 phases of group dynamics
- Group Phases “answer key”
- Student Interview brainstorming sheet
- Open House Think Sheet
- Reflection sheet

Objective 1: To continue to build community by understanding different contributions individuals make to group dynamics

Rationale: Participation can take many forms and shapes. By understanding different contributions individuals make to the group dynamic and learning process, members gain appreciation for each other. Assumptions about interpersonal dynamics will be uncovered, and awareness of individuals’ participation traits will be highlighted.

Activity #1: Talker or Listener?

- Distribute Group Roles sheet. Each member reads the roles and identifies which role most closely describes his/her behavior in a group setting.
- Once each member identifies her/himself as a particular role, have each person tell what s/he picked and explain why that choice was made (what parts of the description really rang true?)
After everyone has been introduced, ask the group whether, based upon their role choice, they consider themselves a talker or a listener. Ask team to rearrange desks into 2 smaller circles: one side for talkers and the other for listeners.

Once divided, each group will get to talk amongst themselves and answer these questions, which will be shared with the whole team:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Talkers discuss:</th>
<th>Listeners discuss:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Why do groups need talkers?</td>
<td>1. Why do groups need listeners?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Why do you feel inclined to talk more frequently than listen?</td>
<td>2. Why do you feel inclined to listen more than speak in a group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do the listeners need to know about you?</td>
<td>3. What do the talkers need to know about you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What questions do you have for the listeners?</td>
<td>4. What questions do you have for the talkers?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once conversation seems to be dying down, reconvene the group and allow each group to provide their answers to the other group. As they ask their questions to the other group, there most likely will be some back-and-forth, which is fine. Once the conversation has run its course, facilitate a reflection on the learning activity. Some sample questions are listed below:

- What was the experience like of labeling yourself as one of the roles? What are the times when our students are labeled – by themselves or by others – and how might they respond to that process?
- How might this activity inform your thinking both in this group and while interacting with students?
- Were there any times of tension during the small group or large group discussions? What caused the tension? How did you respond to the feeling of discomfort?
- What are the pros and cons of disagreement in a conversation? When tension exists, how do we keep the conversation productive?

**Objective 2: To learn the typical stages of group dynamics**

**Rationale:** Though not all groups follow identical trajectories, research shows that groups typically travel through certain interactional phases. By gaining awareness of the stages, group members will understand that the peaks and valleys are normal, so they should not become discouraged when there is conflict or tension (which may have begun to surface in the talkers vs. listeners activity).

**Activity #2: Climbing the Mountain – As a Team**

- Ask team to form groups of 2-3, with at least one talker and one listener. Explain that they will receive 5 cards, each of which describes a stage of group
development. Their job is to chronologically order and title each stage, based on the description.

- Distribute slips of paper and allow groups to order and title them. When groups are done, have them share which they thought was first, second, third, fourth, and last. Also come to quick consensus about what to title each phase. This shouldn’t take too long, and I doubt the team will put the phases in the wrong order and require your intervention.

- After the phases are ordered and titled, lead a short discussion:
  - What stage do you think we are in now? What makes you think this?
  - Is it helpful to know these stages of group or development? Why or why not?
  - What connections do you see between the various group roles and the stages of group development?
  - Did you interact any differently in your small group knowing that you were working with someone who is a talker or a listener?
  - Was there any disagreement or conflict? How was it addressed or dealt with?
  - What “words of wisdom” do you have for the second stage, which is characterized by conflict and disagreement?

**Objective 3:** To explore demographics of the Aspen neighborhood and consider how this information can be used to better understand students and build relationships with them

**Rationale:** In order to make sense of the world, the human brain uses assumptions and theories to fill in gaps where data is missing (schema theory). To address this issue, two related processes can occur: first, people can gather more information, thereby reducing the need to rely on assumptions. Second, people can “dig up” assumptions, analyze and critique them, and recognize how these assumptions may lead to misinterpretation of individuals, groups, and events.

**Activity #3: Fish is Fish and Aspen is Aspen**

- Read *Fish is Fish* aloud to the team (or allow a group member to read it). Ask the group how the staff compares and contrasts to the fish, and how the students compare and contrast to the frog. This could be done as a quick-write, think-pair-share, small group, or whole group. Allow time for discussion.

- Tell the team that we going to begin to “join the frog” so that we can develop a more accurate picture of the land that surrounds the safety of our ACS waters. To begin the inquiry, we will look at some simple demographic data about the Aspen neighborhood. While working through this activity, our task is to try to dig up assumptions that we have and to consider how knowing this information can help us to build a relationship with and better understand our students.
• Again, ask team to divide into groups of 2-3 (can be the same as last time or different). Groups will be given a piece of demographic data about the community and will think about what this piece of information means for the lives of the students, consider how this data can be utilized to make a more accurate image of the students, and theorize how this data can be used to build empathy with students.

• After small groups have had time to work through their demographics, allow them to share their findings with the whole team. Encourage other members to add different layers of analysis to the demographic. What hopefully will emerge is a “hunting of the good” for the neighborhood, students, and families.

• Ask the group if any themes or trends emerged in what was being shared. Allow time for discussion and analysis.

• To make meaning from this learning activity, ask members to do a quick write that responds to one of these questions:
  o What does this activity have to do with your adaptive unconscious? What would Malcolm Gladwell have to say about the work we are doing?
  o As you think back on your experiences at Aspen, were there times when you were like the fish – when you misinterpreted students because your schema was incomplete? How do you respond to those incidents now?
  o What does this learning experience mean for your practice as a teacher and caretaker of children?

• Members may choose to share with the group, but participation should be optional, as responses could be personal.

• To close the activity, tell the team that one of our projects this year is to metaphorically write the Aspen Is Aspen story. To do so, we will have to be willing to leave the comfort of our own ponds and really start to analyze and critique our own practices. While the Fish is Fish metaphor is far simpler than what we are attempting, the basic ideas of increasing our own knowledge and eliminating inaccurate assumptions should ring true. As we continue to face situations and data that are seemingly bleak, we can develop a “habit of mind” of reinterpreting them as sites for opportunity.

Objective 4: To generate an interview protocol used to better understand students and their culture

Rationale: In order to avoid the thinking trap of the fish, Aspen staff must become adept assumption hunters and information gatherers. Rather than relying on tacit beliefs, staff can use data mined from students and parents to form a more complete and accurate picture of the Aspen community’s culture, values, and norms. While cultural discrepancies and mismatches will still likely exist, open communication lines and honest conversations reduce the possibility of a deficit perspective and a “blame the culture” mentality.
Activity 4: Kids Say the Darndest Things!
- Set the purpose for this activity that as teachers, we are talented at gathering and analyzing academic data in order to inform our teaching. **What would it mean if we gathered and analyzed data in order to inform our relationships with students?** In this activity, interview protocols will be developed so that staff have the information needed to avoid the Fish’s mistakes.
- The team should break into two smaller groups – about 3-5 people each. Distribute the graphic organizer to assist brainstorming. Give groups time to develop the questions they’d like to ask students in each of the categories. Encourage groups to write questions that don’t fit in the categories on the back of the page, as they are just suggestions to start the process.
- Allow groups to share with each other and add in great questions that the other group generated.
- Have each small group work on its own to create a “final” version of the interview protocol. It should be no more than 8-10 questions, so that it can be administered with each student in about 5 minutes or so.
- Remind the team that this is not something that should be photocopied and distributed to students; making the effort to talk to each student one-on-one is a meaningful act that demonstrates individual interest.
- Assign the “homework”: by October 11 (our next PLC session), interview all the students in your class (or a sample for specialists and staff), record responses, and bring them to the next PLC. Try to locate patterns, trends, or any assumptions that were confirmed or challenged. If possible, conduct a follow-up interview with a couple students in order to get a better picture of students’ thinking, values, and belief systems.

Objective 5: To reflect upon today’s learning experiences and consider how this information may help when staff first meets new students

*Rationale: With the school open house occurring in just two work days, team members will consider their approach for putting “theory into practice.” In this reflection, the group will consider what it has learned about community building, the Aspen neighborhood, and the characteristics they hope to make manifest in their practice.*

Activity #5: What does this mean for next week?
- Based upon everything we’ve learned about establishing community, let’s talk through these Open House decisions (can be done whole group, small group, or individually):
  - What should I wear? What will this physical appearance say about me?
  - What are the physical must-haves for my classroom? What does this have to do with community?
Once everyone has been able to think through their decisions for Open House, pass out the written reflections.

Thank you so much for everything you’re doing to help the staff learn! I’m looking forward to following up with you, getting your feedback, and figuring out what the best use of your PLC time in October will be!!
Appendix D: Sample PLC Think Sheet

Housing

Aspen Demographic: 24.6% of all land in the neighborhood is vacant. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society has implemented their Vacant Land Stabilization Program in the neighborhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What this data means (Analysis)</th>
<th>What it means for the lives of the students (Application)</th>
<th>How this affects students’ thinking and worldview (Empathy)</th>
<th>How I can use this information to foster and sustain relationships (Synthesis)</th>
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In what ways, if any, does this affect the image you have of the Aspen neighborhood (think *Fish is Fish*)?

Were any assumptions uncovered and/or challenged?

How can this data be (re)interpreted so that it creates a positive image of the students and neighborhood? What might they know, understand, or be able to do because they are a part of this demographic reality?
REFERENCES


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