

FROM ABSOLUTE SPACES TOWARDS INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS:  
A CASE OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP

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FROM ABSOLUTE SPACES TOWARDS INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS:  
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## **DEDICATION**

Par mis primeros maestros, mamá, y papá. Soy quien soy gracias a ustedes.

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## **ABSTRACT**

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**SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: SARAH W. NELSON**

This study is a qualitative investigation of how one teacher's equity orientation impacts her work in an urban high school in south Texas. Her experience including students, especially those who identify with differences, is represented as a critical case study.

The primary purpose is to understand how one teacher moved towards a more inclusive environment so that teachers and school leaders will have an additional heuristic for transforming absolute space and so that students are provided with more equitable learning opportunities. An absolute space is a space that is restrictive, static, and not open to negotiation. In this space, one's identity is determined through established discourse and roles. As such, these spaces privilege particular identities over

others. The method of inquiry is a critical case study (Patton, 2002) that includes ethnographic techniques such as interviews (Seidman, 2006), archival research (Glesne, 2011) and field observations (Patton, 2002).

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Call me Israel. While I do not like labels, I feel the need to identify my positionality so you, the reader, may better understand the impetus for this study. I am a twenty-nine year old Mexican-American metrosexual (Harris & Clayton, 2007) who is originally from Campo Escondido (pseudonym), a geographic region of south Texas that was once part of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. This area is predominantly Hispanic, Roman Catholic, conservative, and provincial. According to the Association of Religion and Data Archives (2011), Roman Catholicism became the largest denomination in America in the late nineteenth century and remains so today. Texas ranks third among the states in terms of the population of Catholics (Alvarez & Plocheck, 2009). According to the U.S. Census (2000), 978,369 people resided in Campo Escondido of which 42% identified as Catholic adherents (Association, 2011). Additionally, although Campo Escondido is considered a political stronghold for Democrats (Bicknell & Meyers, 2011), the majority of citizens tend to be socially conservative (Janes, 2011; Perez-Trevino, 2010).

Known for its proximity to the Texas-Mexico border, Campo Escondido is home to many immigrants. Yet, the Southwest territory, which included Campo Escondido was annexed through U.S. conquest in 1848, has historically been a site of discrimination against immigrants and the children of immigrants, including those of Mexican ancestry



(San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1954 Operation Wetback, and the 1964 termination of the Bracero program (guest worker program) by Congress are a few past attempts to control undocumented migration through policy (Espenshade, 1995). Although its effectiveness in doing so is uncertain, a more recent effort to mend the porous nature of the border is the *Secure Fence Act of 2006* enacted by the Bush administration. Today, the Obama Administration has not yet provided any comprehensive immigration policy reform. According to the Pew Research Center (2008), if current trends of immigration continue the United States will grow by 150 million people by 2050, with 82% of this increase due to immigrant arrival, particularly from the Latino population.

Early settlers saw Campo Escondido for its potential farmland and convenient access to water and called it a magical place (Rozeff, 2007). According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, 37.6 % of the population in Texas is Hispanic. Recently, the Texas-Mexico border, including Campo Escondido, has become a national concern because Mexican drug cartel war violence has spilled into the U.S. side of the border (Kocherga, 2010; Newman, 2009).

Despite the current presence of violence, Campo Escondido sustains its economy through agriculture, business, and tourism. This area is served by many universities and community colleges. While Campo Escondido is my home, it is here where I learned my innate differences were set against community norms and contested. The “storying” of my personal experience at home has helped me understand the culture I was born into (St. Pierre, 2008). To tell my story, I use tenets of autobiography and autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

## **My Differences**

In elementary school I was expected to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, to participate in the annual Christmas gift exchange and to dress in costume for Halloween although all of these activities violated my family's religious beliefs. My parents asked my teachers to respect our religious beliefs; some teachers respected my parents' request and others ignored it. Either way, I felt my religious difference was a burden to my classroom teachers because none of them were consistent in their attempt to make the classroom inclusive for me.

My parents explained to my teachers why Jehovah's Witnesses did not celebrate birthdays, donate blood, nor recite the Pledge of Allegiance. At the beginning of every school year my mother made special visits to my teachers to explain that it was okay for teachers to keep me in the classroom during the Pledge of Allegiance, holiday observations, and birthday celebrations; however, she asked my teachers to explain to the other children why I did not celebrate. My mother suspected that my teachers did not always follow through with her requests, especially since I have two older brothers who had gone through the same process before I did and reported being isolated from the group during activities that went against our religion. According to my mother, it was okay if I stayed in the room because it would help teachers and students learn about and respect our religion more. I recently asked my mother what she thought it could have looked like for me to stay in the room during a birthday celebration or holiday observation. While she was not sure, she and the teachers could have figured it out together.

As my mother suspected, from time to time my teachers temporarily sent me to another class during activities that went against my religious beliefs. I am not sure why teachers chose to send me away on some occasions and not others. Perhaps as Greenwalt (2002) and Nord (1995) suggest, they assumed they were not proficient enough to negotiate the tensions of disparate religious beliefs in the classroom. By sending me out of the room, the teachers eliminated the discomfort that comes with having a perspective that is too different or too unfamiliar for the majority to easily accept and relieved themselves from the role of facilitating a conversation around a topic they did not understand. They may have also assumed I would be more comfortable outside of the space than in it. Either way, I was segregated from my peers and I experienced many unintended consequences as a result of my teachers' actions. For example, when I was sent out of the room, the receiving teachers who I reported to often assumed I was a trouble maker because my own teacher never explained the circumstances of my visit. These teachers would automatically ask me to sit by myself rather than with the group and they gave me work to do and did not want me to speak to any other students during my temporary visit. Because I was removed from common social functions like classroom birthday parties and because my parents and I did not attend school sponsored events that went against my religious beliefs, such as parent-student thanksgiving luncheon, I felt alienated and ashamed of my differences to the extent that I was afraid of reaching out to anyone for fear of rejection. This contributed to my alienation in elementary school. I did not develop a sense of belonging in a classroom nor feeling socially connected to any student or teacher. Greenwalt (2002) maintained:

Educators who have been raised in and/or belong to various Christian denominations may not see long-standing public school practices, such as the annual Christmas or Holiday concert or various discipline policies, as potentially oppressive for religious minority students or for students who hold no religious beliefs. (p. 23)

My experience supports Greenwalt's claim because it illustrates how schools and the people in them are organized to maintain the status quo. Traditional norms and beliefs such as those around holidays are often so deeply embedded in the routine of schools that they become invisible (Thurer, 2005). As a result, educators do not question or challenge norms they perceive as natural. Thus, children are seen as similar rather than different.

While it was mostly my religious difference that teachers in elementary school found problematic, my peers found other aspects of my identity to be problematic. Many of peers perceived me to be gay because of my meek nature, mannerisms, physical size, and tendency to have female friends. Most of the neighborhood boys participated in football, basketball and other physical contact sports. My parents could not afford for me to participate in sports, but the other students interpreted my absence from sports as an indication of me not being tough enough. Even if my parents could have afforded the fees associated with organized sports teams, I did not participate in sports because I wanted to steer clear from being called names in case my peers made comments based on their assumptions of me. I suspected that defending myself from the other students who called me names could have resulted in violence and jeopardize what I thought was my good standing with the school and contradict my religious faith, forgiveness.

Although I often felt alienated because of how others felt and what they said, I was not completely removed from school. On the contrary, I participated in fine arts and academic extra-curricular activities that were free of charge. This was fun for me. I became interested in acting; in public speaking, in expository writing, and in reading aloud. The other boys in school, including my only neighborhood friend, Louis, frowned upon my interest in the arts and academics. He, like the others, punished me by making fun of me for what they believed was not normal for a boy, especially a Hispanic boy who is “socialized within a Mexican/ Mexican-American culture that perpetuates the images of *machismo* and *maricon*” (Rodriguez-Kessler, 2006, p. 232).

Yet, despite what students or teachers assumed about any difference I exhibited in elementary school, I stayed focus on school and counted on the promise of prayer when I was bullied for being different. Incidentally, prayer was and still is today how I utilize my faith in order to confront the biggest challenges of my life. In addition to faith, I benefitted from the empathy of educators who seemed to sense my difference and who reached out to me so that I would not feel alienated. Ms. Moreno was one of those. Ms. Moreno, a teacher, helped me navigate through an unwelcoming place, my fourth grade elementary classroom. Her effort, although problematic at times, demonstrated how educators can take action in their own classrooms in order to include students who are different.

### **The Call**

As the bell rang for dismissal, all twenty fourth graders ran toward the back of the room to retrieve our belongings. In the process of gathering my books, I accidentally stepped on the strap of another student’s backpack, causing the student to drop his bag as

he walked away. “Get off my backpack, faggot,” he yelled. His words left me in tears. Ms. Moreno saw me crying and approached me to ask what was wrong. After I told her about the comment, she gave me a hug and suggested that I should not let what the other students think of me hurt my feelings. I knew this from advice my mother had already given me, yet this time I buckled under the pressure because I was a young child learning to cope with acting masculine enough to satisfy the expectations of others who perceived me as gay. That day I cried because it was not only hurtful to hear my classmate articulate his hate for difference, but I also cried because I suspected harassment of this sort would continue. At this age, I understood what gay meant and the consequences associated with it if one identified as gay. Whether or not the other boy used the term in the pejorative sense did not help me feel any better, for I was still hurt that I or anyone else could be punished for being different. As my tears began to stop, I asked Ms. Moreno, “You mean like sticks and stones will break my bones, but words can never hurt me?” Ms. Moreno replied, “Yes, like sticks and stones.”

Ms. Moreno’s few words of encouragement gave me confidence at that particular moment when I needed it. Unfortunately, many teachers misunderstand their duty as neutral agents of the state and misinterpret neutrality as meaning silence when they encounter situations that may potentially call into question their personal beliefs. Silence does not equal neutrality. On the contrary, silence connotes consent (Walsh & Maniotis, 2010). According to Kroeger (2008), “Regardless of personal views[...] all teachers should speak up when they hear derogatory homophobic comments and interrupt them, promoting children’s well-being and safety” (p.127). Although Ms. Moreno did not directly hear the comment and interrupt it, the reassurance in the form of a verbal

response she provided suggested Ms. Moreno acted responsibly by making me feel like difference mattered and like difference had meaning, regardless of her personal beliefs about sexual orientation.

After my classmate shouted at me for stepping on his backpack, I began to realize school would be a place I needed to tolerate because I was perceived as gay. Because schools are imbued with norms and discourse that stems from heteronormativity (Capper, 1999; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010), my classmate's use of a derogatory term was not only meant to hurt me for deviating from the standard, but it was also meant to conform me. Thurer (2006) argued that "discourse is a form of mind control" (p. 106). Language is like a menu that is always there to prescribe what is normative. Anyone who identifies with or is identified by discourse outside the boundaries of the menu is rejected and punished. The call I received was a form of mind control.

While I had a choice to walk away or to fight back, I chose to behave maturely and to walk away from any situation that could have escalated into violence. Finding the strength to forgive a classmate who was judgmental was difficult for me, yet I still did it. For me, school was as an absolute space, a space that was restrictive, static, and not open to negotiation. In this space, my identity was locked through established discourse and behavior. Like an absolute number in math that retains its original value and same distance from zero whether positive or negative (e.g.  $|-12| = 12$ ), an absolute space is where identity is always confined and reset without consideration of variance.

### **A Teacher**

For a few days following the name calling incident, Ms. Moreno asked the class to read a short book about a young girl who was an orphan. The girl went to school but

no one spoke to her. She felt sad and did not want to go to school. Eventually another girl came to welcome the main character and became her friend. Ms. Moreno asked the class to discuss the story aloud and tell her what we thought. Several students responded, and it was clear from the discussion that Ms. Moreno was using this piece of literature to teach the class an important lesson about accepting others who are different. I raised my hand and said, “This is like that other story, *Chrysanthemum* we read a long time ago in another class.” There was silence. “How so?” replied Ms. Moreno. “Well, students are not the only ones who can make another student feel accepted. Teachers can, too,” I said. Ms. Moreno smiled knowingly. The story we read was complimented with a class project in which students were asked to bring pictures, letters, stories, or any artifacts that could help tell others about ourselves. While this example illustrates Ms. Moreno’s basic attempt to make students aware of each other’s differences, it does not demonstrate whether or not Ms. Moreno was prepared to explain *why* being aware of others’ differences was important to do. The challenge for educators then and now is to create inclusive classrooms where students are open to each others’ differences in a way that promotes caring:

In everyday life, as well as times of crisis and times of war, we live with a horror of the violence and something the people inflict on each other for whatever reason. What is required, beyond judging or blaming, is a preparedness to face this and do it in an ethical way. What is required, ethically, is that we should care. This ethical challenge, I have suggested is to hold a position of continuous questioning on reflection, to work to create and sustain a common public sphere, and to be open to others who are different from ourselves. (Christie, 2005, p. 43)



Perhaps if Ms. Moreno had explained to the students the purpose of caring and accepting others in light of the classroom incident, the literature about differences she used would have made a greater impact. While these types of activities are a start, continuous reflection as Christie (2005) suggests is how teachers can work towards inclusive environments.

### **Towards Inclusion**

Ms. Moreno called my mother and explained the project about bringing artifacts to explain one's differences. For a couple of days, I looked around the house for something to show my classmates so I could discuss my differences. I found pictures of my family at church. I gathered pictures and newspaper clippings of me at district competitions and the trophies I had won for acting, speaking, reading, and writing. As part of the project, I also interviewed some of my uncles and grandparents. I showed Ms. Moreno my artifacts and my progress. She supported me and had contact with my mother about the project. Ms. Moreno's approach was demonstration of an ethic of care, which was a source of my success in fourth grade because I did not have to feel ashamed of my religion or being perceived as gay:

Such an ethic focuses on the demands of relationships, not from a contractual or legalistic standpoint, but from a standpoint of absolute regard. It recognizes that it is in the relationship that the human is grounded; isolated individuals functioning only for themselves are but half persons. (Starratt, 1991, p. 195)

Because cultural proficiency requires authentic relationships (Nelson & Guerra, 2011), Ms. Moreno attempted to bond with students by using strategies such as an autobiographical project and incorporating literature on differences to instill a sense of

identity and understanding in each student. This project helped me feel different, but also included.

On the day of the presentation, I did not have any trophies that showed my participation in athletics like the majority of the boys did. In fact, my trophies looked very different. At the top, each trophy had a lamp of knowledge. The other boys had trophies with miniature football or baseball players at the top. The girls had trophies, too. Interestingly, many of their trophies were from the same academic activities I participated in as well as from cheerleading and other sports. I had several newspaper clippings to show I had won first place in the district competition in acting, reading, and writing. To discuss my family's faith, I brought in pictures of us at an annual state assembly of the Jehovah Witnesses. When I showed this picture, I discussed the fact that I was not baptized, and explained I did not celebrate my birthday.

At first, I felt the activity worked. Before this presentation, the idea that I was a small boy with a squeaky voice who did not play sports automatically stigmatized me as a 'sissy.' Also, because I did not follow the religious faith of the majority and did not practice certain traditions, I was stigmatized as unsociable and perhaps not normal. Yet, after this presentation, I felt my classmates had a better understanding of how different I was from them.

Whether I did or did not fulfill any of the assumptions other students had about me as I grew up, my identity was contested because I did not follow the norm. As I grew up, even though, I did not realize it at the time; *normalcy* manifested itself as a pedagogy (Britzman, 1995) that was always already there. After this activity, the number of uncomfortable questions asked about my sexual orientation stopped briefly and

comments made about my faith significantly decreased because Ms. Moreno momentarily interrupted the oppressive efforts of the normalcy I was subjected to. After the activity, it seemed that my classmates either accepted my differences, or came to the realization at some level that it was unacceptable in this classroom to make fun of people's differences. Either way, my self-esteem increased.

Ms. Moreno's small effort to highlight everyone's differences is an example of a teacher taking an assets based perspective (Capper, 1999), which helped move towards an inclusive environment. Ms. Moreno continued to emphasize the value of differences rather than try to make differences invisible for the rest of the year. However, this activity did not completely transform everyone's understanding because students continued to make assumptions about me as time went on.

While Ms. Moreno's work did help me understand my differences, as with all relational work, her work was imperfect. Although she had the best of intentions, Ms. Moreno's work was problematic at times. For example, Ms. Moreno wanted to make the classroom a site where differences were visible and accepted, but she often used me as the example of what everyone else ought to strive to do. I became the center of attention when she would point out my good behavior: "Class, I really like the way Israel is sitting down and doing his work." It was not uncommon for Ms. Moreno to request that I be the first to line up to go to the cafeteria, to the library, or to the computer lab. My school work was always posted on the walls, and I usually had the same number of gold stars under my name as the others who I knew were smarter than I. I felt protected by Ms. Moreno's equity lens, but I also felt singled-out and guilty because I received privilege as a result of my differences. In some ways I felt I was in a worse place than before. If

students had not sneered at me in the past, they did it after they saw Ms. Moreno's favoritism play out.

The story of Ms. Moreno illustrated that the work of creating inclusive classrooms is complex, messy, and difficult. While Ms. Moreno attempted to make her classroom a place where my differences were acknowledged and at least somewhat accepted, she also unknowingly erred by making me the exemplar. The power of Ms. Moreno's story is in recognizing that transformative teachers are not idealized models of perfection. Rather, they are human, not knowing everything, and yet working to create inclusive classrooms; moreover, the story of Ms. Moreno indicates that transformative work always requires reflection. Knowing the potential traps (e.g., pity, favoritism) and the human benefit inherent in this work may help others in their pursuit of inclusive classrooms to continue this work that is often thankless, tiresome, misunderstood, and many times not supported. As an educator, I concur with Maxwell (1994) who argued that one should not strive towards solidarity and community in organizations because contemporary society misconstrues such constructs with homogeneity and consensus; therefore, contiguity, a distinct source of similarity-based solidarity that "derives from the way people interact, meet one another's needs, and thereby come to know and care about one another" is a more equitable social understanding because it values difference, similarity, and complementary rather than similarity alone (p. 4).

### **Growing Pains**

As I moved to middle school, how others perceived my sexual orientation continuously clashed with the heteronormativity inherent in schools (Koschoreck &

Slattery, 2010). Still, I tried desperately to act more and look like the other boys to fit in. However, I failed miserably at it.

I particularly remember the morning and afternoon bus commute to be part of the day I dreaded. All the neighborhood boys and my brothers who were older and physically taller than I was sat in the back of the bus and talked about video games, sports, girls, and mischievous behavior. These boys often made jokes and teased the girls on the bus, yet everyone sat as close as possible to the back of the bus. I did not understand. Why did everyone want to be around those kids when they clearly did not listen to the driver, made a mess, and made fun of everyone? Why did no one want to hang out with me? Was it not cool to be a smart boy who listened to adults? Was there something I did not know? What went on at the back of the bus? These questions and more had puzzled me since I was an elementary student, but I never tried to understand them. I simply blamed the name calling on myself for being different.

However, as a middle school student, one day I conjured up the courage to sit in the back of the bus to find out what went on back there. I had thought about going to the back before, but I never actually went through with it because I suspected I would cause trouble. This time was different. I had sneaked out a football from my brother's room. I figured if the boys saw me with it they would want to talk to me and be my friend. When I arrived to the back of the bus, I quickly noticed how everyone looked. The majority of the boys looked tough and acted rough. They wore jeans, t-shirts, and sporty sneakers. I hoped no one would see my shiny black loafers I used for church or pay attention to my collared shirt that was neatly tucked in to my polyester pants.

In the back of the bus sat the athletes one side. On the other side, were students who were known as trouble makers. It was obvious I did not fit in, but I tried to act like I did. I yelled out obscene words and threw spit wads across the bus. I wanted to give others the impression I was a tough boy who lived on the edge. I thought I had to act this way in order to be eligible to sit in the back and be considered a macho boy. For a minute I felt like the biggest, baddest, and meanest kid in the back of the bus. But this was not who I wanted to be. It felt wrong to yell out profanity, but before I could move to the front of the bus, some boys handed me a large black permanent marker. Judging from the scribbled seats, I was sure they wanted me to write my name, someone's phone number, or draw a small picture. Hesitantly, I applied the tip of the marker to the vinyl seat, but I stayed frozen. I did not write on the seat. Instead, I replaced the cap on the marker and handed it back to the boy who had given it to me. I stood up and slowly walked to the front of the bus where I originally sat. This single experience, together with a history of being normalized, helped me realize that if conforming to the norm and being accepted as a macho and tough boy meant acting like a menace to society then I was not interested, nor could I pretend to be interested. For the first time, it occurred to me that the root of the problem was not me, nor the other students who bullied me on account of my differences. The problem was something bigger. The problem was the invisible hand of normativity and the system it created.

Even after I was cognizant of the real problem, I wanted to have friends, to connect with someone my own age, and to feel included. At one point, I denounced my faith and pretended to be Catholic in order to be invited to the most popular social events of the year, *quinceañeras*. These birthday celebrations allowed me to begin relating to

my peers. As such, I was also invited to attend a *Kermez* (carnival-like church fundraiser) on several occasions. In order to attend these events, I lied to my parents about where I was going, so they would give me permission to leave the house. During this phase of my life, I still attended my own church and believed in my own faith. I masked my true faith to my peers, but I felt like I lived a double life because this strategy only worked on the surface. I felt guilty for denying the religious beliefs my parents had given me in order to fit in. I felt like a traitor for giving in to pressure and not appreciating the meaning of my difference.

To my dismay, fitting into the dominant religion was still not enough. My prepubescent voice, effeminate mannerisms, small physical size, and my refusal to fight back continued to be cause for name calling, stares, and rumors from other students, even from those who I thought were my new friends. By the end of my eighth grade year, I often thought about escaping the degrading conditions of school by drowning my sorrow in drugs and violence, running away from home, dropping out of school, or dying.

### **It Got Better**

After I completed my eighth grade year, I decided not to attend the local high school because I wanted to avoid the same students who pressured me to conform by making fun of me. Instead, I enrolled in a high school that specialized in preparing students for the teaching profession. The high school I attended is a public school that is located in a town one hour away from my home. I felt the move there was the only thing to do in order to escape the embarrassment of being made fun of for something I had no control over. I felt that if I changed schools, I would make new friends and no one would alienate me anymore, nor force me to conform. Above all, I wanted to become a teacher

so I could protect students who grew up with experiences similar to mine. The students and teachers at this new school made school more enjoyable for me. The school attracted students from all over Campo Escondido, making the student population very diverse. For the first time, I did not feel like the Other (Anzaldúa, 1987).

While I enjoyed the new school, the distance between the school and my home became an obstacle. A round trip was about two hours and my parents could not afford to drive there to be involved as much as they wanted to be. As a result, my parents never went to open house or any awards ceremony in any of the four years I was enrolled there. I did not stay after school to participate in fine arts like I did when I was in elementary because there was no way to get back home if I missed the only bus home after school. There were hardly any social activities available such as dances, parades, or sports. There were few student clubs available for students too. While I certainly did not mind the academic rigor the school provided, I would have liked to know what a high school dance looked like or what cheering for a high school team felt like. Because there were few social outlets available, I felt deprived of activities and opportunities those who attended the local school still had. Moreover, by my second year in high school, I felt more like an adult than a high school student because I was enrolled in a community college and took dual enrollment courses. While this school provided the context where I did not feel like an excluded teenager anymore, I longed to experience ordinary teenage activities like going on dates, having friends, and being involved in school. However, because I was forced to leave to another high school, I hold some resentment to students and teachers who did not make space for me when I was an elementary and middle school student.



Many elementary and middle school teachers and classmates did not consider my differences nor understand the possibility of identity as “fluid, partial, and becoming” (O’Malley, 2010, p. 14). Whether unintentionally or intentionally, students and teachers around me perpetuated the binary logic that represented a “fixed and powerful means to identify and discipline any who deviated in any aspect from the majoritarian view of categories” (p. 17). To avoid further sexualizing/heterosexualizing acts, identities, knowledge, and institutions, one ought to problematize current forms of hegemonic discourse so as to recognize the harm one advances when one perpetuates it. Only then may one be able to see how others’ meaning is found through intersectionality. (St. Pierre, 1997). As I reflect upon this part of my young adult life, I wonder how much has changed, or not, in the ten years since I graduated from high school. How is the environment in schools for students who identify with difference?

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to group socialization theory, children consider status among their peers to matter most when it comes to navigating through school. A child’s status in school can make one’s school day bearable or intolerable (Harris, 1998). As such, children will do what it takes to fulfill the norms of the dominant group in order to fit in. However, these hegemonic norms, structures, and discourses present a problem as evidenced by recent news reports that are replete with stories of LGBTQI students being alienated to the extent of committing suicide (Crary, 2010; Friedman, 2010; Martinez, 2010; O’Hare, 2010), of Muslim students experiencing increased harassment because of religious beliefs (Foxman, 2010; Islamophobia Watch, 2010; Zehr, 2001), and of students of color being profiled by law enforcement officials who perceive them to be illegally in

the country (Beirich, 2009; DeLine, 2010; Martinez, 2011; Traywick, 2010).

Furthermore, media, political, and academic coverage of these events suggest these events are the work of individual bad actors rather than the damaging effects of hegemony (homophobia, Islamphobia, xenophobia). Schools, too, tend to address only the behavior, not the cause. Calls for anti-bullying campaigns in schools are popular (Lei, 2011; Hardy, 2010; Proctor, 2011; Prosecutor Bolsters School's Anti-Bully Campaign, 2011). However, these pleas are generic. Brown (2008) maintained:

If it is sexual harassment, call it sexual harassment; if it is homophobia, call it homophobia; and so forth. To lump disparate behaviors under the generic *bullying* is to efface real differences that affect young people's lives. Bullying is a broad term that de-genders, de-races, de-everythings school safety. (p. 29)

As the intersection of differences becomes more prevalent in schools and the current social-political climate condones discrimination against particular students who identify with differences (Beirich, 2010; Grygiel, 2009; The Christian Science Monitor, 2010; Traywick, 2010), understanding how teachers can best move from absolute spaces towards inclusive settings within the classroom is of the utmost importance. This is particularly important since educators often assume they do not have sufficient agency to advocate for students who are LGBTQI (Yeung, 2008), religious minorities (Kilman, 2007; Nord, 1995), and immigrants (Hattam & Every, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is informed through a queer theoretical framework and poststructuralist/ postmodern epistemology. According to Carlson (1998), epistemological traditions dictated by the logos-mythos binary have served to separate

knowledge, reason, and authoritative truth (logos) from the work of sophistry, illusion, mystification, and desire (mythos). This approach to knowing can be traced all the way back to the Plato's famous Egyptian myth, *Phaedrus*. Through Thoth, the god of language and discourse, Plato praised texts that stemmed from authoritative truths and assigned fictions and poetry to mythos or feminine texts that he considered open to interpretation. As a result, a "productivity of identity" was created (Pinar, 1998, p. 9) to separate people who exhibited differences, especially in sexuality. These individuals were considered products from the world of mythos and are characterized as driven by desire and impulse as opposed to reason. Today, this classification of individuals with other differences continues to exist.

For example, Carlson (1998) maintained, "Public education has, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, been governed by a rigid logo-centric rationality, and has been one of the leading defenders of logo-centrism in society. As such, it should not be surprising, then, to find that [logos driven schools have] also privileged those identity groups more associated with logos in culture and conversely and simultaneously disempowered and silenced those most associated with mythos (female, working class, poor, Black, gays)" (p. 116). To contest the historic logos-mythos binary, which influenced 18<sup>th</sup> century (the Enlightenment) American and European ways of knowing, late 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars (Nietzsche, Altizer) declared the fall of objective reality and ultimate truth. Similarly, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, other scholars (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Lacan) propelled the tenets of post modernity and did so by problematizing texts in order to expose, oppose, and critique underlying structures that promoted particular individuals and simultaneously disenfranchised others. As post modernity paved the way for civil rights,

radical feminism, and the New Left (Thurer, 2005), queer theory, a philosophical movement that aimed to problematize sex, identity, bodies, power, and knowledge, became popular in the academy in the 1990's as a way to further social justice. For this study, I am extending the tenets of queer theory to other intersections of difference that include religion/other belief systems and immigration status.

In addition, this study is informed through my own marginalized positionality. I am a middle class Latino man. I am also a U.S. citizen who was born to two Mexican immigrant parents. I have been away from Rio Vista for over five years. All of these circumstances colors the way I present my interpretation and know. I looked to various lenses in order to situate this study within a pluralistic theoretical background and to provide another way of knowing.

## **Methods**

For this single, critical case study (Patton, 2002), I researched the practice of a teacher who works in an urban high school in Campo Escondido. I used a qualitative approach for this study, so I have contributed to destabilizing traditional ways of knowing and offered a different tool to understand how teachers create inclusive classrooms. As such, the methods I employed to undertake this study were informed through a queer theoretical framework and poststructuralist/postmodern epistemology. In addition, I assumed the role of a *bricoleur* (Kincheloe, 2001) and borrowed ideas and thoughts from various disciplines to guide my analysis of the data and to assist me in the way I represented the data as a final case

**Research questions.** My research problem stems from the following overarching questions: 1. What does an inclusive classroom look like in regards to the teacher and

student interactions? and 2. How does one teacher create inclusive environments?

Supporting questions that will guide this study include: 1. How does the teacher understand intersections of differences? 2. what conditions enable/or hinder the teacher to create inclusive spaces? 3. what strategies does the teacher employ in creating inclusive spaces? 4. in what ways is the classroom not inclusive? and 5. is creating inclusive spaces even possible?

**Participant.** For this single, critical case study (Patton, 2002), I researched the practice of Ms. Smith (pseudonym) who works in an urban high school in Rio Vista, which is part of a larger area in south Texas known as Campo Escondido. Ms. Smith has twenty years of teaching experience and holds a bachelors degree in science and a master's degree in educational administration. She currently holds a leadership position on the executive board of a local teachers' association chapter. Recently, the school district honored her with a Teacher of the Year award. Before I explored Ms. Smith's work for the purpose of writing this dissertation, I had also observed the work of Ms. Smith and believed her to be an outstanding teacher.

For example, Rio Vista ISD has a significant percentage of students who are English language learners; therefore, it was not unusual for Ms. Smith to tutor students who have a difficult time grasping Science instruction that is in a language other than the one they are fluent in. On many occasions, I witnessed Ms. Smith sit with various students and review Science instruction before school, during lunch, and after school. By incorporating the use of a teacher-made word wall, which displayed important vocabulary words in both English and Spanish, Ms. Smith helped students grasp scientific concepts, learn English, and employ higher order thinking skills. There is no doubt in my mind that

Ms. Smith went above and beyond in her teaching, especially because she supported her instruction with illustrations, on-line videos, virtual labs, and lots of hands-on activities that have the potential to motivate students to participate.

Another admirable quality of Ms. Smith is that she has always sought out professional development on her own time. For the past five years, Ms. Smith has participated in a week long intensive science summer institute sponsored by a cancer research hospital in Texas. I have also personally seen Ms. Smith make great use of this professional development because she uses the innovative research-based information to teach Science and to incorporate cancer awareness in her daily lessons. For example, during an instructional unit on cells and genetics, Ms. Smith took her students outside to demonstrate the damaging effects of the sun. She used heat sensitive frisbees that change color in the sun. Ms. Smith and students played with two kinds of frisbees, those that students had applied a thin coat of sun screen to and those without sunscreen. While students passed the frisbees around, they not only had fun, but they also had the opportunity to learn about the harmful effects of the u.v. rays from sun. Ms. Smith's effort to tie science instruction and cancer awareness through a game helps make science easier to learn.

In addition to providing innovative instructional practices and seeking out professional development on her own time, Ms. Smith is also a role model for service. She provides students with the opportunity to participant in various forms of community service and participates in these activities along side her students. For example, Ms. Smith invited all her students to participate in the annual Rio Vista plastic bottle recycling challenge. During an instructional unit on Ecology and environments, Ms.

Smith and her students read and discussed the importance of recycling and its impact on the planet. After introducing her students to the recycling challenge, the students participated in a three month collection of plastic bottles. As a result of their concerted efforts, they won first place because they collected one ton of plastic. Ms. Smith's commitment to service is worth noting because it is another way she connects science to activities and phenomena outside the classroom. Other activities Ms. Smith hopes to participate in this year with the students include several community-wide beatification projects. Affording students the opportunity to participate in these challenges not only helps students learn content, but it also holds them accountable for the places they occupy such as their school, their city, their home, and the Earth.

Further evidence of Ms. Smith's effectiveness as a teacher comes from students who indicate they have been highly influenced by Ms. Smith. For example, I recently had the privilege of speaking to one of Ms. Smith former students. This former student indicated she intends to become a teacher herself. When I asked this student why she wanted to be a teacher, she said,

Because certain teachers, like Ms. Smith, make learning fun. One time, I remember I was so afraid of the smelly pig we had to dissect. I did not want to cut it open because it was gross. Ms. Smith, on the other hand, convinced me that it was okay. She put the radio on while we were working so that I could relax and enjoy the learning experience. At my university, I needed to dissect a cat. The only thing that helped me get through that assignment was remembering all I learned about dissection in Ms. Smith's class.

This student went on to say that in addition to learning science, she also learned that Ms. Smith was the teacher she wanted to emulate when she finished teacher preparation and become a teacher.

**Social justice educator.** “To move forward for social justice, educators need the strategies, *revolutionary* ones in some context, for rethinking and taking leadership for school practices to better meet diverse students’ needs” (Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p.4). Additionally, Theoharis (2007) suggested that current leaders need to understand the challenges, rewards, and the moral and ethical imperative of leading for social justice, as it is important for leaders to first develop a theory of social justice leadership. However, just as there is no single approach to developing leaders for social justice, there is no single definition of what constitutes a social justice leader. Scholars propel multiple and varied definitions of social justice. For example, Brown (2006) and Evans (2007) asserted that social justice leaders prioritize issues of equity. Dantley & Tillman (2010) agreed that social justice leaders center on equity; however, they argue that social justice leaders also problematize how institutional norms create and sustain inequities. They also suggest that social justice leaders be willing to work to address those systemic practices. McKenzie et al. (2008) also believe social justice leaders focus on issues of equity and work at the systems level; however, they prescribe a precise direction for doing so. McKenzie et al. suggest that leaders for social justice need to focus on raising academic achievement for all students, must prepare students to be critical citizens, and must create inclusive classrooms and schools.

For this study I operationalized a working definition of social justice using the following three common tenets of social justice leaders: 1) a focus on issues of equity; 2)



an understanding of the systemic nature of existing inequities; and 3) and willingness to work for change at the systems level, rather focusing changing the individuals within the system.

**Data collection.** To further explore Ms. Smith's work, I used ethnographic methods (participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document collection and analysis) over the course of a three month period (September 2011 to November 2011). Borrowing tenets from Seidman's (2006) interview protocol, I interviewed Ms. Smith one time for background information, a second time for clarification and elaboration of data from the first interview, and a third time for meaning. Each interview with Ms. Smith lasted approximately one hour, and it was semi-structured, audio taped, and then transcribed. The transcripts were member checked to establish trustworthiness. I observed the teacher in the classroom, too. The purpose of field observations (Patton, 2002) is to describe the setting that was observed, the activities that took place, and the meaning of what was observed from the perspective of Ms. Smith. As such, I used selective disclosure (Patton, 2002) while in the field. I kept an electronic ethnographic record (Murchison, 2010) each day of fieldwork to organize data collection. Lastly, I asked Ms. Smith for permission to review artifacts such as photos, letters from students and parents to the participant and the participant's professional portfolio so that I could write a thematic description about her and her work. To establish dependability of the data, I also collected data in the form of interviews with three former students. These conversation-like interviews were approximately one hour long. Transcripts were member checked for trustworthiness.

**Contextualizing the work of the social justice educator.** While I did look at one teacher doing good work and who exhibited a social justice orientation, the unexpected representation I wrote up conceptualized the teacher's identity and problematized the teacher's work. I argue here that missing in school improvement literature is the literature that problematizes the 'good/bad' dichotomous understanding of teachers and the work they do in schools. As such, the work of Ms. Smith in this study was characterized as a work in progress, or work that was moving towards an inclusive environment, rather than judging her work as a fixed point. Unlike a traditional narrative of "noncontradictory truth" (Cary, 2006), the findings of my study resembled an "uncooperative text" (Lather & Smithies, 1997) because my text did not represent my participant and her work in an idealized way, nor did I retouch the less than perfect elements of the participant's life and work to represent absolute truth. Instead, I represented the narrative of Ms. Smith's work as a messy, realistic, disturbing, unexpected, and nuanced account. I did this purposefully to provide a more complex description of her and her work in order to write a narrative that did not contribute to the discourse of teacher's work as good/bad, effective/ineffective, or any other dichotomous evaluation. I chose to represent that participant's work in way that demonstrates even the best teacher's work is at once both effective and ineffective because learning environments are not stagnant spaces with monolithic students. I represented the participant in various facets (social justice educator, good teacher, wife, friend, leader) who, although well intentioned, was human and not perfect; therefore, not only did I *not* write a victory narrative or tale of triumph over adversity, but I embraced the task of the bricoleur and recognized the "complexity and heterogeneity of all human experience"

(Kincheloe, 2001, p. 681). Furthermore, while my intentions were not to contribute to the narrative of teacher as villain, I wrote up a critique, not a judgment, of Ms. Smith and her work.

By maintaining a bricolage of perspectives and methods, I wrote up a narrative I felt was better suited to inform practice, construction of identity, description of students, educators and classrooms, and understanding of educational environments. Instead of understanding all these concepts as absolute, static, determined, defined, or removed from human influence, I maintain that these elements (our understanding, places of learning, and one's identity) are all fluid. Therefore, teaching and learning must be understood through multiple perspectives, or a bricolage, for teaching and learning is a complex web of experiences, interactions, knowledge, and texts among students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Classrooms can be understood in the same breadth; however, the current socio-political environment strongly encourages educators to develop classrooms that are absolute spaces that are restrictive, fixed, and not open to negotiation. In these absolute spaces, intersections of difference are locked through established discourse, assumptions, behavior and surveillance. Like an absolute number in math that retains its original value and same distance from zero whether positive or negative (e.g.  $|-12| = 12$ ), an absolute space is where identity and difference is always confined and reset without consideration of variance.

According to the field of cultural geography, a *space* is not even human inhabitable. One can only begin to live in a *place*:

Spaces are scientific, open, and detached; places are intimate, peopled and emotive. [One] may travel through spaces (perhaps isolated in a car or train), but

[one] will live [his] everyday life in places. Place then is the counterpoint of space: places are politicized and cultured; they are humanized versions of space.

It is from the empty abstraction of space that different cultures take and make place. (Anderson, 2010, p. 38)

Therefore, it is the task of the classroom teacher to transform the classroom space into a place of learning. Ellsworth (2005), who borrowed Winnicott's idea of transitional space, maintained that teachers have the potential to reimage their pedagogy and the places of learning inside of their schools. When educators embrace pedagogy as the enterprise of "addressing the learning self as an emergence, as a self and an intelligence that is always in the making," (p. 57) classroom may begin to be a transitional space where one is always becoming:

The limits of our knowledge of self, of other, and of the world require us to put ourselves in relation while at the same time keeping ourselves separate. What we cannot know requires us to constantly traverse the porous boundaries between self and the other, individual and social, personal and historical. We cannot know self in absence of separate different others. We cannot know others in absence of self. We cannot know only through distinction, difference, and cutting, and we cannot know only through connection, integrating, and cohering. We think only in relation. We think only in process and in the constant movement across the boundaries between our inner and outer realities, and that movement, in its very crossing, reconfigures those boundaries and what they make of ourselves and others. (p. 61)

Thus, to understand the complexity of oneself and those around one, places of learning that facilitate the fluidity of self and place are needed. Otherwise, absolute spaces will continue to surface as the intersections of differences become more prevalent.

Moreover, while I did write up a narrative I felt was better suited to inform practice, construction of identity, description of students, educators and classroom, and understanding of educational environments, it is important to acknowledge the inherent paradox this messy and complex understanding presents for those interested in doing or researching equity work. For example, consider the first half of the title of this dissertation: From absolute spaces towards inclusive environments. It is necessary for me as a queer theorist to recognize the limitation and impossibility of moving from one polar end to another, for “moving towards” implies interest and intention of moving towards full inclusion as if absolute inclusion actually exists. While we can hope and work to make environments more inclusive, it is necessary that we do not think that the end result of the good work and social justice efforts is absolute inclusion because we will automatically perpetuate the idea of binary logic. Thus, the idea is for one to swim in between the binary logic (absolute space/inclusive environments) so that we are always educated humans striving for more equitable environments with the understanding that our work and efforts are limited. Full inclusion can only be enacted in a utopian world.

### **Key Terms**

*LGBTQ*: “Individuals who do not adhere to a heterosexual identity or chromosomally-driven gender identity” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Any person who self identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersex, and queer..

*Religious/other belief systems minority:* Any person who self identifies with religion, faith, spirituality, or other belief system that is not reflected within the dominant groups' practice.

*Immigrant:* Regardless of naturalization or immigration status, any person who either immigrated or whose family immigrated to the United States, or who self identifies as an immigrant.

*Intersectionality:* the fluid matrix of innate differences that is representative of one but not limited to: language, race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexuality, ability, age, immigrant status, veteran status.

*Absolute inclusivity/inclusion:* the ideal classroom setting where every difference a student can possibly exhibit is welcomed and accommodated.

*Absolute exclusivity/exclusion:* the classroom setting where students are marginalized based on differences.

*Inclusive environments:* (a paradox) a classroom that is equally inclusive and exclusive at the same time.

*Social justice:* For this study, I use three tenets to conceptualize social justice: 1) a focus on issues of equity; 2) an understanding of the systemic nature of existing inequities; and 3) and willingness to work for change at the systems level, rather focusing changing the individuals within the system (Dantley & Tillman, 2010).

*Good teacher:* For this study, a good teacher is synonymous for a good employee. In addition, a good teacher is an educator who enacts good pedagogy through aesthetic care in order to move towards an inclusive environment.

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

According to Patton (2002), it is necessary to report any personal and professional information that might have an effect on data collection procedures, analysis, and interpretation. Since I am the primary instrument for data collection and because data was processed through my own interpretation and biases, my perspectives affected the outcome of this study. I made a conscious effort to be constantly aware of and bracket my biases (researcher's privilege, immigrant parents, bullying experiences) as I conducted this research so that my results would exhibit credibility and dependability (Linclon & Guba, 1985) with the data I collected. I also enlisted the assistance of a peer debriefer to help me in limiting the influence of my biases and assumptions. Additionally, there are delimitations to this study. Some delimitations of this study were that the results are specific to time, place, and to one participant. Because in qualitative research, one looks for the particular, not the general, the findings of this study may be transferable (Patton, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

It was my intention to use a case study to explore the experience of one teacher's experience within a socio-political context that condones discrimination against LGBTIQ, immigrant, and religious/other belief systems minorities so that I could provide teachers and school leaders with an additional heuristic for moving towards inclusive environments. This chapter provides an introduction to my study and description of the theoretical bricolage I used. It also provides a brief review of the literature, a summary of methods I used in the study, a glossary of terms, a short discussion of the limits of my study, and some concluding remarks. In chapter two, I provide a more detailed review of

the scholarly literature regarding the three intersections of differences (sexual orientation, religion/other belief systems, and race/ethnicity) within the context of public schools and university teacher preparation. In chapter three I present my research design and methods used to conduct this study, including the research questions that guided this study. In chapter four I present the data and findings of my study, and in chapter five, I provide an analysis of my findings and my conclusion.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section briefly discusses the concept of intersectionality. The second section discusses the need for teacher preparation programs to address issues of LGBTQI and how teacher preparation programs may do so. The third section details the debate of teaching about religion in the classroom. It also discusses how teacher preparation can assist teachers in helping make space for religious minorities in the classroom. The last section is a discussion of the need for teacher preparation to advance culturally responsive pedagogy to include immigrant students. In all three sections, the individual agency a teacher has to address these issues of difference is also highlighted.

#### **Identity**

The need to assist educators in understanding the fluidity of identity and in finding meaning in difference is imperative. For example, scholars (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Snider, 1996) suggested that educator preparation programs should not only advance the notion of differences in sexual orientation, but they need not discuss sexual orientation in isolation. When identity is fixed and when difference is dismissed, well intentioned programs like Project 10 in Los Angeles (McCready, 2004) and The Triangle Project in Canada (Snider, 1996), which are

alternative schools for LGBTQI youth, often become racially divided. Instead, preparation programs ought to advance intersectionality: “Identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes stuffed respectfully with intellect, sex, race, vocation, gender. Identity flows between, over, aspects of a person. Identity is a process” (Anzaldúa, 1991, p. 252-253). When identities are examined in isolation, identity becomes organized hierarchically. According to Lugg (2003), intersectionality theorists argue that to disentangle one form of difference from another (race from sex or vice versa), is to enact essentialism. Therefore, Crenshaw’s (1991) notion of intersectionality and Hutchinson’s (1999) notion of multidimensionality advance the multiple identities each person exhibits. Moreover, for this study, religious identity and national identity are also two forms of identity politics that warrant equal attention in public school classrooms.

### **Teacher Preparation Programs and Sexual Orientation**

California lawmakers passed a bill on April 14, 2011, mandating that California public schools include the contributions of gay and lesbian people into the social studies curriculum (“California Senate”, 2011). Yet, despite policy, it is not unusual for public school teachers across the nation and world to avoid teaching about LGBTQI people and issues and avoid advocating for LGBTQI persons because of religious views (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010) or because of insufficient knowledge about it to do so (Starr, 2002; Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2002). A fear of retaliation from parents and colleagues (King & Brindley, 2002), including from communities and organization that are homophobic (Cobb, 2006; Hagerly, 2011), are among other reasons educators are continuously silent on the matter. As such, there is a need for teacher preparation programs to address this issue so all students will have an equal opportunity.

Bedford (2002) maintained that teacher preparation can either perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism or help to diminish it. One example of how teacher preparation programs advance heteronormativity is in Berill and Martino's (2002) study of male teacher perceptions of themselves. Researchers asked participants to discuss if and how their pedagogy, behavior, and beliefs about themselves as male elementary teachers were influenced by educator preparation. Participants revealed that because of class assignments, discussion, and their professors' disposition and expectations that were infused with heteronormativity, they found themselves watching their behavior in the classroom to avoid being labeled a pedophile or a deviant. Because the participants felt conditioned to act in a certain way to keep their employment and not be considered a danger to children on account of their differences in sexual orientation, teacher preparation can perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism.

Grace and Wells (2006) embraced the concept of *agape*, or "inclusive perspective designed to focus on the personal and the professional needs that sexual minorities have" in order to inculcate LGBTQI responsiveness into their educator preparation curriculum (p. 57). They also teamed up with the Alberta Teacher's Association in Canada to provide support through workshops, conferences, and resources so that in-service teachers can receive professional development on inclusion: "We do this work in our university and with the Alberta Teacher's Association to help teachers and their co-interest groups become responsive and responsible in the work to create inclusive educational environments for sexual minorities" (p. 56). Other research based strategies that are advanced in teacher education to help reduce homophobia in public school include the use of persuasive communication (Yep, 1997), use of music (Russell, 1997),

use of story and performance (DuBose-Brunner, 1997), use of role play (Manger & Sulek, 1997), use of conversation (Alida-Roy, 1997).

Still, not all educator preparation programs (Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2002; Starr, 2002), nor all educational leadership preparation programs (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008; Schneider & Owens, 2008) address the intersections of differences equally, especially not the fluidity of sexual orientation. Therefore, university professors within teacher preparation have a significant role in the process of creating LGBTQI responsiveness.

**The role of the university professor.** Harrison, Smithey, McAfee and Weiner (2006) assessed each potential candidate's disposition before admitting a candidate to their educator preparation program. While Harrison, Smithey, McAfee and Weiner's (2006) pre-assessment protocol alleviates a professor from the responsibility of teaching about diversity and inclusion because they only admit students who already come with a social justice orientation, Capper, Alston, Koshoreck, Lopez, Lugg, and McKenzie (2006) maintained that dispositions are not fixed characteristics that individuals have or do not have. They advance the notion that dispositions can be learned, even by teachers who teach at the elementary level and who might think that young children would not understand homophobia and heteronormativity (Casper, Cuffaro, Schultz, Silin, & Wickens, 1996; Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996; Hulsebosch & Kperner, 1997; Marinoble, 1997).

Letts (2002) argued that professors who queered their pedagogy and content helped pre-service teachers recognize public school curricula and pedagogy as already infused with binary logic. Yet, not all teacher education professors queer their content

and pedagogy; therefore, Sharp (2009) explained that university professors within teacher education programs must push their students to contemplate heteronormativity and the effects of it in schools: “People need to become uncomfortable if positive change is to occur; and as urban educators, LGBTQ, and non-LGBTQ alike, we may be able to situate students in some of those uncomfortable conversation, perhaps causing a broadening of their subjectivities” (p. 115).

Some professors (e.g., King & Brindley, 2002; Lipkin, 2002; Loutzenheiser, 2002) provide general recommendations for those interested in teacher education enhancement, while others, like Sanlo (2002) provided a course syllabus to use as a guide when creating a course that is reflective of issues affecting sexual minorities. Pendleton-Jimenez (2002) advanced the notion of using herself as a text in the classroom to teach about differences in sexual orientation: “I have a clean-cut boy haircut. I wear Doc Martin boots, jeans, men’s dress shirts, and blazers to teach. Most people would recognize me as a butch lesbian stereotype. I use the authority these characteristics provide me, as they grant more legitimacy to what I say” (p. 218). Yet, the challenge is for many professors to take up the cause and teach pre-service teacher about advocating for students who identify as LGBTQI .

Eric Rofes (1989), a late San Francisco professor and LGBTQI activist, recalled that many of his own colleagues in the college of education at his home university did not believe in teaching about meeting the needs of sexual minorities because many believed that students who identified as LGBTQI were simply going through a rebellious phase in their lives. Years later, Rofes (2002) recognized this resistance as an opportunity to create an educator preparation program that could support LGBTQI candidates and those

who are heterosexual: “How could I be an openly gay professor and allow such conditions to continue? Don’t I have a responsibility to ensure that students preparing to become teachers face neither interpersonal discrimination nor barriers to employment based on sexual orientation” (p. 198)? The lack of concern Rofes’ colleagues expressed may indicate why students in Sear’s (1994) study felt teachers were only concerned about teaching subject matter and never concerned about students’ differences in sexual orientation.

Professors in teacher education are not alone when it comes to teaching about LGBTQI awareness and strategies to address homophobia and heteronormativity. Professors who teach in social work (Cramer, 1997), medical programs (Wallick & Townsend, 1997), criminal justice (Iasenza, 1997), literature (Gonzalez, 1994; Kitch, 1994) and law enforcement (Stewart, 1997) also provided teaching strategies. Scholars (Arguelles & Fernandez, 1997; Crew, 1997; Estuar-Reyes & Yep, 1997; Rhue & Rhue, 1997; Williams, 1997) have also examined the strategies entire ethnic communities and organization use to combat heterosexism.

**Teacher agency.** Despite the extent of preparation a teacher may have or degree of policy in place at the state, national, and local level, there is another challenge. It is ultimately up to the individual teacher in a classroom to use his/her agency in order to advocate for LGBTQI students. Athanases (1996), Katch and Katch (1996), Sanders and Burke (1994), Macgillivray (2004), and Hammett (1992) are all classroom teachers who address homophobia and spark awareness of LGBTQI persons and issues. Today, the equity work of classroom teachers and programs and the challenges associated with it in England (DePalma, 2009), Canada (Snider, 1996) and the United States (Allen, Harper &

Koschoreck, 2009) is documented and has served as a resource. However, this literature is scarce, and there is still a need for many more teachers to take up the cause in other parts of the nation and the world, especially considering the high dropout and truancy rates amongst LGBTQI students (Loutzenheiser, 2002) and most disturbingly, the high rate of bullying and suicide among LGBTQI youth in the United States (Crary, 2010; Friedman, 2010; Martinez, 2010; O'Hare, 2010).

### **Teacher Preparation and Religion**

Teaching religion and spirituality is prohibited in public school classrooms as doing so may be a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Walsh, Kemerer & Maniotis, 2010). Warshaw (1986) concluded in his study that most college students leave colleges of education with quite distorted ideas about the accepted exclusion of religion from the classroom. In order for classroom teachers to facilitate a discussion or debate about religious truths, teach about various religions, and demonstrate respect for students who are religious minorities, teacher preparation programs, as well as the textbooks used within colleges of education, should portray an “accurate academic treatment of religion perspectives” (Haymus, 2002, p. 32). Yet, while teaching about religion is allowed, educators often fear possibly violating the Establishment clause (Lugg & Tabbaa-Rida, 2010; Nord, 1989), especially during the holidays (Berry, 2011; Zirkel, 2011). The avoidance of religion in the classroom suggests that there is a need for teacher preparation program curriculum to address this issue.

The results from Olderndorf's and Green's (2005) study indicated why teacher preparation programs needed to address religion in the classroom: “Six teachers lacked basic information about belief and practices different from their own. Some did not think

Catholics or Jehovah's Witnesses were Christians, and several mispronounced the names of major world religions" (p. 71). Given the stark reality that teachers have the potential to become the *otherer* in the classroom (Mojito, 2009), it is no wonder why students who identify as religious minorities often find themselves trying to negotiate a space in public school because they feel alienated, scared, and threatened by their peers and teachers who do not understand them (Sarroub, 2001).

Furthermore, Mayers (2001) suggested that because so little literature exists on how teachers' are shaped by their spiritual beliefs and no literature exists of how teachers spiritual commitments manifest themselves in practice, spiritual reflection in teacher education, which calls for teachers to reflect on the deeper pedagogical, political, and biographical forces that he/she has internalized and which both consciously and unconsciously shape his/her practice, is recommended.

**The role of the university professor.** Kniker (1990) highlighted the social justice effort some teacher education programs at public universities, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of California at Santa Barbara, Western Illinois University-Macomb, are advancing to increase the religious literacy amongst their pre-service teachers. Yet, many professors of teacher preparation do not share the same interests. There are scholars who argue for greater separation between religion and school (e.g., Blake, 1996; Blau, 1998; Keller, 2000).

Singer (2008) believed it impossible for religion to be an asset in school, especially considering the historic relationship to genocide, dictatorship, corruption, and treatment of others. Balint (2010) warned against thinking that respect-of-differences is a panacea. Because certain differences, especially in religion and ideology, are not easily



and often not at all respected by many citizens, Balint asked, “Why should those who have beliefs that make it hard for them to respect other differences be strongly encouraged to do so” (p. 135)? It is Balint’s contention that a forced respect of others’ differences is fake and dangerous. Instead, he suggested a more “regardless of what you think or feel, all citizens must have their rights respected approach” (p. 138). Baer and Carper (2000) advanced the notion that offering parents school choice through vouchers would free schools from dealing with religion and appease parents who are both adamant about religion or not adamant about religion.

On the other hand, Lugg (2004) pointed out that voucher programs, although popular and acceptable at the federal level, are problematic because they have the potential to cause state-sponsored religious coercion if “public funds follow a religious-minority student into a religious-majority private school where the student’s differing faith (or lack thereof) is not respected” (p. 172). Greenwalt (2002) suggested that “the most desirable program may depend on the makeup of the local community, and the best program at any particular moment rests heavily on the competence of the teacher” (p. 1).

For example, Ayers and Reid (2005) interviewed students to determine their perception of reference to religion in a social studies class. Students indicated high levels of comprehension particularly because the role of religion was discussed in relation to significant events. Ayers and Reid maintained that teaching literature and history in isolation does not provide students with a full understanding of the text, for the influence of religion on both is vast:

The very faces of Europe and Africa were changed as Muslims and Christians battled over land during the Middle Ages. Countries such as India have entire

social systems based on religious beliefs. Holidays in Italy and Mexico are celebrated to honor various saints in the Catholic Church. For many years, a national church, the Anglican Church in England, was too much for many in England to bear, causing many to find religious freedom elsewhere. (p.15)

While Ayers and Reid's point is clear, they do not indicate how, where, and when in-service teachers can develop the necessary skills to teach about religion and foster inclusion of religious minorities in the classroom. In fact, while a vast amount of historic and contemporary scholarly literature about religion in schools does not move past the debate over teaching or not teaching about religion in public schools (Blumhofer, 2002; Nord, 1995;Sizer, 1967; Stern, 2007), there are few suggestions in the literature of how teacher preparation programs might include teaching about religion and how teachers can foster inclusion of religious minorities.

**Teacher agency.** Since the founding of this country, United States educators and policy makers have pondered whether or not to teach about religion in schools. Today, the U.S. is not the only country grappling with this issue, for France and England have only recently finalized plans for mandating the study of religion, philosophy, and moral education in public schools (Hinsliff, 2004; "President of France", 2007). Thomas (2006) has also documented this very same debate as it occurs in Japan, India, Spain, China, Italy, Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, and Saudi Arabia.

Whether or not a classroom teacher receives knowledge from his/her educator preparation program about various kinds of religions and how to teach about them in the public school, or if policy regarding religion in schools exists, a teacher has individual agency and may seek professional development opportunities to gain that knowledge so

that religious minorities are included in the classroom. Kniker (1988) provided a checklist teachers can use to accommodate religious diversity in the classroom because “to ignore varied circumstances of these students is to be socially irresponsible and, for teachers, pedagogically dangerous” (p. 309). Also, Nord (1989) and Sawyer (1998) documented their successful methods and models for teacher professional development and curriculum realignment so that teachers inform students, not persuade them. Furthermore, Noddings (2008), and Nord and Haynes (1998) not only stress the need to teach about world religions in school, but to offer different ways to do so in specific subject areas. Any of these examples can help teachers make classrooms inclusive environments.

### **Teacher Preparation and Immigrant Students**

The story of the United States is not complete without the contributions of immigrants from all over the world. Yet, current political and economic conditions have created a backlash against immigration, particularly immigration from Central and Latin America. Rising health care costs put a focus on undocumented immigrants (Wolf, 2008), in-state tuition for immigrants sparks anger amongst American citizens (Hill, 2011), and polls show that the public favors tougher border control (Pew Research Center, 2011). Given this context, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs provide pre-service teachers with the tools to advocate for students who identify as immigrants so that all students are given an equal opportunity: “In order to negotiate the ideological perspectives of immigration past and present, teacher educators should encourage future practioners to move towards a more inclusive mode of citizenship that recognizes the intersection of the national and transnational and furthermore celebrates

globalmindedness” (Fitchette & Salas, 2010, p. 33). Yet, Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, and Crawford (2005) indicated that teachers complete their preparation programs and perpetuate one of three things in the classroom: “ a curriculum centered on the dominant culture, which ignores bias and fails to address inequity, a curriculum that pretends that differences do not exist, thereby denying the experiences of many children in the classroom, a curriculum that treats multicultural as tourism, in which superficial aspect of the culture (holidays/food, etc) are introduced” (p. 50).

As such, scholars (Byrnes, 1996; Carter, 2009; Fitchette & Salas, 2010; Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, Crawford, 2005), find teacher preparation inadequate because it does not prepare teacher candidates with the training or experiences needed to value individual differences. Delpit (2006) maintained that teacher preparation “usually focuses on research that links failure and social economic status, failure and cultural differences, and failure and single-parent households” (p. 34). Therefore, teacher preparation needs to address the tendency educators have of blaming students with differences, particularly, immigrants, for failure in public schools because they are the innocent/victims (Valencia, 1997). According to McDermott (2009), failure is what we conjure up as a society, not what children do.

Quiocho and Annette (2006) documented the negative perception teachers in one California school had about immigrant parent involvement: “They take their children to Mexico for anything throughout the school year and keep them away from school for weeks. How can the children learn this way” (p. 54)? However, Lopez (2001) argued that parent involvement does not all need to look the same. In fact, Lopez’s study suggested that teachers should not deem the absence of immigrant parents from school as

carelessness because immigrant parents do care about the education of their children. He further maintained it is important that teachers recognize and validate the culture of the home and know that immigrant parents are involved in other forms. However, Pohan (1996) and Weisman and Garza (2002) warned that simply gaining knowledge about how to best meet the needs of immigrant students in teacher preparation is not enough. A teacher must change his/her attitude towards students with differences by reflecting on his/her beliefs and values about individuals with differences and strive to change his/her attitude through action and advocacy.

**The role of the university professor.** Moreover, to prepare pre-service teachers during their preparation programs with the skills necessary to take action and to advocate for immigrant students, some university professors (Pohan, 1996; Shannon & Escamilla, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2007; Wiseman & Garza, 2002; Wiest, 1998) have created opportunities and strategies so that pre-service teachers may engage the community during their internship. When the teachers took the initiative to understand their students' home environment, they understood how to meet the needs of the students better. For example, a teacher discovered on her visit that one of her Spanish speaking students could play the guitar. As such, the teacher changed her attitude and noted that the students possessed other strengths and various forms of knowledge. Other professors, Fitchette and Salas (2010), advanced a model they used within their preparation programs in order to examine current immigrant issues with pre-service teachers. The model asks pre-service teachers to be critical of historical contexts and historical perspectives, and to participate through communication and dialogue. Teachers in this study were believed to be better advocates for immigrant students.

Sleeter (2001) suggested that more research is needed that follows graduates into the classroom and links pre-service education with community-based learning and with ongoing professional development and school reform. For example, Veney (2008) maintained that students and teachers do not need to be of the same ethnic background. Instead, students need teachers who are culturally proficient. Cultural proficiency is “the policies and practices of an organization or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable the agency or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999). According to Guerra and Nelson (2007),

To become culturally proficient, educators need diversity training that helps them understand how their own and the school’s cultural identity are embedded in all aspects of schooling, including what, how, and who is taught, how classrooms are organized, what instructional materials are selected, how student behavior is managed, and how interactions with parents are structured. This depth of understanding does not occur after one or two packaged professional development sessions. Becoming culturally proficient requires a transformative journey to take educators beyond cultural awareness and knowledge to a safe space where deficit beliefs and practices can be explored, challenged, and changed. (p. 60)

**Teacher agency.** According to Carter (2009), making space for students with differences is done by:

increasing [teachers’] own knowledge base to help vanquish the injurious communicative divides among and between student and teachers who differ by race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status, among other social identities; by working to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn within the

school; by maintaining a culture of high expectations for all students; by developing critically consciousness and historically accurate pedagogy and curricula; and by preventing new forms of segregation within schools with due vigilance. (p. 29)

Furthermore, Delpit (2006) maintained that when teachers did not acquire the knowledge and the shift in attitude they need in teacher preparation to meet the needs of immigrant students, they usually received it by being proactive, reading, and studying on their own to make knowledge a part of their pedagogy.

Whether or not teachers are proactive and seek out opportunities to enhance social justice in the classroom, teachers have agency they can use to make space for immigrant students. For example, Arnot, Pinson and Candappa (2009) described how some school systems in the United Kingdom purposely place immigrant students in English only speaking environments so that students drop out faster or leave to their home country. However, there are teachers in these very same school systems who use their agency to speak up and fight for immigrant children by making welcoming space for them despite the harsh conditions.

Shannon (1995) and Shannon and Escamilla (1999) documented the work of one teacher in one of the schools they studied who challenged and resisted cultural and language hegemony in her classroom every day. She created those conditions in a bilingual classroom that made a difference for poor and immigrant children and their community. Brittain (2009), Romo and Falbo (1996) and Stanton-Salazar (2001) have also documented the work of teachers who make spaces for immigrant students. Shannon and Escamilla (1999) admitted, “Our challenge is then how to guide teacher candidates to

continue to question practice so that they are not absorbed into school cultures that systematically violate immigrant children's dignity and contribute to their educational failures" (p. 367). Salinas (2006), Shorr (2006), Maples and Groenke (2009), and Villegas (2007) offered potential strategies for teachers to use in their classroom to do just that.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the plethora of research regarding the need for teacher preparation programs to address intersectionality, there is a void in the literature. Much of the literature that recommends strategies for diverse populations neglects to address meeting the needs of those identifying with differences in religion, sexual orientation and national origin. The literature that does speak of it is often dated or normative in nature. As such, more empirical research is needed to continue assisting classroom teachers doing social justice work. The findings of this study have the potential to inform professional development workshops and teacher education courses.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this chapter is to present a detailed plan of the methods I used in conducting this study. The following chapter includes criteria for participant selection, description of the setting, a description of the research design and data collection methods, procedures for data analysis, measures to ensure trustworthiness, and limitations and delimitations of this study.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore one teacher's experience creating inclusive environments for students who identify with differences in order to develop a more critical understanding of the work of social justice teachers. This critical understanding lead to the development of a heuristic that informs teachers and school leaders about working towards inclusive environments.

#### **Research Questions**

My research problem stems from the following overarching questions:

1. What does an inclusive classroom look like in regards to the teacher and student interactions?; and
2. how does one teacher create inclusive environments?

Supporting questions that guided this study include: 1) How does the teacher understand intersections of differences; 2) what conditions enable/or hinder the teacher to create inclusive environments; 3) what strategies does the teacher employ in creating inclusive

environments; 4) in what ways is the classroom not inclusive; and 5) is creating inclusive environments even possible?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed through a queer theoretical framework and poststructuralist/postmodern epistemology. Queer theory as a theoretical framework is appropriate to borrow from for this study because it suggests that a “sexual order overlaps with a wide range of institutions and social ideologies” (Warner, 1993 p. 5), and therefore, urges scholars “to queer” or to problematize ideas in any area of study. Furthermore, “queer theory invites us to think about ourselves, our patterns of desire and respectability. It forces us to ask the most basic questions about how society organizes itself” (Thurer, 1995, p. 101). Because schools use systems and discourses that are always already there to categorize everything from students to curriculum, queer theory informed this study by helping me, the author, resist all tendency towards forced normalcy, organization, and labeling through hegemonic systems, structures, and discourse.

Queer theory suggested sexual orientation mattered, just as race, gender, class, religion/other beliefs systems, immigrant status, and other intersection of differences mattered. Because the origin of Western philosophy is rooted in an indifference to difference, or, as Halperin (1990) suggested, because traditional Western thought forwards a strategy of solidification, individuals who exhibit differences undergo an invisible process called *identity reductionism* that reduces people to one axis of identity. As such, queer theory is relevant to this study because it disrupts one’s common sense view of the world that everyone is similar, uniform, and static. Moreover, queer theory

justifies the existence of individuals with differences, defends the creation of spaces for individuals with difference, and proclaims that people who exhibit differences are holders of power and knowledge. Queer theory acknowledges that not everyone is the same and that the world and social life in general is not black and white, but rather gray, messy, and always hard to pin down.

Queer theory also assumes a definition that cannot be captured. Like reality, identity, and sexual orientation, which are all fluid, a definition of queer theory is never definite, finished, final, or still (Thurer, 2005). Moreover, queer theory was the primary theoretical frame that helped me understand the world and provided me a lens to construct another form of knowledge such as the narrative of Ms. Smith.

Furthermore, I borrowed tenets from multiple disciplines (education, cultural geography, curriculum studies, anthropology, sociology), perspectives (queer theory, ethnography, autoethnography), forms of representation (case study, life history, narrative), and research techniques (interviews, document collection, observation) to represent the experience of one teacher moving towards inclusive environments so that I could provide teachers and school leaders with an additional heuristic.

**Research design.** Qualitative studies vary, but I adhered to the following tenets of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009):

- I, as the researcher, served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
- Qualitative research involved going into the field to observe what is occurring, to conduct interviews, and to collect artifacts and personal documents.

- Description and interpretation was used to convey what is learned about the phenomena and to theorize about the phenomena.

Erickson (1986) suggested that the general lies in the particular and that what we learn in a particular qualitative study can be transferred to similar situations. Also, each qualitative research study looks very different because a researcher is the primary instrument of data collection. It is the reader, not the author, of the study who should determine what can apply to a reader's context. This facet of qualitative research coincides with queer theory's notion that there are no universal and absolute findings and solutions to problems within the social sciences. To re-frame a teacher's experience as a text and phenomena to learn from, I used a qualitative research design to write up my study.

For this study, qualitative research was appropriate because it highlighted the voices of underrepresented groups. Furthermore, Kincheloe (2001) encouraged researchers to adopt a multiple-perspective approach in order to become aware of what else may inform their research and the creation of new knowledge. Incidentally, Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Berry (2006), Burr (1995), Gergen, (1999), Kincheloe and Berry (2006), Lincoln (2001) McLaren, (2001) Pinar (2001) and Waite (2004), charged us with the responsibility of defending the polyphonic nature of qualitative research by taking on a bricolage. Neglecting the interdisciplinarity inherent in qualitative research may reinforce positivistic tendencies in research and thus potentially reduce one's representation of research and rob researchers of the possibility of providing an alternative our way of knowing.

**Case study.** Merriam (2009) maintained that case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system, which is characterized by its particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic features. According to Yin (2009), a bounded system can be understood best as specific, contemporary phenomena within its real-life context. As such, a bounded system is more like an object, a complex, functioning thing with separate working parts or boundaries (Stake, 1995); therefore, I used case study as a research design.

On the other hand, Wolcott (2009) saw that case study was better suited if it, like all other ways of organizing data, is regarded as a *genre* for reporting than a strategy for conducting research, especially because case study is not particular to any specific approach. However, for this study, I employed case study because it was congruent with queer theory's goal of finding ways to dig out the voices or narratives in schooling to develop theoretical discussions, voices, personal experiences, teaching strategies, and activist efforts to diversify the curriculum, the classroom, and the campus (Chang, 2007).

### **Participant Selection**

Qualitative research is concerned with covering depth with small samples as opposed to covering breadth using larger samples. Therefore, I used an *n* of 1, selected purposefully, to get an *information-rich* case (Patton, 2002). According to Merriam (2009), "a single case or small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p. 224).

In order to identify a participant, I first considered educators of whose work I had knowledge and whom I thought exhibited some characteristics of social justice leaders:

A consciousness of the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of schools; a critique of the marginalizing behaviors and predispositions of schools and their leadership; a commitment to the more genuine enactment of democratic principles in schools; a moral obligation to articulate a counter-hegemonic vision or narrative of hope regarding education; a determination to move from rhetoric to civil rights activism. (Dantley & Tillman, 2010, p. 23)

My personal knowledge of one particular teacher's work and how this one teacher exhibited elements of Dantley and Tillman's criteria of a social justice leader helped me narrow my search. Ms. Smith (pseudonym), was a teacher who worked in an urban high school in the city of Rio Vista, which is part of a larger area in south Texas known as Campo Escondido. I had worked along side her at one time and had witnessed her work to include students who identified with difference. In this way, my eyewitness account served as a clue to the existence of a critical-case study (Patton, 2002), which warranted further research. While my hunch was important in narrowing the search for a participant, I was still unsure if Ms. Smith would yield an information-rich case (Patton). To determine whether Ms. Smith might be a critical case worthy of further study I conducted a pilot investigation.

**Teacher.** To further understand if Ms. Smith did create an inclusive environment, I conducted a pilot study with three former high school students who I knew had Ms. Smith as a classroom teacher in the academic school year 2005-2006. I conducted this pilot so that I could have multiple perspectives to inform my participant selection. I began by having a simple conversation for approximately one hour with two students who were conveniently selected (Merriam, 2009) by myself. We spoke about

the former students' experience in Ms. Smith's class and about their experiences in classes with other teachers to further ascertain if Ms. Smith was a critical case sample. Using a critical case sampling, I wanted to suggest that if Ms. Smith helped students in the social-political environment of Rio Vista then other teachers with similar intentions could also help students in Rio Vista and other contexts. Patton (2002) suggests that "it makes strategic sense to pick the site that would yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (p. 236). Therefore, I explained the purpose of my study to the students and asked them about their experiences in Ms. Smith's class.

James (pseudonym), who is now beginning college, self-identified himself as a gay, Hispanic male. Elizabeth (pseudonym), who recently graduated from college, identified herself as heterosexual, Hispanic, female, immigrant, and one who is interested in a science career. Both former students suggested that Ms. Smith, indeed, made the classroom a welcoming place and one where their differences were known and accepted. James said, "I felt refreshed to know Ms. Smith embraced my differences." He also attributed his interest in becoming a school teacher to Ms. Smith. Similarly, Elizabeth said she felt a distinction in this teacher's classroom compared to the other classrooms she attended.

By using snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009) I was able to contact another student and have a conversation with her, too. Paula (pseudonym) also identified herself as a Hispanic, female, and immigrant. She also suggested that Ms. Smith worked to make her classroom an inclusive environment at some level and suggested that I ought to speak with Ms. Smith.

In addition to searching for a participant who represented a critical case, I also sought a participant with whom I had an existing relationship. Because I was proposing to intimately examine the work of a single teacher, my study had the potential to become another example of traditional education research, which tends to be highly oppressive in that traditional research relies on an “objective observer” entering a teacher’s space, extracting data, and using those data to pronounce a judgment about the teacher’s work (Tedlock, 2000). Because I sought to conduct a different kind of study, one which rejects the dichotomous nature of traditional educational research, I purposefully sought to find a participant that I knew and who knew me. Familiarity between researcher and participant facilitates a more trusting relationship (Tedlock).

In the case of Ms. Smith, I was not only a former colleague of hers and familiar with her work, I also considered Ms. Smith a friend. She had been a mentor to me when I was a novice teacher and I had learned a great deal from her. Selecting a participant who was also a friend was both an asset and a complication to the study.

One of the advantages of our friendship is that we are both very comfortable around each other and the trust between us was high. Because of this, I did not have to spend significant time as a qualitative researcher attempting to build rapport with her. Also, because Ms. Smith did trust me, I was able to explore unpleasant and difficult topics in a way that I could not have done as an outsider. Moreover, I felt that because of our existing relationship, she was more candid in the interviews and less guarded during my observations of her than she might have been with an unfamiliar researcher.

While there are advantages to eliciting participation from a friend, a risk is that there is potential for the friendship to be tarnished if there is a disagreement or concern



during the study. I tried to control for this by meeting with the participant periodically in order to listen to her questions and comments about the study. Also, I made myself available to meet just as friends. I did not bring my audio recorder, nor pen and paper, to these meeting because it was important to me to remain friends with the participant after the study was complete. By building in time during the study to discuss issues that arose during the study or to simply catch up as friends, the teacher and I secured our friendship and completed the study.

Another risk associated with selecting friends who are participants is that I, as a researcher, could have been denied access to some of the best data sources because of my friendship with this particular individual. According to Peltó and Peltó (1978), “Every firm social relationship with a particular individual or group carries with it the possibility of closed doors and social rebuffs from competing segments of the community” (p.184). At the moment, I am not aware that this happened. A potential risk I ran as a researcher who elicited a friend as a participant is that my bias could have distorted my interpretation. However, to help me bracket for this, I met with a peer debriefer (Patton, 2002) to revise the case study as I analyzed the data.

Also, my decision to select a participant who is a friend stems from the concept of qualitative bricolage because it reflects a new way of doing research (Kincheloe, 2001). Instead of seeking a distance between researcher and participant, I wanted to be as close to the participant as possible. Patton (2002) wrote that as researcher one ought to “be open to new possibilities, the bricolage of combing old things in new ways, including alternative and emergent forms of data collection, transformed observer-observed relations, and reframed interviewer-interviewee interconnection” (p. 402). Thus, my

process of participant selection was informed by my epistemological stance, positionality, and background of theoretical frameworks, which maintained that the methods in qualitative research ought to be supple, dynamic, and open to serendipity.

**Students.** In addition to inviting students for the pilot study I conducted, I also elicited another group of former students as participants. I first asked Ms. Smith if she could brainstorm and identify names of former students who I could possibly contact. She gave me a list with thirteen names. I contacted these students through email, Facebook, and phone calls. I introduced my research topic, questions, and asked individuals to recommend names of others who I should speak to. After this cycle of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), I generated a new and smaller list of names after I made initial contact and only a few students responded. This second list had five names. I sent each of these five individuals a consent form. A total of three signed and returned the consent form and participated in this research study. Each student said they possessed differences that Ms. Smith knew about. The first individual self-identified as a gay, Hispanic male. The next individual self identifies as a heterosexual male Catholic immigrant. The third self-identified as a heterosexual female immigrant.

### **Setting of the Study**

The geographic region where this study took place was important because it played a role in the work of the participant. This study took place in the city of Rio Vista located in a larger area in south Texas known as Campo Escondido. Anzaldúa (1987), a native of south Texas, described this area as one that made her feel like the Other because of her difference in gender and sexual orientation: “Here, the queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear” (p. 40). Another Mexican-American academician

who also wrote about his experience in academe along the Mexico-U.S. border described the area as “conservative and rural” (Garcia, 2005, p. 18). After learning that the university community where he was employed shared the same form of bigotry as that found in the community at large, Garcia learned to carefully conceal and negotiate his queer identity to avoid being denied tenure because even “the academy [did] not exist in isolation of the surrounding environment” (p. 18).

Similarly, Adam (1998) maintained that behavioral norms are indeed contingent upon place and are often the determining factor of who is sacrificed for the greater good of the group: “When kinship codes constitute the primary mechanism whereby the means to survival are produced and distributed, then homosexual relationships may be marginalized as irrational, subversive, or inconsequential to the predominate social code” (p. 176). Every member of the community is expected to adhere to the norms and assist in regulating the behavior of others (Foucault, 1979). In other words, the development and performance of identity is highly influenced by the regulatory gaze of the community in which one lives. Anyone who deviates from the norm is a threat and is excluded for the sake of the others’ benefit. Yet, despite the norms of this particular setting Ms. Smith believed she worked towards an inclusive environment for students who were different.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Queer theorists call a variety of methods used to collect and produce information on individuals who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior a “scavenger methodology” (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2002, p. 244). This approach is important because I have attempted to employ a scavenger methodology to highlight students who identify with differences in absolute

spaces and how a teacher creates inclusive environments for these students. As such, I used ethnographic methods (participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document collection and analysis) over the course of a three month period to collect data about individuals with differences and a teacher who embodies characteristics of a good teacher and social justice educator.

To begin, I first presented Ms. Smith with my own story, so that she would understand my own experience in K-12 public schools as a student who identified with difference. Ms. Smith said she was shocked to learn about my personal struggle with difference, but she praised me for being transparent. Sharing my story with the teacher was difficult for me but it was a way of establishing trust and demonstrating vulnerability. She shared her own experiences as a K-12 educator with as much or more trust, transparency, and vulnerability as I had shown in my story.

**Interviews.** I set up a time and date for the interviews with Ms. Smith as soon as she read my story. I interviewed the teacher three times borrowing from Seidman's (2007) model of interviews: one time for background information, a second time for clarification and elaboration of data from the first interview, and a third time for meaning. According to Seidman's (1991) idea of a three-tired interview process, the first interview ought to elicit the context of the participant's experience. As such I asked a range of questions in an effort to reconstruct events in the teacher's life that reconstructed her experience. In the second interview, I provided the teacher with an opportunity to discuss the details of her experience within the context already established in the first interview so that what she actually did was highlighted. For the third interview, I interviewed the participant with the intention of asking her to reflect on the meaning of her experience so

that I could explore intellectual and emotional aspects of the teacher's work and life. All interviews with the teacher were conversation-like. By using a semi-structured interview protocol, I was able to ask questions that elicited different types of information such as experience/behavior questions, opinion/values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions (Patton, 2002).

A recursive interview process is characteristic of what Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer (2002) call, "queering the interview" (p. 239) to get at "multiple, fragmented, discursively constituted subjectivities, intersected significantly by gender, race, sexuality, and class," so that "subjective representation" (p. 244) is documented. This is accomplished over time and by getting to know the interviewees, not by dismissing the interviewees based on their difference. As such, I wrote only a few questions beforehand. Mostly, I developed topics or points of inquiry so that the interview would be more like a conversation between friends who were learning from each other through open dialogue, not rigid questions. I applied these same principles to the interviews process with the three former students of the teacher too.

Setting up all the interviews was a collaborative process between all the participants and me. Originally Ms. Smith wanted to meet during her conference period because she thought it would be easier for her but later, she changed her mind and suggested that we meet in the evening and talk over dinner. One former student was not in Texas, so we scheduled a date and time to meet using SKYPE, an internet video protocol. The second and third students met me for dinner at local restaurants. Ms. Smith joined one of these interviews at the request of a former student. Each interview lasted approximately one hour to an hour and half. I immediately transcribed all the

interviews from the audio recording. All transcripts were member checked for the purpose of establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Observations.** In addition to conducting interviews, I undertook some observations in the classroom, in the home of the teacher, and in other relevant places. Over the course of three months, I made seven observations of approximately three to four hours each. The purpose of field observations (Patton, 2002) was to document the human behavior that took place and to gain an understanding of what happens in Ms. Smith's classroom. I particularly wanted to see how she interacted with students.

In order to spend additional time with the teacher and to observe her in her natural setting and demonstrate appreciation for her time and willingness to participate in the study, I volunteered to help her in any way I could. For example, since the teacher set aside time in her schedule to work with me, I one time helped to clean and organize the teacher's classroom after school, decorate a bulletin board, and brought supplies from home for a classroom project the students worked on. On one occasion, I also helped Ms. Smith organize her desktop files on her computer. Being present in the field for extra time allowed me to document serendipitous findings that could potentially answer my research questions.

I took photographs of the setting. These photos helped me recall important events or situations I made reference to in data analysis (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Murchison, 2010; Patton, 2002).

**Archival research.** Throughout the course of the study, I also reviewed artifacts such as photos, letters from students and parents to the participant, and the participant's professional portfolio. I also found artifacts that were already available, such as those

that are public (items in classroom, news reports, and World Wide Web documents).

According to Glesne (2011), artifacts are the material objects that represent the culture of the person and the setting being studied. While these artifacts are mundane to the participant, Glesne suggests that artifacts can be read for stories that surround them.

**Ethnographic record.** Murchison contends that because “ethnographic data is fleeting” (p. 70), the researcher ought to record data in a systemic way before it disappears and dissipates. As such, to organize my work and make sense of the data, I kept an electronic ethnographic record (Murchison, 2010) in a form of a word document of each day I was conducting fieldwork. This record helped me recall the events, the emotions, and the conversations important to answering my research questions. Through the record, I reflected about the progress, the direction, and the concerns I had about the study. In the ethnographic record, I wrote descriptive notes that were not judgmental, but rather based on my perception about the setting and the participant(s). In one section, I kept a log of events and thoughts about next steps to take, and I clarified my own thoughts and problems, wrote down feelings, and elaborated descriptions. This also served as a space to organize emails and notes for myself.

### **Data Description**

After every interview, observation, and artifact collection, I proceeded to write in a narrative fashion all of the data I collected to contextualize it. In developing the narratives, the initial efforts I made to present the data in its most raw form served as first process in filtering the data I collected. The description in each narrative served as the gestalt of each data source because it even describes data that were not significant to answering my research questions. According to Wolcott (1994), description will assist a

reader in observing what the researcher saw and heard. I did this because I wanted the reader to have the experience of being in the field because I was in the field.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began as soon as I entered the field in order to begin making sense of Ms. Smith's practice. This helped me guide my interviews sessions, observations, and data collection. As such, I was cognizant of early and potential patterns that I might find from the data while I conducted field work. For example, while transcribing my interviews, I developed insights and hunches about what was going on, so I noted these insights off to the margin. These notes served as the beginning of my rudimentary analysis. According to Patton (2002), recording and tracking serendipitous insights during data collection is part of field work and the beginning of qualitative analysis. Pre-coding helped me stay on track and would have helped me modify my approach in the event I needed to do so.

**First cycle coding.** The first step in the three-layer analysis (describe, analysis, interpret/theorize) I conducted was that I created codes that identified topics that were relevant to answering my research questions. Immediately after every interview I conducted, I transcribed the audio. As such, through descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2010), I read through and made notes on the margin of each transcript and/or memo to describe in one word what was significant about that segment. I did this to obtain a topic that served as synthesis of the data and to create a basic vocabulary that would help me further analyze my work. Using Wolcott's (1994) suggestion of description as the foundation for qualitative work, the goal of my descriptions was to make the reader present in the context studied.



**Second cycle coding.** Next, I used pattern coding (Saldaña, 2010) to group patterns I found among the descriptive codes. I then used these grouped codes throughout other periods of analysis to figure out what fit together and what did not seem to fit well as I continued to interview and observe Ms. Smith's practice and collection of artifacts. Using a deductive approach, I made two lists: data that fit and data that did not fit. I merged all lists of pattern codes from the data that fit list so that I could answer my research question regarding how Ms. Smith's practice is moving towards creating inclusive environments for students who identify with differences. This included codes from all transcripts, each observation, and each artifact analysis. I made one master list so I could identify pattern of actions.

After coding, I linked similar ideas into categories. According to Merriam (2009), "The challenge is to construct categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern that cuts across the data. It should be clear that categories are abstractions derived from the data, not the data themselves" (p. 181). Finally, I presented my findings in the form of themes. I found an overarching theme supported by three subthemes.

### **Limitations**

According to Patton (2002), it is necessary to report any personal and professional information that might affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation. As such, there are many limitations I accounted for when I conducted this research. Since I am the primary instrument for data collection and because data were processed through my own interpretation and biases, I was cognizant of the how my biases colored my findings.

Listed below are some of my biases I have attempted to bracket for:

- Researcher privilege

- Researcher is an Hispanic whose parents are immigrants from Mexico
- Researcher experienced bullying on account of differences.

To minimize the effects of my own subjectivity and get closer to my participants' construction of reality, I consulted with another doctoral student to serve as my triangulating analyst (Patton, 2002), a person who independently analyzed the same qualitative data to check for bias. This student is a Hispanic doctoral candidate who is familiar with the context where the study took place. Additionally, the student is a former teacher and administrator and advocate for intersectionality.

## **Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore one teacher's experience working towards inclusive environments for students who identify with differences in order develop a more critical understanding of the work of social justice teachers. This critical understanding lead to the development of a heuristic that can inform teachers and school leaders about the work of moving towards inclusive environments. For this study, I collected data using interviews, observations and collection of artifacts. The transferability of this study is not contingent upon my ability as a researcher to make the connection, but rather the readers'. While there are limits to my study, I discuss here the methods I used so that my findings are credible and dependable in such a way that the reader will be convinced my research was carried out with integrity (Merriam, 2009). The data and the findings of this study are presented in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

In this chapter, I present the data and results of my study, which was an exploration of one teacher's experience of moving towards inclusive environments for students who identify with difference. The purpose of the study was also to develop a more critical understanding of the work social justice teachers do. One teacher was selected using critical case sampling and three of the participant's former students were selected using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) to provide additional perspectives about the teacher's practice.

The first section of this chapter provides the narratives of each data source. The purpose of this section is to provide a detailed description of what I observed, heard, and read while conducting fieldwork. The second section of this chapter describes my interpretation of the data, which I present as findings in the form of themes. The last section is a summary of the results.

I accomplished this investigation using individual interviews, observations of relevant settings, and document collection and analysis. I interviewed the participating teacher one time for background information, a second time for clarification and elaboration of data from the first interview, and a third time for meaning (Seidman, 2006). Each semi-structured interview with the teacher lasted approximately one hour,

and was audio taped, and then transcribed. Trustworthiness of the transcripts was established through member checks.

In addition to interviews, I also observed the teacher in the classroom. The purpose of these field observations (Patton, 2002) was to better understand the context of the teacher's life and work. In conducting the observations, I described the setting that was observed, the activities that took place, and the meaning of what was observed from the perspective of the teacher. I kept an electronic ethnographic record (Murchison, 2010) each day of fieldwork to organize data collection.

Lastly, I asked the participant for permission to review artifacts such as photos, letters from students and parents, and the participant's professional portfolio so that I could write a thematic description about the participant and her work. To further generate a thicker description of the data, I also collected data in the form of interviews with three former students. These conversation-like interviews were each approximately one-hour long. The interview data were transcribed and member checked with the participants.

### **Data: Narratives**

I captured the gestalt from each interview, each observation I conducted, and each document I collected to provide a description of the data. Attempting to interact with the data, I wrote each narrative as a holistic description with the intention of describing all the data without regard to its pertinence to the research questions. I anticipated that in writing the data as narratives, I would situate my voice amongst many others for the purpose of "accumulating layers of meanings" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xvi). It was important for me to describe the data without regard to the research question because I

wanted to provide my reader the opportunity to employ their own interpretation of the data, for “only the human observer can be alert to divergences and subtleties that may prove to be more important than the data produced by any predetermined categories of observation or any instrument” (Spindler & Spindler, 1992). As such, my interpretation of the data is but one of many. The readers’ interpretation is valuable, too.

**Interview one with teacher.** I interviewed Ms. Smith for the first time during her lunch period and in her classroom. The interview took approximately one and a half hours and was conversational in tone. Ms. Smith suggested that meeting during the day was the best time for her because she did not think she had the time or energy to meet with me in the evening. I agreed to meet during her lunch period. To ensure we wasted no time looking for lunch at the school cafeteria, I brought deli sandwiches and a salad to the meeting so we could immediately speak. This also helped me show the teacher my appreciation for her participation in this study. The following is a narrative description of that event.

During our conversation, Ms. Smith stated she has twenty years of teaching experience working for Rio Vista ISD. Before Ms. Smith was a teacher at Bravo High School, she was a teacher at another high school within the district. While she has enjoyed teaching high school science at Bravo High School for the past seventeen years, Ms. Smith did not originally plan on a career in education. As an undergraduate, she planned on becoming a physician and went to several universities in central Texas in search of that career; however, she found the pre-medical program very expensive. Additionally, her father had been involved in a major automobile accident and Ms. Smith

felt the need to return home to help her parents financially and to assist her mother in caring for her father. In describing these circumstances Ms. Smith said,

Now, do I wish I would have gone back and completed medical school? Yes, because of the money. The [teaching] profession has no respect and it pays very little. I guess you can say we teach because of our heart and our will, but it doesn't pay. But the rewards are the kids, and the a-ha moments, and the things you get to help them out with. That's my incentive, because the money is not there. I like what I do. But, I never continued medical school. I wish I could have, but I didn't. So, now I use it to reinforce. I tell kids that if they want to go for something they need to just go for it. Don't go back. I know it is very hard because you want to help your parents and, of course, being the oldest I came back home. That's what I did.

Ms. Smith maintained that after she returned to south Texas, she enrolled in a local university and eventually graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology. While returning to medical school was not an option, Ms. Smith found herself wondering what to do next. She was not interested in teaching. Despite her reluctance, her mother and her younger sister, who was already a classroom teacher, convinced her to inquire about the certification process to become a classroom teacher. Eventually, Ms. Smith began the necessary steps towards certification and began to teach. To her surprise, Ms. Smith became fond of the profession after her first year: "I ended up loving to teach. I found everything in teaching that I wanted in a career." According to Ms. Smith, the teaching profession gave her the opportunity to teach the content that made her happy, to be home, and to work with young people.

After a few years of teaching, Ms. Smith saw that an ex-classmate from high school was going to be the next dean of instruction at Bravo High School. Ms. Smith said, “I believed I was far more intelligent than my ex-classmate and better suited for that leadership role, so I began graduate school and earned a master’s degree in educational administration.” Today, she has thought of going back to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. in education. However, she has no intention of leaving the classroom any time soon. But, in the meantime, Ms. Smith said, “I seek out opportunities to always improve my teaching and myself and what could benefit those kids the most.”

Ms. Smith’s self-directed learning is particularly important considering that she asserted her teacher preparation program did not teach her everything she needed to know:

I don’t think when I got educated I ever had any issues with professors or with the teachers that makes me teach in a different way, or do my job in a different way.

I guess it’s just the way I am. In other words, the way I teach is what I think is going to be best for kids. I think I am doing them a favor by being strict, having high expectation and being demanding and not lowering my standards. Because I feel I can prepare them for what is coming up. So did they prepare me in that fashion for what I am right now? No. So I do what I feel is right.

When I asked Ms. Smith if her teacher preparation had prepared her to address equity issues she replied, “No, it did not.” She went on to say that there was no current in-service professional development in Rio Vista that assists her in addressing the intersections of differences, or support from district and school leaders. Ms. Smith stated that her experience over the years has increased her awareness of the social injustices

present in schools. For example, Ms. Smith recalled the stories of Joey and Frank (pseudonyms) two English language learners in her pre-advanced placement class. Joey is a student who lived in a one of the toughest parts of town. He showed tremendous interest in the community service project Ms. Smith sponsored; however, Joey almost resigned completely from participating because it was hard for his family to provide transportation to and from the weekend activities. Ms. Smith thought that if she praised him a lot and provided him with a leadership role, Joey would perhaps continue to participate despite his needs. She said,

I went home and started to think, “Wow, I can’t believe this kid does so much and look at where he comes from.” So I said, “this kids needs a lot of praise,” so the next day I went to class and said, “Class we are going to have president for the recycling team and its going to be Joey.” You should have seen his face. He said, “Oh wow, I am going to be the president.” Then the guy who picks him up, I told him that he was going to be the vice-president because he contributed a lot too. So, I thought to myself, “I am going to give him a recycling t-shirt.” Little did I know that he relies on those shirts that he gets from recycling events for a daily wardrobe. For every event he went, he got a shirt. I am not sure if he went for just the shirt or he didn’t. I don’t know. I know he would say, “I already have the green one and the black one and that one.” So that is his attire. I guess we don’t take the time sometimes to look at where these kids are coming from and me of course thinking that I have the pre-advanced placement students and that they are coming from a good family environment and that they have everything, so you really cannot judge a book by its cover.



In the middle of this interview, there was a knock at the door. Joey, the student who we had just finished discussing, came in to the room to drop off some plastic bottles. I did not know it was Joey as I had never met him before. I only noticed the student's jeans were worn out and that the student's shoes were not in the best of conditions. The neon green shirt he wore caught my attention, especially because it was new and had on it a recycling logo. Joey left the room, and Ms. Smith said, "By the way, that was Joey." I felt particularly lucky to have observed this encounter.

Frank, another English language learner, was also a student who was failing Ms. Smith's class and was at the verge of a schedule change. Ms. Smith encouraged him to try harder so that he would not drop the course. When Frank began to attend tutorial with Ms. Smith upon her recommendation, he showed promise. He raised his grade and realized he was capable of mastering the pre-advanced placement content. Ms. Smith said,

Before he was all depressed, but now he is like, "I fit in here. I am one of them."

You could tell he didn't have the confidence. Every time, he would come he would sit all spaced out. He always looked like he was confused in my class.

As suggested in the former examples, Ms. Smith did exhibit a concern for academic achievement and inclusive practices; two of McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, Gonzalez, Cambron-McCabe and Scheurich's (2008) tenets of social justice leadership. Because a single definition of social justice is complex and contested (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2010; McKenzie, et al.; Theoharis, 2007), Ms. Smith still observed a broader awareness of student differences (economic disadvantages and English language learners) that characterizes her as going beyond

good pedagogical work. Thus, this suggests Ms. Smith has the potential to prevent a generation and reproduction of an unjust society as Dantley and Tillman suggest. When I asked Ms. Smith how she described her attempt to create inclusive environments, she said:

There has to be trust between me and them and also amongst the students. The students have to respect and have the ability to accept people the way they are. I tell them share or respect people's space, belongings, no making fun of others.

To further illustrate the challenges of creating an inclusive environment, Ms. Smith explained her understanding of the norms of Rio Vista. "I have lived in Rio Vista all my life except for a few years I was away at college in central Texas." While Rio Vista is where she called home and where she enjoyed teaching, she continued, "I love what I do." However, she finds it is a complex place to live, work, and learn for those who identify with difference. For example, she said, "Here, it's about whatever the man says, but that is not me. My world is 50-50. The women are to be submissive to a certain extent. There is so much BS here...pura politica!"

To problematize the gender norms of Rio Vista, Ms. Smith used the prefix "Ms." to indicate she is not defined by her marital status, nor is she defined in relation to her husband. She identified herself with her maiden name "Smith," not her husband's last name, Garza. Ms. Smith did not agree with the traditional practice that women ought to take the name of a husband at marriage, she said:

Why should I have to give someone else credit when I am the one who worked so hard for my degrees and my parents, too. I am glad my husband respects that. In fact, we are working to change his last name to mine. And maybe one day he will

because everyone calls him Mr. Smith. He doesn't have a problem with it. I don't like traditional stuff. I like to do my own thing.

Ms. Smith's perspective of marriage expectations suggests she sees people, including herself, as complex and ever changing. Thus, it seems she did not acknowledge she could see reality as it is and accept it. Instead, she claimed that she could see reality and critically analyze it. Ms. Smith said, "I am a very strong person in the Latina population. I am of the belief that you can strive for whatever you want to strive for. I believe that women are the privileged ones. That saying that 'women can do anything men can do,' I am strong supporter of that."

Another example Ms. Smith provided that illustrated how she pushed back against the norms of Rio Vista is her account of her wedding day:

When I got married I didn't have the traditional march song because that was not what I wanted. Everyone had a heart attack. I didn't get married at night. I got married at 10:00 a.m. There was no dancing. I danced. They did not dance. It's a Mexican thing to change your name. We had a brunch. No alcohol. I did have Mariachis because of my mother who is Mexican. But I did not want the typically four-hour wedding at night where everyone dances. I was on a flight the next day to the Bahamas. I guess that explains how I think. Why do I have to be this way when I can be this other way and who says you can't do it?

Ms. Smith explained that in addition to gender, her ethnic differences is also contested within Rio Vista because she sees Rio Vista as a patriarchal context. To negotiate this tension, Ms. Smith said, "I usually don't write in anything [on forms] because it's none of any one's business. I don't consider myself a Hispanic [or]

Mexican-American [only], so they don't have a box for me. There is no in between. It is all black and white. I'd rather not fill out any forms." Incidentally, Ms. Smith identified her father's race as Caucasian and her mother's race as Mexican. Ms. Smith identified with both her Mexican roots and her Caucasian roots, and she seemed proud to be able to move back and forward along a continuum of ethnic identity and to challenge gender norms.

After Ms. Smith acknowledged her own gender and racial identity as fluid, she discussed the conflict between the norms of Rio Vista and her understanding of reality. She explained it was not realistic for educators to think all students could easily learn. Instead, Ms. Smith believed that educators needed to recognize what differences students exhibited and then work to meet their needs so that all students can learn. She said,

I do not subscribe to the idea that all children can learn. It is not going to work. There are so many barriers that these kids have that you have to really know the kids. You may drill the kids, but if the environment is to the point that the students struggle because they don't have parental support, and they don't have their needs met in the classroom then how can we say that every student can learn. That is not going to work. To me that is down the drain. That is not my philosophy. Maybe some people teach with that in mind, but not me.

Ms. Smith believed that meeting students' needs was a daunting task that few teachers did. She continued,

It's a lot of work, but no one wants to do that. I do it. I get to know each and every one of them. Right away, I do a questionnaire. I see where they come from. Do they live in a home? Is it an apartment? Or, they don't put anything

down because they are coming from Mexico. And with all the stuff going on over there, do these kids who live in Mexico get to go home on the weekend? Who are they with over here? Did they all have supper? With all the violence in Mexico, I wonder how kids are dealing with that. All that stuff makes a difference. How are they going to be successful here when they didn't have a shower, supper, things like that?

While the questions Ms. Smith has posed for students in order to know more about them are general in nature (class schedules, hobbies, and dislikes), she said she is not surprised with what else students offer to share with her when she conducts the questionnaires:

When I open up to them at the beginning of the year and tell that I am not only their teacher, that I am here to be your friend, your counselor, your advisor, and you choose which ones you want to take advantage of. And if you don't that is also your choice, but I know that there will be certain things you will want to talk about. I want you to feel confident, so they know that already, so sometimes they feel extremely confident and come and tell me very personal things.

Ms. Smith indicated students share their differences with her on a voluntary basis, not because Ms. Smith asked for that information. Instead, she elicited general snippets of information to better understand students and be better informed to help students. Ms. Smith also gathered information about students by simply being among them not only in the classroom, but in other contexts too. In addition to being around students and eliciting information, Ms. Smith said she also reflected upon her work and tried to improve her practice so that she can help more students. She reported,

At the end of each day, I ask, “Did I target some people? Was my point made?”

There are couple of a-ha moments like, “I get it!” I don’t only rely on grades, but I do lots of observations and assessments. Like, did I accomplish my goal for that one day, whatever my lesson was? If I reached one kid in each class then to me that is fine. I did what I could, not only talking about did I get the lesson, but did I help anyone else that I could have helped more.

While Ms. Smith agreed that as a teacher she would personally like to know more about students to help them, she acknowledged that knowing which students are different can hurt them. Therefore, she did not agree that students should be required to reveal their differences in order for teachers to meet their needs, especially because “some teachers will be biased, and it may affect the way they deal with that student.” Ms. Smith maintained, “Not too many teachers are open minded. They live in a box that is black and white, so that may be an obstacle. It’s supposed to be an equality education, but some people don’t believe in that.” Similarly, Ms. Smith maintained that school districts should not collect data such as differences in religion/other belief systems, national origin, and sexual orientation because “it would be like opening Pandora’s box. It is personal, and it might interfere with the equal opportunity clause.”

Even though Ms. Smith did not know every difference each student in her class exhibited and acknowledged it was probably impossible to know, she still held high expectations for all of her students in an effort to reach all of them. She said,

I am going to be your worst enemy if I know you can do it and you are not doing it. That’s the worst thing you can do in my class. Once that starts, forget it. It’s

like we are going backwards, and I will turn into a monster. But if you are working hard and not slacking off, you will not have any problems here.

Another challenge Ms. Smith asserted was that the district adopted an efficiency model by placing students where they fit based on space, not needs. Half of the kids in Ms. Smith's class are not at the pre-advanced placement level. Students are labeled pre-advanced placement across all their schedules, even if they only requested one subject pre-advanced placement. Ms. Smith said, "And it's sad because it's a set up for failure. Kids tell me that they don't want to be in my pre-advanced placement class because they didn't sign up for the course." Ms. Smith believed that because the district did not meet students' needs, students struggled.

Ms. Smith agreed that all differences and needs a student possessed mattered, so despite the efficiency model inherent in her school, she did believe she worked towards creating an inclusive environments:

I would have to say [my classroom has a] big time open-door policy. Everyone is welcome, no matter what size or shape. I don't have any barriers. The only barriers I have is that if you don't want to work. Then I am going to say that this pre-advanced placement class is not for you. Here you are going to work.

Accepting people the way they are is the foundation, especially students. They are who they are. You can't do anything about it. Now, you can try to make a difference in regards to their educational background setting or helping them move on. But as far as me changing them as a person like who they are. I can't change them. They come already molded. In regards to education, I can help them be a better student.

Despite Ms. Smith's well intention and conception of an inclusive environment, she struggled with students who claimed to be atheist:

What does bother me is that some are atheist and they do tell me. Somehow, me and those students always clash for some reason, so my belief there becomes an obstacle. I have tried to work with the kids, but they are hardheaded. I have had about three and they have told me, "I worship Satan," or they do this or that. I, as a teacher, do the minimum there and they see me as the other powerful source and they go out the door and don't stay with me. So they themselves drop my class because nothing of what I mention is sinking in their heads. They say, "No. No. No. It is not like that." It becomes a battle. I think its belief versus belief, not necessarily my subject. There are two different identities and they clash.

Even though Ms. Smith grew up as a practicing Catholic and admitted that when she became a teacher she steered away from that religion and became a Christian with no particular denomination, she did not accept atheism as another acceptable belief system students could have. Ms. Smith acknowledged that she was an agent of the state who was responsible for holding up the separation of church and state, yet she still recognized the difficulty of suspending her religious beliefs in the capacity of a classroom teacher.

**Interview two with teacher.** When I arrived to interview Ms. Smith a second time, I helped her organize her classroom before the next group of students arrived. She grabbed a broom; I picked up the textbooks from the desk and stacked them up nicely in the back of the room. The students who had been dismissed had just completed a lab, so the room was disheveled. We cleaned the counter tops and realigned the desks. As we worked together to bring the room back to order, Ms. Smith said to me that she had



finished reading my personal story, which I had given her to read at the end of our first interview. My story documented my experiences as a public school student who identified with multiple differences. After reading it, Ms. Smith had lots of questions about my experience, so we spent time discussing the events that influenced my childhood, and the effects my differences had on my personal and professional life. I answered her questions to the best of my knowledge despite the fact that I felt a little uncomfortable bringing up the past, especially since I try not to remember it. On the other hand, I felt a sense of calmness come over me, too, because I had never shared this part of my life with her before.

For this second interview, I wanted to clarify certain points Ms. Smith made the first time we spoke. For example, I did not understand why students who were atheists tended to drop Ms. Smith's class. I wanted to know more details about the dynamic between her and students who self-identified as atheists. When I asked her to clarify this for me, she said,

They are not going to tell me, but I know. [Besides] I have a goal. This is me and this is you. I am here to teach you. Whether or not you like me is beside the point. You are here to learn, and that is all that matters. Everything else, like you don't like me or you don't like the way I say things, well that doesn't play a role here. We have something to take care, and we need to take care of it. End of story. And this is the way I deal with these ones. This is who you are, so let's just move on.

While Ms. Smith maintained it was not as if she disliked these students. Instead, her religious beliefs presented an inherent conundrum for her working with students who were atheist. She said,

I have a problem with how can they say there is no God. Who do they worship, the monster? But I don't tell them that. I don't go and try to preach them a lesson, but somehow I sense that they have an issue.

As such, Ms. Smith maintained that it is not possible for her to "totally" suspend her beliefs when working with students who are atheist, but she did admit it may be possible for her to do so for the time a student is in her class. She said,

I do it all the time. Since we are talking about religion, we know *The Bible* is black and white and doesn't accept lesbians and gays. That there is no such thing as in between. So, I suspend my beliefs there. And I respect the kids there. And I am willing to teach him. I don't get rid of the gay students.

Moreover, Ms. Smith indicated she felt atheist students left her pre-advanced placement class because the pressure around atheist students from peers in the classroom to conform, not because of her:

I don't throw these kids out. They leave on their own. I don't think they leave because of me, but also because of the other kids in the class. They feel isolated. It's another difference, and I guess because they are not willing to assimilate and they would rather be on their own.

During this second interview, I also wanted to know more about the impetus for the service-learning project I noticed when I visited Ms. Smith's classroom the first time. Ms. Smith had bags filled with plastic bottles in every corner of the classroom. While

Ms. Smith stated that one of the reasons she began this community service project was to help connect the class content to the outside world, she said it had served another purpose too:

It's a sense of belonging. And [students who are different] are accepted.

Regardless of what they are, they are accepted in this group. It's not a club. It's a team. Like Joey, I made him the president. To him, that is the perfect niche. He thinks, "Hey, I am important. I am the president." He came up with the slogan for the team. He came up with "No bottle left behind."

Also during our initial conversation, Ms. Smith mentioned that she did not teach for the money, but rather for the intrinsic aspects of the profession, like the a-ha moments and the rewards of helping students succeed. She said,

I do a lot of stuff on the side that is completely voluntary. Like if I was not here with you now, I would be collecting bottles with students. This past weekend, I was collecting bottles, and I don't get paid. I don't do it because I want to be champs; I do it because our school is known as the dumps. I want to show, "Hey you think our kids are bad? Well guess what? They are doing something positive in our community. They are making an impact."

Another concept I wanted to know about was a questionnaire Ms. Smith used at the beginning of the year to gather general information about students. Ms. Smith also used this strategy to introduce herself and her expectations. She said,

I don't tell them everything about me at first. I usually will tell them that they are here to get their money's worth. I tell them, pretend that you are paying for this course. I tell them, in my class, you're going to get your money's worth. And I

am going to make sure that you get your money's worth. Satisfaction guaranteed.

There is no such thing as mediocre, or half way. We are going to get there. I don't know how, but we will get there. Together we will get there.

During our initial conversation, Ms. Smith also mentioned that schools did not account for all the differences students exhibited. She recognized that the system is an unjust one that expected immigrant students to still perform at the same level as the rest of the students despite not having all the support. Considering the recent drug cartel violence across the border, I asked Ms. Smith what else, if anything, the district, school, and community could do to meet the immigrant students' needs and ameliorate the dangerous effects of the situation. Ms. Smith responded by identifying an important source of the problem: "The teachers who do get these kids make these students feel inferior. They are like, "ugh. I have all this ESL population." I think we make them feel welcomed and provide a safe haven for them." To make sure immigrant students are included, Ms. Smith said she praised and encouraged them:

I will use [immigrant students] as examples in the classroom. Like Carlos was a perfect example. I told the class when they would make fun of how he read, "Excuse me guys, he is learning the language. He is struggling with the language, but he is academically high. Now, if he can make it, so can you. He is trying hard. And look at what he is doing." And I would ask Carlos to read aloud, and he didn't want to. I would tell him in Spanish, "go ahead. I know you can. You have to try. If you don't try then you will never know if you could." I explained to him that it would improve his reading and speaking. And some students read

word per word very slowly, but no one laughed. As soon as Carlos would finish, I would praise him by saying, “very good Carlos. That was awesome.”

Another point I wanted to clarify was Ms. Smith’s own perceptions regarding her innate qualities as a leader since she mentioned she wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in educational leadership. She said,

I consider myself a leader because I take initiative. I don’t wait to be told. I know what is needed. I know the best thing to do for educating our kids and know what they need. I am able to fill that need and move them on. Take them to a higher level. But I don’t think I have to be told what needs to get done. I am very transparent. No ands, ifs, or buts. This is the way it goes.

Ms. Smith did consider herself “a leader,” but believed that the context, which was heavily influenced by politics, made it difficult for her to assume leadership positions such as the principalship. She said, “It’s about who you know to get to the top, not what you know. It’s sad, but that has been the norm in our district.”

Despite the challenges Ms. Smith might have faced in accessing formal leadership roles like the principalship, Ms. Smith has been voted in as vice president for a local chapter of a teacher’s professional association. She said,

I am a voice for teachers on the outside. I make sure that their needs are being met. And when they cross the line, I represent them. I was secretary before, but my goal was to get up to the top. I went against a very powerful person, but I got the votes for where I am right now.

While Ms. Smith’s responsibility is on a volunteer basis and contingent upon voter approval, Ms. Smith found that the politics associated with the teacher’s professional

organization is problematic. According to Ms. Smith, she believed that because she challenged the business as usual understanding, other members resented her.

Considering the resistance Ms. Smith experienced from a few individuals, the challenges of working with others, little or no support from school leadership, and the time spent away from home and family, I wanted to know what drove Ms. Smith. She said,

I can always go the other route, but it is hard for me to do that because I have ethics, morals, and principles that I am going to do right by children. This just doesn't just happen. Education courses didn't teach me. This is just the type of person I am.

**Interview three with teacher.** I interviewed Ms. Smith a third time in an effort to explore how she understood certain concepts we had already discussed in Interviews One and Two. I also wanted to explore the meaning Ms. Smith ascribed to her actions, her emotions, and her beliefs. For this interview, I met Ms. Smith at her home on a Saturday evening. We sat at the dinner table and had a conversation-interview for about one hour.

The first topic we discussed was the meaning behind a grade-based seating arrangement Ms. Smith used in her class. Because Ms. Smith had taught pre-advanced placement science, which can be a daunting subject, Ms. Smith said in previous conversations that she felt that by inculcating a sense of academic excellence into the classroom, she was able to motivate students to study harder and participate more often. In the past, Ms. Smith had designated a table in the middle of her classroom for the highest achieving students to sit. At the time, only four students sat at this table because

her classroom was small. The students who did sit there were called the Fantastic Four. Ms. Smith currently has a classroom with desks and her classroom is much bigger, so the first desk of every row is reserved for one of six students with the highest grade point averages in each class. These students are known as the Six Stars.

Ms. Smith has asked these students to help her with little tasks, such as passing out papers, to bigger tasks, such as tutoring other students and facilitating recycling activities. She stated that students have embraced their roles as responsible “leader[s] in a little class community” because “It’s a motivational thing.” She continued,

Everyone can be on the top. It doesn’t matter what others say or believe that you’re not going to make it. Some students are very surprised when they make it. They realize, “Hey, I am a class star.” Then I have some students who stay in there all year. So it’s like a motivator.

Ms. Smith knows the strategy has worked because many students who took the class in the past have come back to visit Ms. Smith to boast in front of Ms. Smith’s current students about the privilege of sitting in that section. Ms. Smith believes this testimony has also motivated Ms. Smith’s current students to continuously try harder.

Historically, Ms. Smith has found that students enjoyed the competitive environment she maintained. However, Ms. Smith admitted that this strategy is a challenge because students need to take advantage of the opportunities that are presented before them so that this and any other strategy works. She said, “I push them, strive for excellence. Get in there. But if students don’t want to get their part, I can’t make them.”

Another challenge Ms. Smith encountered while using this strategy is a lack of support from administrators. While every administrator is different, some assistant

principals have asked Ms. Smith to reframe from using the competitive seating arrangement because some students will never be able to sit in the distinguished section. Still, Ms. Smith has continued to use this strategy because she says it works.

I also wanted to know what sense Ms. Smith made of the model schools used to organize classroom schedules, select curriculum, and teach students. For example, at Bravo High School, students are grouped into academic teams at the ninth grade. According to Ms. Smith,

[The] system is not without its flaws because they are supposed to choose the students who are eligible for advanced course work. But because of the academic teaming we have now, if [a student] pick[s] one advanced class, if [a student] picks science, but [the student] is weak in English, the system still gives [the student] everything pre-advanced placement. I think it is a set-up for failure when they give students those courses they don't want. I have told the school principal, but they said, "that is the way teaming is supposed to be set up." The kids are saying, "But I didn't pick to be here. I want to get out." Students are mad because they will come to me and say that they did not pick to be in an advanced placement science class. I tell students that if they drop my class then they will be dropped from the rest of their pre-advanced placement courses. So the kids are in limbo, which is not good, but that is the way it is set up.

Ms. Smith and I also discussed the meaning behind her perception that no one else in the school cared about going beyond the call of duty. When I asked Ms. Smith what it meant to her to be able to teach the pre-advanced placement students, she said,



I feel like I can do a lot with these students that I know for a fact is not going to happen in the other classes. Other teachers will not get pre-advanced placement certified. Why do you think they don't? Yet, they complain. But they don't go to the institute [to earn qualification] because they don't want the parents or the kids who are going to challenge their thinking.

Ms. Smith believed she could take students to a higher level, and she was proud of her ability to accomplish that. She also said that because she is one of few teachers who have the credentials to teach challenging courses, her course enrollment is overloaded. She said, "Why is it my fault that the other teachers do not get anything done? Students want to leave [their classes]. I have overload because someone is not doing what they are supposed to. And because I do more, I get punished."

Ms. Smith said that several factors contributed to her perception that no one cared. First, she said that the majority of science teachers at Bravo High School have three or fewer years of experience. She asserted that many of these teachers are only teaching until they are admitted to graduate school. Ms. Smith also said that another group of young teachers who do not aspire graduate school, although content savvy, are weak in pedagogy. Ms. Smith also indicated that most, if not all, of these teachers are not fully certified to teach, so this presents another challenge. She also said that the science department head teacher has been preoccupied with health issues, so he is not accessible or visible on campus. As a result, Ms. Smith noted that many of the science teachers do not plan together anymore.

Ms. Smith says she has tried to work to motivate her colleagues by suggesting several ideas they can work on, especially because she has been a department head

teacher in the past. She said she suggested co-planning in order to create questions for a test and planning to create a bulletin board with a certain skill or scientific concept. However, she said she found that her colleagues resisted her ideas and her leadership efforts. Ms. Smith told me that she worked alone as a result. Ms. Smith said that the school principal was aware of the hostility within the department, but the issue went unaddressed. Ms. Smith believed that she has always been a team player and has tried to resign from afterschool tutorial so that other teachers may have the opportunity to also tutor afterschool. However, she stated the school principal did not allow her to resign from tutoring afterschool because no one else wanted to do it. In essence, Ms. Smith reached a tipping point during the current school year, but she has continued to absorb its lack of appreciation in an effort to work with students since she maintained that it is about helping students as a service, not a job.

**Interview with Gilbert, a former student.** I met with Gilbert (pseudonym), a former student of Ms. Smith, for a hour at a restaurant that was conveniently located near his place of employment. I did not know Gilbert prior to this meeting. According to Ms. Smith, Gilbert did not want to meet with me alone, so he requested that Ms. Smith be present during the interview. While I would have preferred for Ms. Smith not to be present because of the potential influence of her presence on the participant's response, I agreed to the conditions rather than forego the interview. At first, I noticed that Gilbert did not easily open up. It was not until after Ms. Smith joined the conversation that he participated more. While I was initially concerned about having Ms. Smith present during the interview, I feel Ms. Smith's presence enabled rather than hindered the participant's participation.

When Gilbert walked in, he seemed a little upset. I asked him how his day went, and he explained he had a misunderstanding with his supervisor. I listened until he was done explaining the situation. He seemed relieved after expressing his situation at work. After he shared how his day went at work, I explained to him the research question and presented him with a consent form. He agreed to participate.

Gilbert self-identified himself as a thirty year old gay man who was born and raised in the city of Rio Vista. After graduating from Bravo High School in 1999, Gilbert decided to join the workforce immediately. While both his sisters and his parents went to college, he found his interest was in sales. After working for many years in a large department store that eventually closed down, Gilbert found employment in a large home improvement warehouse. Today, he lives with his partner, a teacher at Bravo High School in Rio Vista.

Gilbert seemed to recall his experience in Ms. Smith's class well, especially considering he was a student there twelve years ago. Gilbert admitted that he was neither the most well behaved student nor the smartest one. Yet, he remembered "gravitating" to Ms. Smith as a student. He said, "I don't know why, if she was so strict." Gilbert laughed at his comment and then became serious: "It actually was because of her attitude. She is strict, but she is also very open and laid back." Ms. Smith, who was present during this interview, said,

It is like some of the kids who go to the recycling events. They see me do things, go crazy, laugh. So it's a completely different environment than the classroom. And those who do come to the recycling activity [outside of school], and see me in a different view point, now their attitude has changed. They are like, "hey she

is cool. I can tell her stuff.” They feel now okay she is not going to kill me. They see me as that I am human too.

Gilbert agreed: “In the classroom, she was this way, but out of the class she was another way, and I respected that as a student.”

Similarly, Gilbert felt “comfortable” around Ms. Smith outside and inside her classroom, especially because she did not pass judgment on him for being different. As a result, he decided to inform her during the second semester part of the course that he was gay:

When I was going to school, being gay was not accepted in the school environment, so it was very difficult for me growing up. My family already knew I was gay when I was in middle school, but at school it was a totally different issue. However, no one dared to make fun in Ms. Smith’s class. The problem was that there were some teachers who knew I was gay and I could sense they were against it. In fact, I could always tell what the teachers who did not accept me thought in the back of their minds, “I know what you are, so I am going to avoid you.” And then there were teachers who were okay with it, and Ms. Smith was one of them. I could just sense she accepted me.

Gilbert remembered that when he felt the need to discuss a personal problem or concern with Ms. Smith, he pulled up a stool next to her desk and began to share whatever concern he had at the moment. Jokingly, he said, “I did not confide in Ms. Smith. She took it out of me.” Gilbert went on to say that while Ms. Smith was available for the most part, she did not stop teaching the rest of the class to tend to or listen to Gilbert only. When Ms. Smith lectured and walked around the room monitoring

students, Gilbert found himself sitting near her desk. When Ms. Smith arrived back at her desk, she continued to provide counsel to Gilbert. Ms. Smith interjected and said that, regardless of the situation, personal problem or concern, she did not excuse Gilbert from completing any of the assignments he did not do because he was too stressed, too pressured, or too concerned. Gilbert said, “Students will respect teachers more when there is structure, when there are expectations.”

However, Gilbert failed the second semester of Ms. Smith’s course and repeated it the following year. He maintained that he failed because he did not do his work. In fact, he said that Ms. Smith did not provide him with any special privileges because he was gay. According to Gilbert, there were a few teachers on campus at the time who were gay and who promoted him to the next grade level even though he did not do the work in their classes. He said, a counselor who was gay also offered him hall passes out of any class for no apparent reason.

Gilbert realized that not all his teachers made an effort to listen to him or made an effort to make him feel more comfortable because he was different. Instead, teachers either avoided his difference, or rewarded him with grades he did not earn. When Gilbert repeated the second part of Ms. Smith’s class that he failed, he passed it on his own merit. Gilbert also reflected upon other difficult times he and his other gay friends experienced in high school. For example, Gilbert said that one of his friends committed suicide because he was ostracized for being gay. Gilbert was devastated for months, but he found strength by expressing his angst with friends, family, and Ms. Smith. Today, he has continued to maintain a relationship with Ms. Smith, even after graduating from high school more than a decade later.

Ms. Smith, who also reflected upon the time when Gilbert was her student, remembered something significant about her present work. Much like Ms. Smith helped Gilbert by not rewarding him with unearned grades, but rather by providing council, by being flexible in and out of the classroom, and by making him feel comfortable, Ms. Smith anticipated doing the same for a current student who is also gay. Ms. Smith said,

I have a student this year who is gay and he is cutting himself. He cannot come out to his mother. The mother said, "I don't know what to do with him. I have already tried this and that," she told me. "I am going to have to take him to the counselor. He has already cut himself many times." I have seen the cuts on the student, and they are big. I told the mom not to worry and that I was going to work with the student in a very positive way to get him to get his grades up. Yesterday, he went by and said "I brought some bottles and shoes for extra points." I said, "no, you need to take the retest. We will take the test again and then we can worry about extra credit." He didn't like that and made a face. I said, "Please, your mom is not going to like it that you didn't bother trying to do the retest when I am giving you the chance to take the test again. So please, Mike." He said, "my mother doesn't really care what I do. She doesn't even know what I am doing." I said, "Well in case she asks, we'll have it done." He came back after school and did the test. He passed, and I told him, "you see." He said, "Yea, thanks." I said, "your mother will appreciate it." He replied, "no she will not." So, there are some issues there. But I did what I could to let him know, "hey I am trying to work with you." Because maybe he doesn't get the attention he deserves at home and I looking at it from a different point of view. So, I

guarantee you that this kid is going to move on. Right now he is like this. Where he sits trying to hide himself, but he is eventually going to come out of there. I can already see it.

**Interview with Carlos, a former student.** I met Carlos (pseudonym) for about an hour and-a-half at a restaurant located inside a Rio Vista shopping center. We spent about twenty minutes catching up on the current events of each other's lives. I then provided Carlos with a consent form soon after. He agreed to participate, and we began a conversation-like interview about his high school experience.

Carlos is a twenty-two-year-old Hispanic male who was born in Rio Vista. His parents were both Mexican citizens at the time of his birth, and they brought him back to Los Cañaverales (pseudonym), Mexico, the adjacent town on the other side of the Rio Grande River. Up until the age of eleven, Carlos lived and attended school in Mexico. When he was in fifth grade, Carlos' father passed away, and his mother decided to move to the U.S. and enroll Carlos and his siblings into Rio Vista ISD. While Carlos was an American citizen, his mother was not. At the time, she was able to commute using a visa. While the visa Carlos' mother had was intended for visiting purposes only, Carlos and his family planned on living on the U.S. side of the border.

Between the ages of eleven and sixteen, Carlos felt uneasy about living in the United States. He said, "It was a situation of anxiety and fear because border patrol could come in at any time and take my mother back to Mexico." Despite a sense of paranoia, Carlos and his family continued to make a home in a land that was so close yet so far from what they were used to. For example, Carlos did not know English when he was enrolled in a Rio Vista elementary for the first time. However, he said that he had an

excellent language teacher and he possessed high levels of intrinsic motivation that helped him learn English fast. In middle school, he did well in advanced courses; however, in spite of his academic success, he struggled to connect socially with his peers. Carlos mentioned that he was academically gifted, but his peers found his effort to over-achieve and level of maturity not normal for his age. As a result, Carlos was bullied for being too smart and for being too mature. Carlos remembered a time in middle school when a student ridiculed him for not being an average student like everyone else. He said the traumatic event was further intensified by the fact that his teacher did nothing to protect him.

After middle school, Carlos attended Bravo High School and said he participated in many extra-curricular activities to help him keep busy with school and to avoid any harassment. Carlos maintained that his schooling experience was better in high school, but that it was not unusual for other students, especially one of his best friends, to scold him through public humiliation for being different. While Carlos did not regret studying hard or applying himself to be a high achieving student, he admitted that if he could do it all over again, he would try to tone down his maturity for the sake of fitting in with the rest of the students. He said, “My social skills were more advanced than that of my peers, so they felt out of place. I think I would tone it down a little bit. Try to be a little more my age.” Eventually, Carlos became the class salutatorian. He recently graduated from an Ivy League university in the northeastern part of the United States with a major in economics. Today, he is a tenth grade Algebra and Geometry teacher at a Rio Vista charter school.



Ten years after being a student in Ms. Smith's class, Carlos remembered not only his experience in her class but in other classes, too. He stated that he realized how much public school did not teach him. When Carlos moved across the country to attend college, he thought it would be an easy transition, since he felt prepared. After all, he said was second-highest achieving student in his 400 member class. However, he discovered he was not prepared. He said,

It was a cultural, wealth, and academic shock. Even getting a perfect score on the math SAT and getting accepted into one of the best schools in the country, I was like, "ok, I should not have come." I was not ready for the academic level of writing or thinking, because we weren't pushed enough as high school students. That first semester in college, I was like, "I hate you teachers for not teaching me more and pushing me more." But, I now see it as a teacher that you can only do so much to make sure you give attention to all the kids. It's hard. I guess I don't hate my teachers as much because I have those high kids and I really should be pushing them, but I can't, because I need to make sure all the kids move along.

As a current teacher, Carlos said he recognized the challenges for him to meet the needs of all students in a single classroom and simultaneously meet accountability standards. In fact, Carlos realized the hard work and commitment that went into differentiating instruction for students in order to include all of them. He acknowledged that he had a new level of respect for the teaching profession and for teachers who made a bona fide effort to meet the needs of all individual learners. While Carlos is not sure if he will continue to be teaching five years from now or not, he is committed to improve his practice in the meantime, for he believed that too many teachers already "water[ed]

down the curriculum.” Instead, Carlos said he hoped to be a teacher like Ms. Smith who did not lower expectations because a student is different.

As a student, Carlos said he originally assumed he was like *all* his peers because he saw a few of them at his Catholic church and because the majority of them also had Spanish last names like he did. He said, “I can’t tell you I saw one instance where I saw one of my classmates being harassed or bullied by others, so I guess that is why I assumed that we are all so similar.” However, he eventually realized he was more different than similar to his peers. In high school, Carlos identified himself as a mature, Catholic, low socio-economic status immigrant. In addition to this, he also identified himself as an English language learner who was raised in a female single-parent household. Yet, he did not discuss with any of his teachers his differences or any of his concerns with how his peer reacted to his differences because Carlos feared his teachers would feel pity for him and feared his peers would further alienate him. He said, “I really never discussed those things with someone else. And also I didn’t want to discuss those things with anyone. Part of it was I didn’t want people to know how poor I am.”

Carlos maintained that because he was conscious of the unintended consequences that could occur if his teachers knew about his differences, he said he was sure not to confide too much in Ms. Smith or any of his teachers. According to Carlos, the only teachers he did confide in were those teachers who were not his own, like the extra-curricular activities sponsors. Carlos suspected that if Ms. Smith knew about him, she probably had obtained the information from an open-house meeting or some type of parent conference. He said,

But if she knew about my differences, she never made it a big deal, which also mattered. I mean she didn't differentiate her instruction because of my immigrant status or because my family situation. She never lowered her expectations. That is what I appreciated. She always had high expectations of me, and that has made me successful.

As a teacher now, Carlos believed that Ms. Smith and teachers in general did exhibit an awareness of students' lives inside and outside of the classroom:

I think now as a teacher you find out snippets of information about students that a lot of others do not know. So you are watching out for this and that because you do hear that one kid wanted to stick a knife in his chest, that student over there might be pregnant, or that this student is this. So it's a lot of information. Like, "okay here comes second period. This is what information I have to know and be watching out for." I now wonder how much information Ms. Smith knew about each students and how much surveillance she needed to do so that all everything was under control and avoid catastrophes.

Regardless of how much Ms. Smith knew about Carlos, he believed Ms. Smith did include him in the classroom based on his level of intelligence and maturity only. He did not feel included based on his immigrant status. And while he felt included at some level, he felt others were excluded:

Well she definitely included me with her seating arrangement. I could remember one thing that I thought was weird back in the day. She would have the top ten students in the front of the classroom. But then the lowest kids were in the back. I mean I was one of the top kids, so I was always in the front. It was a status

symbol to sit in the front, so I certainly felt included by the teacher, but I also found it odd that the students who needed the most help, were in the back.

Carlos explained that even though the inclusive space was small (a table), it was a fluid area where students from the back of the room did move to the front table and students who had traditionally sat at the table moved to the back. He said,

It also could have been a motivator because I mean some type of public embarrassment sometimes helps, and definitely some of the kids in the back did move into the front table by the third six weeks. The space was very fluid in that sense. I was not locked in to that seat. But I had to work hard. In a way it was something you had to achieve or work for. It gave you something to prove wrong. I don't understand the motivation for her methodology. I don't believe her mode was ill intended.

While Carlos did not understand the motives for Ms. Smith's strategy as a student, he tried to make sense of it from the point of view of a teacher:

Now that I am a teacher, we talk about having the lower performing students in the front so that they will be on task and learn, but then as a teacher, one might say, "well these kids don't care. Let me pay attention to the kids who do want to learn."

He also suggested that perhaps the motive for the table was to prevent bullying: "It could be that she knew that we smart students are bullied and harassed for answers, for help on project, and that she could protect us because we were closer to her."

Regardless of the motive, Carlos noticed that Ms. Smith was responsive to students who identified as gay and to students who identified as English language learners. Carlos said,

She was not a teacher who was like you have to always speak English here. She was also a teacher who did let us speak in Spanish, and she spoke Spanish to us in case we needed an explanation. That was a mode of inclusion. That definitely helped kids who were ELL or ESL and the fact that she was open minded to those things helped.

Similarly, Carlos remembered the emotional support Ms. Smith gave to one particular gay female student. He said that this student was always looking for Ms. Smith.

According to Carlos, this student confided a lot in Ms. Smith. He saw this student many times sitting by Ms. Smith's desk discussing her concerns.

At the time, Carlos did not think anything of Ms. Smith's approach with these students or with himself. However, during our conversation-interview, he realized that it was possible that Ms. Smith, like his peers, knew how he was different after all. He said,

A lot of my classmates would tell me that before they met me they hated me for [over-achieving]. Not that they were jealous. They were more like, "why are you doing that." Some students would have outbursts in class and tell me, "Stop being such an over-achiever, stop being so smart, you make the rest of us look bad." I was just being me. Ms. Smith definitely protected me from those outbursts that occurred. I had a friend, Mike, who was always trying to make me normal because I was so smart. Ms. Smith definitely stopped those fires before they became forest fires. These outbursts happened over many years and he would tell

me stop being so smart, be a teenager, live a normal life. So Ms. Smith definitely addressed the other students' behavior and that definitely helped me be more safe and secure in the classroom. I think if we had not had this conversation, I would not have remembered. Especially because I try to bracket those things I choose not to remember.

**Interview with Anna, a former student.** Anna (pseudonym) and I made arrangements to talk via a video conference call using a web-based program (SKYPE), because we are in different states. Prior to our meeting, I sent Anna a consent form and communicated with her about the study via email. She returned the consent form, and we made arrangements to meet. We met approximately for an-hour-and-a-half despite unforeseen technological issues. I learned much about Anna and her experience in Ms. Smith's class during our conversation.

Anna stated she was born in Rio Vista; however, she lived and attended school in the neighboring Mexican city, Los Cañaverales, from Pre-K to ninth grade. At the age of fifteen, Anna moved to Rio Vista to live with an aunt while her family two parents and a younger brother remained in Los Cañaverales.

When Anna arrived in Rio Vista, she claimed she had high grades and knew English, yet Rio Vista ISD officials requested that she repeat the ninth grade. Despite this setback, Anna looked forward to a new school and a new experience, especially because she was confident, responsible, and because she said her parents instilled in her a study ethic. Years later, she was named the class valedictorian, and today she is a student in an Ivy League university located in the northeastern part of the U.S. where she is majoring in aerospace engineering. Almost ten years after being a student in Ms. Smith's

science class, Anna said she remembered vividly her experience there, especially because it played a major factor in her choice of career and influenced her view of learning.

Anna identified herself as a Hispanic woman studying in a science field that is male dominated. Anna said that she did not feel she had an excellent grasp of the English language and that she felt insecure and excluded from the university community.

Similarly, Anna admitted that she felt like a “foreign student” ten years ago too in Ms. Smith’s class because of her high academic achievement. She was the only girl in the class who was able to sit at a table that Ms. Smith reserved for the academically top five percent of her biology students. When Anna reflected upon this moment in time she said,

The year I took Ms. Smith was my first year full time in Texas. Legally, I was not an immigrant, but psychologically at that time, yes. It was my first year in that town. It was my first year in that school. It was my first year as a teenager too.

While Anna coped with the pressure of not living with her family, not finding the school or the students to be like the ones in Los Cañaverales, Mexico, Anna said she experienced a temporary culture shock. Yet, in the midst of this situation, she said that she was at least comfortable that she had a teacher like Ms. Smith who provided a similar context like that of schools in Los Cañaverales, Mexico.

According to Anna, Ms. Smith used a grade-based seating arrangement as a strategy to create a competitive environment that motivated students to study more and pay closer attention. She said,

I think teachers really need to explain the expectations so that students are not second guessing what it is they are supposed to do. In the case of Ms. Smith, she

had a very structured classroom. And since I had been in Mexico for nine years where they have very strict classrooms, [I felt I fit]. My parents were worried about me going to a school where the students were not going to apply themselves as much. So I came from a classroom that had a lot of rules and structures. I felt Ms. Smith's class did match that style. Back then we used to have the top five or the top ten percent table and it was competitive to be there. She assigned projects and would tell you the expectations. Biology, by nature, is very difficult and there is a lot of material, so in that sense, that fit me. Her structure and style did fit with me and met my learning style. She also asked for more than traditional public school teachers do from students.

Anna felt Ms. Smith's expectations were high and the expectations Ms. Smith had of her and of the other students certainly helped students stay focused on learning. It kept students occupied with work, too. She said, "[Ms. Smith] was very strict and wanted for everyone to follow the rules." Furthermore, Anna believed that perhaps because of Ms. Smith's high expectations and competitive context, one of the effects of Ms. Smith's high expectations was that students did not have the time to bother or bully other students. Anna perception of Ms. Smith's rationale for having high expectation was important to Anna, considering she had been bullied in elementary school and did not want to experience that again.

Nonetheless, despite the structured environment and high expectations of Ms. Smith's classroom, Anna attributed some of her success as a student to her own overall intrinsic motivation that was nurtured as early on by her parents and especially by her teachers in Mexico. She described the middle school she attended in Los Cañaverales,



Mexico as one that was run like a strict Catholic school, which had high standards. Anna believed she was prepared for any academic challenges Rio Vista schools were sure to provide when she arrived. As such, she felt that a space in Ms. Smith's class was not necessarily made for her in particular. Instead, she maintained,

In the context of that class, I was a nerd. So the space was already made for me.

I was able to thrive in that environment that had a lot of requirements, details, and things I had to learn. With that, I did feel comfortable in the class.

While the environment of Ms. Smith's class was structured and familiar, Anna felt it was not as challenging as it could have been. Anna said,

The big problem in Rio Vista is that most teachers don't push their students, and a lot of the students are not motivated and are low achievers. [Ms. Smith's] system would work with those students. Those are the students who have never been pushed. And she offered that to them, but for me, I was already a high achieving student. I was already pushing myself. I was already interested in science.

Anna said that she felt included as an immigrant and as a female in this science class at some level, but that she felt excluded in an academic sense because "Ms. Smith did not teach beyond the standardized curriculum." Anna said she was already motivated and interested in higher levels of critical thinking, but she believed Ms. Smith limited her "creativity" and "ability to think critically" by teaching too much to a test. Anna said, "The same system that helped others thrive, hindered me." As a result, Anna disliked biology and she said she forgot about being a biologist.

Anna said she majored in another branch of science because of her experience in high school. She did not blame Ms. Smith or any of her teachers for not challenging her,

for she understood the barriers: “Unfortunately because of all the standardized test and the multiple tests, teacher end up teaching to the test and limit students creativity. Instead of having my creativity nourished, it was robbed because it was such a structured environment.” Anna suggested that to improve schools and to further allow teachers to make spaces for students who are different, radical change needed to occur. She said,

We need to get rid of standardized testing and find some other measures. I do understand why the government has to measure the performance. Millions of dollars are being spent. There is a quote I can’t remember, I think it’s by Einstein. “Everybody is smart, but if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.” Or something like that. You cannot measure talent and skill or intelligence with a multiple choice test.

Someone who excels in math might not do so good in literature. Just because a student fails a test, it doesn’t mean he or she is stupid.

### **Observations**

In addition to conducting interviews and collecting documents, I made several observations of the participating teacher in her classroom and in her home, two natural environments for the teacher. Over the course of three months, I made seven observations of approximately three to four hours each. Additionally, I made observations in other relevant contexts when the participant was not present. The observations were relevant to the study in that they helped me establish credibility and dependability. For example, if I had only conducted interviews, I could have potentially recorded only espoused values. However, the observations I conducted helped me add another perspective. Therefore, the observations I conducted helped me generate a

thicker description of the data, informing my questions with different sources. While I purposefully sought opportunities to hangout and observe the participating teacher other opportunities became available through serendipity. Each observation varied in length. When I conducted observations, I used a pen and a note pad to write down what I saw and heard. On a few occasions, if I had my camera available, I took some photographs of the setting to assist in my later recall of what I saw. What follows is a narrative description of my observations.

**Observation one.** The first observation I made of her was in the classroom. This took place before the first day of school. I wanted to see Ms. Smith's classroom, especially because it was inside a new building. Also, I was not sure if Ms. Smith needed extra help preparing for the first day of school. I thought I could be of some assistance. When I arrived, I found her classroom set up and ready. Other than for a couple of books that needed to be put back on a shelf and a bulletin board that need to be covered, Ms. Smith was done. At first, this did not make sense because when I walked down the hall to find Ms. Smith's classroom, I noticed that other teachers in the same hall were beginning to set up. I realized thereafter that Ms. Smith had come on her own time during the summer to organize the new room and had almost completed the process of moving into the new classroom.

To help her complete the set up of the classroom, I grabbed a roll of green paper, and I began to measure it in order to prepare the bulletin board. As I worked, I noticed a few teachers who came by and said hello to Ms. Smith. I made eye contact with a few of them and smiled. Some smiled back and others did not. I did not want to attract attention to myself, so I stayed quiet. By doing so, I noticed many of the teachers who came in to

say hello to Ms. Smith also came in to see how Ms. Smith organized her room. Many teachers stood at the threshold of the door with their hands on their hips and looked across the room. Some complimented Ms. Smith and went along their way and others came inside to ask a question or borrow something. Ms. Smith introduced me to a few of these teachers. She introduced me in the same manner every time: "This is Mr. Aguilar who is working on his doctorate in education." Ms. Smith's colleagues usually changed their tone of voice and seemed more interested in carrying conversation with me after I was introduced. Ms. Smith had a smile on her face when she introduced me. I eventually finished covering the bulletin board and left the classroom.

**Observation two.** The next observation I made was in the home of Ms. Smith's parents, and it was conducted by chance, for I did not intend to be present there for the study. When I made this observation I already had interviewed the participant, so I knew some of the contextual factors. Ms. Smith was not present at the time, but the observation I made of the setting revealed data pertinent to the study. During the course of the study, Ms. Smith asked me if I could collect plastic bottles at my home and at my work place in order to help her and her students contribute to a recycling challenge. I agreed. Once I filled a bag at my home and office, I took it over to Ms. Smith's classroom when I visited to do observations.

One day, Ms. Smith called me to see if I could stop by her parent's home to pick up a few more bags of bottles since it was on my way to her classroom. When I arrived at the home of Ms. Smith's parents, her mother, whom I already had met, greeted me. She escorted me to the back of the house to retrieve the large bags of bottles. There in the back yard of the home I saw about fifty large trash bags filled with bottles sitting

along the perimeter of the yard and up against a wooden fence. I could not believe my eyes. I was scared by the sight of all the bags because I did not know if Ms. Smith's mother thought I was going to take them all. I certainly did not have the space in my vehicle for them all. In the midst of my panic, she directed me to a smaller pile of bags she had set aside for me. I asked her who had collected the bottles. She explained that the entire family, friends of the family, and neighbors of the family collected bottles to the help Bravo High School. Enthusiastically, Ms. Smith's mother said, "She gets all excited about these things and as a result, she gets us all excited about these projects too. Now, she has us all going everywhere collecting bottles." Ms. Smith's father then came out to shake my hand. He said, "I don't want to say thank you once. I want to say *gracias mil veces*" (thank you one thousand times). I smiled, and I placed the last bag in the vehicle and left.

**Observation three.** Later that same day, I arrived at Bravo High School and unloaded the bottles in Ms. Smith's class. I came inside and waited for the next group of students to walk in. When the students arrived, they sat down and copied the objective automatically. After five minutes into the class, Ms. Smith asked the students to take out a sheet of paper in order to give them a quiz over the notes they copied from the previous day. As students prepared to take the quiz, one student asked about retesting. Ms. Smith explained the guidelines regarding retesting, and made it clear that she administered retests after school only. She then proceeded to read a question for a quiz. Some students looked around the room for any clues on the wall or white board that could help them answer the question. Other students never looked up and waited patiently for the next question. Ms. Smith paced back and forward along the front of the room until she

read the fifth and last question. As students walked up to Ms. Smith's desk to turn in their individual quiz, some of the students signed up for tutorial on a separate sign-up sheet that was on Ms. Smith's desk. One student signed her name and whispered to Ms. Smith that she felt foolish for dreaming about being a nurse and not knowing any of the answers on the quiz. Ms. Smith told the student in a very low voice that she could still accomplish her goal so long as she studied harder. Ms. Smith said, "You are already making progress towards your goal by signing up for afterschool tutorial."

Ms. Smith then turned to address the entire class and reminded students that the school wide benchmark test administration for the end-of-course exam would begin the following week. Ms. Smith explained the importance of the notes she would be presenting that afternoon and then lectured for twenty minutes. Students moved their desks closer to a screen where the notes were projected onto. When the bell rang, students exited the room and a counselor came in. The counselor asked Ms. Smith for advice regarding an issue. Ms. Smith read a document that the counselor handed her. Ms. Smith asked the counselor to meet with her on the weekend regarding the matter. The counselor left the room and a new group of students entered the classroom. Ms. Smith prompted the students to prepare to take a quiz too. The same procedures that were carried out in the previous class were also followed in this next class too. Ms. Smith lectured for about twenty minutes after she informed the students that the district benchmark was to be administered the following week. Students also took notes.

When the bell rang to indicate the end of this class period, a teaching assistant came into the room. The teaching assistant appeared frustrated. She approached Ms. Smith and explained that a Spanish teacher and the students in a Spanish class built an

altar in the main lobby of the school in light of *Dia de los muertos* (Day of the dead). According to the teaching assistant, the altar was close in appearance to that of a shrine made in honor of the *Santa Muerte* (Saint Death), a deity among certain Mexican belief systems. The teaching assistant said she had expressed her concern about the inappropriate nature of the altar with the school principal who justified it by saying it was part of the curriculum for Spanish. The teaching assistant did not accept that another teacher was allowed to build an altar in what was perceived to be in honor of Saint Death. The teaching assistant was especially frustrated because she was not allowed to have a Christian prayer group for students.

Ms. Smith took notes and assured the colleague that she would ask the school principal about it, especially if the activity promoted a particular belief system. Ms. Smith explained to the teaching assistant that while she explored the issue, the teaching assistant needed to keep in mind that any religious activities on campus needed to be student-led, not teacher-led. The teaching assistant thanked Ms. Smith for agreeing to look into her concern. Before the teaching assistant left the room, Ms. Smith said, “Oh afterschool, I brought you some more of those things from church so you can use.” After this encounter, I also excused myself. As I made my way out, I came across the altar, which had food offerings and candy skulls. The altar took up a significant portion of the lobby near the front office. I saw three adults and what appeared to be a class working around the altar.

**Observation four.** Before the second interview, I once again came across the opportunity to conduct an observation by luck. I entered a district administration building one day to locate the appropriate office where I needed to drop off some paper

work. When I walked into the lobby, I noticed five easels with large black and white photographs of students during the 1970's. As I followed the trail of photos, I came across a room that was a little museum about the district's history. Inside, there were more pictures and artifacts from decommissioned schools and memorabilia from each of the existing schools. I continued to walk around inside the room, and I encountered a woman who was putting tape on a poster. I said hello and began to inquire about the museum and the poster she was preparing to post. The employee explained that the district had recently purchased the services of a company that monitored a website where students could report bullying anonymously. Perhaps if I had not stopped to appreciate the museum of district history, I would not have known that Rio Vista ISD was making an effort to address bullying. I asked the employees where I could get more information about the program, and she directed me to another employee in the counseling department who explained that only school administrators would receive training on the program, not teachers. According to the counseling department employee who spoke with me, the new campaign to end bullying within the district was the first of its kind. All the schools in the district needed to post notices to inform students of the available services to report bullying. These notices had a phone number one could call or text and a website one could access to report bullying. The posters came with removable post-card size instructions that students could peel off and take with them.

**Observation five.** After the second interview, I stayed behind to observe some of the dynamics between other groups of students and Ms. Smith. I had previously conducted observation during the afternoon. The groups of students I observed this time were from the morning classes. As students entered the room, they found their seats and



copied the objective on the board. Ms. Smith took attendance and informed the students that the end of the grading period was near and that it would be a day to work independently on assignments that one had not been turned in or needed to be completed. When students began to work, Ms. Smith walked around the room to check for understanding. I noticed that the class was overcrowded. It had thirty-five students. Students who did not sit in a desk sat in the back of the room near a stationary lab table. Students asked a lot of questions and raised their hand from their desk. Other students came up to Ms. Smith's desk when she was sitting there. When students came up to ask questions, I saw that Ms. Smith also handed them a progress report. She managed to give everyone a progress report either when they came up to her desk or when she walked by the each student's desk.

When Ms. Smith was not assisting students with an assignment, she helped students sign up for a weekend community service project activity. With a few minutes before the bell, Ms. Smith asked all the students if anyone wanted to purchase a t-shirt with the recycling project logo on it. She reminded students that the proceeds would be used to support future recycling efforts. Four students formed a line to purchase one and others made a note in their agendas to bring money to buy one. Lastly, she asked students to raise their hand if they had bought empty plastic bottles. She recorded the names of those students who had raised their hand.

Aside from paying close attention to the dynamics between the teacher and the students that day, I also noticed the physical set up and the aesthetics of the classroom. The classroom was organized even though there were bags filled with bottles everywhere. The students sat in six rows. The teacher's desk was at the front and center

of the classroom. Her desk was not movable since it was a lab table with a sink. I saw jars of all sizes with specimens in them around the room, microscopes secured away in a glass cabinet, and walls that were covered with anatomy posters, students' work, and other content related materials such as diagrams and word walls. I also noticed there were many personal items in the classroom like stuffed animals, pictures of family members and pictures of students, and letters from students. There was personal furniture such as a lamp, a sofa, and a small patio set in the back of the room.

**Observation six.** When I arrived at Ms. Smith's classroom on a different occasion to conduct another observation, it was her conference period. When I walked in to the classroom, Ms. Smith was sweeping the floor. Again, I began to help the participant clean up in any way I could. Shortly thereafter, the bell rang, and the next group of students from the afternoon block arrived. Again, I noticed there were more students in the class than there were desks. I looked around the room and noticed lots of writing on the white board. After students settled in and Ms. Smith took attendance, she lectured for approximately twenty minutes using a power point presentation. Instead of passively observing, I actively listened to the lecture to see if I could learn what the students were asked to learn. The visual aids were colorful and legible, but I felt the material was complex. I wrote down many questions. After Ms. Smith completed the lecture, she reminded students to study their notes again before they were dismissed.

**Observation seven.** A few days after the third interview, I observed some of the interactions between Ms. Smith and her students when I once again sat in the back of the classroom for about three to four hours. The group I observed this time was in the morning. As students came in the door, I noticed that each one wasted no time in taking

out a spiral to copy the objective. When Ms. Smith was done taking attendance, she asked the students to prepare to take notes. She prompted the students to direct their attention to the side where she had set up a projector. For twenty-five minutes, Ms. Smith lectured using diagrams and charts of a plant cell. The students asked questions and Ms. Smith provided an additional explanation two times. During the lesson, one student did not understand the meaning of a term. Ms. Smith asked the student if he could think of a Spanish word that sounded like the word he did not understand. When the student recited a word in Spanish, Ms. Smith explained how the Spanish word the student mentioned was a cognate of the English term and should be considered when thinking about the definition of the term in question. Before the bell rang, Ms. Smith reminded students as she always has to take the notes home and to study them, especially because the notes were going to help students pass the end-of-course exam. She also reminded students of her availability afterschool for tutorial. Last, she asked the students to bring in a leaf of lettuce for lab assignment they would be conducting over the next two days.

When the bell rang, it was time for Ms. Smith to take her lunch. However, a gentleman walked in to the classroom after the last student left. He was a member of the local professional organization that Ms. Smith was part of, too. As soon as he walked in, they sat in the back of the room for about thirty minutes. Since Ms. Smith is the vice president for the local chapter, she spoke to the gentleman regarding professional issues.

The gestalt I captured in each observation narrative above was intended to make the reader feel as if they were present in the setting. Furthermore, conducting observations provided me with an additional data source to answer my research

questions. After conducting seven observations in various settings and of various lengths, I understood better some of the teacher's work.

### **Collection of Artifacts**

Another source of data I reviewed were documents I collected during fieldwork. These tangible items were collected for the purpose of drawing out the life stories around them (Glesne, 2011). I originally requested to have access to the participant's professional portfolio early on in the study, but Ms. Smith did not have it organized. In an effort to assist with that endeavor, I volunteered to organize the portfolio for Ms. Smith. While doing so I was able to carefully examine each item in the portfolio. The portfolio was a three-ring binder that contained about forty documents, each within its own sheet protector.

The first category of items I came across was the teacher's electronic communications with colleagues regarding student success. In the portfolio, I found several email exchanges between Ms. Smith and a special education teacher. For example, this exchange took place after a student was taken out of Ms. Smith's class unannounced because he was failing. According to the special education teacher who moved the student, Ms. Smith did not accommodate the student's learning needs, and this caused the student to fail.

Ms. Smith wrote an email to the special education department chairperson in response to this move and requested an explanation, especially because Ms. Smith felt not only insulted since the allegations were incorrect, but also because she was never notified about the student's removal. In another email, Ms. Smith explained to the teacher who made an accusation against her that she never received any notification that the

student was a special education student. In the same email, Ms. Smith explained that regardless of whose fault it was, she hoped a misunderstanding of this sort would not occur again. In the same email she wrote, “He was a pleasure to have and I will miss him in my inclusion class period three.” Other emails I came across were between her and a principal, and others were between her and a parent.

The email between the principal and Ms. Smith was about a school safety issue. Due to the fact that no security or adult presence had been available in a certain section of the school during lunch, Ms Smith asked the principal to consider her concern regarding student safety. According to Ms. Smith’s email, large crowds assembled directly outside her classroom door every day during lunch, which could make it difficult for students inside her classroom to exit in the event of an emergency. She said the crowd also blocked an emergency exit to the outside. Ms. Smith requested some visible monitoring of this area. The principal agreed in her reply. In another email exchange between Ms. Smith and the principal, Ms. Smith expressed her concern regarding excessive student absences. This email was also accompanied by a positive response from the principal. I also found emails to Ms. Smith from parents in the portfolio. For example, a parent wrote an email to Ms. Smith and expressed how thankful she was that Ms. Smith listened to her son who “felt desperate.” The parent wrote, “He sees you as a person he can open up to. Please let me know if he ever feels sad or desperate again

Another document I encountered was Ms. Smith’s individual development plan that was part of a professional appraisal report. This document indicated Ms. Smiths’ proposed effort to address student’s needs. Ms. Smith reflected about her strengths in this document and wrote, “I make sure my students learn the specific curriculum

regardless of factors in their background. I plan my lessons according to my campus and students' needs. I have high expectations of my students and I strive for continuous improvement, a positive attitude, honesty, respect, and integrity.” Ms. Smith further explained that her professional goals included becoming an instructional leader and implementing all she learned throughout her career. She also wrote that she planned to pursue her doctorate in educational leadership soon. While I reviewed these particular forms, I noticed there were some years when Ms. Smith did not receive a professional appraisal. According to other documents, Ms. Smith had waived her right to an appraisal every other year since 2008.

In the portfolio there were also a number of certificates that indicated Ms. Smith's participation in professional development and service. For example, some of the certificates reflected Ms. Smith's commitment to engaging students through community service learning projects such as beautification projects and recycling projects. Also included were photos of students, parents, other teachers, and of Ms. Smith's family. Among these pictures were a few newspaper clippings that described the efforts of Ms. Smith's students. The articles mentioned that the students had won the city-wide challenge for two years in a row. A picture of a few students with Rio Vista ISD board members was present. In addition to these documents, I reviewed a school newsletter that the school principal disseminated to all faculty members that commended the initiative that Ms. Smith and her students had begun. One interesting item I found was a certificate that read, “Angel Award.” This certificate was attached to letter and both were given to Ms. Smith by a student.

Other certificates within the portfolio documented Ms. Smith's participation in training on diversity and civil rights. Seeing these documents brought back memories of this professional development opportunity because Ms. Smith and I attended the workshop together. The training helped me learn that people are different and that respecting and embracing diversity is key to the success of an organization. The majority of certificates inside the portfolio documented Ms. Smith's professional development efforts to improve her delivery of science content. Many of these conferences, out of the state and out of the city, she attends on her personal time.

In addition to reviewing documents in the portfolio, I also took notice of other items on the wall of Ms. Smith's classroom. For example, Ms. Smith had a plaque given to her in honor of her commitment to the students of Rio Vista ISD. The grantor of the award was a private non-profit organization within the community. Other significant artifacts in the classroom included a picture of Ms. Smith and other Bravo High School students with a Texas Senator and a Texas State Representative inside the Capitol building, a plaque signed by Governor Rick Perry that was dedicated to Ms. Smith for her commitment and service to Bravo High School, and a bulletin board with notes, greeting cards, and newspaper clips. The documents posted on the bulletin board included letters of apology written to Ms. Smith from students who cheated on class assignments while others were short notes written by students in appreciation of Ms. Smith's teaching.

In this section, I captured the gestalt from each interview, each observation, and each document I collected and analyzed in order to provide description. Each narrative serves as a gestalt because I wrote each one with the intention of describing all the data, even the data that was not pertinent to answering my immediate question. The analysis

of the data were guided by the following questions: What does an inclusive classroom look like? and How does one teacher create inclusive spaces? This next section provides my analysis of the data in the form of themes.

### **Findings: Themes**

I found one overarching theme and three subthemes in the data. Support for the overarching theme and the three subthemes was present in the interviews I conducted with Ms. Smith and in the interviews with former students. My observation notes and document analysis also exhibited support for these themes. The overarching theme is *towards inclusive environments*. I identified three subthemes: *authentic care versus aesthetic care*, *teacher beliefs*, and *leadership from the classroom*. A detailed explanation of each theme follows.

**Towards inclusive environments.** The overarching theme I found within the data was that Ms. Smith's work represents a move towards, rather than an arrival at, an inclusive environment. Although there is ample evidence that Ms. Smith's classroom represents a more inclusive environment than is often found in schools, I conceptualized Ms. Smith's concerted and well-intentioned effort as a work in progress. I have identified how Ms. Smith's work moves toward an inclusive environment.

Born and raised in Rio Vista, Ms. Smith said she understood some of the norms, discourses, and beliefs prevalent in south Texas and particularly Rio Vista to be problematic for individuals who identified with particular differences. Ms. Smith described south Texas to help me better understand the implications the setting has on her work and on her perception of differences. She said, "Here, it is about whatever the Man says, but that is not me. My world is fifty-fifty." Ms. Smith continued, "My husband



respects that I am a very independent woman and he is the same way. I don't depend on him and he knows that. But I don't believe in supporting no man's butt." She suggested that because south Texas was close to the border or because it is a "Mexican thing," certain hegemonic norms were followed that marginalized particular individuals, especially women. For example, she suggested these norms included the expectation of women to be submissive to men. To further illustrate the male dominance in Rio Vista, Ms. Smith suggested men who identify with difference in sexual orientation also feel ostracized. For example, she mentioned that a gay colleague confessed to her that he was very concerned with the fact that he could not be open about his sexuality at Bravo High School for fear of rejection. Trapped by his fear, the colleague was quiet about his difference in sexual orientation. Ms. Smith felt that individuals who found Rio Vista norms oppressive either acquiesced to the norm or challenged the norm.

In the case of Ms. Smith, she said she views herself as a role model so that others can learn from the experience. According to Ms. Smith, the understanding of the norm is not only for women to be submissive, but silent, too. In order to challenge this norm, Ms. Smith sees the need to speak up and challenge male authority. Ms. Smith believes that her role as a vocal community member and educator is contested by other educators and community members who adhere to the norms. She suggested that perhaps because she is not silent others see her as a woman to avoid and have attacked her character:

I don't know if the culture is part of the intimidation. I think they feel I know too much and I have friends in high places. There are rumors, don't mess her, don't do this with her. Some people say that there is a saying, 'don't mess with Smith.'

However, she felt that the attitude other teachers and member of the community had motivated her speak up even more. Ms. Smith also said that people had assumptions about her ethnicity because she was vocal woman.

Ms. Smith reported that friends, students, and co-workers name and categorize her through the use of labels such as *Anglo* or *la güera*, to pin down her identity. In the following account, Ms. Smith explained how she negotiates her identity:

I don't consider myself a Hispanic Mexican-American, so they don't have a box for me. There is no in between, it's all black and white. I'd rather not fill out any forms. Now, they think I am Irish because of my last name.

Ms. Smith further explained her fluid identity by stating:

Some of the kids ask me, "Do you know Spanish?," and I say, "Of course. My mother is Mexican. I even support Dieciseis de Septiembre" (16<sup>th</sup> of September). I tell them that my dad is Irish, from Lithuania. All my friends have always called me "la güera" (the fair one) because I am a little lighter. I guess because I haven't spoken [Spanish] in front of the kids [this year], they assume I don't know Spanish. They think I am Anglo.

Ms. Smith's use of terms such as Irish, güera, Anglo, Hispanic, and Mexican-American, suggest that she embodies some aspect of intersectionality. As such, Ms. Smith uses the multiple identities to further carry out her work to further challenge the norms of Rio Vista.

In addition to challenging norms because she possesses a mixed identity Ms. Smith uses herself as an example to explain to students her perspective on how

individuals do come with multiple identities. To do so, she explained to her students her refusal to change her last name:

I tell the kids the history behind my name. The kids ask if I am married. They are always very supportive of the fact that I have kept my last [maiden] name.

It's a Mexican thing to change the name. Everyone does it. I was not going to do it."

She said that students learned the fluidity of her ethnic identity and some even applauded her initiative to go against convention by keeping her maiden name. While Ms. Smith's attempt to explain how she resisted normativity from influencing how she lived her own life as woman in a patriarchal context had some effect on a few students because some applauded her initiative, it was not a magical strategy. Telling students about how she personally challenged the norms by not changing her last name was part of the process to show the students how she was an example of one having multiple differences. Perhaps Ms. Smith thought that by revealing her approach of challenging the norm would influence students to emulate her actions. In this way, it was an inclusive attempt to help students exhibit a critical consciousness to challenge societal norms. However, her approach was two-fold in that it was also exclusionary because the norm she challenged (keeping maiden name) was a tradition that many of the students' Mexican mothers and even some of the Mexican students who are married had followed. Ms. Smith stated that her rationale for not changing her last name was that, "It is a Mexican thing to change the name. Everyone does it. I was not going to do it." While Ms. Smith did not articulate to students (only to me) her motivation for not changing her last name, her belief still may have inadvertently excluded students who did identify with

the norm. As such, this is an example of how Ms. Smith moved towards inclusive environment.

Another way how Ms. Smith's work moved towards an inclusive environment without fully realizing inclusivity was by purposefully including particular students while also inadvertently excluding other students. Students reported that they were excluded not because of race, immigration status, or sexual orientation, but because they were smart.

For example, Anna said she felt comfortable in Ms. Smith's class as an immigrant and as a female, but at the same time she felt excluded in an academic sense because Ms. Smith did not teach beyond the standardized curriculum. Anna said, "Unfortunately, because of all the standardized test and the multiple tests, teachers end up teaching to the test and limit students creativity. Instead of having my creativity nourished, it was robbed because it was such a structured environment." Anna said she was already motivated and interested, yet she felt Ms. Smith limited her creativity and ability to think critically by not moving beyond a state test. Anna admitted that other strategies Ms. Smith used certainly helped others, but it did not help her. Anna said, "The same system that helped others thrive, hindered me."

Similarly, Carlos, an English language learner and immigrant, also felt included and excluded as a high school student in Ms. Smith's class. While Carlos assumed every one of his peers was an immigrant who had similar roots like he did, his peers still excluded him for being too smart.

A lot of my classmates would tell me that before they met me they hated me because for those reasons. Not that they were jealous. They were more like,

“why are you doing that.” Some students would have outbursts in class and tell me, “Stop being such an over-achiever... stop being so smart... you make the rest of us look bad.” I was just being me.

Despite the fact that Carlos was similar to his peers on some level, his other difference qualified him as an outsider. As a result of not being similar to his peers, his peers did not include him in social functions:

I [have a lot of differences], but I don't think those count as differences because in the classroom and in the school, those were all similarities. A lot of us had parents who were first generation immigrants. A lot of us lived in Mexico. Most of us were Catholics. In Ms. Smith's, I was at a higher level of learning than my peers were. It was even like that in middle school. I never really made too many friends or connection with my peers because I was too smart. They knew it, but it threw people off. I never made connections with boys or girls. When I did get to high school, I was a respected figure. In the classroom, it was a different environment. Same thing for Anna. We were the respected figures of the class. It was a different learning environment. But in that same sense, we were respected but we were also kept aloof. The kids kept far away from us. They did not include us in the regular social life.

Anna's and Carlos' individual experience suggests that each resisted the Mexican-American internalized oppression that suggests Mexican's are not smart (Padilla, 2004; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Moreover, Stanton-Salazar (2001) suggested that teachers, counselors, community leaders, and any other source of social capital around students play a crucial role in the inclusion of students. However, for Anna and Carols,

Ms. Smith excluded them by not accommodating those students who felt capable of moving beyond the standardized curriculum. As such, students did not internalize Ms. Smith's attempt to use herself as an example who challenged norms. Therefore, Ms. Smith's work suggests she moved towards creating an inclusive environment.

Another way Ms. Smith moved towards an inclusive environment was by using practical strategies she believed worked. She incorporated the use of a class-wide recycling project to motivate and include students. For the second consecutive year in a row, Ms. Smith participated in a city-wide recycling challenge. This event was hosted by the City of Rio Vista and was completely voluntary. Ms. Smith said that this serves as an opportunity to connect class concepts, to include students, and to instill a service ethic in students. The challenge was for the teacher to work with students in order to collect the most plastic bottles. While this challenge is open to any educator, Ms. Smith embraced the cause. As such, Ms. Smith's use of this activity as a strategy to motivate students made a significant impact on some students' sense of belonging. For example, as I conducted observations one day, I witnessed a student come into Ms. Smith's room to give her a certificate and letter he made for her. Ms. Smith was surprised and did not know if there was a special occasion for the certificate of appreciation. The student said there was no special occasion. He simply wanted to tell Ms. Smith how he felt about her work. The effect of the recycling project on this students' self esteem can be best understood by the note he wrote and gave to Ms. Smith:

The name of the angel that has always been there for me is Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith is not only a great teacher but also a great person, she thought us to be better persons not only with each other but, with the world. She taught [*sic*] us that

recycling was a good thing and when you do it with friends it can be fun. Before I knew Ms. Smith I didn't care about my classes. But thanks to Ms. Smith I started to realize that school was important for my future. Before I had Ms. Smith's class I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grow up. But when I saw Ms. Smith talking with such passion about biology and more specifically, when she talked about the human body. That's when I realize I wanted to be a doctor. So thanks Ms. Smith for teaching me not only [*sic*] about biology but about the important things in life. You're a true guardian angel.

According to Ms. Smith, the student who wrote this letter was an English language learner who was very smart, but who did not participate as much. Ms. Smith explained that the student previously misbehaved a lot in class because he had difficulty understanding a lesson in English. Ms. Smith, who was well aware of this student's difference, used the recycling community service project to motivate him to participate so he felt competent to handle pre-advanced placement course work in English. Ms. Smith said that the effect, if any, of the recycling team on this student and any others had been that it served as a "sense of belonging, big time."

Another strategy Ms. Smith enacted in her classroom in order to facilitate an inclusive space was to conduct research to better inform herself. This research was a proactive inquiry process Ms. Smith conducted to better meet students' needs. Ms. Smith asked students general questions about themselves at the beginning of the year. As a case in point, Gilbert, a former student, felt the effects of Ms. Smith's curiosity and said he told Ms. Smith he was gay because she was not like other teachers who he could tell

condemned gay students. Similarly, Carlos said that if Ms. Smith knew anything about him, “she did not make a big deal about it.”

As Ms. Smith became more knowledgeable about students, she said she tailored her instruction. Ms. Smith did not ask students specifically to identify their difference. Rather, students volunteered to share information with Ms. Smith. She believed students felt comfortable sharing information with her because she told them to think of her as “more than a teacher, but as a friend, counselor, advisor, or parent.”

While Ms. Smith would like to know everything about her students to help them, Ms. Smith understood it was probably not best for the district to collect information about students’ differences because she believed students should not have the burden of revealing themselves. She said, “Not too many teachers are open-minded. They live in a box that is black and white, so that may be an obstacle” to inclusion.

Another way how Ms. Smith moved towards an inclusive environment for all students was through a competitive seating arrangement. This seating arrangement provided students the opportunity to compete academically for the most prestigious seats in the classroom (seats Ms. Smith reserved students with the highest grade point averages). As such, this strategy helped Ms. Smith maintain academic rigor so that Bravo High School students could compete in the outside world too. She said, “I want to show, hey do you think our kids are bad? Well guess what. They are doing something positive in the community. They are making an impact.” While Ms. Smith felt the seating arrangement was a tool to motivate students to study harder, two students who participated in this study found that it excluded students who were not too motivated.



For example, Carlos, who identified himself as an immigrant, provided some critique of this strategy. Carlos said that he felt included by this strategy at some level, but he sensed other students felt alienated. He suggested that his peers who were not as smart should have had the chance to sit in the front of the class. He recommended that high achievers did not need the extra reinforcement. According to Carlos, the strategy included those who were intellectually superior at the expense of those who were not. He said,

It was a status symbol to sit in the front, so I certainly felt included by the teacher, but I also found it odd that the students who needed the most help, were in the back. Now that I am a teacher, we talk about having the lower performing students in the front so that they will be on task and learn.

Hence, this particular strategy presented a disadvantage which contributed in not developing a totally inclusive environment.

*Aesthetic care versus authentic care.* The first subtheme I found within the context of the overarching theme, towards inclusive environments, was that of aesthetic care versus authentic care. This also suggests how Ms. Smith was moving towards an inclusive environment, as opposed to having achieved one. The challenge to care in schools about students individually is illustrated by the conceptualization of two conflicting forces at play within school, authentic care versus aesthetic care (Valenzuela, 1999). Aesthetic care is a kind of care for an individual based on adherence to procedural aspects of organizations such as structures, norms, rules, and duty; therefore, one who demonstrates aesthetic care does so with a universal, technical, and rational logic, rather than being motivated by what is good for individuals based on their individual

differences (Noddings, 2007). An overemphasis of aesthetic care can marginalize individuals who do not meet the standards, do not fit the norm, or do not follow the rules. Care of this kind is often juxtaposed with authentic care, which is care based out of love or regard for individuals as unique beings (Noddings). As such, authentic care can be best understood as a care for learning, a care for individual learning needs, and a care for students' subjective reality. While educators may display both forms of care or embrace one form of care over another, educators ought to recognize the tension between both forms of care and the implications of each kind of care as they attempt to balance the two forms.

The data revealed that Ms. Smith demonstrated both types of care for students. When I began the study, I saw numerous pieces of evidence that suggested Ms. Smith provided authentic care for students in her class. For example, during our initial interview, Ms. Smith explained that while she originally had not planned on teaching, she continued to teach because of the "heart" and the "will" to help others. Ms. Smith characterized her classroom as a space where "everyone [was] welcome, no matter what size or shape." The following story suggests how Ms. Smith enacted authentic care:

One day, Ms. Smith overheard one student tell another that he could not participate any longer in the recycling activities because his parents did not have the financial resources to provide transportation to get to the off campus activities. Ms. Smith interjected and asked if she could be of any assistance, but the student explained he did not want anyone to pick him up because he lived in a dangerous part of town. According to the student, people in his neighborhood were armed. Despite the danger, the other boy, adamant about helping his friend, offered to pick him up. Ms. Smith felt

helpless. She went home and reflected upon what she had overheard and had learned that day about the student who resigned from the recycling challenge. Upon contemplation of the forces outside of the school that affected this one student inside the school, Ms. Smith thought of a way to motivate the student to continue participating so that the student did not feel left out because of reasons beyond his control. She said,

This is a pre-advanced placement student, the number one recycling student for the school year last year. He has a good score in my class, but his background: His family doesn't speak English. No one has ever gone to school. And yet he is trying to make a difference here, to get really involved. So when I heard that, I said, "Oh my God." I asked, "Is everything going to be okay?" The other student said, "It's okay. I will go pick him up and my parents will go, so it will be okay." Then Joey said, "Well, if you pick me up then I will go." The other student lives in the other side of town and picked up Joey, and they both arrived the next day to the park to pick up bottles. I went home and started to think, "Wow. I can't believe this kid does so much and look at where he comes from." So I thought, "this kid needs a lot of praise."

Shortly after Ms. Smith learned about Joey's home situation, Ms. Smith went to class and announced to the students that she wished to nominate Joey as president of the recycling team. She hoped a leadership role would motivate him to participate despite his difficult home circumstances. Joey accepted the responsibility and, over the course of the semester, Ms. Smith said she noticed Joey exhibited much more promise than before. Ms. Smith recalled a time when she encountered Joey and another student at the park

after school one day. When Joey saw that Ms. Smith was at the park too, he cheered to indicate he was excited to see Ms. Smith:

I saw Joey and his friend at the park where they helped clean up as part of the city beautification project. I arrived there in my cap, shorts, gloves, and a bag. I knew they would be there, but we didn't make arrangements to meet. So I walked into the park and the other students saw me and said, "Wow! Look who is here." Joey couldn't see me at first because it was already dark and the lights were too bright. Joey then said, "Is that who I think it is? It is Smith? Cool! Smith, you're here!" I guess he must have thought that there is a teacher here with us after school picking up trash. I said, "Yes, I am here to support you to pick up trash." We walked the whole park. The three of us picked up three big bags. We didn't leave the park until 9:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Joey participated in many weekend activities outside of school throughout the semester and was very active within the school too. His motivation caught the attention of a Rio Vista city official who was responsible for the community-wide recycling challenge. The city official asked Joey if he wanted to wear the Rio Vista mascot outfit (a bobcat) at his school football games in order to motivate fans to place their empty bottles in recycle bins. Joey again agreed to fulfill another role. When I conducted observations during the study, I saw pictures of Joey wearing the mascot suit with his classmates. The crowd of students in the picture appeared happy, as they posed around a mountain of trash bags filled with plastic bottles.

As suggested in the examples above, Ms. Smith was aware of Joey's differences; therefore, she went home and reflected about potential ideas on how to help Joey

continue participating. Her reflective practices mirrored a social justice orientation, not just good teaching, because Ms. Smith's actions were an enactment of critical consciousness. Yet, instead of holding Joey to a standard, who may have had the resources to participate, Ms. Smith was more sensitive to Joey's needs on account of his different social economic status. Rather, Ms. Smith reflected upon the student's individual situation and enacted authentic care by instilling inclusive opportunities for him to be successful.

Ms. Smith's use of authentic care may have been influenced by her philosophy of education, which indicated her understanding of students' individual realities:

I do not subscribe to the idea that 'all children can learn.' It is not going to work. There are so many barriers that these kids have that you have to really know the kids. I [have] to consider all that a student has to go through in order to meet the student's needs. I think my philosophy is that every student's needs must be met in order for the student to learn. [So, I ask:] Are there needs being met? Am I doing whatever I can, not just in my classroom, to help students? And at the same time, how can we as a district help and as teachers help them be successful. What can I do to help this student? What is the home environment like? How can we help them?

Ms. Smith's reflective practice suggests she cared for learning, and cared for students' individual needs. For example, Ms. Smith asserted that even though teachers might say "all children can learn," she felt that mantra was empty rhetoric that allows teachers to ignore the unique assets, talents, and need students have. Ms. Smith thought

that following such standards as “all children can learn” without understanding the student differences was a detrimental idea.

Another example of Ms. Smith’s use of authentic care is illustrated in her account of when she included Carlos, an English language learner and immigrant. Ms. Smith’s actions resemble McKenzie, et al.’s tenets of social justice leadership, academic achievement and inclusive practices. She said,

I try to make those kids shine. I will use them as examples in the classroom. Like Carlos was a perfect example. I told the class when they would make fun of how he read, “Excuse me guys, he is learning the language. He is struggling with the language, but he is academically high. Now, if he can make it, so can you. He is trying hard. And look at what he is doing.” And I would ask Carlos to read aloud, and he didn’t want to. I would tell him in Spanish, “go ahead. I know you can. You have to try. If you don’t try then you will never know if you could.” I explained to him that it would improve his reading and speaking. As soon as Carlos would finish, I would praise him by saying, “Very good Carlos. That was awesome.”

While students in Ms. Smith’s class, including Carlos, are all expected to test in English and while Ms. Smith is not required to speak or know another language other than English, Ms. Smith welcomed students into her class by encouraging them in Spanish to read in English. Ms. Smith’s attention to student’s needs over the norms and procedures of the school (speak and test only in English) suggest Ms. Smith understood Carlos’ linguistic ability as a difference worthy of including. As such, Carlos suggested he felt included by Ms. Smith authentic care:

She was not a teacher who was like you have to always speak English here. She was also a teacher who did let us speak in Spanish and she spoke Spanish to us in case we needed an explanation. That was a mode of inclusion. That definitely helped kids that were English language learners or English as a second language and the fact that she was open minded to those things helped.

Similarly, when I was present in the room conducting an observation, a student raised his hand and asked Ms. Smith to define a science term she did not understand. Rather than reply with an answer to appease the student's curiosity, Ms. Smith asked the student to think further about a word in Spanish that sounded like the English term in question. After thirty seconds of silence, the student responded with a word. Ms. Smith asked the student to explain the Spanish word and to think about how it could correlate with the English word she did not understand. The student explained the definition of the Spanish term and hypothesized about what the English term could mean. Ms. Smith confirmed the student's understanding without ever giving the definition to the student. Because Ms. Smith did not provide the answer suggests Ms. Smith considered Spanish an asset for learning, not a deficit. Again, this inclusive practice suggests Ms. Smith's attempt of using authentic care to move towards an inclusive environment.

Another student, Gilbert, also recognized Ms. Smith's authentic care. Gilbert, who identified as a gay Hispanic male, remembered that he repeatedly failed Ms. Smith's class, yet Ms. Smith was still the teacher he most gravitated towards. He maintained that she was strict inside the classroom and had high expectations. Yet, she was also human and understood the complexities of adolescence, especially for students who identified with a difference in sexual orientation:

When I was going to school, being gay was not accepted in the school environment, so it was very difficult for me growing up. However, no one did make fun in Smith's class. There were some teachers who knew I was gay and I could sense they were against it, but they really couldn't say anything. And then there were teachers who were okay with it. In other words, I felt what a teacher was thinking, "I know what you are, so I am going to avoid you" But then there were some teachers who knew what I was but they were okay with it, and Smith was one of them. I could just sense it. It was like the second semester that I confessed it to her.

Gilbert thought Ms. Smith understood his difference and did not marginalize him for it. Instead, Ms. Smith counseled him and held him accountable for the class work he failed to do. Gilbert respected Ms. Smith more for doing that because he felt that other teachers either ignored him on account of his difference or passed him because they felt sorry for him since he was gay. Gilbert recalled that Ms. Smith was different all together because she authentically cared not only about his difference in sexual orientation, but she also cared about him learning. He said, "Oh no, [she] would still kill me when I didn't do my work."

While the data suggested that Ms. Smith exhibited authentic care for students, the same data suggested Ms. Smith exhibited aesthetic care (care about rules, standards, and test scores), too. Ms. Smith explained that because of her commitment to results, she was often solicited by administrators to assume leadership roles to raise science test scores. She said,



I have been asked to be department chair, team leader, lead teacher, and play other roles. They always tell me, “Because you’re the best. Because we need you there. Because we need to get scores high. Because you’re the only one we can get [to go the job]”.

As such, Ms. Smith demonstrated good pedagogy and aesthetic care by demonstrating so that students were prepared to pass the state standardized test in science. Previously, students at the ninth grade level were not required to take a standardized test for science. However, due to changes in state testing guidelines for this current academic year, an end-of-course exam in science will now be administered across the ninth grade for students. Ms. Smith is concerned with the potential outcome of this test, since, historically, the passing rate in science for the campus has been low. Ms. Smith said,

[Freshmen] have never had to test. But I have prepared them for the TAKS test, and I have had good results with teachers who had [my students] in the tenth grade. But now, they are going to test in my class. I have very high expectations of my kids. For example, today I was so upset that when I graded the latest tests; everyone had a very bad grade. No effort at all from some students. The open-ended questions were blank. So the next day I told the students, “This is a pre-advanced placement class. You all expect me to lower my standards. I am up here. You all need to get there.” I said, “I know you all can do it.” There was one kid, Frank, who got a thirty. I pulled him aside and said, “you know what, Frank? This is not going to work. What is going on?” I think he is a second-year English as a second language student. He replied, “Pues no sé, Miss” (Well, I do not

know, Ms.) I said, “I have tutorial all the time. I know the English language is a barrier, but you need to put more effort in this class. If you need help, then I want to see you asking for help. This grade is unacceptable.” He did come to tutorial for three weeks. The other day, he took the test again, and he got a seventy. It’s not great. But from a thirty to a seventy.

English language learners like Frank are expected to take an end of course exam in English without any accommodation or consideration of difference of language. As mentioned above, Ms. Smith enforced the norm of English language instruction in her own classroom in order to ensure that Frank was prepared to meet the minimum state standard on the exam. Also, the fact that Ms. Smith assumed some students had put no effort into a test suggests that Ms. Smith cared about a score and thus showed aesthetic care. A passing score is important to Ms. Smith because the score each student will receive this year is a reflection of Ms. Smith. In fact, Ms. Smith took partial credit for her former students’ progress (“I have had good results with teachers who had [my students] in the tenth grade”).

Another incident when Ms. Smith practiced aesthetic care and showed good pedagogy was when she insisted a student speak in English because it would help him pass a standardized test. Although Ms. Smith indicated that she should have addressed an inappropriate comment made by a student, she did not address it:

One kid raised his hand and spoke in Spanish. Another turned around and said, “English, please!” I should have said something to the one who said that, but I did not. The other kid replied, “what the hell? I do know English.” Today, he was talking to me during a lab in Spanish. I did tell the student, “try to practice

your English. We are in America. Come on. Talk English. It will help you pass end of course exam.” He replied, “I don’t like to speak it.” And I insisted that he try.

When Ms. Smith said to the student, “We are in America. Come on. Talk English,” she perpetuated a standard in her classroom, a singular dominant language as opposed to a linguistic multiplicity. Thus, her use of aesthetic care in this specific example suggests she privileged the English language over the Spanish language in order to help the student to meet testing standards.

Moreover, while I conducted observations in the classroom, Ms. Smith lectured from time to time. During a few of these lectures, Ms. Smith indicated the importance of the material that was going to be on the district benchmark test as opposed to the importance of learning the material for the sake of learning. When Ms. Smith stopped lecturing, she also reminded students to study their notes because it would help them pass the state end-of-course exam. Ms. Smith’s emphasis on the value of the content for testing purposes suggests good pedagogy through aesthetic care in order to move towards an inclusive environment.

Furthermore, Carlos and Anna, two of Ms. Smith former students, were concerned with the level of aesthetic care at Bravo High School. Carlos, who left Rio Vista to attend an Ivy League college, said,

I was not ready for the academic level of writing or thinking because we weren’t pushed enough as high school students. That first semester in college, I was like “I hate you teachers for not teaching me more and pushing me more.”

As a high school student and undergraduate student, Carlos was frustrated for not being challenged enough by his teachers. Had Carlos been challenged by his teachers, he would have felt better prepared in college. However, Carlos is currently a classroom teacher and knows the tensions and implications between both forms of care. While he personally would like to enact a more authentic care approach to be inclusive, he realized that in his own classroom, he is pressured also to adhere to state standards in order to produce passing test scores, which reinforces exclusion; therefore, aesthetic care has taken precedence even at his own classroom. As such, this suggests that even Carlos, who is now a teacher, understands the tensions (perhaps even irony) between aesthetic and authentic care and the implications for creating inclusive environments.

Similarly, Anna felt that aesthetic care was a exclusionary to her learning. While she did not directly blame Ms. Smith or any particular teacher for adhering to the standards (displaying aesthetic care over authentic care), she too recognized that aesthetic care was a problem for her because it limited her creativity:

We had rules and curriculum to follow, [but] I was limited to what [Ms. Smith] said because the material was selected only for a test. And, unfortunately, because of all the standardized tests and the multiple tests, teachers end up teaching to the test and limit students' creativity. Instead of having my creativity nourished, it was robbed because it was such a structured environment.

Anna too was an English language learner and an immigrant. While she felt comfortable in Ms. Smith's class, she felt Ms. Smith's aesthetic care excluded her because it limited her intellectual abilities.

Despite the consequences of aesthetic care as noted by Anna, Ms. Smith simultaneously demonstrated both types of care. This is particularly evident in some documents I collected and reviewed for the study. These documents, Ms. Smith's individual development plan and professional development report, were where Ms. Smith indicated how she helped students move forward during a particular school year. She wrote,

I make sure my students learn the specific curriculum regardless of factors in their background. I plan my lessons according to my campus' and students' needs. I have high expectations of my students and I strive for continuous improvement, a positive attitude, honesty, respect, and integrity.

As indicated in Ms. Smith's own words, Ms. Smith expressed a commitment to help all students despite their diverse backgrounds. This is a form of authentic care because Ms. Smith claimed to prepare lessons based on students' needs. On the other hand, she explained that to help students, she focused on curriculum and campus needs, which was a form of aesthetic care. Thus, her attention to aesthetic care and authentic care suggests she simultaneously recognized others' subjective reality and recognized the rules and guidelines that governed public education. Based on what two former students and Ms. Smith stated about her work, Ms. Smith did continue to move towards an inclusive environment by displaying exclusionary practices (aesthetic care) and inclusionary practices (authentic care).

***Teacher beliefs.*** The second subtheme that also suggests how Ms. Smith moved towards an inclusive environment instead of fully actualizing I labeled teacher beliefs. Ms. Smith's beliefs about students' innate differences occasionally manifested in deficit

thinking (Valencia, 1997), or the belief that students and their families are to blame for the inability to measure up with the dominant group because students enter school without the knowledge and skills necessary and because parents do not care about the education of their children. Valencia conceptualized deficit thinking as

A person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals linked to group membership (typically the combination of racial/ethnic minority status and economic disadvantage). The deficit thinking framework holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held exculpatory. (p. 9)

Despite Ms. Smith's good intentions and desire to create an inclusive environment, the data suggest that she also held deficit beliefs about some of her students. In some ways, this is to be expected as many studies have found that teachers often hold deficit beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students (Weisman & Garza, 2010; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Personal beliefs are so unconscious that one does not realize one is enacting them; therefore, even the most well-intentioned teachers and those who are members of minority groups may unintentionally and unknowingly hold deficit beliefs about students with differences (Weisman & Garza, 2010). This appears to be the case with Ms. Smith.

For example, when Ms. Smith first learned that a student was reluctant to participate in any further weekend and after-school recycling events because he did not have transportation, Ms. Smith said she she assumed the student automatically did not have any problems/deficits because he was a pre-advanced placement students who

always “come from a good family environment and they have everything.” When Ms. Smith realized that the student was economically disadvantaged, she wanted to help him, and she did by offering the student a position as president of the recycling team and giving him a personalized shirt. From my observations, I recall witnessing this particular student display an enthusiastic participation. However, Ms. Smith was actually enacting deficit thinking about the student’s economic status:

This is a pre-advanced placement student. The number one recycling student for the school year last year. He has a good score in my class. But his background. He lives in the ghetto. His family doesn’t speak English. No one has ever gone to school. And yet, he is trying to make a difference here. To get really involved. So when I heard that. I said, “Oh my God.”

Perhaps Ms. Smith thought she was filling a void in this student’s life by supplying him with praise and clothes. However, instead of practicing an additive pedagogy, Ms. Smith was practicing a form of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) by not valuing the student’s cultural background or funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) when she dismissed the student’s ability to participate in the project because he was poor. Thus, her teacher belief was well intentioned, but it hindered Ms. Smith’s attempt to move toward an inclusive environment.

When it came to specific students’ differences such as religion/other beliefs systems, Ms. Smith admitted that she did experience a culture clash and, she said,

I have a problem with how can [atheists] say there is no God. Who do they worship, the monster? But I don’t tell them that. I don’t go and try to preach them a lesson, but somehow I sense that they have an issue. I don’t throw these

kids out. They leave on their own. I don't think they leave because of me, but also because of the other kids in the class. They feel isolated. It's another difference, and I guess because they are not willing to assimilate and they would rather be on their own.

Given Ms. Smith's responses and the findings from a recent study by Nelson and Guerra (2012), educators may not have the cultural knowledge, skills, or comfort level to engage in the difficult work of addressing deficit beliefs and may hold some of the same beliefs. Incidentally, it is not surprising that Ms. Smith also exhibited deficit thinking when it came to accommodating students who identified with a difference in religion/belief system because she was aware of the students' cultural knowledge.

Another way Ms. Smith unintentionally exhibited deficit thinking was when it came to students who identified with a difference in linguistic ability Ms. Smith said,

One kid raised his hand and spoke in Spanish. Another turned around and said, "English, please!" I should have said something to the one who said that, but I did not. The other kid replied, "what the hell? I do know English." Today, he was talking to me during a lab in Spanish. I did tell the student, "try to practice your English. We are in America. Come on. Talk English. It will help you pass the end-of-course exam." He replied, "I don't like to speak it." And I insisted that he try.

This example illustrated how Ms. Smith conveyed a mixed message. Instead of using this experience as a teachable moment to show all students the need to appreciate and respect biculturalism, Ms. Smith privileged only the English language as a way to be successful ([English] will help you pass the end-of-course exam.). Thus, another way



Ms. Smith did not advance the notion of deficit thinking was because she tolerated rather than accepted students with a difference in sexual orientation:

I do it all the time. Since we are talking about religion, we know the bible is black and white and doesn't accept lesbians and gays. That there is no such thing as in between. So, I suspend my beliefs there. And I respect the kids there. And I am willing to teach him. I don't get rid of the gay students.

Ms. Smith's rationale for including students who exhibited a difference in sexual orientation indicated that she was aware of attitudes found within mainstream Christianity. For example, Ms. Smith suggested how her religious identity as a Christian clashed with students who exhibit differences in sexual orientation. As a case in point, this response did not qualify Ms. Smith as a culturally responsive educator because she only offered a generic best practice (suspend her disbeliefs) and because she suggested that being gay is wrong as per *The Bible*. Rather than propose a solution to the culture clash between groups of different sexual orientations and suggest that difference does not mean bad or good or that one way of being is not better than the other, Ms. Smith may have perpetuated the idea that teachers can only tolerate, not fully include students who identified with a difference.

***Leadership from the classroom.*** Often, leadership within a school is understood as what is exerted from one in a position of power such as the principal or assistant principal. However, in this study, another subtheme I found that emerged through my analysis within the data suggests Ms. Smith demonstrated leadership from the classroom in order to move towards an inclusive environment. Not only did Ms. Smith consider herself a leader already for various reasons, but other sources of data also suggest she

embodied significant traits that distinguished her as an educator who went above and beyond a job description, or simply good teaching. Thus, she exhibited leadership from the classroom.

Most importantly, Ms. Smith identified as a leader within her own right. I asked Ms. Smith if leadership was only reserved for those with administrative titles. Ms. Smith replied “No,” and stated she did not desire to hold the formal position of a building principalship, for she already felt most productive leading and teaching in the classroom setting:

But now that I have the degree, I feel that if I left the classroom, I will not have the same impact on the students as I do now. I would be working more closely with teachers and making sure teachers did their job, [but] I have never been an administrator. I have applied [in the past] and I have made it to finalist for the position, but not the point that I have felt, “Oh my God. I didn’t make it.” It’s okay if I don’t get in. I am fine in the classroom. I love what I do. And besides, with the budget cuts, they are cutting everywhere. Today, administrators are puppets. They are told, “You go there. You go here.” I would hate to be in that. I would have left it just like our friend who did it recently. It is so much BS. Politica! (politics).

Ms. Smith summarized administration of schools as “BS.” Rather than assume the post of an administrator only to become disappointed and later resign as a colleague did, Ms. Smith said she felt that she was in a better position as a classroom teacher to be more productive. This suggests Ms. Smith perceived that her role to facilitate change is not going to be in the capacity of her being a principal. Rather, she is going to create

change from the classroom. Because Ms. Smith compared the principalship to that of a puppet show which may be a form of oppression that undermines the quality of work (Derman-Sparks and Philips, 1997), she did not see the principalship as an opportunity for change.

While Ms. Smith did not have a formal leadership title on her campus this academic school year, she maintained that she was still a leader. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) argued that teachers are leaders, for leadership is “ubiquitous” (p. 331). In the past, Ms. Smith held important leadership positions such as department head, lead teacher, site-based decision-making member, and sponsor of many extracurricular activities. While Ms. Smith was still active on campus by staying after school to tutor students, the leadership Ms. Smith exhibited during this study was further characterized by the synergy of three different traits she embodied: initiative (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991), service (Greenleaf, 2002), and mentoring (Phi Delta Kappa).

*Initiative.* One week before the first day of school, I visited Ms. Smith to be of assistance since she was moving from one classroom to another. As I walked down the hall, I saw several classroom doors open. I noticed all of the rooms had bare walls and boxes everywhere. At that point, I assumed it would be a long day because I suspected Ms. Smith’s room in the same condition. However, when I arrived, I learned that Ms. Smith had completely set up her classroom. The room was ready to be occupied. I was shocked at first, but then I realized Ms. Smith had taken the initiative to set up her room on her own time and did not wait till the end of the summer to arrange her new classroom. She said,

I consider myself a leader because I take initiative. I don't wait to be told. I know what is needed. I know the best thing to do for educating our kids and know what they need. I am able to fill that need and move them on. Take them to a higher level. But I don't think I have to be told what needs to get done. I am very transparent. No ands, ifs, or buts. This is the way it goes.

Contrary to the famous dictum, one who fails to plan, plans to fail, Ms. Smith took initiative and prepared her room ahead of time. In doing so, she probably secured time necessary for the planning of instruction. Challenging students takes planning; therefore, because Ms. Smith took initiative, as opposed to waiting until the last minute, this perhaps afforded the time to plan lessons for the first few weeks of school. Incidentally, because Ms. Smith felt she did not need to be told what to do, she embodied the characteristic of the 'lone ranger' type teacher who works independently and does things her way in order to make a big impact. While embodying the lone ranger leadership approach was what propelled Ms. Smith's work, Gourley, (2004) and Barton, Deutsch, and Reed (2005) argue that teachers would be able to do so much more if they collaborated with their colleges and avoided the isolation that is associated with becoming a lone ranger teacher. If Ms. Smith was able to achieve many logistical tasks by taking initiative then she is in a better position "to plan, implement, and value a curriculum that supports leadership for social justice" (Capper & Young, as cited in Marshall and Oliva, 2010, p. 326).

Furthermore, a thorough review of Ms. Smith's portfolio also suggests Ms. Smith took initiative to improve her instructional practice. For example, over the last five years, Ms. Smith attended a health and science summer institute, which was hosted by M.D.

Anderson Cancer Research Center. This week-long course, which was held in central Texas during the summer, helped teachers integrate science curriculum with cancer prevention. Ms. Smith's attendance and participation at this professional development activity on her personal time suggests that she took initiative to bridge health and sciences curricula beyond her scope of practice. Again, Ms. Smith's initiative to seek professional development on her own may be a way she attempts to become familiar with pedagogies that support effective social justice leadership education (Capper & Young , as cited in Marshall and Oliva)

*Service.* Another leadership trait that moved Ms. Smith towards an inclusive environment was service. Aside from participating in community service projects with students, Ms. Smith also devoted a portion of her time to a local chapter of a state professional teacher's organization. She said,

I am vice president for a teacher's professional organization, and I am a voice for teachers on the outside. I make sure that their needs are being met. And when they cross the line, I represent them. I was secretary before, but my goal was to get up to the top. I went against a very powerful person, but I got the votes for where I am right now. People have tried to bring me down by accusing me of this and that, but I know my rights. I fought it, and now I have more respect. So I represent teachers on my campus. They come to me.

Despite the challenges (accusations) Ms. Smith encountered while providing service, I noted that Ms. Smith still maintained a dedication to service. For example, a few colleagues came to seek Ms. Smith's assistance during lunch and between classes for private and professional issues. Ms. Smith made arrangements to meet at a later time

with each person who came by. On one occasion, another officer from the same professional organization came to Ms. Smith's classroom from another campus to plan with her for a meeting she would conduct later. Ms. Smith's participation in this organization provided her the opportunity to present to the school board issues that affect staff and students. Ms. Smith said, "I never stop working. I do a lot of stuff on the side that is completely voluntary."

In addition to proving service to the school, Ms. Smith participated alongside students in the recycling challenge to provide the community with service. Because Bravo High School had already won the community challenge in the past, Ms. Smith felt the school board members recognized her name and work. Ms. Smith said, "The board knows me because I am proactive, and I go to school board meetings and speak on behalf of teachers."

Myers (1995) contented that the service-learning processes are very similar to the skills teachers need to facilitate school change and improvement. Because Ms. Smith enacted leadership from the classroom, her service at different levels provided benefits for students. According to Stewart (2007), "In the absence of a strong community-school association, students experience not only a lack of connection between classroom learning and public issues," but they also lack an awareness of the relevancy of classroom learning to their personal lives (p. 19). As such, Ms. Smith's use of service-learning as a classroom teacher may have helped build the lack of connection.

*Mentoring.* Another trait Ms. Smith demonstrated was that she served as a mentor to other colleagues. According to Teachers mentoring teachers (2002), a mentor is:

A good mentor can make an enormous difference in the professional life of a new teacher, perhaps even helping the new teacher to continue in the teaching profession. A mentor provides leadership. A mentor provides the opportunities for questions, perhaps not necessarily answers, but choices that the teacher being mentored can then contemplate, finding his or her own way. A mentor provides communication. A mentor provides collaboration. A mentor is a shoulder, an example, a confidante. A mentor is a friend.

A particular mentor-mentee relationship that was strengthened during the course of this study was that between Ms. Smith and I. While I had classroom, principal, and superintendent certification when I conducted this dissertation study, I wanted to learn about concepts I did not completely understand. A few concepts that I wanted to learn included the role of contexts in teaching and learning, and leadership. When I began the study, I approached the participant because I wanted to work alongside someone who would be open to sharing their personal, professional, and communal identities. By learning from the participant's multiple roles, I became closer to being a better person, educator, and researcher. Overall, I learned about the participant, about myself, about the geographic region Ms. Smith and I reside and about the enterprise of education.

Another example of mentoring, this year, Ms. Smith said she invited a new teacher at Bravo High School to co-sponsor the community service recycling challenge in order to help a novice teacher earn trust and respect from veteran teachers: "I always help young teachers who want to be known, respected, and helpful." According to Ms. Smith, the new teacher embraced the opportunity to help Ms. Smith and to grow professionally.

Ms. Smith suggested that novice teachers ought to know a few things to be successful. She said,

I recommend that teachers speak up in a very professional and diplomatic way. You will get the respect you deserve. [Try not to] burn bridges. And do your research and sound intelligent.

The synergy of all three traits that Ms. Smith enacted suggests how she was able to move towards an inclusive environment while in the classroom. Essentially, because she was able to do all this from the classroom suggests that teachers have the agency to be creative thinkers who promote change as opposed to those who enact good teaching. However, for teachers who don't have the language or the experience to address inequities, a good place to start for educators is to understand social justice leadership is "both a process and a goal" (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007) that may be enacted through reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning and by valuing awareness, personal growth, and change as learning outcomes (Adams, Bell & Griffin).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the results of this study. First, I provided a narrative description of three interviews with one teacher, narrative description of three individual interviews with three former students, narrative description of seven observations, and narrative description of document analysis. Each narrative I presented captured the gestalt from every data source. After I described the data collected, I provided an analysis of the data collected in this study. I organized the data into one overarching theme, towards inclusive environments, and three different subthemes: authentic care versus aesthetic care, teacher beliefs, and leadership from the classroom. These themes



described how one teacher conceptualized an inclusive environment, described what an inclusive classroom looked like, discussed the conditions that enabled or hindered the teacher's work, illustrated the ways the classroom was not inclusive, and highlighted the leadership aspect of the teacher's work.

In the next chapter, I interpret the data to theorize about absolute space. I address the implications for practice and research. I then offer a conclusion to this study.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

In chapter four, I presented the results of this research study. These results included a narrative description that captured the gestalt of each of the following: all interviews with each participant, all observations, and document collection. In addition, I provided an analysis of the data into one overarching theme: towards an inclusive environment. I then provided subthemes: authentic care versus aesthetic care, teacher beliefs, and leadership from the classroom.

In this chapter, I will further discuss how I borrowed tenets of poststructuralism and queer theory, and attempted to employ multiple ethnographic data collection methods in the spirit of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001). Subscribing to the idea of bricolage, provided me a lens to blur the boundaries between two forms of representation, case study and narrative, so that I rendered another way of knowing (an unexpected representation). Secondly, I will theorize about absolute environments, discuss the importance of understanding binary logic, and provide some implications for moving towards inclusive environments. Third, I will discuss the implications for practice and research. Finally, I will present my conclusion to this study.

#### **Another Way of Knowing**

Lather (1994) maintained that a vast amount of educational research tended to represent a story of triumph over adversity. This formulaic write up, also known as a

victory narrative, while well intentioned, perpetuates academic elitism and advances a positivistic epistemology (Cary, 2006; 1999; Kincheloe, 2005). However, instead of enacting an arbolic epistemology that is linear and hierarchical, I agree that researchers are in a better position to write up the complexity of human experience using qualitative research when they exhibit rhizomatic thinking, an epistemology of multiplicity (multiple voices), flattened hierarchies (researcher's privilege), and nomadic spaces (cuts across disciplines/methods) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Perhaps victory narratives and other narratives that are singular in perspective are prevalent because researchers do not assume interdisciplinarity:

The strict disciplinarian operating in a reductionist framework chained to the prearranged procedures of a monological way of seeing is less likely to produce frame-shattering research than the synergized bricoleur. The process at work in the bricolage involves learning from difference. Researchers employing multiple research methods are often not chained to the same assumptions as individuals operating within a particular discipline (Kincheloe, 2001, p.686).

For example, after reflecting upon her own use of research methods and the data that resulted from it, Cary (2006) discussed how using life history as a method for representation and way of knowing limited her story to that of neutral, expected, and realist representation. She wrote, "My own work using Life History methodology failed to contextualize the stories of my participants sufficiently and, as a result, I was uncomfortable with the data. The move I made was to stand in a different position" (p. 22).

Finding herself in what Marcus and Fischer (1986) called a crisis of representation, Cary opted for a poststructuralist feminist perspective that provided the lens to interrogate the method she found reduced her representation. According to Kincheloe (2001), a bricoleur exhibits an appreciation for the complexity of life and exhibits a critical lens of power and culture to make change. Therefore, Cary wrote, “I attempted to rethink the method as a way of living with the ambiguity. The unexpected story forced me to question my authorial/authorizing position and led me to ask-how can I do ‘justice’ to [my participant’s] story?” Incidentally, Berry (2006), maintained that social justice and relationality were tenets for a bricoleur. As such, avoiding telling the difficult story and feeling comfortable doing so was not only an epistemological issue for Cary, but it was also an ethical one, too. Through a bricolage of perspectives and methods, Cary challenged positivistic tendencies of research by interrupting, extending, and redefining how she did research. In the end, she re-presented her participant’s story in a way that was troubling, yet dignified.

As a poststructuralist writing in the time of the postmodern, I, too, attempted to employ a bricolage of methods (interviews, document collection, observation), forms of representation (case study, life history, narrative), perspectives (queer theory, ethnography, autoethnography), and disciplines (education, cultural geography, curriculum studies, anthropology, sociology) because I, like Cary, found myself grappling with the data I collected and how to tell it. Mostly drawing from research in the field of education, I borrowed different lenses and methods to tease out the complexity of one teacher’s work so that I rendered another way of knowing, an unexpected representation.

For example, with this study, I aimed to provide an additional heuristic to inform school improvement and convey the notion that school improvement process and identity is messy; therefore, my representation of the data troubles the normative school improvement literature that suggests school reform is as simple as applying a standard formula. Some examples of school improvement literature that is normative includes: *If you Don't Feed the Teachers, They eat the Students: Guide to Success for Administrators and Teachers* (Connors, 2000); *Building Leadership Capacity* (Lambert, 1998); *The Four Dimensions of Principal Leadership: A framework for Leading Schools* (Green, 2010); *What's Worth Fighting out There* (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998); *How to be an Effective Teacher: The First Days of School* (Wong & Wong, 2001); *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 1998); *Reframing the Path to School Leadership* (Bolman & Deal, 2002).

Normative literature or prescriptive literature such as those texts mentioned above echo the idea that school improvement can be accomplished through a packaged model, tool kit, check list, or best practice. However, it is my contention that school improvement is not a simplified task. Furthermore, the prescription that experts or consultants (Marzano, 2003), policy makers (Duncan, 2009), researchers (Harris, 2002 ) and even educators (Ripley, 2008) offer for school improvement should be approached with caution, for much of it neglects the complexity of school improvement and the complexity of humans. Instead, the post-modern text I offer as a heuristic for school improvement elicits grass-roots inquiry and focuses on complexity and paradox as an understanding for moving schools forward. Of equal importance also is that my text

allows one the opportunity to see the uncensored and realness of equity work, identity, and schools as a way of knowing.

Thus, my research suggests that Ms. Smith perhaps could have moved more towards an inclusive environment for students who identified with difference if she was aware of the effects of absolute thinking as suggested by critical theoretical underpinnings. Perhaps because Ms. Smith was not informed of these theories, her work resulted in consequences, whether intended or unintended. Like Ms. Moreno, my own fourth grade teacher who tried to include me and sometimes exacerbated my sense of alienation, the story of Ms. Smith is still a valuable one because it illustrated that classroom teachers are not perfect. They are not either bad or good, effective or ineffective, smart or stupid. Teachers, like all humans, do not exist in binaries. We are always swimming in between bad/good, effective/ineffective, smart/stupid, and never are we one descriptor more than the other. Furthermore, my research suggests that avoiding to think about humans in absolutes is an enactment of Derrida's notion of *differánce* [sic].

According to Derrida (1978) while meaning is certainly not found in what something is not such as what binary logic presumed, meaning is rather temporary and not fixed because it is found in what something is not *and* simultaneously what it is. Derrida further illustrated this concept in literature with Deconstruction. Yet, even in applying *differánce*, meaning is temporary because *only* some level of meaning is found. Absolute meaning is never present. As such, complete identities, inclusive classrooms, and deconstructed language will always remain chaotic, slippery, and dynamic. In essence, we humans will never achieve complete identities, inclusive classrooms, and

deconstructed language in an absolute form. The trick is to move toward all these in a more informed way. Perhaps when educators are not informed, they further alienate students who identify with difference.

For instance, Dubowsky-Ma'ayan (2010) documented the experiences of thirteen individuals who identified as masculine female during their adolescence. As a result of expressing non-normative gender expression, all thirteen individuals recalled that school was a space they disliked because it was where they could not be who they wanted to be. One participant reported how the locker room was an absolute space that reinforced the binary gender system:

[It] was completely traumatizing to get undressed in a room full of girls. In fact, I wouldn't. I would try to cut the classes. I would try to be sick on those days. I would forge notes saying I didn't have to take a shower. I think I only had to take a shower like once or twice because I was able to somehow weasel out of it the other days. I kept my undershirt and my underpants on, because I was wearing boy's underpants most of the time and I was embarrassed that people would see me if I took my clothes off. It was weird having me in the locker room because the girls were not comfortable with me there and I was definitely not comfortable being there. (p. 130)

In addition to experiencing the absolute space of a locker room, the participants in this study reported that other aspects of their schooling experience were also absolute. The gendered curriculum was another example of how schooling was complicit in their subjugation. Instead of learning about themselves as different individuals, the school curriculum covered "girl" issues with the girls and "boy" issues with the boys. The

narrow focus of the curriculum forced the participants into feminine gender roles, which is not how they felt inside. Also, while not all the participants identified as gay because some were heterosexual, all of them agreed that their masculine expression automatically categorized their sexual orientation as gay. While gender expression and sexual orientation are two separate concepts, the participants felt their identities were confined by the heteronormativity in the school.

Similarly, Enomoto and Bair (1999) found in their study how Arabic immigrant students were expected to assimilate into the norms of one American high school. The researchers used structural-functionalism and reproduction theories as the sociological framework to explore the structure of schools and examine how schools transmitted Americanization as normalcy. The high school in this study was purposefully selected because it had an Arabic immigrant population of fifty percent. Researchers observed that the school organized students through curriculum tracking. Immigrant students who were not fluent in English were placed in general and remedial tracks while mostly White students were placed in the advanced track. Tracking immigrant students into remedial courses was found to be a structural way to assimilate Arabic immigrant students into American norms. For example, Arabic students were expected to learn English since no standardized assessment was available in any other language. Also, the majority of the teachers felt that the Arabic bilingual teacher retarded the language acquisition of Arabic students. Moreover, the teachers believed that students of other nationalities who are forced to speak English would learn the language much faster.

The structures of the high school and the teacher beliefs that are reported in the study did not only contribute to the establishment of an absolute space where students



were considered smart/not smart, but it also perpetuated a hegemony in that students were expected to abandon their mother tongue in order to learn English to be successful.

Because the differences (e.g. language, immigrant status) students exhibited in this study were not accommodated or included, the absolute space Arabic immigrant students were found in was a form of socialization that the school embraced. Students who identify with differences similar to those in the previous two studies expressed their angst against the socialization of absolute spaces by contemplating suicide (Rodindon & Espelage, 2011). Recently, one student actually did committed suicide after feeling the alienation of not being an American citizen (Martinez, 2011). What is as equally as shocking as this terrible news is that we have known for a longtime that schools do not grow people. Instead, schools exist to maintain the status quo. According to Rogers (1971) the person inside of schools can only grow another person within it:

[A person] is an individual whose locus of evaluation is internal. He is not governed by the 'shoulds' and the 'oughts' of conformity, nor necessarily governed by the rules of his institution, if they conflict too deeply with his own values. And he is a person with values, values which are not simply words or beautiful statements, but values which he lives[....] A person is openly expressive of where he is, who he is. He does not live a façade or a role, hiding behind the convenient from of being a 'teacher,' a 'principal' a 'psychologist.' He is real, and the realness show through. Hence he is unique, and this means that there is enormous diversity in persons- diversity in philosophy, in approach to life, in opinions, in ways of dealing with students. Thus, when there are *persons* in

educational institutions they become controversial, difficult, not easily fitted into categories. (p. 215)

Thus, every educator needs to therefore be a person first if schools are to avoid becoming absolute spaces. To avoid perpetuating absolute environments, it is also important to understand binary logic and its effects in the classroom. This is important to do because we live in world that is organized around “regimes of Truth” (Foucault, 1980), which controls and manipulates individuals through discourses and norms. Furthermore, if educators transform absolute spaces to inclusive places then students who identify with difference will have an equal opportunity. Because this process is messy and not linear, practitioners must be willing to be mindful of hegemonic norms and discourses, especially when teachers themselves perpetuate them.

For example, Ms. Smith reported that students who identified as atheists typically left her classroom because her own belief system clashed with the students’ belief system. While Ms. Smith admitted that it was not as if she did not like the atheist students, she did agree her Christian views presented a conundrum for the learning of student who identified as atheists. Similarly, Gervais, Norenzayan, and Shariff’s (2011) social psychological exploration of anti-atheist prejudice found that individuals *distrusted* atheists and did not want to work alongside them. Yet, while Ms. Smith did not say that she distrusted these student, she did believe she did not and could not suspend her religious views to accommodate students who identified as atheists. As such, she did not employ a mindful practice (Epstein, 1999). Therefore, Ms. Smith created a classroom that was an absolute space by thinking in absolutes: monotheism/atheism. Ms. Smith said,

I respect all religions, but I feel that there is one God and everything else is second. So do I bring into the classroom my religion? Yes. Do students respect it? Yes. Can they relate to it? Yes they do. If I did a basic count in my classroom of catholic versus nondenominational [Christian], I would find that there are more non-denominational [Christians] as a whole. So we all do see eye to eye in different respects, especially when we begin the chapter on evolution.

Ms. Smith assumed that students respected and related to her religion or Christian views. In fact, she believed her students exhibited similar Christian views all together; therefore, she indirectly labeled every student a Christian, without actually knowing if they were in fact Christian. This was an example of absolute thinking because Ms. Smith categorized the students as all Christians. The implication of thinking in this form is that anyone who was not a Christian in the classroom was “the Other.” Ms. Smith also further illustrated her absolute thinking in a hypothetical poll of catholic versus non-denomination students in the classroom. Again, the assumption she made was that every student represented Christianity (Catholic/non-denomination Christian). While this may be or may be not true, Ms. Smith did not actually know the religion or other beliefs systems that were represented by her students. Therefore, her assumption that there are only two forms of Christian groups worthy of being polled neglected the fact that there are hundreds of differences within Christianity in the form of various denominations. Had Ms. Smith administered a poll she would have perpetuated a forced choice that again would have labeled everyone either Catholic or non-denomination Christian. Her belief that “we all see eye to eye” is a monolithic form of absolute thinking that included

students but excluded others. Thus, her classroom was an absolute space as much as it was an inclusive environment.

Another way Ms. Smith's absolute thinking manifested itself in the classroom as an absolute space was through a grade based seating arrangement. In order to promote a more a competitive and rigorous environment where students felt motivated to accomplishing advanced content, Ms. Smith distinguished a section of desks for students who had the top ten percent grade average. Whereas an academic elite group had preferential seating, *the other* students occupied the rest of the desks. While academically high students who have had the opportunity to sit in the distinguished section historically liked the prestige of the position, the same students who sat there also found it problematic. Again, Ms. Smith created an absolute space in her classroom by thinking in absolutes: intelligent/not intelligent; motivated/unmotivated. Carlos, Ms. Smith's former student, said,

She would have the top ten students in the front of the classroom. But then the lowest kids were in the back. I mean I was one of the top kids, so I was always in the front. It was a status symbol to sit in the front, so I certainly felt included by the teacher, but I also found it odd that the students who needed the most help, were in the back[...] I did feel included, but it was based on intelligence. I don't think any other difference mattered.

Carlos said he felt only included based on his academic ability and that all of his other differences did not matter. Thus, this suggests that Ms. Smith may have reduced students to one axis of identity, intelligent/not intelligent. Again, this further suggests she exhibited absolute thinking that fostered an absolute space. As a student, Carlos found

Ms. Smith's strategy ironic because it created a dichotomy of learners, a dichotomy that included intelligent students and excluded students who were presumed to be not intelligent. Like Carlos, Anna, another former student, said that the strategy was problematic for her too because Ms. Smith attempted to include unmotivated students only. Anna, on the other hand, identified herself as an already motivated student who was excluded. She said,

I don't think the class helped me. Here is why. The big problem in Rio Vista is that most teachers don't push their student and a lot of the students are not motivated and are low achievers. So her system would work with those students. Those are the students who have never been pushed. And she offered that to them[...], but for me, I was already a high achieving student. I was already pushing myself.

Anna's experience suggests that Ms. Smith may have exhibited absolute thinking that automatically labeled every student as unmotivated. As a result, the classroom was always already an absolute environment where student were either unmotivated and sat in the back or students were motivated and sat in the front. However, because Anna did not identify with either prescribed categories of students, she felt excluded from the classroom all together.

The data from this research study suggests that while intentioned teachers, like Ms. Smith, attempt to create an inclusive environment for students who identified with difference, it is likely for teachers to exclude students in the process. Therefore, it is important for educators with an expressed commitment to social justice to understand binary logic and the effects of absolute thinking so that they instead "promote the

formation of the self that is less fixed and more open, without rigid identity boundaries, and with greater freedom over its own self-production and growth” (Carlson, 1998, p. 117). Using the hetero/homo binary, Carlson (1998) explained how binary logic over time provided meaning for how we organized ourselves and each other:

Sexual difference had become neatly describable in terms of a hetero-homo binary, with each term in the binary dependent for its meaning on its opposite, which it excluded. Hetero implied healthy, homo implied sickness, hetero represented control of sexual desires and impulses, homo represented the sexual outlaw controlled by his or her desires. All of this worked to support an elaborate system of motivating conformity to the highly repressive norms of modern culture. The stigmatization of the sexual other served as a warning to those who might consider stepping outside the bounds of repressive sexual norms in other ways. (p. 114)

The warning and elaborate system of conformity Carlson (1998) discussed was already previously illustrated in academe by Foucault’s (1979) conception of a panopticon, a prison structure used for surveillance and punishment of inmates. Foucault’s panoptic metaphor showed that much like a panopticon where a jailer stood and watched over prisoners to keep them aligned with a prison code of conduct, our discourse also served to align our identities to prescribed norms. Today, Foucault’s understanding of such coercive forces are continuously studied through a critical lens and social movement called queer theory. For example, Thurer’s (2005) explanation of how our daily lives and discourses are imbued with coercion even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, makes a case and point for the relevancy of queer theory in education and in other enterprises:

The power that defines us constantly by gazing at our bodies resides not only in discrete institutions but is everywhere. It flows through our society as an invisible force insinuating our moral and religious rules, laws, sports, education, medicine, the workplace, and, especially mass-produced images. Coercion need not involve someone literally watching us, for we have internalized the cultural gaze and continually ‘gaze’ at ourselves, regimenting our behavior, and even our flesh to conform to the dictates of culture. (p. 110)

Furthermore, while it is possible for educators to understand binary logic and the effects of absolute thinking so that they promote identity formation that is more fluid, it is important to note that absolute achievement of an inclusive environment is utopian. Fortunately, scholars have offered ways to problematize absolute thinking in order to move towards inclusivity. For example, Burbules and Rice (1991) argued that dialogue across differences is worthwhile and possible if one is to value complexity in human understanding:

The very activity of pursuing and maintaining dialogue across differences can foster in us more general dispositions and practices of communication that help support more successful communicative relations with a variety of people over time. Attempting dialogue across difference, and persisting in the attempt even when it becomes difficult, develops such ‘communicative virtues’ as tolerance, patience, and willingness to listen. As a process, dialogue requires us to re-examine our own presuppositions and to compare them against quite different ones; to make us less dogmatic about the belief that the way the world appears to us is necessarily the way the world is. (p. 405)

Dialogue across differences in organizations needs to be sustained by people who are committed to its cause. It is not an easy task, nor is it fun because it requires for one to challenge what one believes. Nonetheless, it is dialogue that is worthwhile because it is situated within a “generous and sympathetic regard for the perspectives and self-expression of others” (p. 411). As such, other virtues one must exhibit to foster dialogue across difference includes: the tendency to admit that one may be mistaken, the capacity to reinterpret one’s own concerns in a way that makes them clearer to others, the self-restraint so that others may speak, and the ability to express one’s self honestly and sincerely.

Promoting and embodying these communicative virtues inside and outside places of learning and living so that differences are celebrated and understood is the mission of educators. While there are no specific answers for how to achieve absolute understanding of differences or absolute celebration of differences, the authors maintained that if we are to become critical educators for a better tomorrow we all need to understand that moving towards inclusivity is a difficult, perhaps even impossible, but worthy endeavor: “Learning and developing as a person involves incorporating painful lessons, failures, and frustrations, without being paralyzed by them; it involves living with the tensions, rather than striving to mask them with the oversimplifications that might make the world seem more palatable” (p. 413).

Another scholar who suggests a way to problematize absolute thinking in order to move towards an inclusive environment is Hooks (1986). Writing on sisterhood, Hooks explained that women traditionally organized and build solidarity around what they had in common. In the case of the early feminist movement, which was only inclusive of



White women, solidarity amongst these women was built around common oppression or victimization. Women of color were not included in the early feminist movement.

Therefore, Hooks argued that in order to break the historical racism, sexism, classism, and all other forms of oppression, women of all intersections needed to embrace the transformative power of critique together so that women together could begin to make change through political solidarity:

Radical commitment to political struggle carries with it the willingness to accept responsibility for using conflict constructively, as a way to enhance and enrich our understanding of one another, as a guide directing and shaping the parameters of our political solidarity. (p.125)

Once women became united through Sisterhood to end oppression, Hooks maintained that it would be easier for men to follow after that. To that end, women need not to remove difference to feel solidarity, but they ought to emphasize shared interests and beliefs, united in appreciation for diversity, struggle, and political solidarity. Hooks suggested,

When women actively struggle in a truly supportive way to understand our differences, to change misguided, distorted perspectives, we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity. In feminist movement, there is a need for diversity, disagreement and difference if we are to grow. (p. 138)

Borrowing Hooks' notion of political solidarity is another way to move towards an inclusive environment, especially because it unites people who are different. Like Burbules' and Rice's (1991) notion of dialogue across differences, political solidarity

requires a sustained ongoing commitment from everyone too. While this is also a difficult and cumbersome process to enact, it is also possible and worthwhile.

Tisdell (2007) also suggests a way one may problematize absolute thinking in order to move towards an inclusive environment for everyone. While Tisdell wrote about the relevance of authenticity and spirituality in the context of a higher education classroom so that adult educators could learn how to deal with diversity and equity, K-12 public school educators may also apply some of the principles in their work in order to be socially just. One of the main ideas in Tisdell's work is that educators need to understand identity is socially constructed; therefore, it is impossible for one to know one's authentic-self outside the norms that inform one's life unless one sought out a more authentic identity. One may move towards a more authentic identity through a concept called authenticity, or the deliberate act of defining one's self rather than by others' expectations.

The concept of authenticity, while attractive, is not absolutely achievable. As such, the real power of striving towards it come from the conscious awareness that it is not completely possible, yet it is still worthwhile because it helps one to move towards being accepting of others. Tisdell suggests that through a spiritual journey, one can move towards knowing and operating from an authentic identity, but one needs to recognize that a major caveat of authenticity is that it calls for our world and our identities to be utter chaos:

It is important to be skeptical of claims to ABSOLUTE [*sic*] authenticity, since this is what cult leaders often claim. But if one believes in a unique essence to every human person, regardless of what one calls that essence, it is possible to

move toward operating from that core self or authentic identity, at the same time one calls into question what that ‘authentic identity’ is. This is the paradox: to attempt to move toward one’s more authentic identity, while at the same time questioning the notion of authenticity. (p. 552)

Educators may move towards authenticity, despite the messy nature of it, by enacting *mindfulness*, or an unbiased awareness of present experiences. Cashwell, Bentley, and Bigbee (2007) discussed the role of this activity and skill in the education of counselors in their research. Because counselors are in constant contact with diverse identities, practicing mindfulness has been suggested to promote self-efficacy and prevent burnout. Like counselors, educators may also benefit from enacting mindfulness too in the classroom because of its effect on one’s self and effect on others:

As a product of spiritual practice, mindfulness manifests in an attitude of acceptance, nonjudgment, curiosity, enthusiasm for life, and a willingness to live in the present moment. By living life in the present moment rather than in the past or the future, the individual begins to connect more fully with others, and the reality of life as a human, and experiences her-or himself as a human ‘being’ rather than a human ‘doer.’ (p. 71)

As such, practicing mindfulness may help classroom educators to think and act differently when confronted with their own biases. The idea is for educators to eradicate the practice of deficit thinking via mindfulness. Perhaps if educators practice mindfulness, students will be in a better position to enact it too, especially since Napoli, Krech, and Holley (2005) observed how students who practiced mindfulness also made better decisions.

Further, the contribution of scholars above may help many educators make sense of binary logic and how to move towards an inclusive environment. While that may be so, these concepts are not to be taken as the only answers. Instead, I'd point the question back to you, the reader: How can a teacher create an inclusive environment for students who identify with differences?

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

In this section, I will address how researchers and practitioners may help to ameliorate some of the consequences of binary logic and absolute thinking as well as the absence of inclusive environments for students who identify with differences.

**Implication for research.** University professors within the college of education play an extremely important role in helping educators move towards an inclusive environment. Professors who teach in a teacher, a principal, and a superintendent preparation program may use an array of resources to help educators problematize, if any, hegemonic practices and deficit beliefs about students who are different. The need for preparation programs to address matters of human difference is well documented in the literature (Ford, 2004; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Myers, 2010; Parish & Aquila, 1996). Potential resources professors may use to begin discussing differences and the need to make room for them in schools includes but is not limited to required readings, guest speakers, films, community-based alliances, current events, personal experiences, or student experiences. However, the preparation program Ms. Smith attended did not have an explicit and implicit social justice focus.

As such, any initiative Ms. Smith presented to help students who identified with difference was a manifestation of her own well-intentioned effort and social justice orientation. However, not all teachers may exhibit these qualities. Therefore, the likelihood of other teachers making some of the same unintentional mistakes Ms. Smith made are quite high unless more college of education professors make a concerted effort to weave in issues of equity and access into the preparation of educators.

For example, Nelson, Aguilar, and Niño (2009) examined eighteen years of students' action research projects in one preparation program at a large state university to identify if any change in students' projects had occurred as a result of faculty who integrated issues of social justice into the curriculum. Results of this study indicated that students produced more social justice action research projects after faculty imbued their course syllabi with issues of social justice than before they did. Thus, this study suggests that in order to lead for social justice, students must have the opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge and skills throughout their preparation program.

Another way university professors who teach in the college of education can influence how teachers move towards an inclusive environment is by focusing less on standards in education as an absolutely necessity for school improvement. Meier (2000) argued that standards are not conducive to learning:

The purpose of education in a democracy is to break down barriers, to overcome obstacles, to open doors, minds, and possibilities. Education is empowering and enabling; it points to strength, to critical capacity, to thoughtfulness and expanding capabilities; it leads to an ability to work, to contribute, to participate. It aims at something deeper and richer than simply imbibing and accepting

existing codes and conventions, acceding to whatever is before us. The larger goal of education is to assist people in seeing the world through their own eyes, interpreting and analyzing through their own experiences and thinking, feeling themselves capable of representing, manifesting, or even, if they choose, transforming all that is before them. (p. 67)

As Meier suggests, the education one receives should help one be critical of the system one is born into. However, the educator preparation Ms. Smith received did not do this. As such, it is my contention that people are complex and dynamic, so it is ironic to think people, particularly teachers, are predictable beings who should be held against specific criteria in order to be deemed effective/ineffective. For example, when preparation programs advance toolkits, checklists, and best practices as a way of knowing, preparation programs privilege a neoliberal epistemology that hinders progress of individuals who do not meet a standard (Biesta, 2011) by trapping people in binaries. This is socially unjust. For example, Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) challenged the orthodoxy of teacher preparation as it perpetuates neoliberal reform in other countries with similar school systems as that of the United States':

Working for a more socially just public education will require a reconceptualization of the role of teachers and the consequent redevelopment of school structures and processes to accommodate this in ways that will challenge the perceptions of students, community, teachers, principals/headmasters, government and their agencies regarding the norms that have come to exist through neoliberal reform. (p. 337)

Instead of preparing individuals for the role of principal and superintendents to look for specific standards in teachers and preparing teachers to enact standards in order to be considered “effective,” preparation programs can advance the idea that humans do not exist in binaries. Preparation programs can teach that one is never this/that, good/bad, effective/ineffective. One is always both at the same time. In essence, one is always swimming in between the binaries. However, Parish and Aquila (1996) maintained that educator preparation did not subscribe to these ideas. Rather, “structured relationships in schools, as well as in the colleges of education that prepare teachers for their craft, create a culture in which it is clear what ‘teacher work’ is” (p. 301). As a result of this phenomenon, the norms of teacher craft have become so standardized that one is able to identify a “culture of schooling.”

On the other hand, Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) argued that teachers are leaders and leaders are teachers despite the discourses that inform practice, which preserve binary logic such as leader/follower, leadership/management, superior/subordinate. Essentially, the terms, *leader* and *teacher* are “seductively elusive” and “ubiquitous” (p. 331). Again, university professors who teach in the college of education can influence how teachers move towards an inclusive environment is by focusing less on standards. Standards are articulated expectations in terms of absolutes that sets up individuals for failure since humans do not exist in binaries.

Rather than prepare educators and school leaders through standards for school improvement, Slater (2008) turned his classroom into a collaborative action research laboratory for graduate students in his university’s educational leadership program so that they understood the complexity of educational environments and of individuals.

Graduate students worked closely with surrounding school educators to identify an area of concern and approach it through action research as a way to move towards school improvement. Action research, a distributive problem solving research method, helps practitioners identify concerns specific to the needs of students on their campus without relying on standards. Slater's students in the university program benefited from the experience and so did the schools that participated. Slater (2008) maintained:

Educational leadership programs can contribute to graduate students', schools', and universities' understanding of action research by making participation in action research part of the graduate curriculum. The best approach is not only to tell graduate students about action research but also to involve them in doing action research. Action research, in my opinion, also is appropriate as the basis of master's and doctoral dissertations. Action research as master's or dissertation research matters not just to the graduate student but to the practitioners who both participate in the research and become a natural audience for the research report. Action research theses and dissertations can benefit real schools in the real world, not just sit on library shelves. (p. 56-57)

Like Slater, Nelson (2008) also facilitated action research with a school. As a new faculty member at the time, Nelson recalled the struggle she endured personally and professionally during the time she served as a *critical friend* to a school enacting action research. She recalled, "My role was not to be the expert who comes in to save the day. My role was to help the team develop the knowledge and skills they needed so *they* could lead the initiative" (p. 36). As the school moved forward, Nelson became less part of the work. The outcome of this was not only that the teachers and principals who participated



found an area of concern specific to their school and found their own solutions to it, but that Nelson, a professor of education, learned that school improvement was a difficult and complex task. The experiences of Nelson and Slater illustrate that university professors do play an extremely important role in helping educators solve some of the most perplexing issues facing schools today, including how to move towards an inclusive environment. The experiences of these exemplars are just two of many more that professors may use to improve their own practice at the university level.

**Implication for practice.** Similarly, current public school teachers may also use the experience of other practitioner to help them move their schools towards an inclusive environment. Teachers interested in improving their practice may learn from the experiences of exemplars in teaching such as those documented by Ladson-Billings (1994) in *Dreamkeepers*. The Dreamkeepers, five African-American and three White teachers, made classrooms inclusive for African-American students. In addition to documenting how teachers worked with racial minorities and the efforts teacher made to include students, Nieto (2007) has also documented how teachers have addressed other intersections of differences too.

Over a span of thirty years, Nieto worked with teachers who were committed to social justice and embodied particular behaviors characteristic of what she conceptualized as *teacher leadership*. Teacher leaders are those who practice: believing in, and advocating for, public education; challenging conventional wisdom; improvising; modeling social justice; using power inside and outside the classroom. While these traits are broadly defined, Nieto suggests that practitioners can foster certain conditions to enact teacher leadership: respect and support from administration and colleagues; the

time and resources to practice leadership; the opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues. Nieto argued that learning from the stories of teacher leaders will afford one who is interested in becoming a social change agent the opportunity to become a “moral compass for the nation” (p. 307).

Similarly, Stillman (2009) illustrated how three teachers, who were prepared through three different university preparation programs with a focus on equity, negotiated the tension between curriculum standards and their agency as critical educators. Three teachers explained how their training in *Critical Professional Practice* illuminated their ability to “take back the standards” rather than blindly follow them. Teachers enacted *knowledge integration* or combined the expectation from the standard with their own expectation of technical and ideological knowledge base. This helped teachers modify standards into culturally relevant ones. Teachers also maintained an *authentic purpose*, which was the ability to articulate their reasons for becoming teachers and choosing to work in underserved communities. Also, teachers employed *strategic negotiation* with local and district administrators and officials to convey that even without a rigid curriculum, students were able to meet the standard.

While not every practitioner may have gone through a teacher education program that observed social justice, teachers have potential to be powerful agents of change. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) maintained that practitioners in practice are in a position to use their agency as a catalyst for activism: “Teachers are in control of their work with an agenda to not only work for children in their immediate care but also having a wider social justice imperative” (p. 336). Unfortunately though, very little literature exists on the work these types of teacher leaders are doing. According to Yendol-Silva, Gimbert,

and Nolan (2000), missing from the literature are the voices of teachers and administrators who have enacted the third wave of teacher leadership. While the first wave of teacher leadership consisted of those teachers who fulfilled formal management roles such as department head and team leader, the second wave of teacher leadership was characterized by teachers who provided pedagogical expertise as specialists out of the classroom. The third way of teacher leadership, as suggested by findings from Yendol-Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan's study, is characterized by teachers who lead from within the classroom and "navigate the structures of the school, nurture relationships, encourage professional growth, help others with change, and challenge the status quo by raising children's voices" (p. 12).

Considering the challenges teachers may face in enacting teacher leadership in an age of accountability, scholars have also conceptualized ways teachers may still make revolutions in education. For example, Wood and Lieberman (2010) suggest that the principles of The National Writing Project serve as a professional development model teachers can adopt in their own daily professional lives to improve their practice. Wood and Lieberman argue that if practitioners think of themselves as authors, it becomes necessary to then think of teaching as writing, which is a recursive process of constructing knowledge that is worthy of being publicized and scrutinized:

The principle of revision reminds teachers that good teaching is never finished or accomplished but always in need of improvement and refinement. The principle of obtaining feedback helps teachers to recognize their need for audiences to offer both encouragement and critique. The principle of publication imbues teachers with the responsibility to make public what they know and learn. The best

teachers recognize the value of refusing to cling to final versions of good practice and, consequently, hold their work up for public scrutiny. (p. 271)

The National Writing Project, one of the older teacher networks, has proven to be a vehicle for promoting voice, ownership, and agency in practice. Thus, the idea of teachers working together in the name of critique is not new, but it may be uncommon considering the public scrutiny of one's work that is involved. Yet, time after time, the National Writing Project's principles have served as a model of professional development for many teachers who are interested in informing their practice.

In addition to the possibility of adopting the principles of The National Writing Project as a model for professional development, teacher can also take advantage of other professional development opportunities such as those offered by university-school partnerships. For example, California State University, San Marcos and Universidad Iberoamericana-Tijuana hosted an exchange between teachers on both sides of a border to better prepare them for helping immigrant students on both sides of the border. Reyes and Garza (2009) examined this work to determine the impact, if any, of the geographic area and the socio-cultural and political contexts of the border on border teachers' philosophy of education and instructional practices. Their study suggested that when teacher on both sides of the board collaborated to help immigrant students feel included, the teachers contributed to *border pedagogy*, a significant type of pedagogy educators along the border used to foster a multicultural understanding of students.

Teachers on both sides agreed that while they wanted to help immigrant students, specific conditions on both sides made it difficult. However, the teachers agreed that having the opportunity to interact with teachers from across the border in border

pedagogy activities (conferences, institutes, workshops) better prepared them to help students. As a result of participating in this form of professional development, border teachers in this study felt more equipped to help immigrant students than they had previously. As such, teachers who are continually proactive in their quest for school improvement can make a significant difference when they work together with colleagues who are also committed to helping students who are different, even if the colleagues are in completely different countries.

Another way in-service teachers may inherit an equity lens, especially for deconstructing deficit thinking, is through Garcia and Guerra's (2004) conceptual framework. Through a diversity project and education research organization, Garcia and Guerra have helped teachers problematize deficit thinking through staff development. They have five underlying assumptions that guide their work:

Deficit thinking permeates social society; schools and teachers mirror these beliefs; professional development in diversity is not just for White teachers; intercultural communication permeates every aspect of schooling; cultural sensitivity and awareness do not automatically result in equity practices; and professional development activities must systemically and explicitly link equity knowledge to the classroom.

Qualitative data collected before and after staff development activities suggested that educators did move towards an additive view of students and family diversity after participating in this particular professional development.

Furthermore, the existence of deficit thinking in schools is not new considering the historic contribution of anthropological studies in education that has shown how it has

permeated schools over the years. However, teachers who employ agency can transform schools into democratic entities. According to Erickson (1987), as the anthropology of education became a specific discipline in the mid 1960s, its adherents noted the ethnocentrism of the cultural deficit explanation was leading to the formation of absolute spaces. What was equally appalling at the time to anthropologists was how attractive public school educators found the cultural deficit explanation. While critiques by other anthropologists did surface to problematize this explanation, public school educators found no interest in them because they were frustrated by their difficulties in working with minority children. In essence, the cultural deficit explanation justified the failure of minority students for educators as something outside the school, not inside it. Moreover, since as long as anthropology of education became a field on its own, members of it have observed factors inside and outside of the school as potential reasons for the low school achievement of minority students. Yet, Erickson maintained that such previous ideas such as the communication process explanation and the perceived labor market explanation were helpful to some extent in order to understand what was going on in schools, but they were limited. One needed to understand the politics and culture of school failure and success together. Erickson considered these explanations as implicitly deterministic, which left hardly any room for human agency.

Thus, in order to transform schools into democratic entities so that all children could have an equal opportunity, anthropologists within education charged educators with making progressive choices in their own lives while working for social justice in the wider society too. Educators can begin making changes in the schools they teach in, for a

school is one of the areas people can work to change since it acts as a distributor of knowledge and power in society:

Hegemonic practices are not only ramified throughout the general society and in the local community outside of school, they are alive and well inside the classroom. They permeate and frame the school experience of students who are members of stigmatized social groups. These practices are enacted by particular social actors. Domination and alienation of the oppressed does not simply happen by the anonymous working of social structural forces. People do it. It is the result of choice (not necessarily deliberate) to cooperate with the reigning ideological definitions of what minority students are, what curriculum is, what good teaching is. (p. 352-353)

As Erickson suggests, people have the agency to challenge the dominant group's tendency to control power and knowledge and the structures the dominant group builds that perpetuates oppression. The "reigning ideological definitions" of people, places, and things within schools creates absolute thinking inside the classroom where students are either boys/girls, where teachers are ineffective/effective, and where curriculum is standardized. Writing on this matter more than twenty years ago, Erickson's ideas are still relevant today considering the socio-political environment that condones discrimination against students who identify with difference.

Participating in professional development opportunities and learning from the experiences of other practitioner may help one move his/her schools towards an inclusive environment. While there are various practical challenges to this equity work and many teachers may not have had any exposure to issues of social justice, teacher leadership and

teacher agency as a vehicle for social change offers promise for today's practitioners wishing to make a difference.

### **Areas for Further Research**

My intention in conducting this study was to explore one teacher's experience creating inclusive environments for students who identify with differences in order to develop a more critical understanding of the work of social justice teachers. This critical understanding is important to a development of a heuristic that informs teachers and school leaders about the work of turning absolute space into an inclusive environment. Specifically, I intended to contribute to the scholarly literature on teacher leadership, university preparation, social justice, and queer theory. While I was able to contribute some theory regarding the possibility of inclusive environments as a never fully achievable construct, I believe my contribution is limited because this is a single case study of one teacher in a specific context.

Therefore, I propose that we must continue to examine the socio-political environment and the hard work of educators who attempt to move towards inclusive environments in the midst of the hegemony. Specifically, my research suggests that we ought to continue to highlight and support the well-intentioned work of social justice educator while also not forgetting to critique it in order to continuously lessen the impact of hegemonic practices and absolute thinking that permeates the schools intended to help children. In addition, my research suggests that authentic care and aesthetic care are two present forces that influence teacher's work. Further research is needed to determine how teachers negotiate the tensions between the two in the age of accountability. Finally, my research suggests that we need to consider listening more to the voices of students who



identify with differences in order welcome intersectionality, especially students whose differences is missing in the literature.

## **Conclusion**

This study was a qualitative single case study in which I engaged one teacher in south Texas and three of her former students to investigate how one teacher created inclusive environments for students who identified with differences. Considering my purpose, the project was successful. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis I described what an inclusive classroom looked like for the teacher. I also determined how this teacher understood the intersections of differences, which resulted in a heuristic that can inform the practice of other educators. Further, I determined the conditions that enabled and hindered the teacher in moving towards an inclusive environment in the classroom, the strategies the teacher employed in moving towards an inclusive environment, and the ways in which the classroom was not inclusive.

In addition to this investigation, I also provided implication for research and practice. The role of the university professor is a very important one that carries with it the responsibility of helping to develop further teachers and school leaders. Current in-service practitioners are also very valuable, for they are the ones who are in direct contact with the students. I would like to conclude this study by saying that I have written my magnum opus, but I will not. Instead, I will conclude by saying that I have begun a journey not only to highlight my own identity and the differences I exhibit, but I also have begun a journey to highlight the identity and the differences that others may have too. This journey will not be easy, and I predict this work will be contested. However, it is work that I must do if schools are to become sites of equity.

As I reflect upon this study and the future work before me, I cannot help but to feel a frustrated and disappointed with myself and the world we occupy. One may argue the greatest achievement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that we put a man on the moon. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I wonder what we possible could boast about. The newest trend in cellphone technology? I think not. We find ourselves in one of the greatest moments in time, yet I am reminded by war and hate crimes that it is also a hostile moment in time for people who are different. While this dissertation is only a piece of the puzzle, there is still work to be done so that all children can have an equal opportunity. I ask you the reader: How will you help? Thus, I conclude my study by echoing the immortal call for action of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

## **EPILOGUE**

It has been four years since I was last a classroom teacher; therefore, when I began looking for a participant, I wanted to select someone who had significant experience in K-12 schools and who could be readily available to meet with me. Aside from using other criteria to select my participant, I felt that if I worked with an acquaintance, I could perhaps answer my research question to the fullest extent possible because I would report less espoused values and capture a more authentic account. I thought whichever acquaintance I selected would surely comply with my every interview and observation request as well as my request to review personal documents. Conducting research with an acquaintance sounded well in theory to me when I proposed my research study to my dissertation committee, especially because I did not have to spend too much time building rapport with someone. Instead, I anticipated spending more time collecting data. Also, working with an acquaintance was important to me because I did not want to be a creepy researcher in some unknown place or unknown person's classroom searching for answers to my questions. I thought that perhaps working with an acquaintance would allow me to write an accurate description because Ms. Smith was my close friend who did not have to act differently around me. I wanted for the research process to be as much of a learning journey for not only me, but also for my friend.

For this dissertation research, I invited Ms. Smith, a veteran teacher, who I respect and admire. Prior to participating in this research, Ms. Smith and I worked together on

many other projects as both friends and colleagues. Over the past seven years, she has not only been a friend, but she has also served as a mentor. I was particularly interested in exploring Ms. Smith's work because I witnessed on a few occasions many of Ms. Smith's former students approach her in public and articulate their appreciation for her talent, care, or personality. I observed these students share with great enthusiasm with Ms. Smith where they worked and what they studied in college. There is no doubt in my mind that Ms. Smith had influenced many lives. I was also intrigued because Ms. Smith had hundreds of pictures students had given her, thank you cards and letters from students and parents, and newspaper articles, certificates and awards that documented her work. In order to explore her work further, especially her equity lens, I invited Ms. Smith to participate in my research study. I figured she was doing something right to help students. I wanted to figure out what that something was so that I could provide an additional heuristic to inform educators.

Over the course of the study, I interviewed, observed, and reviewed some of Ms. Smith's own personal documents. I came into her house, her classroom, and back into her life as an obtrusive friend because I was simultaneously a researcher and a friend. I suspect this process was fun and exhausting for both of us because the inquiry afforded us an opportunity to catch up on the last four years we had missed, but it also was emotionally draining. The experience was rewarding in many ways; however, conducting research with Ms. Smith also proved to be a challenge.

### **Challenges**

One of the ways doing research with a friend proved to be a challenge for me was because I perceived Ms. Smith did not always cooperate. At first I thought that because

Ms. Smith was my friend, perhaps it was easier for her to say no when I asked her to keep a journal during the study. In an effort to collect diverse sources of data, I asked Ms. Smith to write in a journal a few times a week. I figured this would not be a problem because I thought it was an easy task. While Ms. Smith believed it was a good idea too, she confessed that she had too much work to do and that she probably would not be able to keep a journal. Initially, I did not take her too serious because I felt that since Ms. Smith was my friend she would eventually comply with my request. To my dismay, Ms. Smith did not keep a journal. As I result, I was bothered.

However, rather than give up completely on the request, I continued to try my best throughout the study to encourage Ms. Smith to document her reflections and thoughts in a journal so that I could include them in the write up of the case study. Again, Ms. Smith reported feeling overwhelmed with the demands of teaching and did not keep a journal. One day, as I was conducting observations, I saw Ms. Smith's desk full of papers to grade. It was then that I felt foolish because I remembered the demands of teaching. Also, I realized Ms. Smith was already cooperating by participating in my study. I realized that could not be angry with my friend. Instead, I was disappointed at myself for automatically expecting Ms. Smith, my friend, to comply with my demands.

In essence, a challenge for me throughout the study was not an uncooperative friend, but it was my privilege as a researcher. The power I automatically had as a researcher helped me perceive that Ms. Smith was uncooperative. However, I remembered the purpose of my research and that I wanted to learn from the participant. As a result, I diminished the power dynamic between us and accepted that my friend could not maintain a journal.

This process was not easy, and it did not happen overnight. For example, on many occasions Ms. Smith and I arranged to meet for interviews and observations. When I arrived to meet with Ms. Smith I often found myself waiting for long periods of time because she was not ready to sit and talk with me. At first, I was disturbed by this, but then I remembered that I was there as both a learner, researcher, and as a friend. Because I valued my friendship with Ms. Smith, I learned to be patient and to be flexible. I originally did not have these skills, especially because I had deadlines. Yet, overtime, I developed the skills and the motivation to accept Ms. Smith as the expert.

Another challenge for me thought the study was that I felt subconsciously obligated to be nice rather than honest when I wrote the description of the data. I suppose I did this because I did not want to judge Ms. Smith's work. As a result of this subconscious desire to remain loyal to my friend by not representing Ms. Smith in the worst light, I found myself ignoring the not so pleasant details of what I originally recorded in my interviews and observation notes. It was not until I attempted to write up my case that I realized my case study did not reflect an accurate representation of my participant. As a result, I could not answer my research question based on the data I had reported. I realized this happened because I was only using the most favorable data to answer my research questions. I realized I needed to not only discuss the details that described Ms. Smith in the best light, but more importantly, also discuss the details that described Ms. Smith as an imperfect human being. To do so, I transcribed my interviews again and retyped my notes. It was then that I observed I had subconsciously left out many notes and valuable quotes simply because I did not want to portray my participant as a villain. While this cost me more time and effort, I realized thereafter that going back

and retracing my steps was time well spent because my write up should not be about be about conveying only the nice part of the study. It should be about conveying whatever is going to help us understand the complexity of moving schools forward. As such, the challenge for me was accepting the necessity to provide a critique, not a judgment, of Ms. Smith's work.

### **Rewards**

Despite the challenges I encountered while doing research with a friend, the research process afforded Ms. Smith and I many rewards too. For example, the nature of the research process allowed Ms. Smith and I to reacquaint ourselves. After I had moved away from Rio Vista in 2008, Ms. Smith and I lost touch. When I invited her to participate in the study, I felt we could recapture the time we missed. As such, I gathered the data necessary to answer my research questions in the most unconventional way. For instance, we began all our interviews in the classroom, but we always ended them over dinner that same evening. I originally thought we would use Ms. Smith's classroom to conduct all the research and that I would keep the study very formal, but because we were friends many interview and observation sessions were informal.

For example, during the inquiry process, I learned much more than I bargained for about Ms. Smith. While I did know most of Ms. Smith's family members, I did not know anything about her family history. It felt great to learn about Ms. Smith's family because we became closer. As Ms. Smith recalled some of the family history, Ms. Smith began to cry. Before I knew it, I cried too. Sharing stories each of us had helped us both connect once again. We also explored each other's perceptions regarding sensitive topics like religion, politics, sexuality, and immigration. I did not think these were not easy to

discuss, but I learned to listen to Ms. Smith and appreciate her perspective, including the different views we each possessed.

Incidentally, many of the interviews between Ms. Smith and I were over two to three hours long because we discussed the study and then sometimes moved off topic and discussed something irrelevant to the study. One of the most memorable experiences of this was when I was heard the audio of the interview. As I listened to some of the interviews, I noticed that when I paused to take notes, I heard Ms. Smith hum to the tune of a song that was playing in the restaurant. This was interesting to hear because it suggested the informal nature of the meeting. Also, when I heard Ms. Smith hum, it brought back many memories of when I used to hang out with Ms. Smith on a daily basis to vent about work or to simply have fun. This was a bitter-sweet memory because while it helped me remember the life I left behind to pursue a doctoral degree.

In addition to all the time we spent together investigating her work and her life, we also spent a great amount of time discussing my life and my current work. I asked Ms. Smith to read chapter one of my dissertation so we could discuss it. This chapter not only was a way for Ms. Smith to know more about the study because it was a summary of it, but it was also a way for her to learn more about how I personally identified with the research. In this chapter, I included a narrative of how I was alienated on account of my personal difference in the elementary and middle schools I attended. This was emotionally draining as it was refreshing. Our dialogue helped me understand Ms. Smith's perception of me as a person who identified with difference, and it also strengthened our bond as educators, friends, and individuals who each identify with difference. Informing Ms. Smith about my past experience was a little embarrassing at



first because I am still a little subconscious about being made fun of for being different. However, I overcame that anxiety because the chapter afforded me the ability to teach Ms. Smith something about me she did not know before. The exchange we had shortly after she read my story indicated to me that Ms. Smith encouraged my work and did care about making a difference in students' lives. By facilitating a reciprocity of teaching and learning, Ms. Smith and I developed a deeper respect and appreciation for one another than we had before because we were able to explore the trials and tribulations each of us had overcome and are still fighting. Now that we each know more about each other, it has helped to solidify our bond as friends and as individuals who identify with difference and who are trying to move towards inclusive environments for public school students who identify with difference.

After completing this study, I believe Ms. Smith and I will continue to be great friends. In fact, because I believe Ms. Smith and I work well together and because I value and acknowledge her work, I would like to elicit her reaction to this dissertation and invite her to co-author future work with me so that we can explore our work as educators aiming to make a difference.

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## **VITA**

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