

2018-01-01

Policy Mediation and Curricular Integration in a Texas Charter School

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POLICY MEDIATION AND CURRICULAR INTEGRATION
IN A TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOL

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Master's Program in Sociology

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2018

POLICY MEDIATION AND CURRICULAR INTEGRATION

IN A TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOL

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Sociology

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2018

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers and administrators work together to create an effective learning environment. The research question is how Administrators and teachers mediate policies and does that mediation hinder or facilitate curricular integration? This study uses ethnographic methods; with a focus on relationships between policy and practice (Pacheco, 2010), the role of teacher experience characteristics of educators and their mediation of policies (Ratner; Kolman, 2016). The role of policy documents in the implementation of instruction (Woulfin, 2016).

The focus of this study are the processes of curricular integration in a Texas charter school. At the campus level, vertical and horizontal curricular integration requires attentive teacher and administrative observations, effective collaboration, and the experience to mediate how these components affect classroom instruction. Teacher observations are the first step in the process of differentiation and intervention that keeps students from falling behind. Administrative observations direct the activities of teachers as defined by state and institutional documents. The institutional emphasis on cultural preservation makes this charter school beneficial as a research site because the curricular focus and overall mission of the campus is to provide valuable services that enrich the community rather than merely providing educational services. The mission of this school is to combine community and classroom in order to create the most effective learning environment possible for students.

In addition to an extended school day, the Community Academy offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities that supplement learning as well as provide for after school care that is valuable to low-income working class parents. Ninety seven percent of students at this school are low-income English Language Learners (ELL), who struggle with English proficiency when they arrive at the school. The dual language curriculum is the backbone of classroom instruction in the primary grade levels. The dual language curriculum requires mediations in order to be effective for students when they are struggling with classroom materials. Teachers collaborate

daily to adjust and differentiate curricular instruction so that struggling students do not fall behind. This process of mediation is how teachers balance curricular mandates with student needs.

Many teachers expressed concerns about the vertical integration of curriculums. The vertical integration of curriculum is how well the curriculum meets in the middle from one grade to the next. Curriculums that are not vertically integrated leave gaps that require re-teaching at the beginning of every year to make sure that students are prepared for the learning objectives for that year. When curriculums are vertically integrated, teachers spend less time re-teaching materials.

The charter places the responsibility of curricular development on the teachers. In the process of developing their curriculums, teachers attempt to implement thematic units that extend classroom learning into the community and create a sense of cultural pride and preservation for the students. Increases in the frequency and rigor of state-mandated testing hinders the ability of teachers to implement cultural themes. Teachers, who have more experience working at the Community Academy, are more effective at implementing thematic units. At the middle school level, curriculums are English only and structured differently than at the elementary level. Teachers at middle school level struggle with thematic units more than teachers at the elementary level.

Literature Review

Significant work has been done on the importance of leadership, policy and multiple influences in creating new settings for innovative teaching and learning (Brouillette, 2002), the state and federal laws that regulate charter schools (Murphy, 2002) and the emergence of charter reforms as educational policy (Powers, 2009). This section discusses what a charter school is; the arguments for and against charters (Finn, Mano, & Vanourek, 2000) and the problems of education reform (Ravitch, 2013).

Thomas Murphy (2002) briefly discusses federal and state-specific legislation regarding charter schools. The first two federal legislative actions regarding charter schools were the amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1994 and 1998. These laws allowed charter contracts to receive federal funding that is separate from the funds allocated for traditional public schools, and established attendance-based funding that draws money away from public schools when students attend charters.

The legal processes of that establish charter applications (Walsh, Kermer, and Manitois 2014) have a direct impact on the structures of charter applications as well as on the frameworks of the institutions they govern. While federal reform efforts provide the funding and independence that drive charter School expansion, state legislative efforts establish most of the enforceable accountability structures. An education charter is a contract between an education agency or organization and the state within which it operates. Charter schools emerged out of the concern that the United States was losing ground in the global job market. The school-by-charter concept created by Ray Budde (1988), quickly spread throughout the national reform debate. Advocates claim that charter initiatives increase the availability and quality of schools for disadvantaged groups by expanding school choice.

School choice is a concept based on market laws of supply and demand (Lacrieno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser & Henig 2002; Goldring & Smrekar 2002). The argument for school choice is that if families choose the school their child will attend, then underperforming schools will lose attendance and fail, and only successful schools will prosper. According to this perspective, open market education will increase the quality of schools in the United States through competition and a less bureaucratic system of policy implementation.

Bureaucratic systems are the foundation of accountability measures for institutions and at the federal level, charters are less bureaucratic by design. Federal reform efforts provided charter schools with independence from the burden of bureaucratic systems that govern public schools. The Public Charter School Program (PCS) in 1994 established the legal context of charters as “authorized entities [which] are granted varying degrees of autonomy from state and local rules

and regulations... [and] who are held accountable for meeting the terms of their charters [which vary] depending upon particular state laws” (Murphy, 2002 p.35). Four years after signing the PCS, congress substantially amended it with the Charter School Expansion Act of 1998. The amendments were designed to make federal funding more readily available through state education agencies, with the intent to provide “support for planning, designing, and initial implementation of charter schools... and expanding the number of high quality charter schools available to students across the nation” (U.S. Congress, 1998, Sec. 2 & Sec. 3). The federal funding for charter organizations increased the number of states with charter schools from only three in 1994 to 32 in 2000; the number of charter schools increased nationwide from 100 in 1994 to 1,692 in 2000 (Department of Education, 2000). By 2014, there were 6,465 charter schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015a). In 2015 California had the largest number of charter schools in the United States with 1,125 charter schools, followed by Texas (658), Florida (623) and Arizona (600) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b).

The flexibility of instructional methods and curriculum is a fundamental principle of reform efforts. The flexibility of the Community Academy make this site optimal for studies of campus level mediations. A standing criticism against charter freedom and flexibility is that they tend to over-enroll the easiest to education student populations (Finn, Mano, & Vanourek 2000; Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser & Henig 2002). Finn, Mano & Vanourek (2000) argue that there are many myths to charter criticisms however simplistic accountability structures are problematic. Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke & Moser & Henig (2002) argue that in order for accountability structures to prevent selective enrollment, funding structures should account for the cost differences of educating different populations of students.

The student population at the Community Academy consists primarily of ELL’s. Mariana Pacheco (2010) examines the impact of teacher mediations on meaning making opportunities for ELL students. Pacheco finds that accountability pressures push some teachers to have more integrated teaching methods. However, “policy and its instantiation in practice need to be aimed

deliberately at enhancing what counts as reading to include expanded and critical meaning making opportunities” (p.314). Teachers’ mediation of emphasis in classroom instruction facilitates expansive meaning making opportunities.

Another study on teacher mediations examines teacher characteristics and experience (Burkhauser & Lesaux, 2017). The authors find that novice teachers benefit from support from teachers that are more experienced. Experienced teachers make adaptations to context more effectively than novice teachers do and novice teachers are more likely to limit their modifications of materials to the amount of time spent on a particular lesson and the order of the lesson plan. Novice teachers are also more likely to adhere strictly to instructional materials.

Methods

The push for the political efficacy of qualitative research began with narrower definitions of what types of education research can receive federal funds (Eisenhart and Towne 2003). The push back from qualitative work evolves from attempts to conceptualize, define, and organize culture in education (Eisenhart, 2001). The ability of positivist research to generate seemingly simple solutions to complex problems is politically desirable for policy implementation purposes (Cooley, 2013). As a result, there is a heavy emphasis on positivist research in education. Cooley recognizes the need for “proponents of qualitative methods to try to better educate critics in these policy circles [as] to both the value and rigor of qualitative work” (p. 254). Diane Ravitch (2013) describes the need for sound and valid education research as a necessity of the American education system.

Dorothy Smith (2005) established the Institutional Ethnographic Method (IE) as a method that resists the structuralist paradigms that characterize mainstream sociology. The structuralist perspective in the social sciences relies heavily on the work of Emile Durkheim (Smith, 2005; Applerouth & Eddles 2011; Allan 2013). The structuralist position in mainstream sociology argues that social structures are over-determinative, or have too much control over individual action. Smith’s argument against structuralism criticizes its lack of empirical connection to material data. For Smith, the structuralist paradigm is a theoretical abstraction with no material grounding in the activities of individuals. In contrast, IE attempts to empirically identify the extent to which institutional structures shape rather than determine the activities of individuals.

Smith (2006) distinguishes IE from Grounded Theory, which involves data collection activities that are purportedly void of theoretical frameworks (Seal, Clive, 2012) by producing theory that emerges from data through a “perspective-based methodology” (Glaser, 2007). According to Smith (2006), grounded theory emerges from data, while institutional ethnography

considers data within the institutional context and the discursive structure of the texts that govern that institution.

The core concept of IE is the mapping of “ruling relations”. Ruling relations of an institution influence the experiences of individuals that work within that institution. IE defines ruling relations as “relations that carry and accomplish organization and control” (Smith, 2006 p. 17). Smith conceptualizes frontline workers as those who carry out the day-to-day activities of the institution. These activities are coordinated through textual documents and institutional discourses. Identifying the connections between institutional texts and the activities and narratives of frontline workers is what Smith (2005, 2006) refers to as the mapping of “ruling relations”. The identification of textual language in the narratives of workers who carry out the daily activities of an organization is essential to mapping the ruling relations.

The mapping of ruling relations involves an analysis of textual language, institutional discourse and the identification of that language in the activities of frontline workers. In ethnographic methodologies, researchers immerse themselves in the culture of the subject population in an attempt to capture implicit aspects of the social context (Frank, 1999). This immersion allows the researcher to collect data about aspects of the social context that may go unnoticed in the course of everyday activities. This thesis places more emphasis on the connections between text and activity than traditional ethnographic approaches.

IE distinguishes from traditional ethnographic approaches by a stronger emphasis on the connection between text and narrative. Smith (2006) describes how abstract texts influence action and experience within an institution. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the application of textual coordination in this study starts with text rather than action. The action that precedes the charter document in this case would be the application process. The analysis focuses on the process of mediation from textual policies to teacher instruction.

Textual Coordination is the process of coordinating activities through documents that direct and evaluate action within an organization. Institutional Discourses are the dialogues that actualize institutional activity. Because there was no research access to formal discussions, such

as staff and professional development meetings, institutional discourse in this case only considers the interview data.

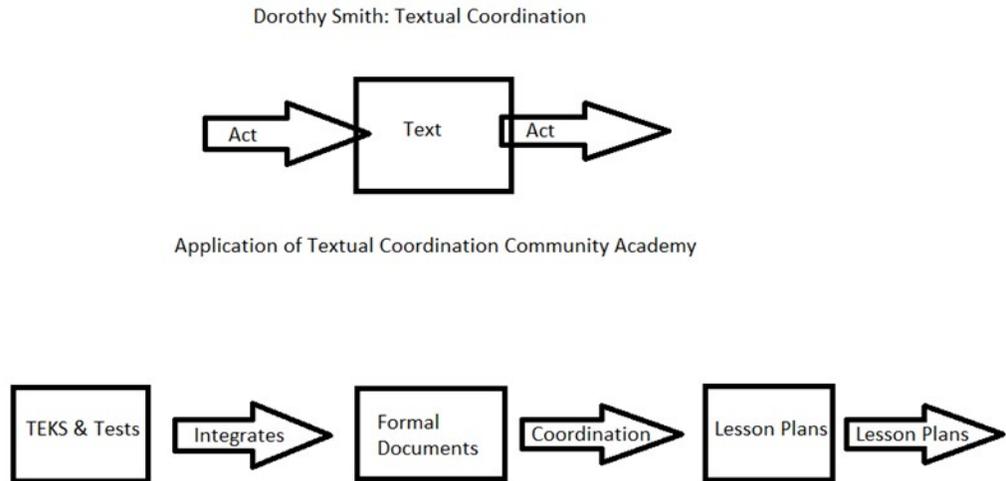


Illustration 2.1

Charter Categorizations

A requirement of all Texas charters is that the terms of the charter establish the accountability of the organization as imagined by the charter authors and enforced by the oversight organization (Powers, 2009; Ravitch, 2013). The application approval process establishes the accountability of the organization as documented in the charter. This analysis considers the development and orientation of the charter mission and curricular orientation of the organization. These factors orient these organizations within the context of the communities they serve.

Charter schools are publicly funded organizations that operate independently of traditional public school structures. Charter schools are, by design, independent and alternative systems of educational choice. As schools of choice, charters have different curricular orientations and institutional focuses that provide educational choice to parents and students. The

specialization of charter schools organizations allows them to provide specific educational services according to the institutional mission. The point of this categorization is to distinguish charter structures by how they position their institutions in the economic, educational and social context. This categorization considers four categories; 1) entrepreneurial, 2) performance-based, 3) community-based, and 4) community service based.

Entrepreneurial structures are organizations that resemble an economically efficient business model, with cookie cutter designs and profit orientations. Performance-based structures are organizations that emphasize competition and college readiness. Community-based structures are organizations that connect deeply with the local community, but limit their services to education. Community-service-based structures are organizations that provide services beyond education to benefit the local community. Together these categories comprise the charter school options available in El Paso.

While the potential for categorization is not limited to these four categories, this section only considers the local context. Twelve of the fourteen El Paso charter campuses belong to multi-site organizations such as the Harmony charter network (3 campuses), the Burnham Wood charter school district (5 campuses), the Premier charter network (2 campuses), and El Paso Academy Inc. (2 campuses). Single site campuses in El Paso include the El Paso Leadership Academy and the Community Academy Preparatory School.

Large-scale categorizations consider structures generally and broadly. This categorization distinguishes the research site from other charters in the local area. An established way of categorizing charter structures includes economic characteristics, such as profit or non-profit and founding principles, such as community-based, teacher-based or corporate (Powers 2001). This categorization considers curricular orientation STEM/liberal arts academies, and outcomes, such as college prep or vocational.

Charter reformers would argue that the differentiation of organization mission creates specialized organizations and thus more choices in the educational marketplace so that these organizations can better serve specific populations of students. Charter school opponents argue

that the independence of specialized organizations leads to selective admittance policies and reproduction of the status quo. The argument that charters, as an alternative, allow for change in education systems (Finn, Manno, Brunno V. & Vanourek, 2000) provides a lot of gusto for the success of the charter efforts. However, according to Ravitch, the reform “solutions” that have dominated political policy action are problematic in many ways:

“I contend that their solutions are not working. Some are demonstrably wrong. Some, like charter schools, have potential if the profit motive were removed, and if the concept were redesigned to meet the needs of the communities served rather than the plans of entrepreneurs” (Ravitch, 2013 p.5).

The argument that educational organizations should meet the needs of the community stands as the foundational assumption for categorizing charter structures in this analysis.

Texas Charter Laws

Federal charter legislation and Texas charter legislation both have followed the same path of expanding charter school access through funding and administrative support. Texas charter law places charter organizations closer to the same levels of bureaucratic and legal accountability as public schools under Texas law, and classifies them education charters three categories: home rule charters, campus charters, and open enrollment charters (Walsh, Kemerer & Maniotis, 2014).

Home rule charters convert entire districts to charter rule through public vote by constituents living within that district. Campus charters are charters granted to teachers and parents for independent operation. Open enrollment charters accept applications from any student regardless of location within the local district. The legal process associated with each application type determines what category a given charter school falls into.

Fussarelli (2003) provides a general overview of the political dynamics associated with Texas charter reform legislation. The State of Texas authorized the establishment of charter schools on May 27, 1995 via Senate Bill 1 of the 74th legislature that created Chapter 12 of the Texas Education Code. Chapter 12 authorizes home rule district charters under subchapter B, open enrollment charters under subchapter C and grants authority to district trustees to approve other charters under subchapter D (Texas Senate, 1995 Sec 12.002). On May 28th 2001, the 77th legislative session added subchapter E to Chapter 12 of the Texas Education Code, granting authority to approve and administer charters to public colleges and universities.

In addition to different processes of legal establishment, Texas law also contains statutes that establish standards of qualifications, assessments, accountability, and privileges. To qualify for charter application approval in the State of Texas, an organization must be “a public or private institution of higher education, a tax exempt [business or non-profit] organization, or a governmental entity” (Walsh, et al 2014 p.17). Texas charter laws considers charters as state actors (LTTS Charter School, Inc. V. C2 Construction, Inc. 2011) and an organization may not be re-approved if they have had a charter revoked in the previous 10 years.

El Paso Charter Structures

Once a chartered organization has achieved “high-performing status”, it may open new campuses without further application processes (Walsh, Kemerer & Maniotis 2014 p.19). This allows larger organizations to use a single charter for multiple campuses, while smaller organizations will have only one campus per charter. The convenience of allowing multiple campuses to operate under a single charter is problematic to the concept of local control, The conflict between abstract definition and local control is consistent with the arguments of both Bourdieu (2003) and Smith (2005).

Ten of the twelve El Paso charter campuses belong to multi-site organizations such as the Harmony charter network (3 campuses), the Burnham charter school district (2 campuses), the Premier charter network (2 campuses), and El Paso Academy Inc. (2 campuses). Single site

campuses in El Paso include the El Paso Leadership Academy and the Community Academy Preparatory School.

Table 2.1: Charter Categorization

Column1	Community Academy	EPISD	State
Hispanic	98.90%	83%	52.20%
White	1.10%	9%	28.50%
ELL	73.70%	26%	18.50%
Special ED	8.60%	10%	8.60%
Economically disadvantaged	94%	65%	59%

An example of an entrepreneurial model application is the charter for IDEA public schools. According to the IDEA public schools website, they have 61 campuses along the Texas/Mexico border region, servicing 36,000 students in districts where the majority of students are minorities. All 61 IDEA campuses operate under a single charter on file with the TEA (TEA, 2017). The IDEA Public Schools charter utilizes broad generalizable language such as “the IDEA Academy intends to serve the needs of the community”, without identifying what those needs are, or how they are going to accomplish that goal.

Cookie-cutter applications allow for rapid expansion of charter organizations into new campuses. This practice is typical of larger organizations; however, Harmony Public Schools, the largest charter network in the United States (Ravitch 2013), issues a specific application for each region in which they intend to open a new campus. In Texas, Harmony schools have 15 applications on file, one for each community they serve and two for the Austin area (TEA 2017). Each Harmony application has a region-specific statement that details the demographics and market demands in order to justify expansion into that region. Additionally, the largest local charter network in El Paso, Burnham Charter District, has four applications on file for five campuses.

The composition of an advisory board is an important factor in the development and direction of organizational intentions and ideology. Harmony's board of directors includes current and retired college professors, community health specialists, and curriculum development specialists. The Board of Directors for IDEA includes a majority of business executives, two attorneys, two media directors, a chairperson for a charitable foundation, a hospital CEO and one municipal official. The local board for IDEA public schools in El Paso consists of one distribution manager for Budweiser beer, one city official, one college professor, and one local business owner. The Burnham charter district board is composed of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from business to IT and human resources; all are parents of children who attend the district schools.

Curricular Orientation

The basic curricular structures required in all Texas Charter School applications are the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) scope and sequence. TEKS criteria are required for all public schools in Texas including charters. This analysis categorizes charter organizations that rely heavily upon standardized concepts as having standardized curricular orientations. Charters that move beyond the standardized curricular requirements into descriptions that are more detailed strengthen their curricular orientation.

All charter applications for El Paso Schools contain a discussion of TEKS objectives. However, most charters describe TEKS as a curricular foundation. Community Academy describes TEKS as a guiding curricular foundation that establishes the minimum requirements of thematic units. Ultimately, the Community Academy charter explicitly seeks to move beyond TEKS into a more community-oriented learning environment.

The Community Academy uses the TEKS as a foundation for curriculum development. The charter requires teachers to teach all material outlined in the TEKS and expects them to teach beyond the TEKS in order to elicit higher order thinking skills. The Community Academy Preparatory School will train the teachers to facilitate learning through challenging student-

centered, cognitive, and social activities. Such activities will instill a deeper understanding of the skills with an enhanced aptitude for problem solving, which will allow students to perform well on the [STARR] (p. 48). The language in the Community Academy charter explicitly establishes the instructional intentions and curricular process at the campus level.

In this categorization Harmony Public Schools (HAS) is identified as a performance oriented charter, due to the academic background of high ranking executives and the region specific charters. While the board members of HSA all have graduate degrees, they are all in STEM fields and do not have extensive backgrounds in primary and secondary education. HSA places considerable emphasis on “alternative’ or ‘authentic’ performance assessments and participation in state and national competitions” (TEA 2017 CDN 71806 p. 13-14).

HSA’s emphasis on competitive performance is a politically appealing framework to solicit support for innovative pedagogical practices. HSA does have a pedagogical orientation that goes beyond the standardized curricular conceptualizations of TEKS and common core. Incorporating the concepts of “constructivist learning” and “multiple intelligences”, the charter describes constructivist learning as an emphasis on a “student’s responsibility for their own learning and their active role in seeking and using information... [where] the role of the teacher changes from being an information-transmitter into being an instructor who guides the students” (TEA 2017 CDN 71806 p. 12). HSA has one charter for the local campus that describes the educational innovations that are specific to the organization. The depth of pedagogical detail presented in the charter language supports the strength of curricular/pedagogical orientation.

Compared to the Burnham district charter, HSA includes more details about institutional details. In contrast, Burnham district has one charter for the district and one charter for the Elementary School. The district charter contains a vague description about the mission and structure of the organization while the campus charter includes more details about the specifics of the campus. The campus charter only includes 3 brief point about the curricular orientation of the school; 1) diverse cooperative learning, and 2) direct instruction that is aligned with 3)

Choice Theory as a communication tool for problem solving. Each charter provides different descriptions to explain the curricular/pedagogical orientation of the organization.

In contrast to other charters, the Community Academy Preparatory School charter provides a strong explanation of how the institution operates within the pedagogical philosophy of Dewey (TEA 2017 CDN71807). In the Community Academy charter, thematic units form the foundation for vertical and horizontal integration. According to the charter application, the thematic units should align vertically across grade levels and horizontally across classrooms. The thematic alignment creates a foundation for dialogue between students in different classes as well as students in different grades outside of the classroom and in the community. The integrated approach is designed to foster “interactive social learning opportunities” (TEA 2017 CDN71807 p. 42) and promote higher-order thinking skills as the integrated themes are applied to different educational materials.

The Community Academy charter also explicitly establishes a dynamic process of curricular development rather than a simple dependence on state mandates.

The teachers will be charged with designing a curriculum that will be culturally enriching, relevant, and challenging. At the end of each year, the thematic units will be Curriculum revised, altered and possibly replaced if necessary... If teachers have the opportunity to create the curriculum, scope and sequence, and daily lesson plans, they will feel ownership of the material and will present it to the children with more passion and vigor. (TEA 2017 CDN 71807 p.15)

Community Academy seeks to extend the thematic units beyond the classroom and into the community through community engagement and service learning. This builds upon Dewey’s perspective that students are more capable of understanding the significance of the classroom material when they can relate materials to their lives outside of the classroom (TEA 2017 CDN71807).

The analysis in this section provides one way to categorize charters by the specifics of their applications. This categorization process considers institutional possibilities as a continuum rather than a fixed scale ranging from entrepreneurial to community service oriented structures. Considering categories along a continuum, rather than a fixed scale, allows categorizations to change with new institutional innovations. This continuum also extends to the second level of analysis - curricular orientation - that ranges from a standardized orientation to pedagogical orientation. The depth of description of the pedagogical approaches and philosophies in the charter create the foundations of curricular practice and determine the strength of the pedagogical orientation. While the range of pedagogical philosophies and approaches in El Paso are superficially similar across the majority of the charters, more in-depth analyses of charter structures consider the nuances that distinguish each organization.

Setting and Access

The setting for this study is the Community Academy Preparatory academy. The Community Academy is located in the middle of a low-income border neighborhood. The community population is largely immigrant with a strong Hispanic cultural heritage. The analysis above considers Community Academy as a community-service-oriented institution. The Community Academy model moves beyond simple community-based education, providing services beyond education that are essential to community health. These include medical and dental care, social work services, childcare, and extra-curricular afterschool activities. The board members at Community Academy include one social worker, one college executive, one non-profit managerial specialist, one M.D., and the founder.

The Community Academy serves a student body that is 98.9% Hispanic and 1.1% White as compared to 52.2% Hispanic and 28.5% White statewide. Ninety-four percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged, 73.7% are English Language Learners and 5.7% special education. These percentages compare with 59.0% economically disadvantaged, 18.5% English language learners and 8.6% special education statewide.

Table 2.1: Demographic Comparisons

Column1	Community Academy	EPISD	State
Hispanic	98.90%	83%	52.20%
White	1.10%	9%	28.50%
ELL	73.70%	26%	18.50%
Special ED	8.60%	10%	8.60%
Economically disadvantaged	94%	65%	59%

There are five measures for testing data on the report card. The Satisfactory Standard reports the percentage of students who meet the minimal acceptable standard for academic achievement. The Community Academy falls short of the state average scores of 75% and a charter goal of 80% with 67% meeting the minimal standard. Post-secondary readiness measures the percentage of students who are prepared for higher education. The Community Academy scores 24% on post-secondary readiness compared to 45% of students statewide. The Community Academy scores 9% on the advanced standard metric compared to 18% on state average. The Community Academy scores 70% met or exceeded progress compared to 62% on state average and they scored 19% on exceeded progress compared to 17% on state average. These scores measure the percentage of students who have progressed at an acceptable rate.

Thematic Teaching

P The demographics of the community are what make the integration of the thematic units so important for this campus. With 73.3% of the student body considered English Language Learners (ELL), the overall focus on the TEKS objectives alone may be insufficient to ensure adequate engagement with the curriculum. This fact about the demographics of the Community Academy student population makes the dual language program central to the school's curriculum. The thematic units, helps connect the Spanish curriculum to the English curriculum through concepts that make the material relevant to the immediate community context. The dual language program, especially at the lower grade levels, are essential to creating curricular

scaffolding that helps prepare the students for the English-only, state-mandated testing they will encounter as they move up in grade level.

The Community Academy charter states that the teachers who are responsible for classroom instruction are responsible for development of curricular initiatives and implementations while the TEKS provide the curricular foundation within the thematic units.

Teachers will be required to teach all material outlined in the TEKS and will be expected to teach beyond the TEKS in order to elicit higher order thinking skills... by implementing intermittent assessments, teachers will know what material needs to be reviewed in order to guarantee that the students are prepared for the [STAAR] test. (TEA 2017 CDN 71807 p.48)

Data collection for this study was limited to the information in the charter, the practices of the administrators and the activities and developments of the teachers. The data collected came from teacher and administrator narratives about their experiences performing the responsibilities of their job requirements. This study did not collect any data on students.

As a community-service-based charter, Community Academy models the vision of the school around community engagement and thematic learning. According to the Community Academy charter, “the curriculum is based on school-wide thematic units... [which] will be culturally enriching, fostering a multicultural understanding and appreciation” (TEA 2017 p. 11-12). The Community Academy charter states that the curriculum integrate both horizontally and vertically. The charter describes vertical integration as being “aligned throughout all grades, creating a progression of higher order thinking as children advance” (p.12). The thematic units integrate horizontally within each grade to create a consistency of material across subject matter. This integration provides a connection between the classroom, campus and the community.

While not explicitly stated, there is an aspect of integration that extends beyond the classroom and into the community. The pedagogical theory and philosophy of John Dewey

guides the educational approach at Community Academy. “Dewey criticizes the traditional classroom because students fail to understand the importance or need for what they are learning” (TEA 2017 p. 41). The Community Academy utilizes thematic units to facilitate social learning outside of the classroom and preserve the cultural identity and heritage of the community. According to Dewey, this connection to the community allows students to be “deeply engaged in what they are learning” (TEA 2017 p.41). The most effective way to accomplish this goal is to develop instructional methods that extend the curriculum beyond the campus and into the community so that the students may stay engaged with the importance of what they are learning.

Textual Analysis

The data collection process involved ethnographic observation, interviews, and policy document analysis. The interview data collected from teachers and administrators and the context of the charter document provided the framework of analysis. The identification of policy language in the narratives of the participants illustrates how these textual documents orient the activities of workers within the institution.

IE allows the researcher to collect data within the established structure of the institution. This reduces the potential for researcher bias because institutional documents structure the data collection. This data collection approach allows for better institutional policy analysis because it considers the activities of the institution within the preexisting institutional framework. An ethnography that is thus methodologically allows for data that reflects the nuances and processes of that institution. Structural influences that are external to the institution embed into textual documents through the state processes and procedures of the application process.

A major component of IE is “textual coordination”. Smith identifies textual coordination as sequences of actions and documents that coordinate those actions (Smith, 2005 pp.67-68). Lesson plans are one of the primary documents that facilitate coordination between teachers in the dual language program. Teachers work together to develop classroom instruction that brings together material in two different languages. Working together, teachers complete a lesson plan

that for an administrator to evaluate, who then offers professional support to improve the planning and coordination of those documents.

Two curriculum documents establish the curricular policies at the Community Academy. The primary institutional document is the state-approved charter application. The official charter for the school integrates the Texas Education Knowledge Skills (TEKS), the state mandates for curricular scope and sequence at each grade level the official charter identifies these state mandates for each grade as setting the minimum expectations for students in each grade level. The TEKS augment the thematic units.

The secondary curriculum document is the conceptual curriculum guide that outlines the thematic units and has not had revision since 2005. According to the charter, teachers are to develop the themes and integrate them into the classroom instructional content. The approach to curricular design at Community Academy works well at the PK-5th grades, producing commendable testing results. However, Community Academy's recent expansion into the higher grades disrupted the implementation of the thematic units due to a different structure of teaching that is required to meet middle school testing mandates established by the state for grade levels 6-8. The middle school uses English only instruction and testing.

Collaboration and thematic teaching achieves much of this integration. The vertical integration of the themes is a major point of inquiry for the study due to the difficulty of implementing local cultural themes within abstract and generalized standards of state accountability systems.

Interviews

This study utilizes the sequential interview technique for data collection (Clive, 2012). Three rounds of interviews were conducted. The first round establishes the perspective of the administration within the context of the charter policies. In the second round of interviews, the administrative perspective structures the teacher questionnaire. The third round used teacher perspectives to create the final administrative questionnaire. The interview process simulates

institutional flow where administrators provide guidance to teachers in accordance with policies. The interview process aimed to identify the institutional discourses in the context of institutional policies, narratives and activities. This technique integrates well with IE because institutional texts “should not be analyzed in abstraction from how they enter into and coordinate sequences of action” (Smith 2006 p.67). The identification of institutional texts in interview narratives about work activities provides the foundation for the analysis.

The analysis of the interview data focuses on how ruling relations impact teachers’ classroom practices. The study’s emphasis on the ruling relations aims to identify how administrators mediate policies and institutional structures in order to provide an effective learning environment. This application of IE examines how the actions of administrators orient the daily practices of teachers, and how teacher observations of students affect the classroom environment. This process is especially important in areas where policies need to be updated, adapted or improved in order to benefit students.

The first round of administrative interviews included the principal, vice principal and instructional coach. While the instructional coach is not officially an administrator within the institutional structure, this study considers the instructional coach to be an essential mediator between teachers and administrators. This initial interview consisted of 21 semi-structured questions focused on institutional expectations of teachers in their roles as educators. The teacher sample includes 16 teachers; 9 novice teachers (<5 years of experience) and 7 experienced teachers (>5 years of experience). Their interviews consisted of 19 questions focused on their experiences of teaching at the school. The account of teacher experience only considers the amount of time a teacher has work for the organization. The narratives of the teachers provided the foundation for the final round of interviews with administrators. The thematic analysis of the sequential data aimed to identify the flow of institutional power (i.e. ruling relations).

Sequential Interview Flow Chart

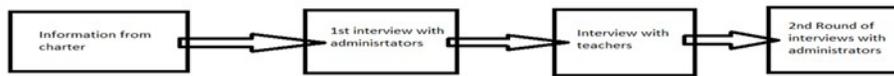


Illustration 2.2: Interview Process

The study took place between February and May of 2018. Visits to the school took place 2-3 times a week to conduct interviews with participants during conference hours. Administrator interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and teacher interviews lasted 15-25 minutes. The interviews were recorded and manually transcribed. Once the original transcriptions were completed, the first round of coding followed the components of Institutional Ethnography, such as textual coordination and institutional discourses, as well as the major components of curricular integration as defined in the charter. During the first round of coding, personal identifiers were removed from the transcriptions; this reduces bias during analysis as participant identity becomes less recognizable to the researcher.

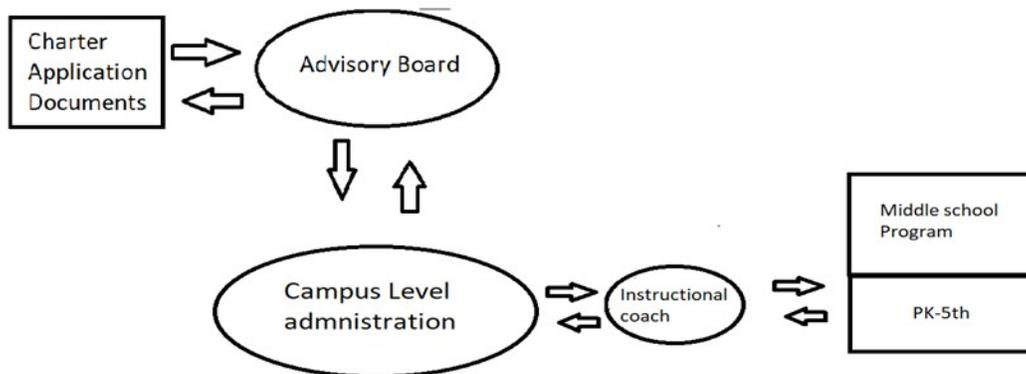


Illustration 2.3: Institutional Flow

Findings

The emphasis on teacher ownership of curriculum intends to engage and motivate teachers about teaching the subject matter in the classroom. According to the charter, when teachers are passionate about the materials they are teaching, the students engage with the material and have higher rates of information retention. Community Academy implements thematic units that focus on the cultural heritage of the local community. These themes are supposed to integrate with the TEKS and create a relevance to the community by extending student learning beyond the classroom. However, the thematic units are difficult to implement with the structure of testing demands.

The school has two different levels that are consistent with state testing structures, elementary school and middle school. The middle school teachers instruct all three grade levels for a single subject. This improves vertical integration. The elementary program has one teacher for each language in each grade level. This improves horizontal integration.

The responsibility placed on individual teachers to develop and implement their own curriculums requires constant adaptations and modifications. This process is effective at maintaining student progress because teachers have the freedom to make adjustments in classroom as they observe student educational needs. Experienced teachers are much more comfortable with creating their own curriculum than novice Teachers and many teachers have resorted to external structures to assist them with their curricular development and implementation. The use of many different curriculums without regular campus wide collaboration decreases vertical integration at the elementary level due a lack of vertical collaboration and horizontal integration at the middle school level where they struggle with thematic implementation.

Structure and Collaboration

Curricular structure is a significant aspect of curriculum renewal. The structure of the curriculum determines the foundation of the curricular and instructional approaches. The curricular structure at Community Academy is loose and malleable by design. The malleable curricular structure is what provides the teachers at Community Academy the instructional freedom that all teachers and administrators identified as an asset to teaching; however, some problems require mediation in order to enhance a loosely structured approach so that all students will receive the highest quality of education possible. The training provided to teachers by the administration addresses the problems associated with a loosely structured curriculum, such as teacher experience, curricular stability, and consistency.

The primary administrative emphasis on collaboration is between teacher pairs in the dual language program. Collaboration at this institution is hindered by the difficulty of mediating the adult-centered model of curriculum that is typical of legislative texts with the teacher-centered emphasis of the charter and the student-centered (Sorenson, Goldsmith, Mendez; Maxwell, 2011) emphasis of the administration. The decisions made by teachers at this school center around the needs of the students. Teachers make the majority of student-centered decision-making in the process of daily teaching practices. Mediations between teachers in the dual language program and in the classroom is how they meet the majority of student needs. Mediations between teachers and administrators improve the instruction of the state-mandated curriculums. The Principal described the expectations for teachers to collaborate in the dual language program.

We expect the teachers to work together during their planning period to collaborate in terms of what it is they are going to be teaching the next week. They are supposed to spiral the instruction which means that one teacher is teaching fractions the first day and the next day the lesson continues not just repeats. They teach to one point in English and the next day the lesson continues in Spanish.

Dual Language Coordination and Student Grouping

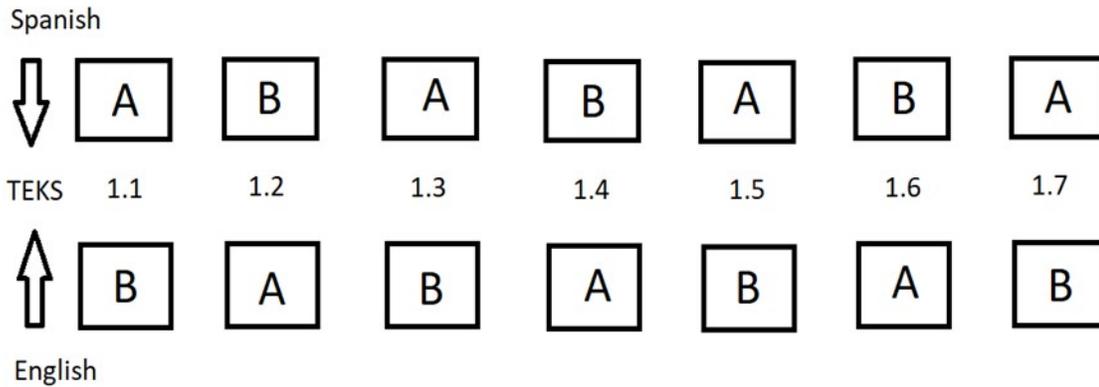


Illustration 3.1

The coordination efforts of teachers in the dual language program revolve round student grouping. There are two students groups at the elementary level (A and B). The students alternate between English and Spanish on a daily basis as indicated in illustration 3.

The expectation of the Principal at the Community Academy is that teachers support their students through classroom activities. “It is best practice to keep track of what they are doing to support in case a student keeps struggling and struggling and struggling, and so when they fill this [RTI document] out, they fill it out with the support that they have been providing”. Much of this support comes from the collaborations between teacher pairs where they meet constantly to keep track of how students are grasping the material. A 3rd year teacher described the importance or daily collaboration.

We are supposed to meet once a week to plan. But we find ourselves meeting every day to plan and discuss what is going on or today, hey did you notice this student today, something is going on. We work very, very, closely with one another. We work together

to mentor students at times because we do notice when things are going on. We meet constantly.

The importance of the close collaboration is that teachers get a sense of how students are progressing through the curriculum across both languages since teachers do not have the same students every day. “What we do is we talk about what each of us will do in the coming weeks and then if the kids are not performing well we sit down with them... one on one and then work with them a little extra during the independent time”.

Professional development meetings in conjunction with off-campus training resources such as Region 19 training programs and other grant-sponsored curriculums to develop teacher skills in coordinating and developing curricular instruction. Campus level administration supports this type of training.

I was trying to build capacity with teachers because I think that they should all be leaders in the classroom. Then I show curriculum and teach what the charter is asking us to do with thematic units but also with content and following the TEKS, or the essential skills from the TEA, so I was sending them... to workshops at Region 19 and told administration that I am going to invest some money and build capacity with teachers.

A study conducted by Burkhauser and Lesaux (2017) identifies teacher adaptations to curricular instructions by comparing novice with experienced teachers. The authors' findings indicate that teachers make curricular decisions based upon two primary factors; teacher assessments of student needs and district level reform pressures. All teachers were responsive to students' needs; however, the key point of differentiation between novice and experienced teachers was that experienced teachers were much better at integrating student needs with reform pressures. The resulting effect on classroom instruction is that novice teachers were less likely to make adaptive changes to curricular instruction structures than were experienced teachers. The

autonomy of teachers' instructional development at the Community Academy Preparatory School encourages deliberation and modification; the school administration offers support and advocacy rather than stifling teachers' creativity and autonomy with an overbearing curricular structure.

The study conducted by Burkhauser and Lesaux would suggest that the curricular approach implemented at Community Academy requires an abundance of experienced teachers in order to maintain a high quality learning environment. The teaching staff at the Community Academy is composed of teachers with varying degrees of experience.

The majority of teachers at Community Academy identified the freedom with regard to curriculum as an asset to the maintenance of student progress. The flexibility of the curricular structure allows teachers to modify the pace of instruction. A novice teacher stated that, "you have more ability to connect with the students and less students get left behind. Like in the district, it's like 'Sorry we have to move on' where we can adjust where we need to". An experienced teacher identified this flexible structure as an asset to orienting the curriculum to improve student understanding of the material.

What I like about this school is that we have the opportunity to integrate a lot of topics. We can create many things and we have that freedom. When we are creating problems in math we are using words around this context, sometimes in the books we have different context. Because if they don't understand the context they cannot understand the problem so we need to orient the context to their life for it to make sense to them.

The teachers' ownership of curriculum is certainly effective for maintaining the progress of individual students. However, some novice teachers expressed concerns over the lack of a campus-wide structure hindered horizontal and vertical integration.

We [would] know that everybody is on the same lesson teaching the same things at the same time, just on different levels. I think that that would be a good thing for us to have. We don't have that; we just go at our own pace. It's ok, I just think it would be ok to know where everybody is. Do what we need to do and write it into our lesson plan. Then we do the best that we can. I think we do a pretty good Job, it just isn't a set curriculum.

The process of professional development asks teachers to identify the conceptual problem of their instructional methods when particular grades are consistently not performing up to standard. Administration then provides additional training and resources as necessary in order to accomplish the curricular goals of the administrators and instructional coach.

The Community Academy Preparatory School encourages teachers to evaluate students' annual growth rather than basing evaluation on a single test score. The teachers develop their lesson plans according to the progress of students in their classes. The school conducts assessments that document progress at the beginning of year (BOY), middle of year (MOY) and end of year (EOY) scores. These materials include the DRA and the RTI as well as other less known computer based assessments.

Teacher observations of students during classroom activities produce mediations that augment these scores. The quantitative assessment data of the students drive the professional development meetings. Lesson plans improve through professional development meetings at two-week intervals, where teachers evaluate whether or not the students have understood and mastered the required TEKS for that period. In some instances, modification of scope and sequence are required. If a teacher observes that students are gaining a strong mastery of a particular TEK, the teacher may revise the emphasis on that TEK to spend more time on other objectives where students are struggling.

Modifications and interventions begin with teacher observations of students in the classroom. Many teachers reported addressing student struggles with immediate modifications before engaging in formal intervention processes. An administrator described this process.

With a child that is struggling, we provide interventions; [teachers with the instructional coach] start the RTI process which starts the intervention. Where the teachers notify the literacy coach so we put them through that RTI process and they, as a team, come up with the intervention for this child. To help the child become successful, we provide tutoring, we do home visits, get to the root of the problem.

The principal described the managing of the dual language model as a difficult process because the most important factor is maintaining a complete coverage of the material.

I've worked with other dual language programs where it's divided up differently and the curriculum doesn't match because the kiddos don't get to see the teachers regularly and the curriculum ends up getting split down the middle. When that happens, the objectives don't get covered because instead of a 180-day school year they are basically getting two 90-day school years. We have to make sure that we are covering the year even though we are teaching two different languages.

The collaborative process helps teachers cover the mandated curriculum without repetition. Fewer repetitions through instruction increases the amount of material that teachers can include.

The principal worked closely with teachers in order to maintain the connections between institutional goals of thematic integration and the state mandated curriculum.

The board, when they initiated the charter, they had some educators working on the charter. They basically adopted it but they really didn't know specifically how to address the TEKS. It [was] really left up to the educators to revisit and tweak. Because we have to follow the state curriculum and so, even though Community Academy has very lofty

kinds of activities, like the integrated curriculum where they want us to embed the culture part, we have to connect it to the TEKS. So I challenge the teachers... I ask the teachers to take the charter, because the TEKS have changed. The charter was made in 2006. As the TEKS have been updated, I open that dialogue to the teachers to make sure that we are addressing the required TEKS objectives and getting those updates embedded into the charter.

This approach is consistent with the process outlined in the charter that teachers should own and implement their curriculums.

Through the process of lesson planning, teachers also use collaboration time to assess the daily progress of students. Student grouping is an effective strategy for these evaluations and informal assessments that teachers use to begin interventions and differentiation processes. An experienced teacher described using different grouping strategies.

I have different levels in my groups. Basically, if they are not reading well or they are low in math... I group them and in language arts I have my groups and my guided reading. So from those kids that are very low or bubble or they are high, they have differentiation. I do a lot of differentiation and I do a lot of one on one.

In the context of independent/guided learning time, differentiation and intervention involve grouping students based on teacher observations of student progress and other more formal measures. Student group activities have a two-fold purpose; 1) teachers reported having groups of students work together in varying ability levels; 2) when teachers perceive that students are not progressing, they group those students together to receive guided instruction during independent time. A novice teacher described her grouping strategy.

I introduce the lesson, then the next day we will do some hands-on activities, and then we'll do some book stuff. Guided practices are usually done with me and each other. They help each other understand independent practice. Guided practice, I don't really grade, because it's not a grade reflecting them. When I look at the independent practice and I see three–four students that are struggling, those are the students that I pull.

Many teachers reported grouping students together in different ways for different activities. In some activities teacher may group students of different abilities together, while in other activities teachers may group students of similar abilities together. Teachers make these grouping decisions based on observations about how well students learned.

While more experienced teachers are confident in their student observations and interventions, more novice teachers rely heavily on administrative support in developing their instructional practices. A novice teacher described the strength of other teachers on the faculty.

The teachers that are strong here have a very take-charge attitude, so no matter who comes and goes, those teachers are very flexible and versatile and are able to continue working regardless of administration.

A novice teacher struggling with a low-performing class reported that administrative support was essential to her confidence in the classroom.

For example, I am having a lot of trouble with the writing. And I was desperate, I'm telling you that this class has been low performers. [The principal] just came to me and told me, look this is how we did things before and now, she gave me these materials and she taught me how to do it.

Administrative support helps teachers to maintain the progress of students. Through these collaborations, teachers are in constant communication about the development of student abilities in accordance with their weekly lesson plans. Where students are not progressing as expected, teachers first rely on individual evaluations and modifications by grouping students in order to comply with charter orientations. However, this emphasis impedes campus-wide collaboration efforts.

When asked about campus-wide curricular opportunities, the majority of teachers reported planning their collaborations with other grade levels on their own initiative between classes and on duty-free time such as lunch breaks. An experienced teacher described how a lot of multi-grade-level collaboration occurs.

What we do is, for example, in this hallway it's not grade level but it is multi-grade-level so we start talking to the teachers, we just get together and we talk. Writing for example is one of our fails. So we talk about what are we going to do and how we are going to do it. The other day we got together and we said that we need to start over with these writing lessons.

Community Academy only holds Campus-wide deliberations the twice a year. Campus-wide deliberations would increase instructional stability because many curricular opportunities at Community Academy are campus-wide opportunities that span many grade levels.

In addition to the common emphasis on reading and math, new TEKS objectives require extra training for teachers. Financial literacy is a new TEKS that campus level administration places considerable emphasis on improving.

We are struggling in math with financial literacy. That particular TEKS was introduced a couple of years ago and I have had to send teachers to trainings so that they could fully understand the curriculum of financial literacy. So we are struggling with that. In math

that is one of our lowest components. We are trying to research and find ways that we can address that so that we can be successful there.

The Community Academy charter explicitly states that teachers develop their own lesson plans so that they express ownership of the curriculum in the classroom. This approach necessitates highly trained and experienced teachers to make regular adjustments and enhancements in order to reflexively engage the students and respond to their needs.

State Policy and Cultural Preservation

This section argues that state or macro-level structures are rigid in implementing processes of evaluation, the rigidity of these policies conflicts with the flexible approach to curriculum development established by the charter. Teachers and administrators mediate the conflict between the rigid structures of accountability and the need for flexible teaching to maintain an effective learning environment.

Walsh, Kemrer & Maniotis (2016) outline the rigidity of STAAR assessments as a system that is established by the Texas Education Code (TEC). The process of assessment is a generalized process. There is a strong emphasis on cultural preservation at Community Academy. This emphasis is particularly significant because the local community is a low-income minority community that is Spanish-language dominant, which conflicts with the fact that State testing is mandated in English unless special permission is granted.

The state education policy emphasizes results over process that allows the freedom for Community Academy to provide thematic curricular extensions. What once was a major emphasis on thematic teaching has dissolved into opportunistic implementation of thematic and cultural instruction, due to the heavy burden of state testing mandates.

Both administrators and teachers described the difficulty of implementing the thematic units with the state structure. An administrator identified state testing as the primary focus of teaching with thematic units as a secondary factor. “That’s the hard part. We try not to teach to

the test, but since the STAAR is such a big thing right now we try to cover all the TEKS. So the thematic units are more of like a secondary thing. Because we have to try to do everything that we can before the test". Many teachers stated that they usually implement themes opportunistically rather than through heavily structured planning. An experienced teacher describes how smaller thematic units work better with the mandated curriculum.

Right now, we are not doing the full thematic units but mini thematic units. Like the 100 days of school. We did math, science, social studies, we did a lot of things for that and it was very fun. We know the TEKS that we have to teach so we can implement those things together.

Structured planning of thematic implementation usually occurs for special projects, holiday events and campus wide programs implemented through administrative initiatives.

TEKS objectives are primarily concerned with the coverage of the material and state tests evaluate student comprehension of those TEKS. This creates a point of conflict between state approaches to testing and the mission of the institution to provide a curriculum that seeks to preserve the heritage, culture and language of the Segundo Barrio community. Lower intensity testing and Spanish language testing options are available at the lower grade levels, making it easier for those teachers to include cultural themes. This dynamic becomes problematic at the higher-grade levels where test performance has taken precedence over the implementation of the thematic units because English-medium testing is the only option available.

Conclusion

Maintaining the annual progress of students within each grade level requires significant mediation of state, institutional and administrative policies. The mediation that teachers provide helps shape the classroom environment. While founding institutional documents and institutional discourses expect that teachers build and develop personal ownership of the curriculum, some teachers expressed a desire for a more structured campus wide curriculum.

The need to facilitate stronger vertical integration produces the desire for a more structured campus curriculum with these teachers. Each grade level is responsible for producing and implimenting lesson plans. Teachers spend a lot of time collaborating with other grade levels in their free time, passing in hallways or on lunch breaks. This curricular isolation combined with a lack of regular campus wide collaboration hinders vertical integration. Regular campus-wide deliberations among teachers would allow for teachers of different levels of experience to openly share ideas. This would improve collaboration among teachers at different grade levels and reduce redundancies in coverage caused by curricular gaps between grade levels.

The campus level administration is using professional development in the form of administrative support, external training, and structured curricula to assist with teacher performance and curricular integration. Many of these materials come from other districts or grant funded sources. While these sources have provided stability at some grade levels, the more rigidly structured a curriculum, the more difficult it becomes for teachers and administrators to mediate these structures for the benefit of students.

The lower grade levels implement thematic teaching differently than at higher levels. This difference is especially true from 5th grade to middle school. At the elementary level teachers utilize the structured themes more than at the middle school level. At the middle school level, teachers utilize some thematic teaching; however it is less structured and much more opportunistic. More complicated curricula and a stronger emphasis on testing make the implementation of structured themes more difficult. Teachers at the middle school level

incorporated real world examples that enhanced lesson plans rather than focusing on structured themes.

At Community Academy, this process is already difficult because the majority of the student population are English Language Learners and a fundamental emphasis of the institution is to preserve cultural identity. The demographics of the student body at Community Academy make the prospect of integrating language, culture, and state mandates a difficult task. The teacher and administrator narratives, combined with observations of the low level of thematic implementation, suggest that as the emphasis on testing increases, the difficulty of cultural and linguistic preservation also increases.

Directions for Future Research

The wide range of services that Community Academy provides to the community creates a number of challenges for administrators and teachers. The institution offers medical assistance, childcare assistance through their enrichment program, and other culturally centered extracurricular activities. The development of socio-political issues in the immediate community is an area of research that is of timely concern. It would be extremely beneficial to this institution to understand how local community issues, such as the presence of Border Patrol and immigration enforcement near the community, affects the progress of students in the classroom. Other research opportunities include projects associated with the enrichment program, parental involvement meetings, and general community health services. The administration at Community Academy is also concerned with how to help vulnerable students understand and react to the turmoil surrounding immigration policy in a healthy and productive manner.

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Appendix A

Campus Administration: 1 Principal; 1 Vice Principal; 1 Instructional coach

Teachers:

Grades pre-k through 5th have paired teachers, 1 English and 1 Spanish, these teachers teach only within the determined grade level.

Middle School Program: 1 director, and 1 teacher for each subject. Subject teachers instruct all students for 6th-8th grades. Elective teachers; Spanish and Music are included in middle school program and teach students in all grade levels.

Appendix B

1st Administrator Questionnaire

- 1) How would you describe the chain of command at Community Academy?
- 2) How is curricular policy communicated and enforced?
 - a. How are policies communicated to administrators from the board?
 - b. How do administrators communicate policies to teachers?
 - c. How are practices monitored for policy compliance?
 - d. What measures are taken in circumstances of non-compliance?
- 3) What level of freedom to teachers have in developing curriculum?
- 4) What level of choice do students have in choosing courses?
- 5) What policy documents are used to define instructional policy?
- 6) What are the procedures for assessing the implementation of thematic units?
- 7) Who is involved in assessing these implementations?
- 8) What is the purpose of assessing teachers' use of thematic units?
- 9) What are the consequences of those assessments?
- 10) Is the academic progress of each student measured? How and how often?
- 11) What is considered to be acceptable progress for any given student, or are there different standards for different categories of students (SPED, ELL, etc.)?
- 12) What happens if a student is determined to not be progressing at an acceptable rate?
- 13) How does the yearly progress of each student relate to the thematic units?
- 14) Does the institution evaluate students for gifted and talented characteristics?
How?
- 15) Are there programs specifically designed for gifted and talented students?
 - a. If so, how are students placed into the gifted and talented program?
 - b. If not, how are curricular standards established for students in general?

- 16) What are the curricular goals of the TEKS objectives?
- 17) Can you describe how the TEKS curricular objectives are implemented?
- 18) Are there prerequisites for specific courses?
 - a. If so, do core TEKS objectives play a role in determining pre-requisites?
- 19) What is the purpose of prerequisites within the curriculum?
- 20) Are prerequisites used to facilitate or regulate student progress? How?
- 21) According to the charter, thematic teaching is a multidisciplinary strategy that implies a continuity of curriculum within and across grade levels. How is this achieved?
- 22) Do teachers “loop” with their classes? If so, how long do they stay with a particular group of students?

Teacher questionnaire

- 1) How long have you been a teacher here at Community Academy?
- 2) Which other teacher are you paired with for the dual language program?
- 3) Do you collaborate with your cohort on a weekly basis in order to coordinate the curriculum in the dual language program?
- 4) What are some of the strategies that you and your cohort implement to make sure that the curriculum is spiraling between the two languages?
- 5) How do the student groups rotate between the two classes?
- 6) Do you guys use the thematic units? How so?
- 7) How do you weave the TEKS with the thematic Units?
 - a. When you take the TEKS and you consider the thematic units, how do you make those things work together?

- 8) Which subjects have a linguistic crossover or are taught in both English and Spanish?
- 9) Have you used the thematic units in the past?
 - a. How do the thematic units create integration across subjects?
- 10) How often does the implementation of thematic units get brought to your attention?
 - a. How well is it monitored?
- 11) How often do you refer to the conceptual curriculum guide when developing your lesson plans?
- 12) I understand that there have been a lot of different administrators here. How has the changing of principals affected the development of curriculum?
- 13) In the charter it states that students of all abilities should be mainstreamed together in the same class. Do you have particular strategies for dealing with students of different ability levels?
 - a. How do you assess those students' abilities in classroom interactions?
- 14) When you meet with your cohort, how often do you refer to the academic progress assessments for particular students who you may feel are falling behind? How do you and your cohort try to figure out what is going on with a particular student?
- 15) How would you say that policies are communicated from the administrators to the teachers? As far as policy issues are concerned, the things that teachers are expected to do, what is the process of communication from administrators to teachers?
- 16) As far as developing your lesson plan teachers have state mandates that have to be met. As long as you meet those objectives, what level of freedom do you feel that you have to create those lesson plans or utilize particular methods of instruction?
- 17) Ms. Morales has mentioned that there are particular points in the TEKS where the entire school is struggling. How do you deal with those curriculum fails? How do the teachers

address those particular areas and try to enhance the curriculum to try and gain some ground on those areas that the school is struggling in?

18) In your opinion, how important is maintaining the continuity of curriculum between grade levels for the academic performance of the students?

19) Do have any other opinions about curricular development here at Community Academy? Perhaps some area of significance that I haven't identified?

2nd round administrator questions

1) How are the conference hours determined in the campus wide scheduling?
a. What factors influence what grades levels have conference hours at particular times throughout the day?

2) How is the geography or the layout of the campus determined?
a. When a teacher of a particular grade/subject is assigned to a classroom, how is that classroom location determined relevant to the campus layout of the building?

b. How are the classroom/grade/subject assignments determined within campus geography?

3) How does the institution emphasize or facilitate curricular leadership?

4) How does the administration focus the emphasis of the thematic units?

5) Do you promote the use of external curriculum structures (prepackaged curriculum designs from non-campus sources)? Why or why not?

6) Do you receive curricular input from teachers?

a. How is that input usually considered in regards to curriculum structure?

7) What would you consider to be the institutional instructional logic or philosophy of the curriculum structure?

- a. How is that logic or philosophy communicated?
- 8) At the campus level or administrative level, how often are curricular/instructional adjustments made during the school year?
- 9) How often does administration emphasize collaboration across grade levels?
 - a. How do you facilitate this collaboration?
 - b. Do you have any campus wide curriculum planning or enrichment days during the school year?
- 10) In the process of this project I have found that the majority of the curricular integration is centered on testing objectives. Do curricular teams emphasize post-testing integration?
 - a. After the testing season has ended, what drives curricular planning through the end of the year?
- 11) Under what conditions are students retained?
 - a. How are those decisions made?
 - b. What standard of evidence has to be achieved before a student is retained?
 - d. How often are English language skills central to retention decisions?
 - c. Are you aware of any student that has excelled after retention?
- 12) How much is social skill and play centered learning emphasized at the lower grade levels?
- 13) How do you keep up to date on the socio-cultural issues within and relevant to the Segundo Barrio community?

Vita

Brian Diedrich is a Master's student of Sociology at the University of Texas at El Paso with undergraduate backgrounds in sociology and philosophy. He has received awards for outstanding performance in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

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