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How do Teachers Understand and Act on policy Directives to Close the Gender Achievement Gap in Writing Present in State Test Scores?

Michael Stanley

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HOW DO TEACHERS UNDERSTAND AND ACT ON POLICY DIRECTIVES TO CLOSE THE GENDER ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN WRITING PRESENT IN STATE TEST SCORES?

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2008
DEDICATION

for my family
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I never would have been able to complete this dissertation without the support of a whole host of talented people, to whom I am ever grateful.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined how a group of 9, predominately white, middle-school writing teachers thought about struggling student writers and made sense of national and district policy mandates to close the racial and gender achievement gaps present in state test scores. Data from focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews revealed findings about the teachers’ interactions with school leadership, how they understood and acted upon achievement gaps in writing, and their collaboration as a team of educators. Confusion and frustration typified the teachers’ interactions with school leadership as a number of top-down mandates through Professional Learning Teams and disappointing interactions regarding discipline issues failed to support teachers and seemed to run counter to the stated policy goals of closing the achievement gap. Similarly, lacking a coherent message from the leadership, teachers turned to their own conceptions of the role of teachers and education as they struggled to confront the achievement gap in writing. Here, the research participants sought to reframe the gap
discourse in broader terms, yet failed to directly address the role of white privilege that operated in the group. These themes intersected in the group’s discussion about collaboration. While, at the end of the project, participants clearly desired greater collaboration among their team of writing teachers, they also indicated that the school’s tracking system, which impacted both teachers and students, presented daunting challenges to deeper teamwork.

The researcher placed these findings within context of the literature in a number of fields, including the gender achievement gap, the teaching of writing, teacher perception of policy, as well as supportive leadership styles, school discipline, critiques of the gap discourse, the role of white privilege, collaboration, and tracking. Ultimately, the findings pointed to the importance of more reflective, collegial conversations—among teachers, as well as between teachers and administrators. The researcher concludes with an argument for the importance of helping teachers develop the capacity to address how issues of identity impact pedagogy, and suggests that the recursive cycles of practitioner action research present one possible way to build this capacity, enhance collaboration, and improve practice towards the goal of heightening student performance.
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TABLE 4: *CALCULATION OF GOODNESS-OF-FIT $\chi^2$ FOR OBSERVED RACE AND GENDER FREQUENCIES IN AIM* ................................................................................................................................................. 145
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

“Excellence and Equity” was the message hammered home during the new teacher orientation my first day as an employee of Aspen Hills School District (pseudonym). The confident noble ring of this short phrase quickly became a sort of subconscious mantra in the early days of the fresh school year; all the inspirational PowerPoint presentations and team-building activities taking place during that time hummed with this intentional policy focus.

The district-level focus only sharpened at my school site. The School Improvement Plan (SIP) for 2007-2008, which underwent a number of revisions to incorporate more vigorous goals, stated an “excellence” goal that “the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced in writing will increase from 73% to 83% over the next two years as measured by the CSAP” and an “equity” goal that “to close the achievement gap in writing between males and females, the percentages of male students scoring proficient or advanced will increase from 66% to 76% over the next two years as measured by the CSAP.” Employed as a seventh and eighth grade writing teacher at the school, these SIP goals held a particular relevance for me. Given my role and the school’s stated priorities, the challenges of the young school year snapped into focus: I was charged, along with other teachers at my school, to “close the achievement gap” present in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) data.

During an early school-wide faculty meeting focused on the district’s performance on the yearly Colorado state assessment, the school leadership shared data that demonstrated a measurable difference in CSAP scores in writing between students at my middle school along racial (Figure 1) and gender (Figure 2) lines. While this data
showed that a gap exists between Latino and Black students and their Asian and White peers, the policy makers at my school, as the SIP goals state, determined that the gender gap in writing deserved the most attention—perhaps due to the relatively low numbers of students of color enrolled in the school.

*Figure 1. CSAP Achievement Gap by Ethnicity at Research Site Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient*
My middle school’s focus on closing the gender achievement gap in CSAP writing scores by raising the achievement of male students represents one example of a larger national and international concern about the performance of boys in school—particularly with literacy skills such as reading and writing. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, girls outperform boys in reading at 4th grade, 8th grade, and 12th grade. The gaps between girls and boys are smaller in the early grades and get larger in the later grades (Mead, 2006). Debate about the nature of this gender gap, its causes, and what it means for boys’ and girls’ education has been hot since the 1990’s, with various camps staking out their rhetoric about the “plight of boys” (Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001, p. 1).
My personal position as a new teacher in a large school only served to compound the daunting challenge to close the gender achievement gap in writing. More than a straightforward matter of curriculum, finding a way into my new role necessitated reaching out to my new administrators and other writing teachers on staff as I strove to form connections with colleagues. This component of the study connects to another overarching problematic issue in education: the retention of quality teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, across the nation 9.3% of public school teachers leave before they complete their first year in the classroom and over 1/5 of public school teachers leave their positions within the first three years of teaching. Moreover, nearly 30% of teachers leave the profession within 5 years of entry, with an even higher attrition rate exists in schools serving disadvantaged populations (Certo & Fox, 2007). Research in this area highlights the importance of creating conditions in the working environment that foster teacher retention such as opportunities for collegial interaction, professional development, participation in decision-making, and support for student discipline (Certo & Fox, 2007; Ingersoll, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

My purpose for this inquiry was twofold. First, this inquiry aimed at exploring how other teachers think about their struggling student writers. As stated above, while performance gaps exist in local, state, and national data, the debate about this issue is complex and confusing. Given the wide-ranging views on the gender gap, it is necessary to start with how teachers, the people on the “front-line” in addressing the gap on a day-to-day basis, understand this issue. Here, this study provides a valuable opportunity to see how people on the frontline understand school and district-wide directives set by policy
makers. How teachers conceive their role within policy set from above and what they do in the classroom is ultimately the bottom line for the school’s SIP goals.

The second purpose for this study examined the process of writing teachers thinking collaboratively about their practice. This aim sought to add to the first by finding out how teachers act on this issue.

These two purposes grew out of a more personal and pressing need I felt to better understand how my peers make sense of this daunting charge to close the gender achievement gap in writing. Put simply, as a teacher new to the school and the field of writing instruction, I wanted to find out how others approached this problem. Beyond this imminently practical concern, acquiring a detailed understanding of how teachers make sense of the gender achievement gap in writing by talking to colleagues about their thoughts and strategies they actively used to address this issue provided a solid foundation upon which to build this study. In this sense, the aims of the study were geared to allow me to get a sense of the way things stood with this issue at my research site.

The connection to teachers and policy represented a more abstract, but no less important, interest. As a classroom teacher, my experience includes a constant stream of policy directives passed down from decision makers that I have been asked to carry out. Since teachers’ understanding of the gender achievement gap in writing is intimately bound up with the “excellence and equity” policies from above, it is necessary to explore how teachers make sense of the district and school administration directive. Policy is made real through the actions of those who put it into practice. As Franzak (2006) states, policymakers need to see teachers as “key policy players” (p. 236). Exploring how
teachers understand the policies handed to them can help lead to more effective classroom practices aligned with identified priorities.

**Significance of the Study**

This study has the potential to make significant contributions on three main levels. First, in the most abstract level, this study promises to extend educational research regarding teachers’ understanding of the gender achievement gap in writing and the specific strategies they use to address this gap. On this abstract level, this study also aims to deepen research on how teachers make sense of policy directives sent down by decision-makers higher-up in the school hierarchy. Second, this study holds local significance—what Watkins (1991) calls “relevancy” or “applicability” (cited in Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007)—to the context of the research site. That is, the findings are important in that the study should help the participants and others in the school reframe and expand their understanding of how the school is working on closing the gender achievement gap in writing, fueling future cycles of investigation and informed action. Lastly, on the most personal level, the transformative nature of insider research holds practical significance in helping me improve my own teaching practice and nurturing the professional collaborative relationships I experience with my colleagues.
PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

Beginning with the two-pronged goals of exploring how other writing teachers made sense of the policy directive to close the achievement gap in writing and examining how my colleagues thought of themselves as a team of educators, I turned to the literature to search for insights that would help frame my inquiry. In this initial stage of consulting the literature, I focused my attention on understanding the gender achievement gap, the unique demands of teaching writing, and teachers’ perception of policy. Although I returned to the literature as I wrestled with the findings that emerged from the research group, this preliminary literature review provided a firm foundation from which I then designed and refined the method and data collection strategies of the study.

The Gender Achievement Gap

*Historical Context*

To make sense of the current concerns about under-achieving boys, I conducted a review of the literature to understand the historical context of this issue. A number of educational researchers (Maynard, 2002; Measor & Sikes, 1992; Cohen, 1998; Spring, 2005) have sketched the long history of education and views of masculinity and femininity.

Maynard (2002) describes the “Victorian values” of the educational system in the U.K. and the U.S. before the 1870s that socialized young people to believe that “males were superior to [females] in every way—physically, intellectually, morally and socially” (p. 10). Within the “separate spheres” of the public male world and the enclosed domestic domain of the female, women’s role in life remained confined to the service of men.
Indeed, as Measor and Sikes (1992) point out, the assumed mental strain associated with female over-education (read anything that extended beyond the skills necessary for marriage and motherhood) was thought to cause infertility.

The hold of Victorian values changed somewhat due to the challenges from the women’s movement in the early twentieth century. Equal access to education for boys and girls became the focus during these years. Arnot et al. (1999) explains that despite this new sensibility, society did not expect this equality would follow on into the world of work.

Beyond the early efforts of the women’s movement, the social changes brought on by the Great Depression and World War II fundamentally altered the Victorian ideal that men and women inhabited separate spheres. The pressure for women to enter the workforce during the war years and the counter pressure following the war for women to return to their supporting roles as full-time wives and mothers fueled the creation of new ideas about education and concerns about the women’s role in childrearing. Separation from the mother was viewed as potentially damaging “deprivation” (Maynard, 2002, p. 11). Despite these new ideas, the number of women in the workforce continued to grow in the U.S. and the U.K. throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation movements worked to challenge attitudes that continued to deny equal educational opportunities for boys and girls.

In 1992, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) published their report entitled “How Schools Shortchange Girls.” This report and the following work of researchers such as Carol Gilligan began to highlight how American schools have historically overlooked girls. “How Schools Shortchange Girls” aimed to ensure
fairness and equal access to resources for girls and shared findings of girls deferring to more assertive boys, of teachers calling on boys more frequently, and of girls following courses of study that led away from the math and sciences (AAUW, 1992; Reichert, 2000). While the work of the AAUW and other researchers did much to cast light on concerns about girls’ underachievement, Taylor (2001) and others view the body of work emerging in the 1990s as the first few shots in the so-called “gender wars” (Taylor, 2001, ¶ 6).

Foster, Kimmel and Skelton (2001) track the growth of “anti-feminist and backlash discourses” (p. 12) that soon began to ask “What about the boys?” Indeed, some voices went so far as to claim that school had declared a virtual war against boys. Gurian (1998), for example, made the case that the anti-boy environment of elementary schools were “feminizing boys” (Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001). Similarly, Gurian and Stevens (2005) argued that the “male learning style” was in opposition with “many current educational practices” prompting the need for “new methods, strategies, and teaching techniques that have been proven to work in schools and classrooms that educate boys” (p. 9). These emerging discourses tended to cast the interests of girls and boys as pitted against each other rather than attempting to find common ground and recognize that many of the conditions that cause girls to struggle in the classroom are the same ones that cause boys to struggle (Taylor, 2001). As William Pollack, author of “Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myth of Boyhood,” put it, the voices concerned about gender and education seemed “to be debating who has it worse, boys or girls...[even though] we know in a way that both boys and girls are being shortchanged in their education and in societal support” (Taylor, 2001, ¶ 5).
Dominant Discourses

State and national assessment data provide evidence that a gender gap in writing exists. However, whatever clarity this data brings to the issue breaks down as different groups debate the possible causes of the gap and what it means for the education of young people. Epstein et al. (1998) identified three dominant discourses present in the debate about boys and educational achievement: “poor boys”; “failing schools, failing boys”; and “boys will be boys.”

The “poor boys” discourse positions boys as victims of certain society ills—particularly fatherless families, female-dominated schooling, and feminism (Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001). Put differently, this discourse seeks to blame women for the failure of boys. As Epstein et al. (1998) states, “If it is not women teachers, it is mothers; if not mothers, it is feminists; most often it is a combination” (p.7). My search of the literature has not yielded any scholarly articles on the gender gap in writing that take this tack, yet this viewpoint certainly exists in popular media. For example, the comments of George Gilder in the National Review—“Why would any self-respecting boy want to attend one of America’s increasingly feminized universities?”—rebound in depths of cyberspace and the blogosphere (see Kimmel, 2006 and Kline, 2006).

The “failing schools, failing boys” discourse focuses on the ineffectiveness of schools to produce high levels of literacy in students. As Foster, Kimmel and Skelton (2001) explain, the inadequate schools, rather than feminism, are to blame for the failing performance of boys. Gurian and Stevens’ (2005) The Minds of Boys and Ralph Fletcher’s (2006) Boy Writers are good examples of this discourse. Gurian and Stevens finger the industrialization of the classroom and the consequent erosion of the role of the
family in education for what they term the current “crisis in male education” (p. 22). The crisis for boys and schools is a result of parents giving away too much to institutions. Fletcher (2006) takes a similar, if somewhat less sweeping, approach. Rather than faulting the entire educational system, Fletcher offers many suggestions and curricular approaches to improve boys’ experiences in school. Here, Fletcher argues for allowing humor and being tolerant of some boys’ desire to write violent stories. The focus of this work is to help teachers make school and writing “boy-friendly.”

The last discourse identified by Epstein et al. (1998), “boys will be boys,” emphasizes stereotypical male behaviors and draws on biology and psychology to explain these traditional characteristics. Foster, Kimmel, and Skelton (2001) note a similarity between this discourse and the “poor boy” rhetoric in that they both tend to cast boys as victims because of the women’s movement’s success at “promoting the female over men and maleness, thus challenging traditional ways of being a man” (p. 5). Some of the work of Dr. Judith Klienfeld and other experts through the Boys’ Project typify this discourse. According to Viadero (2006), Klienfeld’s research, conducted through interviews with high school seniors, provides evidence that the poor performance of boys may be an indirect result of the advances of young women through the women’s movement. As Kleinfeld explained to Viadero in an email, “they [young men] no longer see themselves as the provider of the family, so who and what are they supposed to be?” (Viadero, 2006, ¶ 35).

Reichert and Hawley’s (2006) “Confronting the ‘Boy Problem’” also represents a sophisticated take on the “boys will be boys” discourse. Here, Reichert and Hawley never go so far as to plainly place the blame at the feet of women—indeed, they use feminist
methodologists such as Fine and Reinharz to make the case that researchers need to develop a new sensitivity to boys’ lives. Instead, they lament that many researchers “drawn to respond to boys’ educational problems have done so impelled by their own [biased] predispositions, detached from boys’ themselves” (p. 7). What is needed, they argue, is an “intellectual openness to boys themselves” (p. 7) and a greater understanding of how boys’ learn to “do gender” as a result of “schools’ gender curricula” (p. 6).

Each of these three dominant discourses implies a conceptual framework for correcting boys’ underachievement. Lingard and Douglas (1999) label this framework “recuperative masculinity.” As Foster, Kimmel and Skelton (2001) explain, “recuperative” strategies hinge on an underlying belief that “boys and girls are different but should be treated equally” (p. 5). Examples of these strategies include giving boys “high profile” roles in the classroom to encourage a positive attitude, incorporating opportunities for competition, using sports to motivate male learners, and—of particular relevance in my case—hiring more male teachers to provide boys with masculine role models (Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001). Maynard (2002), however, cites research that casts doubts about the effectiveness of these strategies. The voices questioning recuperative strategies wonder if these approaches might exacerbate poor male academic performances by encouraging students to embrace “hyper-masculinity” or “laddish” and “macho” behavior (Maynard, 2002; Reichert, Kuriloff, & Stoudt, 2007; Reichert, 2000; Myhill, 2002; Bleach, 1998; Phillips, 2000).

The “poor boys”; “failing schools, failing boys”; and “boys will be boys” discourses provide a useful sieve with which to sift the literature regarding the low academic performance of boys. However, my review of this material prompts me to
consider adding a fourth discourse to the list. To Epstein et al.’s (1998) list, I would suggest appending a “wrong crisis” category. This discourse attempts to undermine the popular notion of a “boy crisis” in education by re-framing the debate. Mead (2006) clearly exemplifies this rhetorical stance. “The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse,” opens her article, “it’s good news about girls doing better” (p. 3). Mead then goes on to state that in all but a few exceptions “American boys are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before” (p. 3). While several researchers take exception to her comments (Reichert & Hawley, 2006; Stotsky, 2006; Reichert, Kuriloff, & Stoudt, 2007), Mead’s remarks certainly aim at redirecting the tenor of the debate about the gender achievement gap. Similarly, Foster, Kimmel, and Skelton (2001) also fall within the “wrong crisis” discourse. Here, these authors claim that the “real boy crisis” is not one of academic failings at the hands of a “feminist-inspired agenda run amok,” but rather one of youth violence and the “cultural prescriptions that equate masculinity with the capacity for violence” (p. 16).

By the Numbers

Sara Mead (2006), in her study “The Truth about Boys and Girls,” carefully details evidence of the gender achievement gap using data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Despite its limitations (Applebee, 1994), the NAEP is the only existing national measure of boys and girls’ achievement over long periods of time. Mead’s study draws on the two NAEP tests of students at ages 9, 13, and 17: the “main NAEP” which includes U.S. students’ scores in reading, math and other subjects since the early 1990s and the “long-term trend NAEP” which has data on student performance since the early 1970s.
According to NAEP data, a clear gap exists between boys and girls in some subjects but not in others. Mead (2006) reports that boys outperform girls at all grade levels in math and science, but only by a small amount. However, girls outperform boys in reading and writing at all grade levels and by greater margins than boys outperform girls in math and science. Mead goes on to state that the existence of these trends “is nothing new” (p. 6); girls have outscored boys in reading since the beginning of the long-term NAEP.

When examining NAEP data regarding writing, it can be difficult to keep the different assessments and what they show straight. The long-term NAEP writing assessment started in 1984 and has presented students with the same writing tasks in the subsequent assessments (Ballator, Farnum, & Kaplan, 1999). Because the long-term NAEP compares performance on the same writing tasks, administered in identical fashion to comparable samples of students and yielding comparable scores, it provides a dependable view of student progress overtime. The main NAEP, however, first assessed writing in 1992 and then later adopted a new framework for the 1998, 2002, and 2007 assessments. While both the long-term NAEP and the framework for the main NAEP take aim at assessing the same key purposes of writing (narrative, informative, and persuasive), Ballator, Farnum, and Kaplan (2000) emphasize that the use of different writing prompts and other procedural differences from the long-term NAEP prevent any direct comparison between the results of the two tests. In the literature, the long-term NAEP data is most often used to provide information regarding the gender gap in reading, math, and science (see for example Mead, 2006; Stotsky, 2006; Campbell,
Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000), while the gender gap in writing is almost exclusively discussed in terms of the data from the main NAEP since 1998 (see Mead, 2006).

Given the importance of the main NAEP data on the issue of the gender achievement gap in writing, it is important to understand the strengths and limitations of this assessment. The strengths of the NAEP data are reflected in the pioneering collection and scoring from a representative sample of students extending back to 1969. However, it is important to appreciate that the framework of assessment has changed over the history of the NAEP. According to the NAEP’s National Assessment Governing Board (1998), the NAEP has “long struggled with the difficulties of writing assessment” (p. 3). The most recent framework, built on the foundations of the earlier 1992 framework developed through the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), follows six overarching objectives: 1) students should write for a variety of purposes, including narrative, informative, and persuasive; 2) students should write on a variety of tasks for many different audiences; 3) students should write from a variety of stimulus materials with various time constraints; 4) students should generate, draft, revise, and edit ideas in their writing; 5) students should display effective choices in their organization, use of supporting details, and appropriate conventions of written English; and 6) students should value writing as a communicative activity (1998, p. 5).

Responding to claims from many educators that the constraints of artificial testing situations limit the relevance of the test results, the main NAEP has extended the amount of time for writing tasks with 25 minutes per prompt and some 8th and 12th graders receiving a 50-minute writing task.
A sample writing prompt pulled from the main NAEP’s demonstration booklet for 12th grade writing (2007) asked students to explain what book they would save by memorization if they lived in a society where reading was not allowed. The accompanying sample of an “excellent” response features an essay about Herman Hesse’s *Demian*. The demo booklet highlights this piece for its “strong transitions…well-chosen details and precise word choices that support a sustained controlling idea” (p. 8).

Results for the most recent round of main NAEP writing assessments in 2007 (Figure 3) demonstrate the existence of the gender achievement gap. Examining this figure, one can note that the average scores of both male and female eighth-graders increased between 1998 and 2007. However, taking a closer look at the gaps in average writing scale scores by gender reveals that the gap has remained more or less unchanged during this time period with female students scoring, on average, about 20 points higher than males. A broader perspective of the gaps in average writing scale scores by gender across several grade levels (Figure 4) reveals that in 2002, female students scored 17 points higher than male students at grade 4, 21 points at grade 8, and 25 points at grade 12. The gap between twelfth-grade males and females increased by a statistically significant (p=.05) amount between 1998 and 2002. Recent data from the 2006 results of the Colorado state yearly assessment echoes the same trend (Morson & Mitchell, 2006).
Figure 3. Trend in 8th-grade NAEP writing female–male score gaps

There were no statistically significant changes in the gender score gap between 1998 and 2007. * Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2007. NOTE: Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scores. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1998, 2002, and 2007 Writing Assessment.
Figure 4. Gaps in average writing scale scores by gender, grades 4, 8, and 12: 1998 and 2002

* Significantly different from 2002. NOTE: Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scale scores. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics

The information on the race/ethnicity gap in writing achievement provides a useful gauge to place the numbers regarding the gender gap in perspective. Figure 5 shows that the gap between average writing scale scores of white and black students are comparable to the gap between average writing scores of male and female students. In other areas such as reading, math, and science, the difference between the gender gap and the race/ethnicity gap is much larger. Mead (2006) states that the scoring gaps between different races and classes are usually anywhere from “two to five times as big, depending on the grade” as the gap between males and females (p. 9).
Figure 5. Gaps in average writing scale scores, by school-reported race/ethnicity, grades 4, 8, and 12: 1998 and 2002

Teaching Writing

The Importance of Writing

Writing matters for a number of reasons. Unfortunately, it is sometimes hard to get a straightforward rationale for the importance of teaching writing from the literature. Take *Because Writing Matters* (2003), a book put out by the National Writing Project, for example. In its introductory chapter, helpfully entitled “Why Writing Matters,” one has to search a bit for the author’s beliefs on this topic. The reader is treated to a history lesson about how more than half of the candidates sitting for Harvard University entrance exam in 1874 failed despite being the products of “America’s best preparatory schools” (p. 1). Writing then, the reader is left to infer, is important because one needs it to climb the social ladder and gain entrance to prestigious institutions of power like Harvard. Is this it then? Really? Writing matters because, hopefully, one day it will get you into a good school? That’s not too different from saying that writing is worth learning because one day you’ll be doing a lot of it.

Later in the chapter, there is a more compelling reason offered: “The new information age, for all its high-tech gadgetry, is finally writing-based. E-mail, the Internet, and the fax are all forms of writing, and writing is, finally, a craft with its own set of tools, which are words. Like all tools they have to be used right” (p. 5). I like this learn-writing-to-reap-the-benefits-of-the-Information-age idea. However, I’m not sure William Zinsser’s assertion about the text-based nature of the age is unassailable—Leonard Shlain (1998) would undoubtedly argue the opposite, that the icon-laden landscape of the Internet is based on the resurgent power of the image over text. Besides,
does the importance of learning the genres of academic writing that is taught in school rest on the snippets of email, or the more ephemeral IMing of the age?

The real importance of writing—or more specifically, the kind of writing that is privileged in school—is in its ability to enable students to convey complex ideas in a clear, succinct manner. Writing is a complex skill that draws on the coordination of several component skills: vision, fine-motor control, phonological processing, memory, motivation, intuition, and imagination. As Peter Elbow (1998) points out, writing involves the use of “two writing muscles” that “operate at cross purposes”—creativity and criticism. Writing doesn’t really matter because it might help you slip into the Ivy League or because it will help you wow your friends in Internet chat rooms. It matters because it is an integrative mental act, that at its best, helps one convey ideas, deliver instructions, analyze information, and motivate others (National Writing Project, 2003).

What Research Says About Teaching Writing

The Writing Next report (2007) is probably the best list of “research-based” approaches to writing instruction readily available. This meta-analysis of writing research purports to measure the “consistency and strength” (p. 4) of the effects of certain teaching practices on student writing quality, and offers 11 specific techniques that research suggests will help 4th-to 12th grade students. This list includes a number of unsurprising items: For example, it turns out that teaching students to use specific writing strategies for planning, revising, and editing actually leads to students performing better on these skills. Similarly, students summarize better when they are taught how to do so explicitly and systematically. The report also recommends that teachers assign students specific, reachable goals for their writing and that students should have opportunities to “read,
analyze, and emulate” models of good writing (p. 5). Other recommendations from the report include directly teaching sentence combining, using writing as a learning tool in content areas, incorporating inquiry activities to help students develop ideas, engaging students in prewriting activities, and adopting a workshop environment that emphasizes the process aspect of writing. For me, the most interesting recommendations from this report suggest increasing the amount of word processing and collaborative writing assignments as a strategy to raise student achievement. Collaborative writing, or writing as a team with one’s peers, yielded a large effect size (Cohen’s $d = 0.75$), coming in a close third to teaching writing strategies and summarization.

Beyond the meta-analysis data from the *Writing Next* report, the literature on teaching writing quickly loses the comfortable sure footing of “hard data” and begins to drift into what Peter Elbow (1998) calls the “magic” of writing. Much has been written about this strange territory of “wrongness and felt sense” (Elbow, 1998, p. xiv). Donald Murray (2004), for example, writes about how his understanding of writing constantly evolves and shifts as his experience of the craft grows. Steven King (2002), the popular novelist, likens writing to mind reading. Ralph Fletcher (1996), the well-known advocate for boy writers, writes about the mysterious nature of a writer’s notebook. Even the author of more commonplace teacher resources, Vicki Spandel (2001), gives a nod to this ineffable aspect of writing, calling it “voice” and saying that many find it “elusive” and “hard to teach” (p. 163).

While the different forays into the magic of writing are ultimately personal accounts of various authors’ adventures in that strange land, there are a few common threads of advice that run throughout. Most notably, these voices highlight the
importance of quantity in learning to write. Peter Elbow (1998) goes so far as to say that teachers must “invite badness” to “encourage excellence” (p. xix). Kelly Gallagher (2006) emphasizes that “lousy first-draft writing must be done before better writing can occur” (p. 50). The National Writing Project (2006), using data from the 1998 NAEP Writing Assessment, laments that 69% of fourth-grade teachers report spending only 90 minutes or less per week on writing activities. To improve in writing, so the argument goes, one must spend time writing.

Another common thread of advice for writing teachers is that they themselves must model writing to their students. Donald Murray (2004) is perhaps most well known for his message that one can only learn about writing from being an active participant within the process, but many others echo this sentiment. “I cannot overemphasize how important it is for teachers of writing to write themselves,” states Alan Ziegler (1981). Likewise, Nancie Atwell (1987) challenges teachers to “not require student writers to do anything they don’t do themselves as writers.” Therefore, it is not enough to simply talk about writing; successful instruction requires that teachers also walk the walk.

Related to this notion of the importance of active modeling of the writing process is Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of flow experiences. This motivational and cognitive model prompted Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006) to explore the importance of psychological aspects of literacy, particularly for boys. Smith and Wilhelm stress the importance of developing a sense of control and competence in writing as well as taking on an appropriate level of challenge equal to the individual’s capabilities—a similar concept to working within what Vygotsky (1978) called an individual’s zone of proximal development. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) discussion of the need for clear goals,
immediate feedback, and a focus on immediate experience for flow experiences to occur also connects to the importance of these elements in writing instruction (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006). Larson (1988) also draws on flow theory to examine the components of successful writing through case study qualitative research. For her, good writing demands that the writer enter into a relationship with the ongoing work. This “system of interaction” between the author and the evolving text “engenders and sustains attention” that “keeps a person motivated and involved in the task” (p. 170). Central to sustaining this motivation is the author’s ability to deliberately monitor his or her internal states to adjust pacing and scope in response to the challenges that emerge from the manuscript (Larson, 1988).

All these viewpoints on different aspects of teaching writing—from the experimentally derived effect sizes of the Writing Now study, to the mysticism of Elbow and the ontological depths of flow theory—demonstrate how far and wide the literature on this issue ranges. The consummate challenge for a writing teacher or a researcher of writing is to boil this complex stew down to manageable, practical themes. Two instructors of an Aspen Hills School District professional development course, attempted to do just that. For these two, multiple readings about writing, race, gender, and the achievement gap suggest six common themes. First, writing instruction needs to be inquiry based, rather than “just a subject with one correct answer.” Students also needed to have opportunities to collaborate with others during the writing process. Similarly, teachers needed to consider both the relevance and the engagement level of their lessons. The literature also suggested that teachers of writing adopt a “learning stance” rather than complain about what students can’t do. Most importantly, the theme of forming strong
relationships between teacher and student within supportive learning environments emerged as the dominant message for the two Aspen Hills instructors. These six themes—inquiry, collaboration, relevance, engagement, adopting a learning stance, and relationships—hold particular relevance for this study as they represent the current discourse about writing instruction within the district’s instructional leadership.

Teacher Perception of Policy

In addition to the gender achievement gap in writing and writing instruction, I also reviewed the literature regarding teacher perceptions of policy. Franzak (2006) emphasizes the top-down dynamic of this “slippery word” that “policy is created by some individuals with the intent of imposing it on others” (p. 229). She also discusses the importance of understanding how policy works at multiple levels—impacting classroom decisions, school expectations, and even national aspirations.

Much of the recent literature on this subject concerns how teachers make sense of national policy initiatives in the United States and England. Rosowsky (2006), for example, uses grounded-theory and content analysis to examine a 4000-word essay produced by pre-service teachers in a postgraduate certificate program. Student responses to a prompt designed to elicit their initial understanding and experience of the United Kingdom’s Department for Education and Skills’ National Strategies initiative provided the raw material for Rosowsky to categorize them into Twiselton’s (2004) classification of teacher types: Task Manager, Curriculum Deliverer, and Concept/Skill Builder. One of the goals of this study was to account for the developing identities of future English teachers under the powerful shaping force of national policy.
Languardia, Brink, Wheeler, Grisham, and Peck (2002) take a different approach, focusing on how standards-based reform efforts in Washington state have impacted teachers. This study relied on interviews and observation to investigate concerns about how teaching practices have changed under the influence of state tests and school reform. Hour-long interviews and a series of classroom observations made up the initial data collection, and the researchers conducted follow-up interviews with all participants two years later. Participants expressed changes in their teaching and professional development as a result of changes in policy as well as the types of support they felt were necessary to help them improve and enhance student learning. Unfortunately, the emerging trends, reported in brief vignettes of participants, prompted the researchers to note that the impact of policy was to largely dis-empower teachers, altering their role from “agents” to that of “objects” (p. 14). Languardia et al. (2002) draw on the motivational research of Thaler and Somekh (1997), Ames (1992) and Deci and Ryan (1985) to emphasize the importance of teachers feeling some “degree of autonomy, choice making and control” (p. 15). These motivational processes, they argue, contribute to the “willingness and capacity” of teachers to undergo the systemic change brought about by a reform agenda (p.15).

The pre-post method employed by Languardia et al. (2002) is similar to Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, and Williamson’s (2001) study of changes in teacher competencies. However, instead of interviews and observations, this survey study polled four samples of teachers between 1991 and 1998 to investigate changes in teaching styles, classroom behaviors, and student reactions that took place in an era of “significant changes in policy and practice” (p. 171). The results of the survey study were slightly more optimistic than
Languardia et al.’s (2002) conclusions, pointing to the “consistency and persistence” of effective teaching styles “despite the pressures on the teaching profession brought about by budget cuts, rationalization, restructuring and the concomitant industrialization of the profession” (Abbott, Chapman, Hughes, & Williamson, 2001, p. 183).

Alexiadou’s (2001) study analyzing semi-structured interview data in studies of policy implementation lays out perhaps the most systematic description of research policy implementation using qualitative methods. Although Alexiadou does not suggest her approach to using semi-structured interviews “as a blueprint for analysis in institutional contexts,” citing the potential benefits of different theoretical considerations (p. 67), she persuasively argues for the usefulness of social constructionist insights and puts forth techniques aimed at providing additional rigor to knowledge gained from interview data. Alexiadou approaches data analysis in carefully delineated stages. She builds slowly from a sense of the whole of each interview developed from repeated readings of interview transcripts, to identifying “weightier” parts of the text, to generalizing themes and ultimately constructing accounts for each participant. Later, Alexiadou tests individual propositions drawn from these accounts against each other in an attempt to generalize understandings beyond the “bounded contexts” experienced by each participant (p. 63).
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Positioning Myself

Research Strategy

I first found my voice as a teacher-researcher through action research. I feel most at home with inquiry that is, as Herr and Anderson (2005) put it, “done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3). While I have learned enough about different research traditions to appreciate the fact that no one tradition or worldview—post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, or participatory frameworks (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, 2000)—holds a monopoly on truth or knowledge, I often find myself as a teacher most skeptical of findings from studies (like those in the Writing Next report) conducted by outsiders. Reading these studies, my internal dialogue runs something like, “Gee, that’s neat, but I wonder if that would work for my students.” For me, there is power and a comforting sense of accountability in the action cycles (McNiff et al. 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) undertaken by specific action researchers to address a particular problematic situation within a specific context.

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) define action research as “‘insider’ research done by practitioners using their own site (classroom, institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study” (p. 2). Since my inquiry grew out of my personal need to improve my practice as a writing teacher and centers on how other writing teachers at my school make sense of the charge to close the gender achievement gap in writing, my understanding of action research strongly informed this qualitative study.
Articulating My Values and Beliefs

If McNiff and Whitehead (2006) are correct that “research often begins by articulating your values and asking whether you are being true to them” (p. 23), I too, must start with the question, “What are my beliefs?” Contemplating this question, it’s hard not to feel as if I’ve painted myself into a corner. I’ve always resisted placing myself in permanent categories—to this day I still balk at personality tests and survey instruments with force-choice Likert-scales. My first thought, or maybe it’s more reflex, is to say that I value being changeable, being undefined.

That’s a start, but I can’t leave this topic with just a nod to the truism that I can believe many things in different circumstances. I’ve got to move deeper than the knee-jerk reaction to say well, it depends…

What are the bedrock principles—the immutable ideals that I cling to throughout all the changes and shifting circumstances? If “research is as much about the storyteller as about the story” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 30), what are the defining drives that shape my plot? What are the values I want to live by and be accountable for?

One way into this personal ground is to look at my foundational beliefs about education. My formative experiences as a teacher took place at a public school in a rural community adjacent to an agency on the Navajo Nation with high rates of poverty, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. The unique needs of this context, paired with the struggle to meet adequate yearly progress under the weight of No Child Left Behind, helped me realize a few things about myself. First, like Dewey, I believe that education is the “fundamental method of social progress and reform” (“My Pedagogical Creed,” 1897, p. 120), not just disingenuous accountability to impersonal one-size-fits-all tests.
Therefore, a teacher is not simply engaged in the training of individuals, but in the “formation of the proper social life” (p. 121). Reading the impassioned speeches of George Counts, I find myself nodding in recognition as he speaks of “growing increasingly weary of the brutalities, the stupidities, the hypocrisies, and the gross inanities of contemporary life” (1932, p. 149). In a system that puts test scores before students and teachers, I agree with Counts that the “nation itself is falling far short of its powers” to “deal boldly and realistically with the present situation” (p. 149).

At the heart of these reflections from my experience lies hope for change. This hope is closely bound up with the related notions of human agency and social justice. As the charged political reality of No Child Left Behind demonstrates, schools are not neutral sites, and teachers should not be neutral either (Giroux, 2004). As Giroux (2004) points out, one of the major threats facing the public school system is the growing emphasis on “technocratic” approaches to both teacher preparation and classroom pedagogy. These approaches seek to deskill teachers by creating “teacher-proof” curricula or encouraging policies that make teachers merely technicians, rather than intellectual professionals capable of making decisions for themselves and their students. In short, the technocratic trend in education does not treat teachers or students as agents. Agents are the subjects of their own education; they interrupt the status quo by asking questions rather than accepting complacency or self-righteous justification (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). As Charmaz (2005) points out, teachers and students are “creative beings who act, not merely behave…They attempt to solve problems in their lives and worlds” (p. 523). Rather than unthinkingly believing second-hand knowledge passed down from authorities, teachers and students create knowledge through a “restless,
impatient” process of “invention and re-invention” through inquiry “in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 1972, p. 229).

Social justice is concerned with correcting oppressive relationships that prevent individuals or groups from exercising their agency. Equitable distribution of resources and fairness are necessary to engage human agents in order to transform their world through action (Charmaz, 2005; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Honoring this value prompts me to join Giroux’s (2004) call for teachers to act as “transformative intellectuals” that believe in educating students to be “active, critical citizens” (p. 211).

These foundational values of agency and encouraging social justice not only inform my work as a teacher, but as a researcher as well. The connection is within the dance of opposites. Giroux’s (2004) notion of the teacher as transformative intellectual unites the “language of critique with the language of possibility” (p. 211), and research studies focused on social justice take place in the interplay between realities and ideals (Charmaz, 2005). Taken seriously, working for social justice in education means more than just being critical of policies; it means teaching differently—in ways that transform how students interact with the curriculum so that they can become “beings for themselves” (Freire, 1972). This echoes the thoughts of researchers—particularly qualitative researchers—who also believe social justice informs their work. For example, Pillow (2003) wrestles with the issue of reflexivity under her feminist worldview and states that working within emancipatory paradigms is “not only about investigating the power embedded in one’s research but is also about doing research differently” (p. 178)—in ways that respect the agency of both the researcher and the participants.
Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), details the long tradition of positivist Western research in denying the human agency of its participants. Indeed, she points out that “research of this nature on indigenous people is still justified by the ends rather than the means” (pp. 24-25). An alternative to this kind of exploitative arrangement is McNiff and Whitehead’s (2006) view that researchers should always see themselves in relation with others and aim to develop “inclusional methodologies that nurture respectful relationships” (p. 25). One does not need to reject all theory produced by traditional research or other forms of Western knowledge to interrupt the old patterns. Instead, as Tuhiwai Smith explains, the process of decolonization involves researchers and participants forging new relationships and “coming to know and understand theory and research from [their] own perspectives and for [their] own purposes” (1999, p. 39). The ends of research by themselves are not adequate justification—staying true to core values of agency and social justice demands also considering the impact of the means. The result is a move away from research on passive “others” (Fine, 1994), to research for or with active participants.

Taking seriously the charge Shepard (1998) refers to as “undermining the powerful and unmasking the ways their power is exercised” (p. 180), I strive to come to terms with my own complex web of multiple identities. As a member of the privileged class, I face the difficult challenge of rewriting the scripts that most directly result in my benefit. I am a product of the white, middle class, English-speaking, male perspectives that far too frequently constitute the oppressor in American society. I am reminded of Ewing & Schacht’s (1998) statement that “oppression always harms the oppressor regardless of how manipulatively subtle or veiled its form” (p. 6). As I seek to escape the
trap of oppression in my relationships with others—whether my co-workers, my students, or my research group—I must strive to relinquish my tainted power and privilege. I am personally forced to profoundly plum my own depths and test how deep my convictions about social change and, consequentially, the ultimate goals of my teaching practices and my research projects truly run—the more genuine my convictions, the more effective my actions as a teacher and as a researcher.

Having said all this about my belief in agency and social justice might give the false impression that I live out these principles as well as I cite references to support their importance. Like anyone else, my truthfulness to these ideals hinges on the messy, often awkward decisions I make moment-by-moment. The sad fact is I have been trained better to manage scholarly texts than I have been to live out my values through daily action. Foster (2005) notes this danger of academics paying lip service to these ideals. He highlights how easily researchers “problematize” and “critique” the practices and institutions of others, but they fail to “act in ways that are compatible with their critique nor do they engage in day-to-day actions within their own oppressive communities” (p. 175). I recognize this trap of discourse without active participation. I can only hope that I can be honest enough with myself through an ongoing process of self-reflection about whether or not I am engaging in action aimed at internal transformation or external social transformation (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Here, a community of friends can also play a role in keeping me grounded in what matters most. At bottom, staying true to these values means showing up mentally, physically, and spiritually every day.
So, I begin with this articulation of my hope in agency and social justice. This position is tempered with respect for myself as a human instrument wired for responsiveness, adaptability, expansion, and full of atypical and idiosyncratic responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the values I share here are vitally important, I acknowledge that there are others that must be honored as well. My paradigm is not one of certainty, but of humanity. Undefined and forever changeable, I reserve the right to either get smarter or just change my mind (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

**Positioning My Values**

Social justice and respect for human agency imply research interests directed at the eradication of oppression. These research interests include understanding the meaning of events or experiences, a particular context and its influence on individuals, and the process of human action. Furthermore, these values imply an interest in developing explanatory theories, conducting formative evaluations intended to improve practice, and engaging in collaborative, or action research. These implied goals demand a worldview that recognizes the importance of relationship (Maxwell, 2005). Consequently, my values seem to lead me to methodologies that resemble Apple’s (2003) recommendations for researchers to think contextually and historically about the multiple levels of power. Just as Apple urges researchers to “get [their] hands dirty,” my methodologies must give first consideration to the lives of real people.

**My Own Experience as an Insider at the Research Site**

These values and beliefs do not operate in a vacuum, but rather intersect with my day-to-day experience as a full-time writing teacher employed at the research site.
Understanding my role in the school setting, therefore, provides additional insight into the particular analytical lens I bring as the “human instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) involved in this inquiry.

During the time of the study, I taught on a team split between grade levels. My schedule consisted of three sections of 7th grade writing and two sections of 8th grade writing. Different from most other writing teachers on staff who taught exclusively in one grade, this arrangement led to some compromises. For example, although I worked with about 60 8th grade students, I attended regular professional learning team (PLT) meetings with other 7th grade writing teachers, reducing the amount of interaction with my colleagues teaching 8th grade—not to mention the 6th grade teachers. Similarly, whereas most of the other writing teachers who taught one grade level also had one or two sections of honors writing or taught AIM (not an acronym) classes to the highest performing students, my mixed schedule consisted solely of “regular” classes. While I came to know and appreciate the students in my classes as unique, thoughtful people with interests in a wide variety of areas, looking at their performance on the yearly state exam and other measures of school achievement showed my students clustering near average to below average. Having passed through the sorting channels of the school, my students had fallen in the group that either did not or could not participate in the school’s high AIM program and who also did not exhibit an interest in nor had the necessary qualifications for the few honors writing classes offered at the school.

Personally, I had just relocated to the area following my happy marriage to support the career choice of my wife, who also worked in the district. Although I had grown up in a similar suburban environment, I still experienced a fair amount of culture
shock as I adjusted to this new situation from my formative teaching experience gathered from years of working in an extremely rural environment on the Navajo Nation. The scale of things alone took some getting used to: the first middle school I taught at in the Navajo Nation fluctuated from about 300-450 students whereas my new school had a population of over 1,000. Yet, despite the large number of students and faculty, my position as a new teacher contributed to feelings of isolation and uncomfortable anonymity—emotions only reinforced by my classroom location: downstairs in a windowless interior hallway.

Classroom discipline, particularly with a small number of 8th grade students late in the year, grew to perhaps the largest challenge faced by my team. With the science teacher taking maternity leave for the last few months of school and the successive string of long-term substitute teachers, a few 8th grade students from the team fell into a negative pattern of acting out in class. While mostly contained to the science class, the poor behavior of these students resulted in our team working with members of the administration of the school to brainstorm possible solutions to the problem. As a result of this collaboration, several students signed strict behavior contracts and members of the school leadership increased their presence in the classrooms—particularly science. However, coordinating the efforts to address the poor behavior of these few students across all of the classrooms with the deans and the assistant principal involved in the situation did not always go according to the plan discussed in our meetings. This resulted in some feelings of frustration within the team. While I did not experience the brunt of this frustration myself, several of my teammates expressed their view that they did not
receive adequate support from the leadership. All of this took place during the data collection of my study and no doubt influenced my thinking as I worked on the project.

Still, I do not want to paint too dismal a picture. Placed in a strong team of teachers, my feelings of isolation quickly mitigated. Looking back in my journal entries, my first impressions of my teammates included statements like, “obviously a lot of experience and she clearly knows her stuff,” “hip, cool, unruffelable,” and “organized, thoughtful.” Many individuals—administrators, teachers, and other people on staff—reached out and helped to draw me into the school community. Although opportunities to interact with my colleagues, even other writing teachers in the language arts department, remained limited, I no longer felt as unconnected as before. Life in the classroom proceeded too. My students and I managed to form good connections, and together we accomplished some good academic work and improved as writers over the course of the year. While I nearly always feel the need to push for more improvement, I must acknowledge the many positives of the year.

Continuum and Implications of Positionality

As Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) point out, issues of positionality don’t end with the rather clear-cut insider/outsider distinction. Schools are hierarchical organizations, and as a teacher new to the school and the writing department, my positionality within the organization holds important implications for the research process and the trustworthiness of the findings. Using Herr and Anderson’s (2005) continuum of positionality, I was originally tempted to conceive of this study as one with myself cast as an insider in collaboration with other insiders. My focus was not directed solely to my self or my own practice—frankly, the isolation I felt as a new teacher in the building and
the structural demands of the workday contributed to my acute desire to move beyond my own thinking on these issues and reach out to colleagues to learn with them. What I craved as a researcher interested in literacy as well as a teacher confronted with the practical directives of my job to demonstrate improvements in my students’ writing was research with others in a similar situation that contributed to our collective knowledge base and, consequently, led to opportunities for professional transformation and improved practice.

The challenge for this study lay deeper, however. Due to my position in the existing hierarchy of my school setting, being new to the community and the department, my position resembled what Collins (1990) refers to as the “outsider-within.” I was undoubtedly an insider in my research setting—as my day-to-day efforts in the classroom attested—yet I also occupied a curious marginality as the new kid on the block as well as one of only two male language arts teachers on staff at the time of the study. Herr and Anderson (2005), once considered this stance a “flawed approach” to action research (p. 46) pointing to the epistemological and methodological problems that result from the tendency of such studies to apply validity criteria designed for outsider research to research conducted by an insider. They state that these problems are exacerbated when insiders to an organization do dissertation research, and the researcher and the dissertation committee treat it as outsider research. Interestingly, Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (2007) no longer refer to this outsider-within stance as a flawed approach. Instead, they highlight the need for these studies to reflect deeply “about how positionality becomes a lens through which we view reality” (p. 10).
One of the strengths of action research as opposed to other traditions is its capacity to transform personal and professional relationships (Anderson & Herr, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). While it was the case when I began the study that the other writing teachers at my school did not come together and seek collaborative inquiry on the issue of closing the gender achievement gap in writing, extending this study to the group provided the occasion for this kind of work to take place. Indeed, I believe that working with my colleagues to learn how they make sense of this issue led to a shift of my outsider-within status to one of more insider-to-insider collaboration.

Site and Participant Selection

As stated above, this research project grew out of my need to improve my own teaching practice by better understanding how others at my school were dealing with the SIP goal directives for writing. Consequently, I conducted this research at the grade 6-8 middle school where I worked as a full-time writing teacher. At the time of this study, the school was under 10 years old and was located in an affluent suburban neighborhood near Denver where the median household income is $114,497, well over twice the state average. Over 1,000 students attended the middle school; 51% were male, and 49% were female. Of these students, 77% identified as White, 7% as Black, 8% as Hispanic and 8% as Asian. Eleven percent of the students qualified as eligible for free or reduced lunch. Of 61 classroom teachers, 9, including myself, exclusively taught writing. Although the SIP goals pertaining to closing the gender gap in writing impacted all the classroom teachers at the school, my research project focused on this group of writing teachers as their position placed them closest to the issue. In this group of writing teachers, the number of years of teaching experience ranged from 2 to 7. Three of the teachers held graduate
degrees. All of the teachers except for myself and one other were female. All but one teacher identified as white. A few of the writing professional development activities members in the group had participated in included Step-Up to Writing, 6 Traits, Colorado Writing Project, and district seminars focused on males and literacy. In addition, each member of the research group participated in monthly equity training provided by the district. These equity trainings focused on helping faculty recognize the need to adjust instruction for underperforming groups, specifically black males.

Data Collection Procedures

There were a number of pieces of information I needed to know in order to answer my primary research question: “How do teachers understand and act on policy directives to close the gender achievement gap in writing present in state test scores?” First off, it was important to note that I included myself in this question. As an insider conducting research on my own site, part of my data collection must have included my own sense-making and action related to this issue. While the process of conducting and writing up this study captures my own thinking and efforts, I must make my own actions as an insider explicit or else I run the risk of falling into the pitfall identified by Herr and Anderson (2005) regarding the outsider-within stance. To make this component of the study explicit, I kept a researcher journal throughout the project to track my own evolving understanding of the research question. For me, the dilemma of working from an outsider-within stance lay in the fact that much of my own answer depended, in part, on what I could find out about the thoughts and actions of my colleagues. That is, for me to best understand and act on this policy directive, I had to first seek out and learn from my colleagues, yet my lens as an insider inevitably colored what I learned from my
colleagues. Therefore, one of my tasks in this study was to make that lens explicit through purposeful reflection.

To address how my colleagues made sense of these policy directives, I needed to collect data on how other teachers defined their roles within the policy directive to close the gender achievement gap in writing and how teachers defined and explained the gender achievement gap in writing. This information was important because how teachers define their roles demonstrated how they imagined/envisioned policy goals impacting their own day-to-day practice. Likewise, since teachers are charged to close this gap, it was important to explore how they define it. Closely related to their definitions was how they explained the root causes of this gap. I believed these fundamental assumptions influenced how teachers view their role in school policy, confidence in addressing the issue, and the strategies/approaches they use.

Additionally, I needed to explore how confident teachers are that they can close the gender achievement gap in writing for their students, given what the school was in the process of doing and what teachers felt they needed in order to achieve the policy goals. These points may seem tangential to the main research focus; however, I felt that part of how teachers “understand and act” on the policy depended a great deal on how efficacious they felt about making an impact on the gap and what the school was doing to support their work on the policy. To flesh out teachers’ feelings of confidence, I wanted to know what current supports in place at the school aided efforts to close the gender achievement gap and what my peers felt they needed to be more effective.

To address how teachers act on these policy directives, I needed to find out what strategies and approaches (if any) teachers were using to specifically address the gender
achievement gap in writing for their students. Beyond what teachers thought or felt about this policy directive, I wanted to know what they were actively doing to address it. What teachers were actually doing in the classroom was ultimately the bottom line for this policy and for future possibilities of improving teaching practice.

To investigate these questions, I first asked each participant to fill out a brief demographic information questionnaire (Appendix A) to collect pertinent background information on each participant, such as number of years of teaching experience, number of years experience of teaching writing, professional development experiences in teaching writing, and level of education. This brief questionnaire required less than 5 minutes for each participant to complete, and participants had the option of not disclosing this information. As I collected this questionnaire from each participant, I held a series of one-on-one initial interviews designed to tap what each member of the group initially thought about the gender achievement gap in writing and what they had experienced working on this focus of the school’s policy (Appendix B).

After collecting this initial information, I scheduled a series of four focus group discussions. While the original plan called for every participant to attend and to take part in each of these focus groups, scheduling conflicts resulted in a few participants occasionally arriving late or leaving early from these meetings as they strove to balance their many obligations. These discussions were conducted at the research site, either during planning time set-aside explicitly for this purpose or after school, and each session lasted approximately 1 hour to 1.5 hours. Due to the potential added detail associated with capturing non-verbal cues such as gestures and other forms of body language, I video
recorded the focus group sessions with the permission of the participants. To provide a backup to the video recording, I also audio recorded the focus group sessions. While the format for the focus group sessions remained similar throughout the study, the topic of the discussion changed with each session to address different aspects of the research questions.

The first session entailed examining a series of information sources regarding struggling writers (see Appendix C). I provided participants with hard copies of Tyre’s (2006) *Newsweek* article and Mead’s (2006) work (approximately 1 hour of reading time) one week prior to this focus group session. The discussion within this focus group centered on how the participants thought about the gender achievement gap and responded to these pieces on the gap. Following this initial focus group session, I scheduled brief individual follow-up interviews with participants. These short audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. The focus of these follow-up interactions was to allow participants to clarify any of their original comments during the group session.

The second focus group session followed a similar format to the first, but instead focused on exploring instances when the participants observed differences in writing performances in their students. For this session, I asked participants to bring in examples of student written work to share and discuss with the group. Since the focus of this exercise was on how the participants made sense of the student work rather than on the characteristics and qualities of individual student’s writing, all identifying information was removed from the work samples brought to the group, and I asked the group to refrain
from using student names in the discussion. The guiding questions for the discussion were “What do you see?”, “What patterns do you see?” I also shared the school’s own SIP documentation and data from local, state, and national writing assessments with the group and asked them to discuss their reactions to this information (See Appendix D). Again, following this second focus group, I scheduled brief individual follow-up interviews with participants to allow them to clarify their comments from the group session.

The third focus group explored the participants’ views about the impact, if any, discussing these issues with colleagues had for them. Guiding questions for this discussion included “Has this experience changed any assumptions about teaching and your established practices?” and “Has this experience affected how you see yourself?” (see Appendix E). As before, after the third focus group, I scheduled brief follow-up interviews with participants to allow them to clarify or expand on their comments.

Finally, to provide for member-checking, I planned a fourth and final focus group meeting to share my tentative findings and ask participants to critically assess my interpretations. In addition to this whole-group interaction, several of the participants also sent feedback in the form of email messages at this stage of the project.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected through my researcher journal, interviews, and observations underwent a process of content analysis to reveal patterns and themes in the study. As I read different accounts of qualitative data analysis for advice about how to systematize this process (Patton, 2002; Maxwell, 2005, Wolcott, 2001; Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Creswell, 2007) about the only thing different researchers seemed to agree on
regarding data analysis was that it was not “off-the-shelf,” but rather “custom-built, revised, and ‘choreographed’” (Huberman & Miles, 1994 cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 150) to fit the particular demands of each study and the peculiarities of each researcher. Despite my initial feelings of trepidation of the daunting task of making sense of the small mountain of transcribed focus group discussions and follow-up interviews generated in this study, I conceived of the data analysis process as spiral-like stages of collection, organization, managing, reading, reflecting, describing, classifying, comparing, interpreting, visualizing, and representing. My custom-built data analysis followed a series of stages involving the coding of data, finding patterns, labeling themes, and developing category systems. Drawing on the work of Alexiadou (2001) and Moustakas (1994), I organized my analysis stages into two sections: the first concerned with the analysis of my research journal, individual interviews, and observations; the second moving beyond the individual to general understandings across data sources.

**Analysis of Individual Data Sources**

In this phase of analysis, I aimed to create a summary account that captured the essential qualities and characteristics of what the participants experienced and perceived. This process of content analysis involved boiling down large amounts of raw field notes and verbatim transcripts into digestible themes of information (Patton, 2002). At the beginning of this stage of analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by transcribing the video and audio recordings of the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews and by reading and rereading this textual source material. As I worked through these transcribed documents, I tried to develop a sense of the whole for each data source. I then began to identify important bits of information that emerged from the data and develop a
coding system to allow me to categorize and classify these important bits in a meaningful way. By the end of this stage of the data analysis, I generated a list of 22 codes that I then assigned to 1262 instances in the transcribed data sources. I utilized a computerized qualitative analysis research tool, HyperRESEARCH, to facilitate this process as well as to manage the resulting sorting and classifying of this data. This coding and classifying work eventually allowed me to recognize larger themes of information and helped me to “interrogate the data from the perspective of the research focus” (Alexiadou, 2001, p. 62), looking for similarities, patterns, contradictions, or inconsistencies between the themes. After this process of “discovering structures” (Alexiadou, 2001, p. 63), I moved into constructing a written account for the research group, aiming to depict the main essence of the individual’s experience.

**Drawing Conclusions Beyond Individual Experiences**

After examining each participant’s accounts, the task shifted to identifying patterns that extended beyond the participants’ experiences. As Alexiadou (2001) puts it, each individual analysis became a starting point for developing an understanding of the larger structures of how individuals deal with the research question. Here, I sought to place the propositions, or succinct key ideas, from the written account for the research group produced after the first stage of data analysis in a wider context by returning to the literature. I then reviewed these propositions against each other, trying to integrate them into general statements of findings that not only speak to the immediate context of the participants, but hopefully also address interests and needs of a wider readership. Ultimately, these general propositional statements, paired with my own unique
interpretive lens, led to the creation of a series of recommendations detailed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Trustworthiness

As Creswell’s (2007) review of the subject of validation demonstrates, there are many ways of attempting to assess the accuracy, or trustworthiness, of qualitative research. Since my study includes elements of action research due to my insider status as well as phenomenological research due to my marginality in the school hierarchy, my approach to ensuring the quality of my inquiry must draw on validation techniques appropriate to both of these research approaches. Herr and Anderson (2005), as well as Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), highlight the unique dilemmas of practitioners studying their own sites and the danger in relying only on validity criteria meant for more traditional forms of research. Aware of this challenge, my approach to ensuring the trustworthiness of my inquiry is not a matter of *either-or*, but rather *both-and*.

As stated above, many perspectives exist regarding how to ensure quality in the qualitative research traditions. In naturalistic research, the terms put forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are perhaps the most established and accepted. Here, the trustworthiness of a study involves its “credibility,” “authenticity,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability” (p. 300). The best ways of ensuring a study has these indicators of trustworthiness, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), include prolonged engagement in the field, thick description, and triangulation of data methods. External audits of a research study can also provide a check for dependability and confirmability.

My study includes several of these validation techniques for qualitative research. My day-to-day work as a writing teacher at the research site supplied prolonged
engagement and persistent observation. Similarly, my research plan included triangulation of data sources, collecting corroborating evidence from my research journal, interviews, and observations to shed light on my inquiry focus. The data from these different sources should also allow for thick description to allow readers of my study to make decisions regarding the transferability of the findings. Furthermore, the process of defending my completed dissertation to my committee represents a type of external audit. Although members on my committee have a connection with the study, their role in the process provides a certain distance that allows them to examine both the process and product of the project.

In addition to these validation safeguards, I added member checking to my research plan. As Creswell (2007) explains, member checking involves “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 208). The follow-up interviews provided a number of opportunities for this kind of sharing for the sake of receiving feedback from participants. I also shared my tentative findings with the research group and asked them to critically assess my interpretations. Following Creswell’s (2007) recommendations, this conferring with the participants aimed at drawing out their feedback on both the “written analyses as well as what is missing” (p. 209).

While the above qualitative criteria are certainly compatible with action research, the transformative nature of research conducted by insiders demands additional indicators of trustworthiness. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) outline validity criteria for practitioner action research. Here, the main criteria for quality are outcome validity, process validity, democratic validity, catalytic validity, and dialogic validity. Anderson,
Herr, and Nihlen (2007) state that these validity criteria for action research are “tentative and in flux,” with some appropriate in some circumstances and some in others (p. 44). They also cite Connelly and Clandinin (1990) to advise each inquirer to “search for and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7 cited in Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007).

Of the different criteria for trustworthiness in action research, outcome validity and catalytic validity best fit this study by shoring up the more traditional qualitative criteria and directly addressing the potential shortcomings of the outsider-within stance. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), outcome validity is the “extent to which actions occur that lead to a resolution of the problem or a deeper understanding of the problem and how to go about resolving it in the future” (p. 40). They go on to acknowledge that in action research a successful outcome of a rigorous project is often a more complex reframing of the initial problem, leading to a new set of questions and problems to address. Key to addressing this aspect of validity is for me to critically question what is meant by a “successful” outcome and to carefully consider for whom it is successful (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007); to be valid, the research must not be successful solely in the sense of serving my needs as an outsider—only deepening my thinking and understanding, but rather it must enrich and deepen the understanding of all of the participating insiders. Ultimately, my research journal, member checking sessions, and the participants’ thoughts about the experience of working together on this study provide evidence of this “spiraling dynamic” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 41) of deeper understanding driving, reframing, and sustaining inquiry.
Catalytic validity, or the “degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, 1986, p. 272, cited in Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007), also represents an appropriate measure of trustworthiness for my study. As Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) explain, high-quality action research studies should move all involved with the study to deeper levels of understanding and should inspire them to take some action to change or affirm the situation under investigation. The written account of the findings attempts to demonstrate this kind of “reorientation” for members of the research group as a result of interacting together through the study. Likewise, if my study is successful in deepening my colleagues’ understanding of the gender achievement gap in writing, it should include evidence of “consequent changes in the dynamics of the setting” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 42).
FINDINGS

Two impulses lay at the heart of this inquiry. The first follows my desire to explore how teachers of writing think about their struggling student writers. The second purpose of the study aims at examining the process of teachers thinking collaboratively about writing practice. Together, these drives move toward the goals of better understanding how teachers make sense of disparate student performance in writing and then work together to create conditions necessary for working collaboratively to improve teaching practice.

Analyzing the transcripts from the focus group meetings and follow-up interviews, several themes emerged and began to inform these dual research aims. To help shape my analysis, I followed the advice of Jeroski, Booth, and Dockendorf (1992) and synthesized the qualitative data by making a quick list of the key points that stood out in my re-readings. The resulting list yielded four prominent themes that I then grouped into three main areas: how teachers in the group viewed their relationship with school leadership, how the group made sense of policy directives to close the achievement gap in writing, and what the group thought about itself as a team of educators, which included barriers to collaboration among writing teachers at the research site. In the sections that follow, I will detail the discussion around each of these key themes, situate the findings in context within the literature, and offer interpretations of the results in light of current theories and research, and my beliefs and values as the particular “human instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) engaged in this inquiry.
Leadership

Of all the topics that surfaced during the focus group discussions and the follow-up interviews, none feature as prominently as school administrative leadership. Indeed, the frequency report provided by my computer software indicated that “leadership” occurred more often than any other code assigned to the transcripts. Not only did this theme come up a great deal, but the participants also frequently associated leadership with some of their strongest emotional responses. Notably, although the group had a number of positive things to say about the school leadership, the topics discussed most often centered on feelings of confusion, frustration, and distrust.

The discussions that make up this theme relate to the school’s principal, two assistant principals, two deans, the professional learning team (PLT) coordinator, and the coordinator of the school’s accelerated academic program for highly motivated students known as AIM (not an acronym). The academic year in which the research project took place included a good deal of turnover and transition for this leadership team. A long-time assistant principal announced her promotion and took up a new position at a different school at mid-year, necessitating bringing on a recently retired principal from the district to help cover responsibilities for the rest of the year. Additionally, the head principal announced his decision to seek employment in higher education shortly thereafter, and although he made clear his intention to stay through the end of the contract year, the need to hire two key figures of the leadership contributed to feelings of transition throughout the school. Moreover, the year presented challenges for the PLT coordinator: new to her position with all its attendant difficulties, she also had to contend with an ongoing personal health crisis.
Within the theme of leadership, the conversation among participants clustered into two main discourses. The first conveys a sense of confusion on the part of teachers about the goals and policy communicated to them by the leadership. The second major discourse concerns the degree to which teachers felt supported in their work by leadership, particularly in terms of professional development and classroom discipline.

**Confused by Leadership Goals**

“Maybe things appear that they are working well, but I think from an insider's point of view, it is everything but that.”

The quote above from one of the follow-up interviews offers one possible way into the discourse of teacher confusion about leadership goals. Throughout the transcripts, the apparent disconnect between what teachers expect and what leadership decides, surfaces again and again. One of the first times this trend became apparent in the focus groups came as the teachers shared their memories about a school policy decision regarding the practice of sustained silent reading (SSR). One of the teachers explained the situation:

I remembered last year—you guys remember that last year's reading scores were like through the roof, and we asked what'd you do, what'd you do? And they [the teachers with the high reading scores] had 15-20 minutes a day of silent reading. So it's like, why didn't the school rearrange itself for this year to do that?... So I completely expected to see, “well this is what we are doing this year,” because this was so successful, and then there's nothing about that.
In this case, teachers who had been at the school the previous year remembered a presentation given to them by the leadership highlighting a successful practice at the school. Yet, when they expected the practice of SSR to be continued the following year, they encountered resistance. A different teacher in the group shared with the others, “Well, I was told last year, too—I did sustained silent reading in my classroom—that I did it too long.” When asked about this by the rest of the group, this teacher continued saying that she wasn’t sure exactly why the practice was frowned on other than the possibility that “someone in charge” didn’t consider that she was doing “enough ‘real teaching’.” Ultimately, this communication disconnect led to a feeling of frustration for the teacher. “That was something that was disheartening,” she states, “because it was really a strong point in my classroom last year.”

Another instance of this confusion discourse came through what one teacher termed “come to Jesus meetings” that she and other teachers had experienced with different members of the leadership. This is how she described these meetings in a follow-up interview:

Oh, goodness! Last year was awful. X----- and I would get random emails that would just say, "You need to see [the principal] after school." What did I do this time?...And then we would go into the meeting and it would be, "I just don't think you understand what I'm trying to do here." "OK, well, what do you mean?" And then he would talk in circles about understanding what he was trying to create, and we had no idea about what he was talking about and then it's like, “What did I do wrong that they even called this meeting—I don't even understand.” And, yeah...it
didn't make any sense. That's the come to Jesus. It didn't make any sense… Luckily I haven't gotten any of those this year. But I'm not doing anything different; that's what I don't understand. So I don't know.

This kind of interaction, where the principal is trying to communicate his vision and the teacher doesn’t understand why she is being singled out and how her actions relate to what she is being told, demonstrates how points of confusion breed feelings of frustration and distrust.

A similar dynamic plays out in the group’s experience of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) that the leadership communicated to them. During the second focus group gathering, I shared a copy of the SIP and asked the participants for their thoughts about this policy document that stated the school’s equity and excellence goals. While the exact percentage underwent a series of revisions, the SIP’s excellence target called for the amount of students scoring proficient or advanced in writing would increase from about 73% to 83% or higher over the next two years. Similarly, the document stated an equity goal of raising the percentage of male students scoring proficient or advanced from about 66% to 76% or higher in the next two years. While the teachers clearly knew about the school policy, they also communicated that it didn’t figure prominently in their day-to-day teaching. At root, this disconnect between the leadership policy and the teachers’ priorities boils down to confusion about how what teachers are being told is important meshes with their own perception of what they need to focus on the most to help their students.

When talking about the goals of the SIP, the teachers discussed what they felt were apparent contradictory messages coming from the leadership. One teacher pointed
out that despite the constant signal from leadership about the importance of using pedagogical strategies geared toward appealing to boys, electives such as applied arts were being dropped the following year. “So, on the one hand, we're saying that we've got to do this [close the achievement gap],” she says. “And then, on the other hand, decisions that are being made are ignoring the intelligences that those genders and races—we are being told—learn through. And I'm confused.” At a different point in the conversation, a few other teachers shared their enthusiasm about the possibility of matching students to teachers to better connect with struggling students. “It makes total sense,” one explains. “I think of the kids I can totally connect with and the ones that I can't, and how I can't change that because I am who I am and my teaching style is what it is, and how much more they’d get out of somebody else.” During this discussion, another teacher shares her confusion over the resistance she met when she had approached the leadership about the possibility of moving a student:

And I remember when I first came here, there was a student I just did not work well with, and he needed to be moved and I requested that, and it was, "No, we don't move kids here." But why not? Why not?

The frustration and confusion evident in this utterance are characteristic of this discourse.

Furthermore, the fault line between the leadership’s self-selected SIP goals and the teachers’ own priorities noticeably strained when the two interfaced in the teacher evaluation process. One teacher explained it this way:

I was just insulted that they gave me 2 out of 3 of my goals. And they told me that my third goal had to be CSAP related. So all of my goals for this year were CSAP related. That's very different than the goals I've written
every other year. My own personal goals as a teacher were related to me
and my own personal growth as a teacher—where I was at that time and
what I could work on. And we all have [CSAP goals], no matter how long
we were teaching. So to have it all CSAP related…means I don't know
how I did.

Rather than being able to determine her own professional goals, the leadership handed
her a set of pre-determined targets. For this veteran teacher, this practice served to
confuse the entire evaluation process and ended up contributing to her feelings of
frustration and disenfranchisement. Most teachers met with their administrative
supervisor, either the principal or one of the two assistant principals, two or three times
over the course of the year specifically to debrief a lesson observation and discuss their
progress toward the yearly goals. Still, despite this communication time built into the
evaluation process, the comments above demonstrate another disconnect between the
leadership and the teachers. Rather than a two-way dialogue about priorities and goals for
improvement, some participants experienced a one-way, top-down interaction that failed
to address their own professional input.

Without a clear understanding of the position of the leadership, the participants
came up with their own explanations for circumstances feeding this confusion. These
teacher-authored explanations tended to focus on the lack of awareness they perceived
leadership had for their views. “They may be a little bit oblivious to [our perspective],
and I think it would be helpful for them to see it through our eyes,” says one teacher.
“[It’s a] Lack of understanding what it means to be a teacher,” states another. She goes on
to explain:
Either they were never in the classroom so long that they understand those things, or they've been out of the classroom so long that they forget that it's a different world. You focus mainly on statistics and data all the time—and you have to just look at your students and know them and do what's best for them. And I think part of it, too, is that for some reason, this administration doesn't value what your input is or what you have to say.

Yet another teacher follows in this vein, saying, “When we are handed something to implement by people who've been out of the classroom for a while, it doesn't actually make sense.” Some in the group readily acknowledge the confusion they experience between leadership goals and their own priorities. As one teacher put it with a half-comical, half-exasperated tone, “Well, we have to try everything. Let's try something different every year!”

**Vision for a More Positive Relationship with Leadership and Policy**

Alongside this confusion discourse ran a countercurrent of comments that spoke to the vision participants had regarding their ideal relationship with the leadership and their role within school policy. Comments in this countercurrent aimed at clearing up confusion by recasting the bifurcated leadership-teacher divide as a “meaningful conversation” rather than as a top-down, one-way flow of information. One teacher described a meaningful conversation she had had with a previous principal. For her, what made the conversation meaningful was “the fact that he was listening.”

And he reciprocated with ideas and not "I understand what you are trying to say here." And I know that "I understand what you're trying to say here"
is a way to show that you are listening, but when it is overused and there is nothing giving back to the conversation, it's almost like you could play a tape recorder that says that and over and over again and speak to a wall, and it would be just as much feedback.

In a separate interview, another teacher echoed this sentiment about the desire for two-way dialogue with the leadership.

It would be nice if we did some round table discussions with administration the way we did with you [i.e. like the focus groups], where they could come in and hear what are our concerns, what makes our job difficult, what do we feel are the obstacles to getting more kids proficient…

Indeed, as the group talked about the year together, it became clear that although they had experienced a good degree of frustration resulting from confusing leadership directives, they didn’t necessarily want less interaction with the school leaders. Rather, they sought more engagement with leadership—albeit of a more collegial, consultatory nature. “I would appreciate it if [The PLT coordinator] was in our classroom,” shared one teacher. “Not to do an observation, but just to come in and see what we are doing, and then give us suggestions.”

Tracing this countercurrent throughout the transcribed discussions and interviews begs the question why don’t the teachers ask the administration for these kinds of interactions. Potential answers to this question have to do with how the teacher-participants conceived of their own role as educators. One teacher in particular, one of the most experienced in the group, spoke at length about the responsibility of teachers to take
an active role in improving communication with leadership. “I really think that as
teachers, we can't be passive,” she stated.

As teachers we are with the kids daily, and we are seeing the changes in
how kids learn and what works and what doesn't work. So when we are
handed something to implement by people who've been out of the
classroom for a while, it doesn't actually make sense. But having a
dialogue with those people—so we're not so in the trenches that we can't
see the big picture—we need that as well.

To emphasize her conviction that teachers need to take an active stance in
dialogues with leadership, this teacher related a memory from a staff activity
earlier in the year where members of the leadership had asked the faculty to write
down concerns that they would like to see addressed. The leadership later came
back and had divided the list of collected concerns into three categories:
individual concerns, concerns that the school could handle, and concerns the
school had no influence in, such as district policies. “And the ‘have no
influence’—that bothered me,” she explained. “And I said something the first
time because I know I have personally influenced district-wide change. Or at least
I’ve been a catalyst or been a part of the change.” Similarly, having just
participated in a district training on 21st century learners where she learned of
plans at the state-level to create curriculum and assessments for these new skills,
she spoke of the importance of teachers and administrators getting involved in
that creation. “We can't sit back and wait for the state to do something,” she said.
“We've got to say, ‘Hey, I heard this. How can I be a part of this? How can all
different levels, you know, representation of different kinds of schools, get involved in this dialogue?"

Bound up with this conception of teachers as active participants with leadership is the responsibility of both sides to give respect to one’s colleagues.

It's just like with students, that if you respect others, you're going to get more respect…Even though our principal has...had his struggles, I have always seen effort. I see a lot of effort, and then missing the mark, which I see with my students, too. But you have to respect their—is it Gandhi who said, "The doer and deed are two different things. The doer always deserves respect as a human being"? I'm paraphrasing it, but it's something like that. It's the doer and the deed—they're separate; you punish the deed, but the doer is always deserving of respect.

Missed Opportunities for Support

In addition to the discourse of confusion detailed above, the focus group discussions and the follow-up interviews with the participants also gravitated toward the issue of support. As with the other comments about the leadership, this emerging discourse included several positive comments about the principal, assistant principals, deans, and professional development providers, but tended to focus on areas the participants considered weaknesses.

Comments in this area tend to emphasize the teachers’ feelings that they were not getting the amount or kind of support that they needed from the leadership. For some teachers, support related to how comfortable they felt reaching out for resources. For example, a first-year teacher in the group said, “I don't feel like if something in the class
were to happen, that I could go to anyone here and say, ‘I really need your help.’” At other times in the conversation, the group connected support to their feelings of isolation.

I just feel that it's—when I'm sharing something, it's just, "Oh, very good."

But it is not genuine. But I think if I were to ask them, "Well, why did you think it was good?", they would have a hard time kind of pinpointing things because I don't really feel like they are ever listening. And I don't really feel like there's much support there.

If I were in charge, I wouldn't put a first-year teacher out in the mobiles, because I would want to stop by. Not to check on them because I think that they can't handle it, but I would just want them to feel like, "I haven't forgotten about you; I support you. I just wanted to see what you guys are working on, but I trust that you are doing a good job."

Moreover, the lack of support the teachers experienced led to oppositional utterances that cast the participants in the role of having to justify themselves against the negative criticisms coming from the leadership. “I think we do have that conflict then,” explains one teacher, “because you learn what works and you try it in your classroom and it works and it's like, ‘Oh my gosh, Nazis after you.’” Ultimately, this perceived lack of support fed feelings of frustration and distrust. When one focus group discussion began to turn to this issue, one participant broke the ice of the initial awkward silence that took hold in the group, asking in a mock-conspiratorial tone, “Our names won’t be on this?”
The teachers’ thoughts and feelings about support came across predominately through discussions about professional learning teams (PLTs) and discipline at the school.

Professional Learning Teams

“The PLTs most significantly didn't work at all.”

The quotation above succinctly encapsulates the prevailing sentiment of the participants about their experience of the professional learning team. Most of the teachers in the research group attended these regular meetings in small teams on a semi-weekly basis throughout the year, led by the PLT coordinator and frequently attended by the building principal. In terms of the school context, these PLT meetings represent one of the most concrete, institutionalized venues for teacher/leadership interaction. However, the smaller set of writing teachers who worked in the higher-level AIM program did not attend these meetings with the PLT coordinator. Instead, this group of teachers had one-on-one meetings with the AIM program coordinator. Even though a number of the participants did not directly experience PLTs, these meetings still became a focal point in the participants’ comments regarding the support they received from leadership.

Reading through the transcribed conversations and interviews, a palpable sense of frustration quickly became apparent. “I leave pissed off,” stated one teacher.

It's the same as it was last year. I think that if it was just a giant waste of time, like I just went there and wasted my time, I wouldn't be so upset. I would be just like, "Oh, I wasted my time." But I think that what makes you really upset is when you feel that your intelligence level is—that's not
fair to say—um...that you are being degraded when you are there—and that they don't respect or care what you have to say about anything.

For this individual, her interaction with leadership clearly fell short of meeting her needs in terms of support. Many in the group associated PLTs with a similar lack of respect. “In a way, I almost feel like we're being...like we have babysitters. Like I'm teaching the 8th grade, but I'm also being treated like I'm in the 8th grade,” explained a participant. Other teachers echo this theme:

It's kind of like, “Well, I already know that—and if you took the time to talk with me about it, you would see that I actually know that and use it. So, why are you wasting my time assuming that I don't know something as simple as an exit ticket?” That's I think what makes me upset.

There are other people in the building I could even work with to improve my teaching for my kids as opposed to just sitting there and us kind of discussing nothing, or discussing the obvious, or discussing things that I was taught my freshman year of college. I feel like it is kind of very elementary, some of the stuff we are going over.

Well, the big thing that came up in the 6th grade one [PLT], was how they wanted us to teach it [summary writing]. And this stupid burrito fold business, and I said, “well I don't need to...it's still too hard.” I mean, I looked at it and said, "I don't get it—show me how this piece of paper with creases on it is going to help me organize my thoughts”...and I've already
introduced a way that is working well, why would I want to confuse them [the students]?

From these comments, it seems apparent that many of the topics discussed during the PLTs, particularly some of the strategies presented by the leadership, failed to address the needs or priorities of the teachers. Even one of the AIM teachers, who did not participate in the same PLT meetings as others in the group, felt the effect it had on her colleagues. “It is a topic of almost every conversation I am involved in with teachers,” she shared.

This disconnect between the support offered by the leadership through the PLTs and what the teachers felt they needed snapped into sharp relief when the group turned their conversation to the directive that dominated PLTs for a large portion of the year: summary writing. Early in the year, PLT groups reviewed the *Writing Next* report (2007). This meta-analysis listed a large effect size supporting the use of summary writing to improve writing performance, and the PLT coordinator and the school principal directed every teacher to incorporate summary writing into their classroom, grade student summaries on a provided rubric, and report out their data in PLT meetings. Although this initiative grew out of a desire to support teachers’ efforts to reach the school’s SIP goals in writing, as a perceived mandate from leadership with little or no teacher input it met stiff resistance from the faculty. For the teachers in the research group, the directive to complete summary writing with their students detracted from other activities they felt were more effective in improving student writing. In the exchange that follows, one can see how unworkable teachers found the summary directive:

A: And was it last year or this year we were told to do it like once a week or something?
B: This year.

C: Yeah.

D: I've ignored that, I don't know.

E: And the math teachers are supposed to be doing it, too.

D: Like, I'm supposed to meet with X----- about my goal this year—on summarizing.

B: We did the math on this. Do you remember what it was? We did the math on, OK, so to write a summary: about 30 minutes or maybe more. And you write in 7 classes, twice a quarter. I forget what we decided it was, but we were trying to figure this out.

F: And that doesn't even account for the time it takes to read the material.

Perhaps more frustrating for the teachers in this study was the feeling that their concerns about the summary writing focus seemed to fall on deaf ears.

I asked twice. Twice. With two different people that are running the summary writing thing—in PLT meetings: To what extent is focusing on summary writing to bring up male writing achievement just telling males to dumb down the level of thinking in your writing and you will succeed?

When asked by members of the focus group how the leadership responded to these comments, this teacher said the comments were met with “cyclical babble.” “I'd get placated,” the teacher explained. “Like, ‘Oh, I hear what you're saying, and that is understandable, and hopefully you're taking it deeper in your classroom.’”

To compound the frustrations of the group, participants indicated their feeling that expectations of the PLT meetings were inconsistent and sporadic. One teacher explained
that often the PLTs that met at the end of the week never received the same information as the ones that met early in the week. “They dropped it by the end of the week,” shared one teacher. Here, the discourse of support intersects with the earlier discourse of confusion about the leadership’s goals:

Y: So, by the time the summary writing came around to us, when people were presenting their data, they said don't even bring your data because nobody here can use it.

Z: And it wasn't explained, it was just you guys…got something different I think.

Y: Yeah…often we did.

Z: Did they say why?

Y: No, they never said why.

Sifting through the transcripts for explanations about why PLTs failed to provide the kind of support the teachers felt they needed pointed toward two foundational attitudes. First, despite the problematic summary writing directive, the group indicated a desire not to do less, but rather, to go much deeper with the topics presented. “Yes, they should be able to summary write. No, it should not be our focus,” stated one teacher. “We should focus on driving them farther than that.” Similarly, the second foundational attitude communicated a need for the concerns of teachers to take a more central role during the PLTs:

It's "professional learning team"—and so the expectation going in was that we're going to collaboratively work to improve what we do, to learn new strategies, and to really be able to take something meaningful into the
classroom. And I think that that's really the root of the problem: That we have this expectation, and by no means is it being met.

As with the discourse of confusion, within the comments expressing the drawbacks of the PLTs as a support structure for teachers runs a countercurrent in which the participants shared their thoughts about how the process could be improved on to better meet their needs. Building off of the foundational attitudes from above, these thoughts center on heightening the collaboration as well as the depth and scope of PLT work.

One of the AIM teachers pointed to her own professional learning experiences as a model of what the PLTs could become:

What my PLTs look like is that I meet with [the AIM coordinator] once a week. And I go to her, and I talk to her, “OK, this is the unit that I'm starting or this is the lesson that I'm doing. How can you help me make it better?” Sometimes I'll come to her with an entire unit and say, “OK, I'm ready to make this unit an understanding by design unit—can you help me come up with an understanding?” We may spend an entire period together that week doing nothing but coming up with my essential question and understanding. Next week it may be, “OK, I'm there now. Can you help me figure out some of the key assessments that I'm going to use in this unit that will all tie back to my understanding?” Or, I may come to her and say, “OK, this lesson flopped, and I still need to cover this material. Can you help me think of a better way to teach this lesson or to teach this concept, or to teach this skill?” So every time that I meet with her it is
different, and every meeting we have is totally based on where I am with my kids and what I need her help on as far as how to make it meaningful for them or how to make it higher level, or how to make it something that is going to prepare for high school.

For this teacher, the essential elements of effective collaborative meetings with leadership regarding her teaching included support that began with her personal, immediate needs to hone her lessons so that they were more purposeful and meaningful. The entire aim of the supportive encounter is to improve the lessons and curriculum she brings to the table and to work together to move them to a higher level. These collaborative meetings represent one of several qualitative differences between the experiences of teachers in the AIM program and other non-AIM teachers in the group. As discussed below in the section about collaboration and teamwork, the reasons for these differences and their consequences for the group of writing teachers became a point of contention among the participants. Still, the positive one-on-one interaction this teacher experienced with the AIM coordinator provides a model for the kind of professional support that more effectively meets the needs of teachers.

Mentors and the role of specific, directed feedback went hand in hand with this description of supportive PLTs. Repeatedly, teachers in the group pointed to supportive relationships they have had with mentors as significant aids in improving their teaching. “As far as my mentor is concerned, he has done an excellent job with giving me feedback,” comments one teacher. She goes on to describe how her mentor observes her teaching and sends detailed notes on email describing what he noticed during the class.
At the end of each email, her mentor lists several things she is doing well and a suggestion for something she can improve on.

And that's something super-valuable to me, and it's something that I really love: the encouragement and the compliments, but I always concentrate on the suggestion, because I don't see it as a "This is what you did bad—this is what you suck at;" it's like, “I think that if you did this it would make your classroom so much better—even better than it is now.” And so it gives me an area to focus on.

Similar to the other teacher’s comments how her AIM meetings ground themselves in her practice, the feedback this teacher receives from her mentor is valued for its specificity and its direct connection to her immediate concerns in the classroom.

The value participants placed on having their own needs drive the agenda for PLTs made up another common leitmotif in the countercurrent of comments related to teachers’ ideal support. Several voices contributed to the idea that the PLT meetings needed a different focus. “The meetings need to be set up with a purpose and that purpose needs to be viable and relevant,” comments one participant in a follow-up interview. “Like a good classroom, it's student-led,” states another teacher, “or in this case it would be the peers—teachers are leading the meeting [i.e. the PLTs].” A third teacher hits a similar note: “Teachers need to be the source for change, not an afterthought.”

Underlying this desire for relevance is a tacit expectation that what teachers share with leadership should receive more than lip service. As yet another member of the research group put it, “Support would be recognition of teachers' needs. And not just recognition, but action.”
Discipline

“The discipline piece plays such a factor in all of our classes, whatever we are teaching.”

The discourse of support also came to light through the discussions that touched on the issue of discipline at the school site. Although the general consensus seemed to indicate that the overall discipline picture, particularly with the 8th grade students, was much improved over previous years, a prevailing sense of lack of follow-through on the part of the leadership emerged in the transcribed conversations and interviews. The participants associated this with the amount of support they received in the classroom.

Following this thread in the data led to comments that indicate a perception that the leadership failed to hold students accountable for their behaviors. One teacher in the group put it this way:

Teachers need to teach, and someone else needs to handle the discipline—
I don't mean the normal classroom stuff. But you need to be able to remove a child who is disrupting everyone else's learning continually, and there needs to be a consequence for that child to make them not want to do it again and that's what this school is lacking.

The central issue in this leitmotif seems to be the way leadership handles the consequence-end of the discipline interaction. The same teacher continues:

I don't think it's because of the deans not wanting to. I know that they have tried to put punishments in place that then were retracted—and really, as a parent, I'm like, "Bad, bad messages to kids." It gives them an attitude: "Let's make the grown-ups fight, and I get to keep doing the behavior."
As this quotation elucidates, the perception within the group was that some members of the leadership were working against the efforts of others with the net result of mixed messages for the students and less support for teachers. “It's kind of whatever the kids want,” explained another teacher.

I know that on our team, students felt empowered because they got the impression that they got a teacher fired. So, when they don't like something, they...instead of working it out as a group of civilized individuals, they're completely opposing, or being defiant about things, they are not being good problem-solvers...the kids are empowered in the wrong way.

In a separate follow-up interview, a third teacher in the group mapped out how this negative empowerment resulting from mixed-messages to students and their families worked to undermine her position in the classroom:

I feel like it has given…the parents the impression that they can go over our heads. I feel like in order for this behavior to take place, someone has made it OK somewhere down the line; it didn't just happen. And that's really irritating, because whereas I feel like we should be supporting the parents and the students, it makes us look really bad…There's a certain level of respect I feel like the kids don't have when they know that the principal can come in and really bully his way into our classroom, regardless of prior rules and expectations and requirements that we have set up from the beginning of the year—those things can really be trashed.
These comments highlight the connection between how leadership handles discipline issues and support for teachers. For the participants in the research group, the amount of support they felt decreased when they experienced the leadership acting in ways they considered to be inconsistent or that ignored the repercussions to the teacher-student relationship in the classroom.

While different in type and scope than the discussion regarding PLTs, the comments about discipline speak to similar underlying dynamics concerning support. This comes across in the countercurrent of this issue. Just as teachers imagined the PLTs would be improved through realigning those meetings toward a greater appreciation for teacher input, they felt discipline would be more supportive if leadership gave more consideration to how their actions impacted teachers. One teacher shared how this might work:

I just feel like, to me, this is kind of a common sense thing, but maybe not, that if there is an issue with a student and the parent calls, it should always be put on the parent—did you talk to this teacher first? And then, if you don't get a resolution, we can all meet and figure out something together.

And I don't feel like that has ever happened.

Placed in context with the other comments from the research group regarding support, this utterance falls in line with similar desires—to have an active role, to engage in dialogue with the leadership, to feel listened to. Above all else, the group communicated a need for the leadership to turn away from a tendency to ally themselves too closely with students and families at the expense of teachers. “To me, an expectation of a good principal is that they are behind the teachers,” comments one participant. “They may not
know exactly everything that's going on in our classrooms, but they have a pretty good idea of the class dynamic. And if there is an issue that is cause for concern, they treat us as professionals—particularly with parents.”

*Placing the Findings in the Literature*

To begin to situate these findings about how the participants viewed their relationship with school leadership in context within the literature, I conducted searches related to a number of the emerging motifs from the data. Chief among these were teachers’ perception of policy, supportive leadership styles, and discipline.

*Teacher Perception of Policy*

The discourse of the confusion teachers feel about leadership goals connects to the literature regarding teacher perceptions of policy. As Franzak (2006) argues, “‘policy’ is a slippery word” (p. 229) due to the different dimensions in which it can operate in—from classroom decisions, to school expectations, to national aspirations. Venturing into the literature in this field, the first step is to understand the “multiple levels and manifestations of policy at work” (p. 229), a helpful statement when considering how the teachers in the research group experienced policy on several different levels from SIP goals, to PLTs, to school discipline. Across all of its dimensions, Franzak points out a defining characteristic of this slippery term: that, as mentioned above, “policy is created by some individuals with the intent of imposing it on others” (p. 229). Encapsulated within Franzak’s conception of policy is the very bifurcated, top-down dynamic that found voice in the focus groups and interviews.
This power differential inherent in the hierarchical relationship between administration and teachers deserves special attention in examining how teachers understand policy directives. As Manathunga (2007) points out, the power-laced aspects of supervision force teachers into difficult, often-contradictory roles. When confronted with policy directives linked to supervision and evaluation, like the participants in the current study, teachers must adopt two contradictory subject positions: one of active subject, exuding professional autonomy to carry out the policy, and one that desires regulation and guidance (Devos, 2004; Manathunga, 2007). While the administrators and the teachers often ignore the role power plays in placing teachers in this contradictory position, Manathunga (2007) argues that there is a need to “carefully explore, problematize and discuss the inherent operations of power” (p. 212) within supervisory relationships because of the tensions involved in how leadership and policy shapes the identities of teachers. Yendol-Silva and Fichtman Dana (2004) use the term micropolitics to describe the overt and covert processes used to acquire and exercise power in these supervisory relationships to promote or protect interests of the authority figures. Furthermore, these educational researchers argue that merely providing spaces for dialogue between administrators and teachers, such as the evaluation meetings the participants in the current study experienced, does not give power to teachers. Rather, teachers must find their own voices and create their own power by defining and occupying new roles that advance more active participation in the creation of policy and decision-making (Yendol-Silva & Fichtman Dana, 2004). This view connects with the opinion of the participant in the research group who advocated for teachers to take an
active role in improving communication with leadership and to try to act as a catalyst for the kind of change they want to see in the school.

In addition to this issue of power, much of the recent literature on this subject concerns how teachers make sense of national policy initiatives in the United States. Languardia, Brink, Wheeler, Grisham, and Peck (2002) focus on how standards-based reform efforts in Washington State have impacted teachers. As mentioned above, this study investigated concerns about how teaching practices have changed under the influence of state tests and school reform. When the researchers conducted follow-up interviews with all participants two years later, the participants noted negative shifts in teaching and professional development as well as the types of support they felt necessary to help them improve and enhance student learning. The trends that emerged from this study provided evidence of how policy largely dis-empowered teachers.

This connects to similar feelings expressed within the discourse of confusion and support from the current study’s focus groups and interviews. For example, the expression of policy in the form of PLTs prompted many participants to speak about how they felt degraded, or that they were treated like 8th graders being babysat by the leadership. Moreover, when teachers in the focus group described positive, supportive interactions with leadership, they expressed a desire to take on a more active role, engaging in real dialogue with others at the school. Languardia et al. (2002) draw on the motivational research of Thaler and Somekh (1997), Ames (1992) and Deci and Ryan (1985) to emphasize the importance of teachers feeling some “degree of autonomy, choice making and control” (p. 15). These motivational processes, they argue, contribute
to the “willingness and capacity” of teachers to undergo the systemic change brought about by a reform agenda (p. 15).

An underlying theme throughout this literature on policy research is the need for further qualitative research studies that “encompass policy, theory, and practice” (Franzak, 2006, p. 234). Franzak (2006) highlights the urgency to explore how policy “shapes the literacy values and practices of teachers” (p. 237). In this light, my aim to explore how teachers articulate and act on their understanding of policy positions my study to make a meaningful contribution to the field by documenting the “complex interactions of policy in practice” (p. 238).

Supportive Leadership Styles

According to Bass (1985) the Full Range Leadership model encompasses three main types of leadership styles: laissez-faire (lack of leadership), transactional, and transformational. Management by corrective action and tangible exchanges characterize transactional leadership. Transformational leadership denotes behavior that utilizes the strong influence of vision, consideration for individuals (strong one-on-one relationships), the encouragement of thinking in new ways, and inspirational motivation. Bass’s leadership model informs the tension between teachers and the leadership described in the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews. Here, the discourse of support surrounding the PLT situation takes on a sharper focus. The resulting picture captures a sort of tug-of-war between a more traditional transactional leadership style and a more inspirational transformational leadership style that aims to broaden and elevate the goals of the subordinates.
Hersey and Blanchard’s (1993) situational leadership model takes this notion a step further. In this model, a leader aims to match his or her approach to the employee’s readiness to perform by drawing on four styles: telling, selling, participating and delegating. If the employees exhibit a low state of readiness, the leader should adopt a more direct manner. As the employees become more ready, they need less task orientation from the leader. In the transcribed data, the participants point out several leadership behaviors that indicate a “telling” or “selling” approach—the directive to do summary writing, for example, or the practice of handing teachers their evaluation goals. Likewise, the countercurrent conversations about ideals point to more “participating” or “delegating” interactions.

The teachers in the research group seem to be saying that they are ready for a more expansive type of situational leadership. This formulation runs somewhat against the grain. For example, Barkley (2007) lays out the essential challenge a principal faces as “enabling teachers to take action” (p. 12), implying that the teachers need to catch up to the expectations of the leadership. However, in my study, the challenge doesn't seem to lie in the principal enabling the teachers to take action—they already want to be active. Instead, the challenge seems to be the leadership approach catching up to the readiness of the teachers by recognizing and finding ways to support the teachers’ desire to take on a more active role in their own professional growth and development.

Barker (2006) lends some additional insight to the issue of how teachers understand their relationship with leadership. In his qualitative historical study, Barker details the changes experienced by a school during a period of transition. Three different head teachers led the school through this time, each representing a different leadership
approach. The unsuccessful initial head teacher eventually made way for a more charismatic head who specialized in turning around struggling schools. This leader eventually lost enthusiasm for the school once the beginning stresses of transformation passes and gave way to a third head teacher who worked to deepen and sustain the change that had taken place. As Barker (2006) put it, “The memory of H1’s failure helped H2 embark on an urgent rescue mission, while H3 was haunted by the perceived success of a charismatic predecessor” (p. 289). However, the transition from one leader to the next wasn’t always smooth. When the third head teacher took over, he “complained that he was compared unfavourably with H2 and that the senior team was at times actively disloyal” (p. 287). A similar dynamic impacted the data from the writing teachers in the current study. Much like the third head teacher in Barker’s (2006) work, the building principal at the research site followed a charismatic principal who opened the school and inherited a number of staff members from previous leaders. This study underscores the importance of the voices within the focus group who spoke of the role of teachers in creating positive, supportive work environments with leadership and mitigates some of the more strident criticisms by emphasizing the challenges faced by leadership in transition.

As a number of participant comments from the focus group and follow-up interviews point out, the type of feedback leadership provides teachers also plays an important role in the discourse of support. Lindsay, Sugai, and De Pry (2002) point out the long-acknowledged importance of contingent and specific feedback in the learning process and argue that the feedback offered by principals also plays a valuable role in changing employee performance. The comments from the research group about the
interactions they prize with mentors and previous principals reflect Lindsay, Sugai, and De Pry’s (2002) findings that most teachers greatly appreciate intangible (e.g., verbal praise, informal notes/e-mails, or formal letters of appreciation) rather than tangible (e.g., gifts, certificates, plaques) forms of recognition or feedback. It would seem that when it comes to the support teachers receive from leadership, often it is the little things that count in terms of more genuine forms of recognition.

**Discipline**

Several studies indicate that the actions of a school principal can greatly impact student performance, especially in more successful schools. Additionally, Mukuria (2002) points out that “the way principals deal with discipline problems in their schools has an impact on the overall school climate” (p. 435). Citing studies by McAdams (1998) and Sergiocanni and Starratt (1998), Mukuria (2002) concludes that the daily actions of leadership influence how teachers interact with students and that the “leadership of the school principal is critical to improving the school environment for both students and teachers” (p. 436). The data from the focus groups and follow-up interviews support the importance of the leadership in how supported teachers feel at the school. According to Mukuria (2002), the specific administrative quality that helped to maintain discipline at schools with low suspension rates involved awareness that “they could achieve little without teachers’ support” and that school discipline was a “joint effort” (p. 440). Just like many of the writing teachers expressed their need for the leadership not to allow students and parents to “go over teachers’ heads” and to support teachers’ decisions in the classroom, Makuria (2002) argues that the most effective principals “supported teachers morally and materially by letting them know that their decisions and judgments were
respected and valued” (p. 441). Conversely, when leadership did not appear to value and respect teachers’ suggestions on discipline matters, as indicated in the transcribed conversations and interviews in the current study as well, teachers distanced themselves from the school leadership (Mukuria, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1990). As the transcribed data from the research group demonstrates, this kind of dynamic can lead to feelings of frustration and distrust among teachers and a break down of communication between the administration and school faculty.

While the literature supports the need for leadership to partner closely with teachers to maintain discipline and improve the overall school climate, it also heavily emphasizes the urgent need for principals to form enduring bonds with children and families. Rieg (2007) states that “building relationships with the children, their families, and the communities is of the utmost importance” for principals (p. 212). Murkuria (2002) also agrees that high parental involvement in schools contribute to lower suspension rates. This aspect of the discipline literature highlights the difficult balancing act demanded of school leadership: not only must they honor and respect the needs of their teachers, but they must also simultaneously reach out to families and build relationships with students. This considerable challenge casts a somewhat different light on some of the comments from the focus groups and interviews calling for principals to throw more support behind teachers. While the needs and perceptions of the teachers represent very legitimate concerns, clearly the leadership experiences a wide range of pressures unique to their position. All this makes the issue of striking the right balance more complicated and nuanced and less clear-cut.
Summary of Findings in the Leadership Theme

How writing teachers think about their relationship with leadership at the school directly impacts how they make sense of their charge to increase student performance as well as create conditions necessary for working together to improve their own teaching practices. Within this theme, issues of policy, professional development, and discipline reveal two related, yet distinct discourses: one of confusion, and one of support.

A mismatch between teacher expectations and leadership goals characterizes the discourse of confusion. Here, participants shared their perception of directives, such as to cut back on a successful SSR program and decrease the availability of certain electives, as inconsistent and never fully explained. The teachers experienced several failures of communication with leadership, such as the unpleasant “come to Jesus meetings,” that led to strong emotions of frustration and distrust. Unsure of the leadership’s motivations, teachers assigned their own reasons for their confusing interactions with leadership, suggesting that leadership had forgotten the realities of the classroom. Perhaps most importantly, despite the fact that key school policy, such as the school improvement plan, drove teacher evaluation, it did not figure prominently in teachers’ priorities. The directives coming from leadership did not match up with what the teachers considered the most pressing needs for helping students succeed.

Participants in the study also talked about how this discourse of confusion might improve. Throughout the ideas shared ran the desire for more “meaningful conversation” with the leadership. Among other things, this kind of positive interaction included real listening on the part of leadership to the concerns of teachers as well as more engagement on the part of teachers to respectful relationship with the leadership. The overall
consensus indicated that teachers needed to take a more active stance in demanding dialogue with leadership about policy goals.

The discourse of support followed a similar arc. While a number of the participants in the group indicated that they had received excellent professional support from the leadership at different times of the school year, the discussion in the focus groups and the follow-up interviews focused on what the participants experienced as shortcomings. Reflecting the power imbalance in the hierarchical relationship between administrators and teachers, the data from the transcripts indicate that several of the participants did not feel comfortable approaching members of the leadership for help with issues in their classroom. Feelings of frustration and distrust also permeated this discourse. Professional learning teams, in particular, brought to the surface several drawbacks to the support offered by the leadership. Teachers reported that they felt degraded in several of these meetings as leadership ignored their voices. The directive to use summary writing that came from PLTs proved unworkable for many participants as they felt that it was inconsistent and not well explained. Several questions and complaints about the mandate went unheeded by the leadership. Likewise, problems with how leadership handled discipline at the research site diminished the support teachers felt. Participants shared how weak or inconsistent consequences allowed students to play the adults off each other, enabling a loss of respect for teachers.

The participants discussed a number of ways to increase the level of support they experienced at the school. Several pointed out that the PLT meetings could benefit from focusing on the immediate needs of the teachers, such as improving specific lesson plans. Rather than depending on the leadership to provide an agenda, a number of participants
argued that teachers should lead these meetings. The value of relationships with mentors and targeted feedback also featured prominently in the comments. Moreover, the research group demanded more consideration of the teacher in the discipline process.

Acknowledging the importance of supporting students and families, the overriding sentiment expressed in the focus groups and the follow-up interviews emphasized that the leadership needed to be “behind the teacher.”

Achievement Gap

The second main thematic area that emerged from the focus group discussions and the follow-up interviews dealt with how the group made sense of policy directives to close the achievement gap in writing. Inscribed into key policy documents such as the school improvement plan and the teacher evaluation goals, the school-wide aim to “close the achievement gap in writing between males and females” by raising the percentage of male students scoring proficient or above on the CSAP exam, impacted the writing teachers in the research group more than any other message from leadership. Therefore, unsurprisingly, this area of the data closely parallels the group’s thoughts about leadership. However, the dominant discourse within this thematic area does not concern the school administration, but rather centers on reflections about the nature of education and how teachers conceive of their role within it. Ultimately, as the participants articulated their understanding of the directive to close the achievement gap, they wrestled with the inadequacy of this lens and their own difficulty talking about gender and race differences.
Connections to Leadership and Policy

“Our questions define our answers.”

As policy, the goal to raise scores to close the achievement gap connected to some of the criticisms and confusion teachers felt about leadership goals. The importance placed on test scores seemed to intensify this connection, linking the threads of the achievement gap, leadership, and assessment/measurement. The quote from a focus group discussion that began this section encapsulates the group’s attitude about this three-way relationship. Whereas the leadership equated high scores with success closing the achievement gap, the participants found this framework too limiting. One of the teachers explained her view that the leadership had been out of the classroom so long that they had forgotten about the realities teachers face and stated that the leadership focused “mainly on statistics and data all the time.” This connection cropped up again in the discussion about the directive to use summary writing. “It is really testable,” commented one teacher, explaining why she felt the leadership chose to focus PLTs on summary writing. “It was the most testable one out of the whole thing [the Writing Next report].” Several of the participants agreed with this assertion. “This is what they can measure,” shared one teacher. Another one followed, “That's why they chose it: because it's testable.”

The link shared between the achievement gap, leadership, and assessment/measurement tended to signal uneasiness or distrust about the preeminence of scores and data. “One the problems with the educational system…[is this] quantifiable and narrowly defined kind of academic success,” stated one teacher. Moreover, the sense that the teachers were not often given the whole picture contributed to this feeling of uneasiness regarding the emphasis on quantifiable data. One example of this uneasiness
involved some confusion in the group about why the leadership decided to discontinue the practice of sustained silent reading (SSR) despite the general feeling among the participants that the activity proved beneficial for students. This sense of frustration resulted from the perceived tendency of the school to change approaches so often that it becomes impossible to know what really contributes to positive student outcomes. “We continue to add too many variables every single year,” one teacher explained, “so we don’t know is it this or that.” For another teacher in the group, the assessment data shared by leadership at staff meetings to highlight the achievement gap was off target. “I don't think that this data reflects the kids that take our most creative approaches and concerns,” she explained. “In this school setting and [with] the assessment that we use, they are left behind.” Similarly, after reading Mead (2006) for one of the focus groups discussions, one teacher explained it this way:

So we're shown holes, and we're asked to close those holes. And it's a very valid thing to be asked, but we aren't shown—if this data is true in the second article—the long-term, the way the gaps change over time. We just see this big hole that's like standing over the Grand Canyon and say, "Close it." That's how it feels sometimes, because we're trying all these things—grasping sometimes. Whereas looking at [the gap] over time, seeing that the girls increase is helpful...and seeing how static really the gap is...That was surprising to me, and I thought, "OK now, they seem to conflict, but they really don't conflict, because we are looking at different data."

In a different conversation, another participant made a similar comment:
I really have a problem with the way we are evaluating students, and the changes we are forced to make on a yearly level when really we don't know what these...what the data is.

One teacher summarized the group’s disquiet with the emphasis on data and scores saying, “I just wonder sometimes, do we just put up the data to make us feel guilty? Because I do.”

*The Role of Teachers*

Beyond this uneasy linkage of the directive to close the achievement gap with leadership and the limitations of assessment data, the challenge of addressing disparate writing performance between males and females as well as between students of color and white students prompted the research group to take a more self-critical and introspective stance on their teaching practice. From this reflective stance, a distinct discourse emerged in the transcribed conversations and interviews about the nature of education and the role of teachers.

The group’s comments within this discourse fell into two main categories. The first set of statements shared a sense of optimism and a can-do attitude about the mission of education and the work of teachers. “My experience with teachers is that…they want to be successful, they want their kids to get the A's, and they're listening to what the kids need,” shared one teacher. “I think that we just all try to do things that pull everybody up,” commented another. These utterances highlight the role of teachers to reach and elevate all students. A different teacher in the group expanded on this idea:

As educators, our goal is always to offer equal access to opportunity. Kids have to take it or leave it, right? And so we try to alter the variables that
influence whether they want to take it or leave it. That's one of our main jobs... Every day we come offering learning. We have to make sure that we offer it to everyone the same. And then we have to try to influence the variables that make them want it.

This paradigm emphasizes the concept of equality. Here, the proper combination of instructional approaches tailored to student needs influences motivation and therefore enables learning. “We just have to keep equipping them with ability to access, resources to access, and thinking skills,” the same teacher elaborated in a follow-up interview. “Our job is to equip these kids for a future we don't know.” Other teachers in the group adopt slightly different, yet related, points of view. For example, one participant focused more on the transformational aspect of education. “I think it is important to let the students know we're learning just as much from them as they're learning from us—boys or girls,“ she explained. Although each participant conceived of the role of teachers in a uniquely personal way, all of the comments in this first category share an undeniably positive view of education and a clear sense of purpose about the role of teachers. As one participant put it, “So that school can be school: a place to learn.”

Along with this first category of comments regarding the role of teachers, a second set of beliefs surfaced in the conversations. A critical difference in assumptions and a somewhat less optimistic outlook characterized this second category. Some teachers in the group expressed doubt about how well school spoke to the needs of all students. “I feel like, I think we all know, the old-school school would favor that linguistic brain almost exclusively,” stated one teacher. Another participant picked up this thread:

What's sad is that you have to teach them how to play the game, so that
they can get the [job] interview. Because he may be really smart, really
gifted, can do many things, but without a college education…he has to
play the game of college in order to get there.

In this utterance, the opportunity offered by education reduces to a game—the rules to
which, however unjust and biased, the students must master. This troubling mixed-
message suggests a level of dishonesty inherent in tests and academic hoops and speaks
to how these pressures shape teachers. The first teacher took this idea further:

And that's the message I give my kids: you want to succeed?— learn how
to speak like the upper class. Because you will, you'll succeed. They'll
assume that you're intelligent, when you may or may not be, and that's
always a good tool to have, but I also encourage them not to ever judge
anyone on those same terms that they're being judged, because it is false.

It keeps elements of our society where they are.

Later, in a follow-up interview, this teacher clarified this position further:

I want you to leave my classroom knowing all the rules of grammar,
knowing how to use the language—that’s fine, but two, I want you to
leave my classroom never judging another person for the way they talk
ever again. Ever.

For this teacher, the contradictory position of simultaneously feeling the need to teach
something he disagreed with caused him to question aloud, “To what extent do I
perpetuate an unjust system?” Hand in hand with this sense of injustice went a sentiment
of inevitability and inertia. About the arbitrary game of education one teacher
commented, “But, that's not our deal, that's society's deal, we can't change it.” Another in
the group added, “I guess you can change the school, but schools mimic systems, and our system is not changing any time soon.” These comments stand in stark contrast to those of another participant in the group about how teachers must act as the source and “catalyst for change.”

As the group discussed the issue of the achievement gap together, the tension between these two paradigms revealed the importance of examining the underlying assumptions about education and the role of teachers. Rather than participants falling squarely into ideological categories, what the data from the transcripts showed was a complex state of flux that resists simple labels—positive or negative, optimistic or pessimistic. Indeed, several of the participants adhered adamantly to both paradigms. Confronted with the challenge to close the achievement gap, the teachers in the research study turned inward to make sense of this directive in terms of their own beliefs. For example, the comments of one female teacher after reading Mead’s (2006) article about the gender achievement gap, points to this inward conversation:

What ideologies do we have beyond "everybody has a chance to be great and learn"? What are the conflicting ideologies that she [Mead] thinks that people are out—are we—does she really believe that people are out there to suppress the female? I mean we still definitely have a society that is patriarchal, there's no—I'm not arguing that, I feel that on a daily basis—but does she really think it's intentional on the part of educators? And maybe I'm being Pollyanna, maybe it is. But I don't see it in any professional educator I've met. I see quite the opposite. Almost a perseveration on every gap and what part of it we play.
More than a matter of simply carrying out the directives of leadership, the challenge to close the achievement gap touched on the most foundational assumptions of teachers’ conception about their role in education.

The paradigms and assumptions of the participants informed their work on the directive to close the achievement gap. From the transcribed conversations and interviews, this came across most strongly in their discussion of strategies used to address the gap and their struggle focusing on isolated categories such as gender and race.

**Strategies and Assumptions**

As one might expect, given the directive to close the achievement gap, much of the discussion in the research group focused on strategies for increasing student achievement in writing. While examining these strategies certainly yields insight into how the participants viewed their role, noting the unspoken assumptions behind these strategies reveals a more profound level of understanding about how teachers in the research group conceived of the underlying causes of the achievement gap that serve as obstacles to their work as educators.

**Table 1**

*Strategies and Assumptions of Underlying Causes of the Achievement Gap in Writing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Shared</th>
<th>Underlying Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not ignore other kinds of intelligences.</td>
<td>School favors certain ways of knowing (particularly verbal/linguistic intelligences) over other intelligences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy Shared</td>
<td>Underlying Assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on strengths of individuals rather than groups.</td>
<td>The focus on the gap between different student groups (male/female, black/white) prevents teachers from focusing on the unique learning needs of individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate more 21st century learning skills (e.g. inquiry-based learning).</td>
<td>School curriculum is out of date and out of touch with the needs of today’s learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow students to be creative with language.</td>
<td>The insistence on formal language and traditional structures prevents the students from finding their voice and sharing their creativity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on creating a strong teacher-student relationship (including matching students to teachers).</td>
<td>Teachers do not have strong enough connections with their students. Relationships between teachers and students need to be more positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have students discuss before they begin to plan their writing.</td>
<td>Students are often not allowed to talk with others about their writing.</td>
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As shown in Table 1, the participants suggested a wide range of strategies to address the achievement gap in writing. The importance of using purposeful movement through kinesthetic activities to help students learn the material featured prominently in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Shared</th>
<th>Underlying Assumptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate more movement.</td>
<td>Too often, students are expected to sit still.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate “boyness.”</td>
<td>School does not value the personalities and uniqueness of boys enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make reluctant male writers feel special in the classroom.</td>
<td>School does not make some boys feel special. Often reluctant male writers are viewed as problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow students to write about sports.</td>
<td>Teachers often fail to include topics of interest to students (particularly males).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate more choice in writing assignments.</td>
<td>Teachers often fail to help students master explicit skills in writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help students see the formulaic aspects of writing.</td>
<td>Students need compelling reasons to write.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make use of competition (e.g. contests).</td>
<td>Reluctant writers, particularly reluctant male writers, are sometimes made to look weak as a result of a teacher’s instructional choices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the focus groups and follow-up interviews. Teachers shared their efforts with this strategy more than any other. “I do a movement thing everyday,” explained one teacher, “It's like my goal. I've got to get them out of their seats everyday to do something.” In a different focus group discussion, another teacher elaborated on the importance of kinesthetic approaches:

I do really think that all kids, not just the boys, need some activity. Now the kids aren't getting normal PE classes like they did 20 years ago either, they're not getting a forced physical outlet everyday. And I really think that there's, you know, as being a coach, and being someone who has done sports my entire life, I really think that there is something to that. Sort of relaxing your body before your mind can be relaxed and open.

For others in the group, finding ways to incorporate movement into the writing classroom positively impacted student behavior. “They need to like run around,” stated a third participant. “Sometimes we go out and run around the track and then write about it. That's the time when they run around the track and they're dying, and they come in and they're like quiet as mice.”

Beyond the enthusiasm for kinesthetic activities, the most surprising strategy mentioned in the discussions and interviews focused on “celebrating ‘boyness.’” Rather than describing a set of activities to do with students, this thread emphasized a shift in how teachers viewed the boys in their classrooms. Responding to a scenario described in Tyre (2006) in which a sixth grade teacher assigns an earth-science lab on measuring crystals, one of the participants explains what she means by celebrating boyness:
This example that they gave in the "Trouble with Boys" article, you know, it says that with 6th grade science teacher, science and earth lab, the girls get out their materials and start…The first thing boys do is ask, "Can we eat this." And my comment is, "That's only a problem if we make it one." Isn't that hilarious that they ask, "Can we eat this?" Can't you laugh and enjoy that boy moment, and then get them focused on starting? I think too often, we make the boy moment—inappropriate…We need to celebrate it.

Instead of focusing on what the boys lack—namely the on-task behavior more frequently exhibited by girls—this strategy advocated highlighting the positive aspects of the humor and unique perspective boys bring to the classroom. Closing the achievement gap between male and female writers, then, is not a matter of fixing the boys, but rather seeing them differently.

Examining the strategies the participants discussed during the focus groups and the follow-up interviews reveals a great deal about how the teachers in the research group view their role in the policy directive to close the achievement gap. The list in Table 1 shows that the participants felt the need to improve how well their teaching met the needs of their students as well as a desire to push their pedagogy, deepen their connections with students, and critically evaluate their foundational paradigms about students they work with. The fact that the discussion about the achievement gap took place largely as a discussion about strategies underscores a positive, roll-up-the-sleeves-and-get-to-work attitude among the group. A key finding from this strategy discourse is that the participants viewed the directive to close the achievement gap as a challenge, and more specifically, a challenge they leapt to with enthusiasm and energy.
The strategies put forth in the group, however, have more to tell about how the participants made sense of their role within the policy directive. For every strategy voiced in the focus groups and interviews, another unspoken assumption entered the mix. Like the two sides to a coin, on the flipside of each call to action operated an underlying cause behind the gap. Taking a cue from Creswell (2007) who cites Czarniawska’s (2004) use of deconstruction in data analysis, the second column in Table 1 examines the silences—the assumptions behind the strategies that the participants often did not say directly, but which drove their understanding of the achievement gap nonetheless.

For example, the strategy of celebrating boyness mentioned above presupposes that school does not value the uniqueness of male students. The participants in the group took this precondition for granted as they thought about the directive to close the achievement gap. The other inferences listed in Table 1 point to several related reasons the teachers in the group used to explain the gap. The view that school fails to celebrate positive aspects of boyness connects to another underlying assumption that teachers do not have strong enough connections with their students and that the relationships between teachers and students need to be more positive. While several of the female teachers in the research group shared their efforts to connect to their male students through common interests in sports or computer games, a few of them still acknowledged the challenge posed by their different life experiences. One teacher in the group put it this way:

X: I would say that sometimes I'm guilty of treating them [male students] like defective girls.

Y: (Laughter) What do you mean. Give me some examples here.

X: Well, why can't you just sit there and write like my girls do?
Y: OK

X: Because I don’t understand it, because I'm a girl, which makes it hard.

Another teacher picked up this idea in a different focus group discussion:

It's easier, I think, as a female to get to know girls, because we have a lot in common. But to kind of go out and get to know the boys more so beyond "You're going to write this because I said so and you need to know this" is, you know, important as well.

For this teacher in particular, getting to know the male students in her classroom included finding ways to make the reluctant students feel special by changing how she responded to their in-class behavior. She shared an example of how this approach worked for her:

I have a student who was a real smart-aleck from the first day until about the first month in of school, and then it just became something where he would be just really irritating me so badly. But there was something I really liked about him; I just couldn't put my finger on why he was irritating me so much. And so he became, "OK, you pass the papers out for me or you collect this for me," and now that's his role. You know, when I say, “OK pass your homework in,” he's up out of his desk, and he's going by everyone. He's super polite now.

Taken together, these strategies and stories of successful transformations act as counter-examples in a backdrop in which participants tacitly acknowledge their feeling that too often teachers fail to form strong connections with students, and in which too often male students are not made to feel special and boyness is undervalued.

Looking at the rest of the Table 1 fills in this backdrop to the achievement gap even
further. The picture that takes shape sketches an out-of-date, narrow school experience that is out of touch with topics of interest to students and that frequently ignores student choice as it simultaneously overlooks whole populations of the student body by rigidly following traditional structures that expect students to sit still and remain silent. For the participants in the research group, this bleak landscape defined the achievement gap. Put another way, when directed to close the achievement gap in writing, the teachers conceived of the task in terms of contrast with these assumptions, framing their view of effective instruction in opposition to this picture of ineffective practices—like a photo to its negative.

In addition to the strategies put forth, the participants also identified a number of obstacles that hampered their work to close the achievement gap in writing. These obstacles ranged from curricular limitations to time constraints and from characteristics of students to broader societal trends. Specifically, teachers in the research group pointed to the tendency of the school to add “too many variables every single year,” such as the unsuccessful focus on summary writing that detracted from their work on other needs, such as compound versus simple sentences and expanding student vocabulary. Others singled out over-reliance on certain formulaic constructions in writing such as unimaginative transitions and restrictive assessment tools as barriers. Negative peer pressure that held back high achievers also surfaced in the discussion, as did frequent absences or students coming to class unprepared with supplies and materials. The group likewise indicated developmental concerns as obstacles to raising achievement, such as a perceived need to constantly reinforce and repeat information due to the short memory of middle school-aged children.
Perhaps most importantly, the group described the role of apathy on the part of students as one of the most imposing roadblocks to their work. In the following exchange, one of the teachers in the group shares a possible explanation for low student performance, and several others in the group add their agreement:

A: Most of the kids—and I can almost attribute it to just the apathy of school—didn't really care to do that. It's just, let's do this as quickly as we can, which...which is something that I don't think that we've talked about quite yet—is that what I see most often from male and female writers who are disengaged, which is what I think is really what we see in the data, is just apathy. We need a box on the CSAP...

B: Just apathy. I agree.

A: ...that says, “I don't care about what we're doing.”

C: Exactly, that plays such a huge role in it.

A: And if they check that box, then we need to look at their data differently.

D: And then we're surprised why they hate writing...

A: Yeah.

B: Because they don't care.

E: Because they have to spend two hours at their seats...

F: Summarizing.

This back and forth from one of the focus group discussions brought together several of the leitmotifs relating to how the group understood the achievement gap and its underlying causes. Here, apathy intersects with the limitations of assessment, the lack of
connection between teacher and students, boring classroom practices, and ineffective curricular approaches resulting from the frustrated relationship between teachers and leadership. Moreover, in a follow-up interview, one teacher elaborated on this apathy, relating it to feelings of entitlement and student discipline:

Right now we coddle the kids… I had a student last year say something akin to, "At school we deserve to have fun; or we deserve to be playing games."… That sense of entitlement: we are entitled to be entertained while we are here, which I think is a combination of that self-esteem generation and television. And the idea that this is more than an opportunity to learn—that we should have to make it fun for them.

The fact that the students did not share the sense of urgency to demonstrate progress seemed to intensify this obstacle. The same teacher continued to explain:

I'm really getting tired of that given, you know, international standards for education in countries where that is not the norm, where teachers teach and they don't stand up there and have a dog and pony show. And students are expected to appreciate that and learn or fail. And those countries have better results than we have. And not so much in countries where there is no educational system at all, and students would love to be in their position whether they are being entertained or not. So that sense of entitlement I don't think serves anyone. And I think it is really bringing our educational system down.

When asked about how teachers can interrupt this sense of entitlement, the participant emphasized the pervasiveness of this issue. “I think it is a broader cultural issue,” the
teacher explained, “because I think it is entitlement across the board. We feel, in this culture, that we are entitled to all kinds of things that we really aren't entitled to. That list would be long.”

Table 2

*Obstacles by Perceived Spheres of Influence*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct Teacher Control</th>
<th>School (Leadership, Teacher Teams)</th>
<th>Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unprepared students</td>
<td>Negative peer pressure</td>
<td>Pop culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compound sentences</td>
<td>Limited time/too many foci</td>
<td>Entitlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-taught forms (i.e. transitions, “you”)</td>
<td>Absences</td>
<td>Apathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Inadequate Assessment tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement/repetiti</td>
<td>Student discipline</td>
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*The achievement gap as inadequate lens.* Beyond talk of strategies and obstacles, another major discourse that emerged within the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews critiqued the usefulness of thinking of student performance in terms of an achievement gap.

Table 2 organizes many of the obstacles the participants in the research group shared during the focus groups and follow-up interviews by where the members of the research group place them in terms of influence or responsibility. Added to the discussion above regarding strategies, this information fleshes out the underlying assumptions about
the achievement gap operating within the group. As a whole, the strategies and obstacles point to some notable trends in how the group made sense of the directive to close the achievement gap. Interestingly, apart from the important exceptions of apathy, entitlement, and the negative effect of messages from popular culture, the overwhelming majority of the explicit obstacles and implicit assumptions about the gap spotlight the shortcomings of teachers and schools rather than any other group or institution. In terms of the nature of education and the role of teachers, clearly the teachers in the research group have internalized a sense of responsibility for the achievement gap—both in accepting a portion of the blame for the gap and in working toward eliminating it.

Throughout the discussions, the participants tended to resist talking about one group (such as boys or black students), and, instead, frequently went out of their way to bring the conversation back to “all students.” For example, even when discussing instructional strategies aimed at improving male writing performance, such as incorporating more movement and kinesthetic activities, the teachers reflexively include female students in their thinking. “Today was very kinesthetic for my kids,” shared one teacher, “and I personally believe that getting up and moving is good for girls, too, right?” Later, in another focus group discussion, another teacher in the group made almost the identical comment saying, “…I do really think that all kids, not just the boys, need some activity.” While as innocuous as these inclusive comments may seem, the same pattern of resisting focusing on just the boys repeated again and again throughout the transcribed discussions and interviews, signaling an important trend in the data:

Like I said before, not just for boys—but I think that kids generally do better when they're sort of forced to get out of the seat and write in a sort
of a condensed period of time.

I have, almost in every class, I'd say a couple of class clowns. In my last class, I have kind of a duo, it's a boy and a girl, and they're very quick.

But interestingly it's both boys and girls who opt out, but both boys and girls who jump in.

A: Right. Because you are going to have boys who are not going to want to write about sports.

B: That's true. And girls who do.

Before long, the research group made it clear that, for them, thinking just in terms of the male students or the female students did not mesh with how they conceived of their role as teachers. “That's why you need to have balance,” explained one teacher.

Rereading the transcribed data, the heart of this resistance to think in terms of one group or another centered on a sense that the formulation of the achievement gap as solely a matter of gender or race failed to capture the complexity of the participants’ experiences in the classroom. “I feel like there are so many factors,” commented a member of the group. Others readily agreed with this sentiment, sharing that they felt that the achievement gap concerned several issues, including language, socio-economics, and class. One teacher wrestled with limitations of a gender-only or race-only lens on achievement:

I always feel just a little funny about it all because we try to isolate things
that are very physical: do they have a penis or don't they, is their skin dark or is their skin white. These are the things we try to isolate and make important in terms of how they learn—and, truthfully, the variables that impact how they learn are deeper than that—they’re brain related, they're culturally related, they’re religion, [and] family life experiences.

Another teacher in the group voiced her view that education has been “stuck in this mindset” of reducing the complexities of student achievement into overly simplistic groups. Trying to synthesize several comments from others in the research group, she explained her position this way:

I see my students succeeding, you know, and it really depends on your delivery and their ability to connect to what you're bringing to them. My students love playing roles, whether they're being CSI agents and we set up this elaborate unit on having, you know, they all have folders, they all have tools that they need to keep track of. And some of my students get really into it. But I can't limit it to my boys or my girls. I think that, you know, as we're all experiencing, these kids are...they're stepping out of the groups.

A group member echoed these sentiments with, “They're not fitting in these perfect little…profiles.” Encapsulating the research group’s frustrations with the gender and race orientation of their directive to close the achievement gap, one of the participants confided, “I think maybe we're causing more problems than we think…isolating groups.”

Much of the dissatisfaction with the focus on the achievement gap through the lens of gender seemed to follow from how participants in the group conceived of their own
gendered identities. For example, one of the teachers in the research group felt a disconnect between his experience as a linguistically talented male and what the research on male writers recommended. He explained it to the group this way:

I used to take umbrage with all that research that would come out that says that males need this, males need that. I've come to realize that I'm just effeminate or something (laughter). But it doesn't seem to fit me. And I've been thinking more and more about it. And I'm trying to reformulate and see what that is, and it might just be that that I just happen to be a male whose brain functions almost entirely linguistically—it’s all about the language.

For this teacher, the disconnect between his experience and the research on male writers prompted him to look for a different explanation for student performance: in this case, the facility with a linguistic learning style. “I feel like I don't fit into any of those categories,” he continued.

Then when I look in my classroom, I see girls who don't have that linguistic part of their brain as developed as other girls will act more like the boys in the research. And that there are linguistic boys who do a good job.

Likewise, another teacher in the group expressed her wish that school looked beyond external characteristics such as gender and race and focused on the strengths of each individual. Lightheartedly, she drew a connection between the four houses available to the students at Hogwarts within the fictional Harry Potter stories and the group’s discussion about the achievement gap. She explained her thought in one of the focus
group discussions:

They're put into those [houses], where they excel at those things, and so they're with people that excel at those things, and it's not based on race or gender or anything—it's just that you're really good at this. Let's put you by people that are like that so you can foster it and grow from it. Why not?

Throughout all of this discussion about the inadequacy of the gender or race focus of the directive to close the achievement gap ran the same skeptical question: “Does the research fall into certain categories too quickly?” For the participants in the research group, these narrow lenses leave out too many pieces of the student achievement puzzle.

While the critique of the gender and racial focus of the directive to close the achievement gap points out several limitations with this stance, probing further into this vein of the research group’s conversations uncovers another side to this trend. If teachers, as one participant stated, “don't want growth of one [group] to inhibit the growth of another—ever, ever, ever,” then how does this stance impact how they think about their work with students? Several pieces of data from the transcribed focus group discussions and follow-up interviews indicate a certain reticence to closely examine group differences, particularly in the context of race.

At first glance, comments from participants such as, “I see a wide range of abilities within race, within boys, within girls. I can't find real stereotypes there,” indicate an appreciation for the diversity present in the classroom. However, placed in context with other collaborating statements, the glazing over of race and gender might also signal a potential blind spot within the group. For example, another participant shared how she thought of the black students in her class. “I don't see my black students fitting into a
certain group,” she explained. “I can't categorize them as a group.” The fact that the research group consisted of a very large majority of white teachers should not be overlooked in the data analysis. All this begs the question of the role privilege played in how the participants chose to frame the discussion about the achievement gap. Although not mentioned directly in the data, a number of the participants seemed conscious of how their own racial and gender identities influenced how they thought of the achievement gap. One teacher explained it this way:

The focus on gender and the focus on race is always just slightly uncomfortable for me. I am a tomboy girl, and I grew up in an Italian immigrant family, so when we talk about African American culturally relevant behaviors, like we did a couple of weeks ago, those [culturally relevant behaviors] are my family. And we're not African American; we're Italian.

For this teacher, her discomfort focusing on gender and race resulted from her questioning the specificity of pedagogical practices designed for African American students because she felt that many of the culturally relevant behaviors also applied to her Italian identity. Once again, this utterance returns to the leitmotif of dissolving differences and appealing to what works for everyone. The same concept guided the comments of another teacher in the group:

I think that whatever we try to do is to try to help everybody do that [improve]. There are plenty of girls who are in that low achievement, too, and…some boys are doing really well. I think that we just all try to do things that pull everybody up.
The extent to which this tendency to discuss achievement in terms of all students represents a real privilege-induced blind spot or inability to confront difficult matters of equity remains an open question. One exchange from a focus group discussion captures this sticking point:

A: I don't know…I had this great essay about it, it was a...what can you change and what can't you change. And if you come out and say that Black students are underperforming—

B: Not all though—

A: —is the next step stop being Black?

C: Right. (laughter)

A: Like, what are you going to change about that? And I guess you can change the school, but schools mimic systems, and our system is not changing any time soon.

Several trends come together in this exchange. First, with the announcement of a racial achievement gap, one teacher immediately rushes to offer a softening counterexample. Second, since the participants conceive of race as something outside of one’s control, when the teacher asks if the next step is to stop being Black, others in the group laugh, acknowledging the futility of the idea. Yet the teacher making the point knows that renouncing one’s race is not the only answer to his hypothetical situation. One might have much more reasonably argued that if Black students are underperforming, the next step should be to critically examine the attitudes and practices within the school that negatively impact Black students. The teacher concedes that one can try to change the school, but ultimately dismisses this idea with a nod to the inertia of the unjust system
that surrounds the school—a system rife with white privilege. In the space of a few breaths, the group dismisses the importance of race in achievement while simultaneously recognizing the unjust racial privilege that perpetuates the gap.

The participants certainly have dedicated themselves to effectively teaching all students and have demonstrated their commitment to anti-racist pedagogy. However, while the way the group couched its discussion about the achievement gap in terms of looking past group differences emphasized the limitations of this perspective, it also served to deflect the conversation away from how race and gender colored the participants’ own perceptions. In this way, the role of the group’s own privilege became the elephant in the room.

**Placing the Findings in the Literature**

To begin to contextualize within the literature these findings about how the research group conceived of their role as educators working to close the achievement gap, I drew on a number of different sources. In particular, literature critiquing the gap discourse and examining the role of white privilege offered several insights to the data pulled from the focus groups and follow-up interviews.

**Critiques of the Gap Discourse**

Ladson-Billings’ (2006, 2007) work with achievement gap discourse helps deepen the research group’s own struggle with the narrow lenses school policy handed them. In her 2006 American Educational Research Association (AERA) presidential address, Ladson-Billings spoke about the limitations of talking about disparities in student achievement in terms of an achievement gap. While acknowledging the long and varied
history of research into the contributing factors of the achievement gap, including stereotype threat (Steele, 1999), culture mismatch (Au, 1980; Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1996), the nature of school curriculum (Apple, 1990; Popkewitz, 1998), and the pedagogical practices of teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Zeichner, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004), she calls into question the “wisdom of focusing on the achievement gap as a way of explaining and understanding the persistent inequality that exists” (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 4) in United States’ schools.

Rather than thinking about student achievement in terms of a gap, Ladson-Billings (2006, 2007) argues that the disparities present in the system should be thought of in terms of an education debt. Citing Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) thoughts on the power of metaphors to structure “what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (p. 3), Ladson-Billings’ comments aim at reframing the fundamental assumptions surrounding how educators think about differences in student achievement between groups. The notion of education debt closely parallels the accumulated economic national debt of the United States as a result of fiscal policies that resulted in years of deficit spending. In terms of education, the concept of debt refers to the foregone schooling resources that “could have (should have)” been invested in children from low-income families (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, for Ladson-Billings, rather than focusing on closing the achievement gap, society should think in terms of paying down this education debt.

Through this new metaphorical lens, Ladson-Billings (2007) points out a number of “substantive and semantic” issues with the current achievement gap discourse. One of the major semantic problems she identifies is how the achievement gap discourse leads
educators to believe that the problem of disparate student performance is only one of student achievement. This places responsibility for the gap squarely on the backs of students and overlooks what Ladson-Billings (2007) refers to as “other ‘gaps’ that plague the lives of poor children of color” (¶ 6) such as the school funding gap, the income gap, the wealth gap, the political and social power gap, and the health benefit gap. This critique of the gap discourse has prompted some educational thinkers, such as Gibboney (2008), to call for educators to demand that society take more aggressive steps to eliminate poverty. The way Ladson-Billings’ notion of education debt seeks to broaden discussion about the problems in education connects with the similar sentiment that emerged in the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews of the current study. Uncomfortable with a gender-only lens, or a race-only lens, the participants in the research group repeatedly sought to recast the discussion in terms of language, socio-economics, and class. In this way, the trends from the transcribed data seem to indicate a transition away from the narrowly focused student-performance-oriented achievement gap discourse to something more resembling Ladson-Billings’ idea of education debt. Pointing out the limitations of the gap discourse, the participants in the research group sought to conceived of the issue in terms of other contributing factors.

Similarly, as Ladson-Billings (2007) points out, the achievement gap discourse, with its implication of cultural deficits preventing students of color to catch up with higher performing white students, allows educators to blame the problem of disparate performance on faulty concepts such as the “culture of poverty” rather than examining the role their own pedagogy plays in the perpetuation of the problem. Ladson-Billings (2007) clarifies that poverty is not a culture but rather a “condition produced by the
economic, social, and political arrangements of a society” (¶ 30) and cites what Haberman (1991) referred to as “the pedagogy of poverty” to partially explain the low performance of students from low-income families. Here, Haberman’s list of the 14 characteristic acts of this anemic pedagogy connects to the research group’s thinking of strategies to address the achievement gap and their concomitant assumptions about the underlying causes behind disparate student performance. The bleak educational landscape that the group assumed lay behind the achievement gap—teachers lacking strong relationships with students and barraging their pupils with assignments that ignored their interests while demanding compliance to rigid expectations for them to sit still and remain quiet—closely resembles Haberman’s list of the core functions of ineffective teaching. Likewise, the inverse also holds true; the research group’s strategies for improving student achievement parallel Haberman’s description of the indicators of good teaching, namely actively engaging students in thinking about issues that they regard as vital concerns. As the research group seemed to be transitioning from a gap-oriented discourse to a more nuanced view of education debt, they also exhibited recognition of the deleterious effects of certain pedagogical practices and a clear preference for more effective strategies.

Interestingly, Haberman (1991) noted that students often take an active role in maintaining practices of the pedagogy of poverty, because the ineffective system absolves the students of “responsibility for learning and puts the burden on the teachers, who must be accountable for making them learn” (p. 5). In this dynamic, Haberman argued that students often control, manage, and shape the behaviors of their teachers by rewarding their instructors with compliance with certain practices and resistance to
others. This connects to the sense of entitlement and apathy mentioned in the focus group discussions. Haberman’s thoughts and the experience of the participants in the research group underscore that the problem of disparate student performance is more than simply a matter of achievement on certain assessments, but rather a result of flaws within the current educational system—flaws that the students themselves have a stake in maintaining lest they bear more responsibility for their own learning demanded of them by more progressive pedagogical approaches. This insight throws into question the way the participants in the research group thought of the obstacles they encountered in their work (Table 2). The power of student behavior in shaping teacher pedagogy changes how these obstacles—particularly apathy and entitlement—exert their influence, intertwining the personal, professional, and societal spheres in a much more complex system than the participants recognized.

While Ladson-Billing’s (2006, 2007) critique of the achievement gap discourse centers primarily on issues of race, the notion of education debt also informs the discussion about the gender achievement gap. She explains that the education debt consists, in part, of a moral debt that reflects “what human beings owe to each other in the giving of, or failure to give, honor to another when honor is due” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 8). Therefore, the education debt reflects the gap between “what we know is right and what we actually do” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 8)—a concept that pertains equally well to how teachers treat the different genders as well as the different races in their classrooms. From this perspective, comments from the research group about the importance of offering choice and celebrating “boyness” take on a new light. Rather than approaches to simply get more out of students, the strategies put forward in the focus
groups and follow-up interviews, such as incorporating more choice and seeking out ways to make reluctant writers feel special and avoid feeling weak, aim at paying down the education debt by honoring the conditions, values, and interests of all students.

The Role of White Privilege

Any conversation about the achievement gap must face the issue of race and racism, and the current study is no different. In the transcribed focus group discussions and follow-up interviews, this issue finds expression most clearly in what goes unsaid—in how it suppressed conversation, framing the group’s discussion in such a way that it rarely directly dealt with racism.

As the racial composition of the research group included mainly white female teachers, the findings from the data benefit from an appreciation of white privilege and how it can influence conversations about race. Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” listed the societal privileges she possessed simply because of her white skin. Ranging from the minor advantages such as being able to find appropriate makeup at any drugstore to major benefits such as greater access to jobs and housing, her privileges reflected the fact that her identity conferred with it a sense of normality that granted her the ability to be seen as an individual rather than as a member of a racial group (Tatum, 1997). Tatum (1997) emphasizes the important fact that McIntosh never asked to receive those privileges and had not noticed benefiting from them much of her life. Privilege, therefore, often operates behind the scenes, under a veil of normalcy.

In examining how privilege can influence conversations about race, it is helpful to consider Tatum’s (1997) distinction between prejudice and racism. For Tatum, prejudice
denotes a “preconceived judgment or opinion” based on limited information (p. 5), whereas *racism* refers to what Wellman (1977) called “systems of advantage based on race” (p. 7). Explaining that “prejudice is one of the inescapable consequences of living in a racist society” (p. 6), Tatum (1997) acknowledges that “not all Whites are actively racist,” but may passively continue to reap the benefits of racist systems in place in society (p. 12). Indeed, as Leonardo (2005) points out, very few whites actually believe they are racist, presumably because they have avoided or mitigated prejudiced acts, yet the machinery of institutionalized racism continues. This substitution of prejudice for racism creates the nonsensical condition where “racism thrives absent of racists” (Leonardo, 2005, p. 44; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Several of the comments from the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews, such as one teacher’s question: “To what extent do I perpetuate an unjust system?” seem to indicate an awareness of and sensitivity to the institutionalized nature of racism within the research group, reflecting, perhaps, the equity training taking place at the school. This ability to recognize the systematic nature of racism, however, often met with a resigned sense of helplessness conveyed in utterances such as, “Schools mimic systems, and our system's not changing any time soon.” Embedded in this sense of inertia sits the reality of white privilege. Even though the group recognizes their injustice, systems that legitimize privilege persist.

Despite the comments mentioned above, the conversation among the participants in the research group tended to avoid talking about race, preferring instead to cast the discussion in terms of what works for all students. However, Gillborn (2005), following the lead of Michael Apple (1999), argues “race is a constant presence in policy and pedagogy—even when it appears absent” (p. 123). Likewise, Leonardo (2005) states that
white guilt often “blocks critical reflection because whites end up feeling individually blameworthy for racism” (p. 40). This fear of “looking racist” often causes white individuals to fall silent on matters of race and to “forsake the more central project of understanding the contours of structural racism” (Leonardo, 2005, p. 40). Sifting through the transcribed focus group discussions and follow-up interviews for evidence of this dynamic yields a number of instances where the participants seem to demonstrate a real aversion to thinking or talking about students in terms of racial groups. On its own, however, this tendency might not signify the impact of white guilt so much as a salutary emphasis on relating to students as individuals. Still, the nature of privilege requires one to look beneath surface appearances. Safe to say that privilege and its correlate white guilt play some role in the group’s silence about racism.

Overall, the findings from the research group in this area support Tatum’s (1997) view that even with many signs of progress, there is not enough talk about race and racism in the United States. As she put it, “we need to continually break the silence about racism whenever we can” (p. 193) or otherwise pay the high price for that silence. Allowing cultural and institutional forms of racism to go unquestioned or to let other aspects of an individual’s multiple identities drop from view exacts penalties “in the loss of human potential, lower productivity, and a rising tide of fear and violence in our society” (Tatum, 1997, p. 200). As Gilborn (2005) states, “there is no fixed and finished rule book for anti-racism, critical race theory, or critical pedagogy” but the work demands “serious engagement with the complex and changing contours of racism” (p. 112). Likewise, Allen (2005) offers perspective for educators dealing with white privilege and its intersection with racism saying, “becoming a white anti-racist is a long,
involved process” (p. 57). In this light, the data from the research group reflect the struggles of educators undertaking the journey toward actively anti-racist pedagogy.

Summary of Findings in the Achievement Gap Theme

From the perspective of the research group, the directive to close the achievement gap in writing represented the single most important piece of policy imposed on the participants by the school leadership. This policy directive impacted how participants interpreted the goals of leadership as well as how they thought about the nature of education and their role as teachers within the context of the goal to close the achievement gap.

The leadership’s goal of closing the achievement gap affected the participants in a number of ways. Following the trend with other interactions with leadership (e.g. the directive to teach summary writing), the teachers expressed confusion with leadership goals and often assigned their own explanations for the motivations behind the policy decision to focus on the achievement gap. These explanations centered on the preeminence of assessment and quantitative data in the eyes of leadership, leading to a close association of the achievement gap with leadership and data/assessment in the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews. Ultimately, many of the teachers expressed frustration with the emphasis on this narrow definition of academic success, even going so far as to assert that the way leadership used the data at its disposal served no purpose other than to make the teachers feel guilty about their performance.

To help make sense of the directive to close the achievement gap, teachers in the research group reflected about the nature of education and how they conceived of the role of teachers in increasing student performance. The discussion in the focus group and the
follow-up interviews tended to fall into two dominant patterns: one that exuded a positive can-do attitude that emphasized the nature of school as a place for all students to learn and one that adopted a less positive stance, reducing education to a game with arbitrary rules that favored some students over others. These two patterns ran throughout the research group’s thinking about the achievement gap. For example, the strategies and the unspoken assumptions that directed the group’s views on effective instruction held up the positive view of teachers and education to counteract the possibility of bleak and oppressive educational practices. Similarly, the expansive optimism of the participants exposed several limitations of thinking of student achievement only through the narrow lenses of gender and racial gaps. Yet even as they adopted a critical view of the unjust systems at work in education, their own difficulty discussing race and gender as well as the ramifications of their own identities tempered this optimism.

Taken together, the research group’s comments about the achievement gap show a willingness to do what it takes to meet the needs of a diverse range of students. The strategies the teachers talked about point the way to a pedagogy that rests on the bedrock of choice, positive relationships, and a celebration of individual uniqueness. Although the participants recognized a number of obstacles to their efforts, they also clearly believed that most of them lie within their sphere of influence to bring about change. In the end, while their conversation sometimes seemed to skirt larger issues of privilege and racism, the participants demonstrated their commitment to anti-racist practices and attitudes.

Collaborating as a Team of Educators

The last major thematic area that emerged from the transcribed focus group discussions and follow-up interviews concerned what the group thought about itself as a
team of educators. As mentioned earlier, one of the motivations behind instigating this study grew out of my personal need as a new teacher in the school site to get to know other writing teachers in the building and build new relationships with my coworkers. Several comments from members of the research group indicate that others shared this perceived need for stronger teaming and more collaboration among writing teachers. However, while the group frequently talked about the benefits of sharing resources and working more closely with other writing teachers, they also acknowledged a number of obstacles to this kind of teamwork. The school’s AIM program took center stage in this category. This program in which highly-motivated students take accelerated and enriched core classes separate from the general school population became the subject of some heated discussion between the AIM and non-AIM teachers in the research group. In the end, the conversation about this barrier to collaboration connected to the frustration non-AIM teachers felt about leadership, discipline, and the achievement gap.

**The Desire for More Collaboration and Stronger Teaming**

“I'm just not used to working in a situation where you don't know who you are working with and you can't work as a team together.”

As the quote above from a follow-up interview demonstrates, members of the research group expressed a desire for increased teamwork and collaborative relationships among the writing teachers at the school site. At several points in the focus group discussions, participants shared how they did not know some of the other teachers in the group even though they had been in department meetings together since the beginning of the school year months previous. Early on, one teacher even asked another if she was a “writing or reading” teacher unaware of their shared connection. After completing the
focus group, this same teacher turned to her new acquaintance and said, “It’s fun to
finally get to know you a little, because I only see you for five seconds at every
department meeting.”

Similarly, this need for increased relationship among the teachers in the research
group came across as the participants verbalized their desire to take part in the study. To
da person, every participant explained their decision to join the research group in terms of
collaboration and relationship building. “I know how many times I've needed help from
people, so I’m just trying to help in return,” stated one teacher. Another teacher explained
her involvement this way:

I'm interested to see what other people are experiencing in terms of
working with males. I would also like to see how other people are
experiencing interacting with different groups: black students, Hispanic
students, and the…what's coming up—what they are seeing.

A third teacher echoed this sentiment, adding, “I really just wanted to hear what other
people are doing.” Yet another clarified her participation in terms of cultivating
professional ties. “I have a lot of respect for you,” she shared, “and I’m interested in your
topic.” A different member of the group also expressed her wish for teamwork:

I feel like I could learn so much from other people who have a lot of
experience, but also even people who are even in the same position as I
am, first year, and still have really great ideas. So for us to bounce things
off of each other…I just like the idea of collaborating with each other and
sharing things.

As if to summarize the sentiments of the group, another teacher contributed this
explanation:

I think that we don't get together enough like this. We often get split by
total department or grade—and really writing is very unique…has very
unique teaching and assessing needs, and so this will benefit us all.

Throughout each of these individual motivations for becoming a member of the research
group runs a desire for connection and collaboration.

As the study progressed, the focus group discussions themselves often served as
vehicles for the kind of collaboration the participants yearned for. For example, one
teacher shared her progression from direct instruction to a more inquiry-based pedagogy,
mentioning a resource she found helpful. Several other teachers seized this opportunity to
find out more about this valuable resource. This collaborative exchange followed:

X: I've seen that that's really helpful—that book.

Y: Yes. Changed my teaching completely this year.

Z: What book was that?

Y: *Study Driven* it's—

X: I have a copy if you want to look at it (several agree)

Y: It's less work for us, too.

Z: What was the author's name—it was Katie?

X: Katie Wood Ray. It's *Study Driven*.

Y: She was at the conference this year wasn't she?

This back-and-forth embodied the kind of sharing of resources and “bouncing ideas off of
each other” participants described when they talked about their desire for teamwork with
other writing teachers. Likewise, a similar interaction took place as one teacher detailed
her use of contests to motivate her students to write:

X: That's why I do so many contests. You can use any writing contest to teach whatever it is you are planning to teach them. And then I just scrape off the top ones and send them in, and I'm at 23 this year—winners.

All: WOW!

Y: Where do you find all your contests at?

X: Terry sends them—

Z: Terry—yeah, she says she emails them.

X: Almost everyone that Terry does.

Y: Is that where you get them all from?

X: That's where I get most of them. And some just repeat from previous years; I'm on their mailing list now.

Again, participants in the research group took advantage of the time with other writing teachers to network and find out about resources relevant to their goals. This same dynamic repeated several times throughout the study as the group shared strategies and other suggestions for improving instructional activities.

Beyond sharing resources and strategies, the group mentioned several additional benefits of increased teamwork and collaboration. One of the most interesting of these reasons centered on what one participant in research group called “erasing bias” some teachers may develop about their students. “When you talk to other teachers about the same child, it’s always surprising,” she explained, “because they have different experiences or comfort zones within each room.” She continued with an example:

A colleague came and told me that someone got an A+ in her class—he's
always A+ for me, and she was really surprised—and then she talked about another child who was never A+ for me and always A+ for her. So, we just talked about that and wondered why that is. …So I think that the first level of that [teamwork] is erasing some of the bias we hold on to with our students based on tiny experiences that don't define them.

For this teacher, the opportunity to share with other teachers provided perspective that allowed her to keep an open mind and re-evaluate how she thought about some of her students.

Two other important benefits the group mentioned involved some curricular and “cross-generational” advantages of collaboration. On the level of curriculum, one teacher talked about her successful collaboration with another member of the research group and how working together helped “keep each other on track”:

…[W]e plan everything together. And I have a tendency to go real right brained and a variety of assessments and, you know, I can get real close to the child but too far from the curriculum. You know what I mean? And she has a better handle on staying close to the curriculum. And so in working together, we can keep each other on track…So we improve each other's approach and then the students have a more fair experience.

Here, collaboration becomes a way for teachers to round out each other’s strengths, leading to an improved educational experience for the students. Participants in the research group also felt that a similar effect resulted from working closely with other teachers of different ages and levels of experience. One teacher put it this way:

I think there is also the cross-generational benefit of life experiences and
classroom experiences to get the fresh energy of the new people and to have some of the insight of the older people. I always am energized by them.

For this teacher, teamwork with a wide range of colleagues strengthened her own teaching by yielding a mix of enthusiasm and fresh ideas.

As a whole, despite evidence of a low level of collaboration among the writing teachers involved with the study, the participants clearly valued collaboration and yearned for more teamwork with their colleagues. More than an opportunity to pool resources and swap lesson strategies that work well in the classroom, the group viewed these deepened professional relationships as essential to enhancing and maintaining their own teaching practice.

_Obstacles to Collaboration and Stronger Teaming_

Overshadowing this discourse extolling the virtues of increased teamwork and collaboration among the writing teachers loomed another strand of the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews—a strand concerned with the obstacles to deeper teamwork. Unsurprisingly, the lack of adequate time surfaced as one of the barriers to collaboration in the transcribed conversations. However, while time is almost always a scarce resource, the participants in the group indicated that a number of the structures in place at the school to allow for teacher meeting time failed to encourage the type of collaboration that teachers valued. One teacher elaborated on this idea in a follow-up interview:

I feel like during the day, we don't really have a common time or any time really when we can meet with other language arts teachers besides a set
meeting where ...those aren't meetings to discuss language arts issues, those are meetings to discuss administration issues.

Consistent with the group’s view of leadership, this utterance demonstrates how this teacher perceived the administrative issues passed on during the scheduled school meeting times as separate from the real issues of the language arts teachers. The lack of conversation with other language arts teachers about issues important to their teaching during the department and PLT meetings contributed to a feeling of isolation and an absence of professional community for this teacher:

And so it is irritating to me that we don't have really any time to meet with each other or collaborate. I always feel like in a sense that I see everyone in passing, and really until, honestly, until a couple weeks ago, there are still people even in our department I didn't know their first names. And it's not necessarily knowing someone on a personal level like where they live, who are they married to—that stuff—but at least while we're here, really getting something out of our time.

Time, therefore, and more specifically the priorities and agendas of existing scheduled meetings represented an important obstacle to the work of increasing collaboration and teamwork among teachers.

In addition to the challenges of time constraints, disagreements among the participants in the research group presented a second major obstacle to collaboration. Sometimes, these disagreements centered on specific opinions about what constituted good writing. For instance, a lively debate broke out in one focus group discussion over students’ stylistic use of pronouns, incorporating “I think” or “you” in their persuasive
writing. Some teachers declared such practices anathema in the classroom while others encouraged the students to use this style as a way of making their writing more direct and to the point. The following passage from the conversation captures some of the intensity of the exchange:

X: But I think it's developmental though. We've got to move them from 6th grade to 7th grade, get rid of "you," use a little bit of “I”…

Y: Answer the question; they're saying, "Defend your position"—

X: —by the time they get up to high school, they should get rid of their own opinion entirely—or at least mask their own opinion—

Y: Well, if they're asked...

X: …for better or worse it's a little shady—stated as fact.

Z: That's what I tell them: "What's more persuasive? Penny telling me 'I think' or Penny telling me 'this is how it is'?" If I believe it is fact, I'm going to be more persuaded by it than just believing that is something that Penny thinks—well, that's not really true (laughter).

While a seemingly trivial matter readily explained away as a “developmental” variation in writing or perhaps as the age difference of the participants reflecting the opinions of different educational “eras,” the difference in opinion corresponds to a notable obstacle to deeper collaboration among the team of writing teachers. This particular disagreement takes on a new importance when viewed in context of a larger rift within the participants of the study. In the example above, each of the teachers arguing against the use of “I think” and “you” in persuasive writing taught AIM (no acronym; as in “Aim high”) classes, whereas the teacher arguing the other way taught non-AIM classes. This
AIM/non-AIM divide soon revealed itself as perhaps the most difficult challenge to broader collaboration among the writing teachers.

*The Feud Between AIM and Regular*

“It's probably the worst part of my job, the—what do I want to call it? I don’t want to say feud, but for lack of a better word right now, the feud between AIM and regular.”

Few topics of conversation generated more intense feelings from the participants than the issue of the AIM program and how it relates to the regular, non-AIM track at the school. The research group consisted of teachers on both sides of this division, and it seemed that everyone had some opinion about the program. Despite these strong opinions, or rather because of them, the participants resisted directly discussing the issue of AIM within the setting of focus group discussions, preferring instead to share their opinions in the individual follow-up interviews. As if sensing the division in the group, the participants understandably chose to gravitate toward topics of common ground when face to face with their colleagues. However, this unwillingness to openly discuss the strong feelings on both sides of the AIM issue contributed to its power to curtail collaboration and teamwork among the writing teachers.

To better comprehend this issue, one must first understand how AIM fits into the context of the other programs at the school. If conceived of as layers, the first stratum at the school would consist of special education services for students with specific learning disabilities, the next tier would represent the regular course offerings that service the majority of students, and honors classes would comprise a third level, providing additional challenge for students who excel in one or two content areas. Atop all of these layers, AIM represents the most academically challenging environment at the school.
According to a description of AIM posted on a district website, the program adheres to the prescriptions of the College Board Advanced Placement Urban Initiative to “provide students increased opportunities to engage in active questioning, analysis and the construction and communication of arguments” (“What is AIM?”, 2008, p. 1). The student population accepted in the AIM program receive accelerated, enriched curriculum in reading, writing, science, social studies, and most likely take part in advanced math classes as well. AIM functions in many ways like a self-contained school-within-a-school. For example, AIM teachers work exclusively with students in the program, whereas non-AIM teachers teach the regular courses with a few honor sections sprinkled into the schedule.

When asked to describe AIM, teachers involved with the program quickly explained that AIM is not a gifted and talented program. Rather than designed for a relatively small group of students with specific learning needs, AIM tailors to the needs of highly motivated, “academically able” students (“What is AIM?”, 2008). One teacher explained the different goal of AIM this way:

The AIM program is not a gifted program. Gifted education is very different, and there are gifted education options in our district at all levels. And that is the smaller percentile that you were discussing. One of the reasons that I wanted to come to this school was that the AIM program is inclusive in that if you don't make the criteria but you campaign to get in, you are allowed a probationary period to give it a try. And it's for high achievers. So you don't have to be gifted to be high achieving; you can simply be driven. And that's mostly what I have are kids that are driven—
or their parents are driven and trying to instill that into them. I do have some gifted, but a lot of our gifted population is in the regular classroom as well. So it is a very different program.

Another teacher involved with the AIM program added that the source of the motivation does not factor in the program’s selection criteria. “They may be intrinsically motivated, they may be motivated by grades, they may be motivated by fear of failure, they may be motivated by just their parents,” this teachers stated, “but as long as that motivation is there, they can succeed at this program.”

Ironically, the inclusive nature of the program opening AIM up to a larger group of highly motivated students rather than a smaller gifted population lies at the heart of the controversy for other teachers. For some participants, the AIM program scraped off too many of the motivated students in the school, creating a de facto tracking system separating the elites from the rest of the school population. One teacher elaborated at length on this point:

When I first heard about it [AIM], I thought, “Oh, that’s the gifted and talented program that we had in [another school district].” And it's really not, I've come to find out. In [this other district], which, although it's a much smaller district, is fairly comparable in terms of demographics and a performance—probably a little higher socio-economic demographics, but the gifted-and-talented is maybe 10% of the population or maybe less. There are some very stringent requirements as to how you get in—you have to have various testing. It's like pieces of a pie, that you have to meet so many pieces...and one of them is not parent desire. It's not student
It's that these kids have IQs, basically, that are in the very upper echelon, and that they, therefore, have different needs as to how they are instructed and enriched, and so forth. So, that I don't see here at all. I don't see a gifted-and-talented program. I see a "highly motivated student" program, which is entirely different. I think that too many kids are in the AIM program, that it becomes—that’s the way to avoid getting in with the problem kids, you know, get your kids segregated from "those kids" that you don't want your kids around. I mean, it has the potential to become—I think it already is—elitist. And I think there are some potential racial implications here about how we are racially segregating kids.

Unpacking this view of AIM yields several points of contention surrounding the program, including the appropriate number of students who should take part in the program, the impact of the program on the rest of the school community, and the question about potential racial and socio-economic segregation resulting from the program. While each of these assertions deserves further targeted study, the undeniable immediate finding revealed in this passage concerns the perception and belief of unfairness present in some of the participants.

Accurate or not, this perception leads to tangible consequences for the teachers at the school. One teacher in the group talked about the consequences of her decision to accept an AIM position at her previous school:

I knew the feud from day one as a student teacher, and I was offered a position to go into AIM as my first year of teaching. And I took it. And I took it with a lot of people saying very hateful things. I lost respect from
people; I lost friendships with people—that serious—because I decided to take a position in AIM.

This threat of professional banishment and personal isolation represents one side of the barrier to collaboration presented by this issue. For teachers on the other side of the divide, the menace is not so much professional disapproval as a sense of being condemned to face the prospect of teaching classrooms bereft of motivated academic leaders. Another teacher gave voice to these fears:

It [AIM] takes away the role models that we need in the other classes...now add honors in, too, and now you are really scrapping the bottom of the barrel with your classes. So you've got a whole class, and then there's all the discipline issues that go with that—a whole class with no one to be a model. The few kids who are left, who are really trying, even though they are maybe just average ability, now they are in such a minority that they feel like they don't want to be ostracized for being super-student, so that they don't even want to share. So I think that that really creates a very bad atmosphere.

Along with this sense of being marooned on a sea of discipline issues, some non-AIM teachers experience a twinge of jealousy of their AIM peers. “Part of me would say, gee I wish I could teach AIM because wouldn’t it be fun to have all those kids who really want to learn,” shared one participant. “But on the other hand, who needs the instruction more? Who can I help more? I can help the low ones more. It’s just not as much fun sometimes dealing with all the other issues.” Taken together, both sides of this barrier work in tandem to create an imposing fortification against greater teamwork. Instead, a dynamic
takes root in which each camp sees itself as the more virtuous, despite the fact that both
sides struggle to do all they can to best meet the needs of their students.

Detailing both sides of the argument about the AIM issue that emerged during the
focus group conversations and the follow-up interviews further underscores the difficulty
this split between the teachers poses for deeper collaboration and teamwork. From the
point of view of AIM teachers in the research group, providing an academic option for
students capable of excelling at high levels nurtures and motivates these young learners.
As one participant put it:

If you put all things aside, if you put how hard you have to work and what
you have to do and your classroom management, and if you put all of that
aside and you truly look at what is best for kids, I think that allowing these
kids to be in an environment surrounded by people—for the most part—
who are as motivated as they are and achieving at the level they are
achieving at, is so beneficial to them.

Implicit in this view sits the belief that AIM students do not learn from non-AIM
students. Acknowledging the potential benefit to other students in having AIM students
in class with them, this teacher concluded that the negative impact on the higher
achieving students would be too great to justify placing them in the regular classrooms
and asking them to serve as models to the others. “While I can see the benefit to other
kids to have those kids [AIM students] in class with them,” she continued, “I think it is
impossible to deny…the negatives that would happen to those higher achieving kids.”

Another AIM teacher in the group commented on the same idea in a separate follow-up
interview. “I understand, intellectually, the reasons that regular teachers would like model
students in their room,” she shared,” but emotionally, I was the student that teachers always counted on to help do things.” This teacher went on to talk about her experience as a student and how her coursework never challenged her at her level until she found her way into higher-level courses in high school:

I was suddenly working hard and not helping anybody else, and it was a glorious experience for me. So as a student that gets things more quickly (some things, not everything), I hated being the teacher helper all the time. I didn't realize that until I started to get older and thought, "I wonder why I have to...why do I get to...can't I just sit here and read?...Can't I engage in something?" So, I see both sides of that. It definitely is an issue.

For another AIM teacher, the complaint of teachers in the regular classroom that they do not have enough model-students in their classroom springs more from a selfish motivation rather than an orientation of what would best serve the high achieving student:

I don't feel like enough people step back and look at the big picture and they…look at what might make teaching in their classroom easier at this moment and not what's best for all of these kids, including the higher achieving ones.

As the comments of these teachers demonstrate, the unburdening of high achieving students from the stunting role of model or teacher’s-helper serves as one of the most forceful justifications for AIM.

A second justification for the AIM program intertwines with this notion about the need to provide a learning environment conducive to high achieving students. Observing the widely accepted practice of leveling math and elective courses to appropriately meet
the learning needs of students, one AIM teacher in the group emphasized the importance of matching students to the right level of instruction to ensure their continued growth:

You know, nobody thinks that it makes sense to put kids who are at math 2 up through geometry in one math class and tell that math teacher, "OK, teach them all—and meet all of their needs, and meet all at the level they're at, and challenge them all, and raise all of their achievement levels." I don't think anybody thinks that's realistic. Nobody says, "OK, let's put in band students who are just now learning to play the trumpet with those who are amazing jazz players in the same class and in the same band." Nobody thinks that's logical. So, I just, you know, my question is, "Why is it logical to think let's put them all in the same core classes together?"

From this point of view, ignoring the different levels of students will negatively impact the learning of everyone in these classes. As the same teacher pointed out, there is no guarantee that high achieving kids will continue to grow if left to their own resources in just any environment:

There's this huge idea with gifted kids that they will just get it, they'll take care of themselves, they'll learn the material, they'll be fine. So if we put them in a classroom, you know, with students with all sorts of abilities, they'll achieve, they'll take care of themselves, they'll achieve. But that's such a false understanding—they won't, they won't; very few of them will. And I think that is the same thing with these high achieving kids, is that you put them in a place where they might be used as the role model or the
tutor, or the helper, and they're not going to get what they want. Interestingly, this utterance applies information about gifted students to high achieving students despite the teacher’s own admission that AIM is not a gifted program. Despite this nonsequitur, AIM, this teacher argues, provides the kind of enriched environment these students need to continue to grow and progress.

However, from the perspective of some of the non-AIM teachers in the research group, these arguments do little to address the perception of elitism and unfairness discussed above. This group asserted that AIM took too many students from the regular and honors track and questioned the possibility of racial segregation resulting from the program. AIM teachers counter these claims by stating that anyone can campaign to get into the program and take advantage of a probationary period to prove their ability to handle the course work. Despite this inclusive stance, other non-AIM participants in the research group noted that these avenues require a certain kind of parental involvement that may disproportionately favor some families over others. Commenting about a conversation with another teacher at the school about her experience in AIM, one of the participants hit on the issue of AIM and parental-involvement:

I was talking to X----- about it, because she's new to AIM program this year and she said, "I find it interesting that the only time I have ever"—she said "ever"—I don't know if that's an exaggeration or not—“ever had a student with parents in the PTO was now that I'm teaching in the AIM program." ….and I've noticed the same thing.

Some non-AIM teachers, then, not only perceived that the AIM program removed a large number of highly motivated students from their classrooms, but it also wielded the
majority of parental power in the school.

Another important part of the criticisms of the AIM program that surfaced in the focus group discussions and the follow-up interviews flowed from the group’s comments about leadership and their experience with the professional learning teams (PLTs). As discussed above, the research group largely characterized the PLTs as a flawed use of time that failed to address their needs for professional development. However, following the school-within-a-school nature of the AIM program, AIM teachers did not take part in the same PLTs as the non-AIM teachers. Rather than the PLT-coordinator who led the non-AIM teams, the AIM teachers spent the time working closely with the AIM-coordinator. As the comments from the research participants reveal, the experiences of the two groups could scarcely have been more different. Whereas the non-AIM PLTs tended to focus on mandated practices from the leadership, such as the ill-received summary writing directive, the AIM professional development seemed to center on the teacher’s own lessons and plans for upcoming instruction. One AIM teacher in the group described her meetings with the AIM-coordinator enthusiastically:

She's this amazing resource to bounce these ideas off of. She's amazing at getting your lessons at a higher level, and she's amazing at making them meaningful. She's the first one to say, "Why are you having them do that?" "What purpose is that going to serve?" "How are they ever going to use that again, and how is that not a complete waste of their time?" She's a true advocate for kids in like "boring!" or "pointless!" or “a waste of their time.” She really challenges us to make sure that every thing that we are doing is purposeful and meaningful and based on our understanding.
When contrasted with comments from other non-AIM teachers about how their PLTs often felt like “cyclical babble,” the different approaches to professional development directed at AIM and non-AIM teachers encompass another major point of contention for the non-AIM participants. The relative poor quality of professional development that the non-AIM teachers received and the resulting feelings of frustration only seemed to confirm perceptions of unfairness regarding AIM, creating yet another impasse to deeper collaboration and teamwork among the two groups of writing teachers.

The stage set with AIM teachers feeling duty-bound to help high achievers reach their full potential and non-AIM teachers full of the battle-tested authority that comes with weathering countless discipline issues and low-quality professional development, the participants in the research group left little hope that the situation might improve. “I think that it is going to be something that is never going to be agreed upon,” shared one teacher. Still, despite all of the points of division that follow the AIM split among the participants, the teachers in the research group all still adamantly shared a desire for greater teamwork and more collaboration. If hope does exist for moving beyond this barrier, then it most likely lies in the possibility of each group adjusting its perspective about the other. One teacher explained it this way:

I'm going to say this—and maybe it's going to come back to bite me, but I think the solution to the problem is that if everybody would just recognize that everybody's job is difficult, and that everybody has challenges in what they do, and everybody works hard. And nobody works harder than the next, and nobody’s job is harder than the next. All of our jobs are difficult in their own way, and we all work hard in our own way. If everybody
could truly believe it and acknowledge that then that's what would eliminate the feud.

*Placing the Findings in the Literature*

These findings from the focus group conversations and the follow-up interviews connect to the existing literature of collaboration and tracking. Moreover, when viewed in context of the literature the findings from the current study points the way to an expanded discussion about the relationship between these two not-often-paired areas.

*Collaboration*

Bovbjerb (2006) distinguishes between two types of professional collaboration among educators: collegiality and teamwork. In her view, collegial collaboration “builds on social relation over time” and the “idea of reciprocal obligations” that follow from common work situations or professional identities (p. 247). *Teamwork*, however, denotes a much narrower kind of collaboration, much more specific to an assigned task in line with the “values and decisions of the managers and directory boards” (p. 248). Of these two dimensions of collaboration, the participants in the research group clearly expressed their desire for increased collaboration in terms of the collegial collaboration rather than the “contrived collegiality” (Hargreaves, 1994; Bovbjerb, 2006) of the existing venues for teamwork already in place. Solidarity, rather than the directives of leadership, inspired the participants’ excitement to share strategies and resources with each other as well as to learn from each other’s unique perspective.

The kind of collaboration discussed in the research group, therefore, closely parallels what Harrison and Killion (2007) thought of as the 10 major roles of teacher
leaders. When the participants talked about the benefits they expected from increased collaboration, their discussion centered on how the reciprocal obligations that result from the feeling of solidarity among writing teachers could build the entire school’s capacity to improve. The issue of collaboration flows into how teachers can serve as leaders among their peers. As Harrison and Killion (2007) outlined, this kind of teacher collaborative leadership translates into specific patterns. For example, collaborative relationships often take on the quality of resource providers or instructional and curricular specialists when teachers help each other acquire strategies and fine-tune their use of standards and assessments through their instruction. Similarly, collaboration of this type could resemble mentor relationships between colleagues as teacher leaders model and support others in the growth as educators. In this light, the desire the group expressed for deeper collaboration carries with it a craving for an expanded leadership role for the teachers on the writing team.

The structure of professional learning communities exemplifies the kind of teacher-centered, collegial collaboration described in the research group’s conversations. Honawar (2008) describes how the use of professional learning communities at Adlai E. Stevenson High School helped catapult it “from an ordinary good school to an extraordinary one” (¶ 2). According to Honawar (2008), in the learning communities at Stevenson, teachers meet in course-specific and interdisciplinary teams to discuss strategies for improvement, build common assessments, and brainstorm lesson plans providing each teacher with “access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of the entire team” (¶ 4). While structures in place at the school mimic these kinds of teams, the comments from the research group participants indicate the ineffectiveness of the current
efforts to promote teamwork, such as PLTs, top-down mandates, and limited department meetings. Honawar (2008) explains that effective teacher teams must not only have built in time for collaboration, but they must also have clearly defined purposes and products of collaboration and mutually agreed upon goals and protocols for guiding their work together. Establishing this deeper collaborative structure also doesn’t happen on its own. Indeed, Honawar (2008) counsels that professional learning communities “require a deep cultural change within the school” (¶ 12) away from the thinking about teaching in terms of individual effort and toward a collective effort. The findings from the research group seem to indicate the need for a similar shift in the school culture.

Tracking

A review of the literature on tracking uncovers a large number of voices, the vast majority of which from the last decade seem to come down against this educational practice. At best, published articles on the subject convey a mixed picture of tracking, providing evidence that it benefits some students while not others. At worst, this body of literature casts tracking in the role of second-generation stratification strategies, following in the same vein of Jim Crow laws. Despite the rather one-sided nature of the literature on this subject, several authors acknowledge the pervasiveness of tracking in the United States public school system (Ansalone, 2000, 2006; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007).

Proponents of tracking argue that it increases the efficiency of delivering the curriculum to students with diverse abilities and, therefore, promotes academic achievement for students at all level. In this view, tracking serves as an educational tool that ensures the “best and most efficient use of human resources” (Ansalone, 2000, ¶ 7).
Moreover, some supporters of tracking argue the positives of the practice from a self-development perspective. This line of thought claims that tracking leads to improved self-concept by matching students to instruction of a more appropriate pace and placing them in groups with peers of similar ability, thus freeing them from having to make “invidious comparisons with more able peers” (Ansalone, 2000, ¶ 9). Additionally, other advocates for tracking contend that placements within the tracking system naturally result from their prior achievement and their own personal interests (Loveless, 1999; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007).

These main arguments—efficiency, positive self-development, personal interests—become the focus of criticism by opponents to tracking. Of these main arguments in favor of tracking, the one most often discussed in the focus groups and follow-up interviews of the current study tended to focus on the notion of efficiency. The AIM program, some participants stated, allowed teachers to deliver a faster-paced, enriched curriculum to students with the proper level of motivation to succeed at the higher level. Furthermore, by freeing high achieving students from the burden of serving as models in the regular classes, the AIM classes helped these students make the most of their academic abilities.

Critiquing the claim that tracking leads to academic gains for students in homogeneous groups, several researchers point to evidence of uneven benefits in the system. Anasalone (2000), for example, recognizes that most early research in tracking revealed some academic gains by at least one if not all of the ability groups observed, but asserts that recent research finds “no clear cut positive or negative effect on the average scholastic achievement of students” (¶ 33). Rather, the more recent research suggests that tracking only improves the academic performance of high ability groups while average
and low ability groups stagnate. As Ansalone (2006) points out, some research suggests that the benefit to high ability groups may result from the “manipulation of variables including teaching methods, teacher expectations, curriculum differentiation, and resource materials” (¶ 17). This trend of tracking favoring the high-ability groups at the expense of the lower groups prompts several educational researchers to view tracking as a central component in the perpetuation of the racial achievement gap. Southworth and Mickelson (2007), for example, points to the “widespread agreement among social scientists that a critical component of the race gap in achievement is the relative absence of disadvantaged minority students in higher-level courses and their disproportionate enrollment in lower-level ones” (p. 502). Furthermore, Oakes (1985) characterizes tracking as an “elitist practice” that perpetuates the status quo by giving students from privileged families greater access to elite colleges and high-income careers (Hallinan, 2004, p. 74). Similarly, Carbonaro’s (2002) investigation of instructional quality across tracks described the difference between the “monologic,” or teacher-dominated, instruction, which typified the lower tracks and the richer “dialogic” instructional stance of the higher tracks, which allowed for choice and student voice in their educational experiences. Burris and Welner (2005) also highlight the effects of tracking and emphasize the importance of this issue for any educators who are interested in closing the achievement gap. Emphasizing the drawback of this differentiated curriculum for students left to the lower tracks, Burris and Welner (2005) go on to argue that “achievement follows from opportunities—opportunities that tracking denies” (p. 598). The issue of gender in tracking is less clear. Some researchers have found that male students had a higher drop-out rate than female students and were more at risk for deviant
behavior problems and low attendance (Gage, 1990; Rhodes & Fischer, 1993), yet others found no statistically significant difference between male and female students in terms of grade failure, course failure and attendance (Dixon-Floyd & Johnson, 1997). Socio-economic status, rather than gender, seems to be the best predictor of a student’s track placement (Dixon-Floyd & Johnson, 1997; Friedkin & Thomas, 1997). These viewpoints seem to support the sentiment raised in the focus groups and follow-up interviews about the racial and socio-economic implications of the AIM program’s tracking at the research site. The perception that the AIM program disproportionately favors certain groups over others clearly influences how some participants think about the program.

To examine the validity of these perceptions that surfaced in the focus groups and follow-up interviews, I asked for school records breaking down the total number of students in AIM and non-AIM tracks by race and gender. I then subjected this data to a goodness-of-fit $\chi^2$ test to determine whether a statistically significant difference existed between observed frequencies in the non-AIM track and the expected frequencies within the mutually exclusive classes of the AIM track. The data met the several assumptions required for the goodness-of-fit $\chi^2$ test to provide valid results. Namely, the categorical data fell into mutually exclusive categories, the observations were independent, and a sufficiently large sample size with expected frequencies larger than 5. As Table 3 demonstrates, at the $\alpha=.05$ significance level there was a significant difference between AIM and non-AIM tracks in terms of gender, $\chi^2(1, N=243) = 15.92$. A casual inspection of the data reveals that more females than expected from the non-AIM proportions take part in AIM classes. Likewise, as detailed in Table 4, there was also a significant difference between AIM and non-AIM tracks in terms of race $\chi^2(5, N=217) = 36.85$,
Interestingly, it appears that white females enter AIM in higher than expected numbers, while black students, Hispanic students, and white males enter AIM far less than the non-AIM proportions would suggest. These numbers lend credence to the perceptions in the research group of implications of the AIM program in the achievement gap experienced at the school.

Table 3

*Calculation of Goodness-of-fit $\chi^2$ for Observed Gender Frequencies in AIM*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Proportions based on non-AIM</th>
<th>Frequencies in AIM</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>$(O_i - E_i)^2/E_i$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>.461</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>243</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $H_0$: The observed frequencies in AIM will match expected frequencies defined by non-AIM population. $\chi^2$ Distribution with $\alpha = .05$, $df = 2-1 = 1$. $\chi^2_{critical} = 3.841$. $\chi^2_{observed}$ is greater than $\chi^2_{critical}$, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected.
Table 4

*Calculation of Goodness-of-fit $\chi^2$ for Observed Race and Gender Frequencies in AIM*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected Proportions frequencies based on non-AIM expected frequencies in AIM</th>
<th>Observed $O_i$</th>
<th>$(O_i - E_i)^2$</th>
<th>$E_i$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 0.067</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 0.057</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 0.053</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 0.042</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 0.357</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 0.310</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>237</td>
<td>217</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 = 36.85$

*Note.* To highlight the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students this chart does not include numbers for American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander students. $H_0$: The observed frequencies in AIM will match expected frequencies defined by non-AIM population. $\chi^2$ Distribution with $\alpha = .05$, $df = 6-1 = 5$. $\chi^2_{critical} = 11.070$. $\chi^2_{observed}$ is greater than $\chi^2_{critical}$, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected.

The evidence of disparate student performance in the different ability groups of tracking and the fact that Blacks, Latinos, and Native-Americans are disproportionately
found in lower tracks takes on a more troubling air when viewed in context of the historical roots of tracking in the United States. Ansalone (2000) traces the practice of tracking back to the decades between 1890 and 1920, a time of extensive migrations and population growth. The influx of new immigrants from Western Europe and the increased flow of southern Blacks into the North resulted in problems within the public school system as it tried to deal with the needs of the new populations. Several factors came together during those years that greatly influenced and legitimized the practice of educational tracking. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in the U.S. Supreme Court established the doctrine of “separate but equal” and cleared the way for Jim Crow laws that spread in several states. Establishing separate Jim Crow schools for black children “denied black children the opportunity for an equal educational experience which could possibly alter their future life trajectory” (Ansalone, 2006, ¶ 5). Additionally, Leonard Ayres argued in his 1909 work, *Laggards in the Schools*, that special classes needed to be developed to suited to the needs of the numerous immigrants failing in the system (Ansalone, 2000). Moreover, the notion of Social Darwinism and the growing use of Binet’s intelligence test by psychologists, such as Lewis Terman, provided fuel to the nativism and racism of the period. These tests supplied the means of identifying “abnormal children” for the differentiated curriculum of the lower tracks (Ansalone, 2000). These controversial foundations that gave rise to tracking in the United States led some educational researchers to consider the racial stratification resulting from tracking second-generation segregation along racial and socio-economic lines. Rather than experiencing inferior educational conditions in separate schools for students with different racial backgrounds that characterized first-generation segregation, these children
attend the same school as their white peers from higher-class backgrounds, but learn in
different tracks (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007; Oakes, 1985).

Beyond the claim that tracking improves the academic performance of students at
all levels, the literature also addresses the assertion that tracking positively impacts
children’s affective development. Ansalone (2000) acknowledges studies such as
Goldberg (1966) and Sorenson (1970) concluded that tracking did not affect the self-
concept of students. However, he also highlights the limitations of early research in this
area, noting the primary concern on the impact of tracking on the gifted students and the
use of predominately white middle class schools for the research studies. According to
Ansalone (2000), recent research provides considerable evidence that “tracking tends to
stimulate a negative self-concept on the part of students assigned to lower tracks” (¶ 41).
Moreover, tracking impacts friendship patterns between students, limiting access to
students in the lower tracks to the funds of social and cultural capital found in the upper
tracks (Ansalone, 2000).

This connects to Houtte’s (2006) discussion of the differentiation-polarization
theory of tracking. In this model, differentiation of students on the basis of academic
performance or ability leads to polarization, or the creation of different sub-cultures
characterized as pro-school and anti-school (Houtte, 2006; Lacey, 1970; Hargreaves,
1967). This notion holds the lower-track students act out in opposition to the system that
“makes them failures” and look for an alternative basis for status such as misconduct and
rebellion (Houtte, 2006, p. 275). Interestingly, Houtte (2006) also found that the
differentiation-polarization theory applied to school staff as well, with the faculty serving
the higher level tracks assuming a more academic orientation and a positive attitude
toward their students, and the faculty working with the lower track students adopting
looser standards and poorer attitudes about their students. These ideas inform the
comments from the focus groups and follow-up interviews regarding the AIM program.
While the non-AIM participants would adamantly deny the assertion that they hold lower
expectations for their students’ performance, there is evidence that they experience higher
discipline issues than the AIM track and that this in turn influences how they think about
their students. Houtte’s (2006) observations may also connect with the small moments of
jealousy expressed by some non-AIM teachers about their AIM peers, indicating the
desire for some participants to move into a more academic orientation with their students
and away from the role of the classroom manager.

The literature also provides support for the belief expressed in the research group
that the higher tracks tend to have higher levels of parental involvement. Kelly (2001)
explored the connection between parental involvement and track placement. This study
distinguished between direct involvement, such as parents demanding placement for the
son or daughter in higher tracks, and indirect involvement, like involvement with
homework and level of understanding of school procedures. Kelly (2001) found that
indirect forms of parental involvement had the most important impact on child placement
and that “students of higher social class have a huge advantage in attaining placement” in
elite track sequences (p. 19). While this does not say that parents of students in the lower
tracks do not take an active interest in their children’s academic performance, it does lend
credence to the observation from some participants in the research group that AIM seems
to represent the greater proportion of parental power in the school.

The weight of these critical perspectives regarding tracking underscores the link
between this issue and that of collaboration. While not often noted in studies about the effects of tracking, the mounting evidence of the academic, affective, and organizational inequity built into these systems greatly impact the disposition of teachers at either end of the continuum to work together in synergistic ways. This finding from the research group, linking AIM with teacher collaboration, represents a useful additional window on the complex issue of tracking.

Summary of Findings in the Collaboration/Teamwork Theme

The third major theme that emerged from the transcribed focus group meetings and follow-up interviews centered on the participants’ desire for increased collaboration among writing teachers and the barriers that stood in the way of deeper teamwork within the group.

Every participant expressed a need for stronger professional collaboration with his or her peers. Members of the research group wanted more opportunities to share resources and strategies with their coworkers with the aim of strengthening relationships as well as improving their teaching practice. As they shared this strong interest in improving collaborative relations, the participants also identified a number of obstacles to this work, including the limited and ineffective use of time at existing school meetings and disagreements within the group. The more the group talked about these issues, the more apparent it became that the division between AIM and non-AIM teachers in the group sat at root in most of the more intractable barriers to deeper collaboration.

One teacher characterized the division between the AIM and non-AIM tracks at the school as a feud over opposing views about the best way to structure the school environment to meet the needs of students. AIM teachers in the research group argued in
favor of the program, extolling the benefits of the accelerated curriculum for highly motivated students freed from the drag of serving as model students in less-challenging classrooms. Conversely, non-AIM teachers in the group shared their opinion that the AIM program took too many high achievers away from the lower tracks, leaving a dearth of student leaders in the regular classrooms. Furthermore, some non-AIM teachers questioned the role of tracking students into AIM in the rise of discipline concerns in the regular classroom and raised the possibility of racial and socio-economic segregation resulting from the school’s tracking system. The added circumstances of the higher quality of professional development offered to the teachers in the AIM track in contrast to the frustrating experience the non-AIM teachers had with the PLTs and the perception that AIM enjoyed a disproportionate amount of parental influence in the school also contributed to the power of this barrier to teamwork for the non-AIM participants.

Ultimately, all of these observations connect to a much wider debate about tracking in the public schools of the United States. The fact that the vast majority of schools in the U.S. use some form of tracking demonstrates the widespread appeal of the argument in favor of programs like AIM. However, sharp criticisms of tracking that dominate the educational literature point out the many dangers and inequity inherent in such programs. Given this polarization, the challenge posed by this issue for greater collaboration and teamwork among teachers caught on either side of the divide must not be underestimated.
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Conversation has been much on my mind lately. Undoubtedly, the process of planning, collecting, and analyzing the numerous focus group discussions and follow-up interviews has something to do with this preoccupation. Yet, while conversation clearly characterized the study as I reflect back on its design and implementation, it also strikes me that conversation informs my thinking as I look forward and attempt to integrate the findings into broader implications and recommendations.

Entering into purposeful talk with my colleagues and analyzing the rich mingling of ideas found in the data served as an invitation to listen in on broader conversations talking place in different fields in the literature. As the research group discussed how to close the achievement gap for writing, their discussion intersected with a wide range of topics. This study intersects administration/teacher relations, building on the work of Manathunga (2007) as well as Thaler and Somekh (1997) and others who explore the power-laced aspects of these relationships and point out the need for administrators to encourage teachers to have a degree of autonomy and control over aspects of their professional development. Similarly, the strategies and pedagogical moves shared in the focus groups and follow-up interviews connect to curricular approaches for teaching writing outlined by the likes of Murray (2004), Elbow (1998), Spandel (2001), Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006), and Fletcher (1996). Likewise, the findings regarding how members in the group made sense of the achievement gap borders on Ladson-Billings’ (2006, 2007) critique of gap discourse in favor of the term education debt. Moreover, critical race theorists following in the steps of McIntosh (1989), Tatum (1997), and Apple (1999) help to draw out the silent implications of the research group’s white privilege and
help explain the difficulty many participants experienced when it came to discussing differences in terms of race and gender. The study even touches on the literature about collaboration, expressing a desire for effective learning communities described by Honawar (2008) and more of what Bovbjerb (2006) called “collegial collaboration” among writing teachers. Taken with the findings regarding academic tracking and the work of Ansalone (2000, 2006) as well as Southworth and Mickelson (2007), this study contributes the important consideration of how tracking systems can negatively impact professional collaboration between teachers. In addition, this study also builds on the work of policy researchers such as Franzak (2006) and school reformers like Blase and Anderson (1995) by demonstrating the power and influence at play in the political world of schools.

In many ways, generalizing the findings from this study is a bit like someone making his way through a crowded room listening in on the various conversations taking place around him. At times the findings seem to nod in agreement or to offer corroborating examples to the animated discussions. At other times—such as with the issues of tracking and collaboration—the findings speak up to add new insights into the mix.

Simply put, the findings argue the importance of more talk—between teachers as well as between teachers and administrators. More than spoken exchanges of thoughts, opinions, and feelings, however, the lessons from the data urge a deeper transformation of pedagogy and practice. The old French and Latin etymology of conversation (literally “to turn about with”) shows that the original meaning of this word more closely resembled “to live with, keep company with” or “manner of conducting oneself in the
world” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2008). It is on this level—steeped in relationship and ontological orientation—that the conclusions of the study hold the greatest promise.

How Teachers of Writing Think About Their Struggling Student Writers

Returning to the two original impulses behind this study, the findings suggest some guiding principles. The first aspect of the study concerning how teachers of writing think about their struggling student writers draws on insights from each of the dominant themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and the follow-up interviews.

Most importantly, as the research group’s discussion about the achievement gap demonstrated, participants turned to their personal beliefs about the purpose of education and the role of teachers to make sense of disparate student performance. These foundational ideas about education ranged from largely positive and optimistic attitudes to more critical stances that focused on the limitations of the current system. This complex interplay prompted the group to point out the inadequacy of thinking of student performance solely in terms of a racial or gender achievement gap. However, this same mix of personal beliefs about the nature of education and the role of teachers also laid bare the reluctance of the predominately white group of participants to talk openly about gender and race.

Likewise, the research group’s discussion about teamwork and collaboration revealed that the issue of how teachers think about their struggling student writers intersects with the issue of tracking at the school site. Indeed, as Franzak’s (2006) work on how policy shapes values demonstrated, how teachers think about their students’ writing and their own pedagogy cannot be separated out from larger issues in the school. The practice of separating highly motivated students from others contributed to how
participants explained the performance of their learners, leading to perceptions of greater discipline issues and downward peer pressure in lower-track classes. Moreover, the split between teachers in the research group who worked exclusively with higher-level students and those who taught regular and honors classes created an imposing obstacle to departmental collaboration. This obstacle limited the sharing of resources as well as synergistic conversations many in the group felt would go a long way in improving their teaching practice.

Similarly, the findings from this study also point out how school administrators contributed to the participants’ thinking about their struggling student writers. Here, frustrating interactions in the professional learning teams (PLTs) and top-down directives, such as the mandate to focus on summary writing, failed to address what teachers felt they needed to improve student writing. Indeed, many of the participants expressed discomfort about approaching school leadership to ask for additional support for fear of negative repercussions on their yearly evaluation. Rather than being able to draw on the collective resources of the school community, this dynamic left many teachers in the research group feeling alone with the daunting task of closing the achievement gap in writing.

Implications and Generalizations

Distilling all this down to one or two take-home messages, I find myself mulling over the realization about the importance of how teachers see themselves. Just as Freire’s (1970) critique of the banking concept of education pointed out, how people perceive the way they exist in the world carries powerful consequences. That is, how teachers conceive of education and their role within it matters a great deal to how they make sense
of the directions handed to them as well as how they think about the students around them. The larger implication, therefore, is the need to help teachers adopt active subject positions, or conceptions about education, infused with positive optimism and powered by a vision of themselves as active decision makers, or as Giroux (1985) put it: “transformative intellectuals”—true catalysts for change. These active subject positions also need a healthy dose of the critical skepticism that came across in the research group’s discussion; without it there would be no reason to question the status quo or poke beyond surface appearances.

Yet, the question remains how best to facilitate teachers’ assumption of these attitudes and beliefs. Reflecting over how engaging in this inquiry has impacted my own evolving teaching practice sheds some light onto this central puzzle. On the level of concrete shifts in my practice, I can point to a sharper awareness of whom I call on in the classroom—how I structure interactions with students and groups of students. I also find myself planning additional opportunities for my predominately male students to exercise choice over the topics of their writing and a deeper awareness of the importance of tapping into student-interest in the work I assign. Additionally, I am more able to reach out to my colleagues within the department as a result of our shared work on this project. All these shifts in my day-to-day pedagogy reveal certain attitudes and beliefs changed through this study, but perhaps the most important impact for me has taken place behind the scenes. Examining the question of the achievement gap and re-evaluating how I think about my struggling student writers has caused me to wrestle anew with my own identity as a privileged white male. How my personal identity interfaces with the realities of my teaching—particularly the consequences of the tracking system at the research site—has
prompted me to re-assess the expectations I hold, searching for ways I may have inadvertently shortchanged my students. This personal, self-critical reflection is the true gift of this dissertation.

Looking back into the data collected in this study that showed the critical stance present everywhere except when it came to the participants’ own talk about gender and race, the curious silence might indicate the best place to start this work. In the immediate case of the research site, the school district has already started along this track with its focus on both excellence and equity goals. Each school in the district takes part in equity trainings designed to shift the district’s internal dialogue about race, gender, class, and culture. However, as the absent frank talk about these issues in the transcribed focus group discussions and follow-up interviews evidences, more remains to be done. If writing teachers are to move beyond the over-simplified construction of the achievement gap into a more comprehensive, nuanced paradigm such as Ladson-Billing’s (2006, 2007) notion of education debt, then they must first be able to deal squarely with how their own privilege interacts with uncomfortable issues of race and gender. Talking around the issue is not the same as confronting it. In this way, the findings from this study echo the work of McIntosh (1989), Tatum (1997) as well as critical race theorists Leonardo (2005) and Gillborn (2005).

The true challenge implicit in the findings about how teachers think about their struggling writers and the policy directives that impact those students, then, is that teachers and administrators must find ways to encourage and nurture an orientation to education that embraces a positive optimism for the future conversant with the realities of power and privilege. In the case of the research site, existing structures, such as the PLTs
and the yearly evaluation process, seem like natural forums for this work. Teachers must advocate for the changes they need. Transforming these structures, however, from the frustrating, top-down interactions experienced by several of the participants to supportive venues rich with what Apple (2003) would describe as “thick democracy” will require a realignment in the dominant stance of the school’s leadership. In part, this realignment will require an openness to critically examine privilege in their own experiences as well as how it is lived out in terms of school policy and the daily life of the school. For example, the leadership may need to critically reassess popular programs, like the advanced AIM track, and ask if perpetuating tracking systems falls in line with equity goals to address the achievement gap. Here, the findings of the study touch on the recommendations of researchers like Manathuga (2007) and Yendol-Silva and Ficthman Dana (2004), who advocate the need to examine how power and privilege operate in school leadership. This reorientation must also carry with it a commitment to grounding policy goals in the real concerns of teachers and students. Just as Makuria (2002) argued that administrators must respect and value the ideas of others, this means leadership must trust teachers as decision makers and strive to open spaces for these kinds of dialogue—to ask and listen, before telling.

Examining the Process of Teachers Thinking Collaboratively About Writing Practice

The second major aspect of the study, examining how teachers of writing think collaboratively about their practice, also draws on findings from each of the thematic areas that emerged from the focus group discussions and follow-up interviews.

For example, the research group’s discussion about collaboration and teamwork emphasized the perceived need for deeper collaboration among the writing team. Similar
to the work of Bovbjerb (2006) and Harrison and Killion (2007), participants in the study pointed out the benefits of this kind of interaction in terms of sharing instructional resources and strategies as well as more intangible gains such as helping each other erase their personal biases toward students and the potential enrichment of cross-curricular and cross-generational teamwork. However, despite this great enthusiasm for collaboration, the research group also identified some imposing obstacles to greater teamwork: most notably, limited time and the bifurcation in the department resulting from the school’s tracking system.

Likewise, the research group’s comments relating to the achievement gap provided clear examples of collaborative thinking taking place among the participants. This came across most clearly as members in the group shared strategies they felt would help address the needs of struggling student writers. The exchanges between participants in these moments exhibit a dynamic process of group inquiry—each teacher offering ideas, sharing examples from their teaching, asking for clarification, and offering help to his or her co-workers. Another example of collaborative thinking came through as the participants shared their thoughts about the nature of education and the role of teachers. The process of discussing the oscillating, complicated views of education helped everyone in the group to wrestle with their normally taken-for-granted assumptions. In this way, the focus group discussions and the follow-up interviews served as an occasion for the kind of deeper collaboration many in the group sought after.

All of these findings regarding the collaborative process of writing teachers thinking together about their practice overlap with the thoughts about leadership shared in the research group. For the participants, school administrators often contributed to the
obstacles preventing greater collaboration among the writing team. The practice of administrative agendas driving scheduled PLTs and department meetings, for example, decreased the amount of time available for teachers to interact in collaborative ways. Similarly, feelings of inconsistent support, especially regarding the discipline issues experienced by the non-AIM teachers in the group, and the confusion many participants felt about administrative decisions they viewed as inconsistent with the stated goals of the school, such as the focus on low-level summary writing, also worked to collapse the space for teamwork among the teachers.

**Implications and Generalizations**

Thinking over the journey of setting up, conducting, and then analyzing the findings from this project, I’m drawn back to my early thoughts about action research. As I shared in the philosophical underpinnings of the study, my first experiences as an educational researcher followed in that tradition. In this exploratory study, I looked to that tradition and the work of researchers such as Stringer (2004), McNiff and Whitehead (2006), and Herr and Anderson (2005) to guide my work as an insider conducting inquiry within my own school. Now, as I reflect about the ramifications of my study in terms of collaboration and teamwork, it occurs to me how action research represents one viable possibility for a way forward.

Many of the transferable lessons of this study relate to what schools should keep in mind when creating a framework through which to examine the problems, determine the appropriate steps for addressing concerns, and supporting the desired actions. Like the self-perpetuating action-reflection cycles of action research, the findings in this study emphasize the need for schools to follow a recursive process of observing, reflecting,
acting, evaluating, and modifying. As schools work to examine the nature of problems such as the achievement gap, this study highlights the importance of including teachers’ voices. As the participants demonstrated, teachers hold a wealth of insight, and this insight should be tapped. Similarly, as a school moves to determine the correct actions/interventions to take to address the situation, administrators should trust in the professional capacity of teachers to know their fields and their students. Rather than pushing top-down agendas, administrators should seek out and incorporate the expertise of teachers. Moreover, when planning to support the ongoing efforts of policy in action, this study argues for the need for leadership to adopt roles typified by mentoring, collegial collaboration, and avoid falling into the dehumanizing patterns that ignore the strengths and needs of teachers.

Several times during this study, participants spoke about how they wished they had more chances to come together and discuss issues of their teaching with others in a format like the focus groups and the follow-up interviews afforded them. Many teachers, like the participants in the research group, crave opportunities to improve. Similarly, like Honawar’s (2008) discussion of professional learning communities, this study also demonstrates that many also crave the chance to work with their coworkers in meaningful ways. These two observations lead me to wonder about the possibility of teacher-driven inquiry as a model for professional development. In the case of the research site, some meetings, such as the one-on-one planning meetings described by AIM teachers, already follow this kind of format. Here, these meetings start with immediate teacher needs and an administrator and a teacher work together as a team to polish the lessons to increase their effectiveness. Unfortunately, the other regular-track teachers did not experience the
same quality of interaction in their PLTs. The majority of these meetings adhered to an administrative agenda that too often simply missed the boat.

Acknowledging the reality that tracking systems tend to lead to a host of problematic attitudes and dynamics (Ansalone, 2000; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007; Oakes, 1985, 2005; Burris & Welner, 2005; Houtte, 2006), including this study’s finding that it can negatively impact collaboration and teaming among faculty within the same department, it stands to reason that such systems deserve careful scrutiny. In an ideal world tracking systems that privilege those at the top at the expense of those below would end in favor of more effective ways of cultivating the potential in all children. In this imperfect world, however, these programs often enjoy too much popularity, parental support, and institutionalized power to simply be swept aside. Still, if in confronting the tracking system at a school an administrator should decide to maintain a program similar to the one described in this study despite its tension with the stated policy goals to close the achievement gap, the very least the school leadership should do is to insist that the teachers who work with lower track receive as good or better professional development experiences as those in the higher tracks.

As an insider, I realize the very real difficulties even this seemingly straightforward recommendation poses. In the life of a school, both sides of a tracking system represent the flesh and blood actions and passion of people—coworkers, friends, and colleagues. Engaging in the necessary conversations to impact policy can rub the wrong way and create friction in the workplace most would rather avoid. Still, policy issues, such as how a school tracks its students and teachers, hold undeniable implications for school’s future. In the case of the research site in this study, this issue
connects with parental power, classroom discipline, perceptions of fairness among the staff, and therefore the level of teacher collaboration. If these concerns can be addressed, the way forward lies in the power of conversation—framed positively in terms of actions that can move the school forward, rather than pointing fingers and assessing blame.

Adopting an action research approach to professional development with adequate resources and high-quality administrative support would go a long way in addressing some of the bruised feelings on both sides of the tracking divide. For the research site, the administrative agenda that dominated most of the PLTs and the departmental meeting time could shift to make space for this kind of work. What would happen if the majority, or even some small percentage, of the normally scheduled meeting time were devoted to action research projects—identified by teachers and investigated collaboratively by teammates concerned with the same goals? My guess is that not only would more work get accomplished in these meetings, but teachers would feel better about their practice and closer to their colleagues.

Limitations and Recommendations

As with any research endeavor, this study and its findings come hand in hand with a number of limitations. Each of these restrictions to the current study suggests possible avenues for future inquiries. First and foremost, this study only sampled the views and opinions of one group of writing teachers, in one school, over the course of one academic year. Undoubtedly, a larger pool of participants working over a longer period of time would have yielded additional insights. One particular limitation that follows from the one-year time frame of this study is the inability to detect long-term, sustained change that may result from the initial efforts of the research group. Likewise, following my
decision to focus the inquiry on the few writing teachers at the research site, the study did not include the perspectives of school administrators. The current study also did not look explicitly at what students had to say about writing policy and how it affected their school experiences. While the exclusion of these other perspectives and explanations does not diminish the truth of the participants’ experiences, it does emphasize the need to include these other voices to gain a more complete understanding of these issues.

New Conversations

As I write this, another school year waits just around the corner. In a matter of days, the languid mornings of summer will give way to the up-tempo rhythms of the school day. Although I am returning to the same building, so much will be new. I will be working with a new grade, moving from 7th and 8th grade to 6th. There will also be new colleagues, several of the members of the research group having moved on to new schools and new assignments. There will be a new principal and assistant principal, with several of last year’s administrators accepting new positions within the building. In many ways, the new school year promises many new conversations. It is with anticipation for these conversations and hope for the days to come that I conclude this dissertation.
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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: ___________________________________

1. Number of years of teaching experience: ____________
   a. Grade levels taught: __________________________________________

2. Number of years experience of teaching writing: ____________
   a. Grade levels taught: __________________________________________

3. Please list any professional development activities regarding the teaching of writing you have participated in (for example, National Writing Project, National Board certification, district classes, program in-services, etc.):

4. Please indicate the highest level of education attained:
   a. College degree
   b. Some graduate level study
   c. Graduate degree:
      i. Level (Eg. MA) _______ Focus: __________________________
   d. Other (special certificate). Please explain
Appendix B: Initial Interview Questions

**Grand-tour questions:**

1. What do you think about the gender achievement gap in writing?
2. What have you experienced in terms of the school’s efforts to close the gender achievement gap in writing?

**Mini-tour questions:**

1. What do you see as your role within the school’s policy goal to close the gender achievement gap in writing?
2. How do you define the term “gender achievement gap”? What do you think are the root causes of this gap?
3. What, if anything, have you done to address the gender achievement gap in writing?
4. What has helped you in your work on closing the achievement gap?
5. What would help you be more effective in your work on this problem?
6. What strategies or approaches do you use in your classroom to specifically address the gender achievement gap in writing?
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW #1

Information Sources to be Shared with Group:


Guiding Questions for Discussion:

1. What does this information mean to you?
2. Could you tell me about a time when your experiences confirmed this information?
3. Could you tell me about a time when your experiences refuted this information?
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW #2

Grand Tour Questions:

1. Can you tell me about what you have observed about the writing performance of your students?
2. Can you tell me about a time you observed a difference between the writing performance of a student who struggles with writing and a student who does not?

Guiding Questions for Discussion Regarding Student Work:

1. What do you see?
2. What patterns do you see?
   a. Have you noted any differences between students of different ethnic decent in your classroom?
   b. Have you noted any differences between the males and females in writing in your classroom?

Information Sources to be Shared with Group:

1. School Improvement Plan (SIP) for 2007-2008
2. CSAP Achievement Data PowerPoint Presentation for Research Site

Guiding Questions for Discussion:

1. What does this information mean to you?
2. What do you see?
   a. What patterns do you notice?
3. What does school policy mean for your day-to-day teaching of student writers?
APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW #3

Guiding Questions:

1. Has participating in this study (both the focus groups and individual interviews) changed any assumptions about teaching and your established practices?

2. Has participating in this study (both the focus groups and individual interviews) affected how you see yourself?

3. What, if any, next steps would you like to take regarding helping your struggling writers?