

Critical Teacher Education in Urban Contexts: Discursive Dance of A Middle School Teacher

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This paper explores whether an urban school teacher's participation in an inquiry based Master's degree programme contributes to any shifts in her understanding of her non-dominant students and her own teaching. In the first section I define the theoretical constructs of critical education and dialogic discourse. The second section, through a micro-analysis of representative data, demonstrates how the English Language Arts teacher's discursive practices at the beginning of the year positioned non-dominant students as deficit learners. By the end of the year, however, the teacher was affording her students multiple literate identities. The analysis also shows how the school's disciplinary and tracking policies throughout the year impacted the teacher's process. The final section reflects on the need for urban school-university partnerships to use teachers' inquiry-based research as an essential component of any critical dialogue about local sociopolitical issues of schooling.

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I'm still wondering how to go about any of this research because I don't know who an English Language Learner is. (*Trudy's Journal*, 2003)

Trudy (a pseudonym), an 8th grade English Language Arts teacher at Willow Middle School (a pseudonym), wrote this research journal entry at the very beginning of her inquiry-based Master's degree in an urban teacher education programme. She is not alone in her confusion about who her ELL students are and what they need.

Within the current US climate of high stake testing, accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and an erosion of support for bilingual education, overwhelmed 'mainstream' urban school teachers are expected to deliver mandated curricula to an increasing number of linguistically and culturally diverse students (US Census, 2005). Currently, although 41% of teachers in the US have taught ELLs, less than 13% of teachers have received any professional development or training in second language literacy and development (Antunez, 2002).

Limited financial resources compound problems for non-dominant students in urban districts (Darling-Hammond, 2004). For example, city schools, which have a predominantly Latino and African American student population (US

Census, 2005), hire less experienced and lower paid teachers and administrators than suburban school districts. This often leads to high turnover, ineffective teaching, and chaotic classroom management (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ingersoll, 2004). In 2003, for example, the year this research study began, 44% of those designated as 'Hispanic' and 82% of 'Limited English Proficient' students failed the 8th grade Massachusetts English Language Arts state test at Willow Middle School. In contrast, only 7% of the overall percentage of students in the state failed the test (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).

In this paper I use the ethnographic case study of Trudy, a second-year urban school teacher, to explore whether her participation in an inquiry-based Master's degree programme contributes to any shift during the year in how she perceives her non-dominant students and her own teaching. Through a micro-analysis of representative data, I demonstrate what discourses of teaching and learning are embodied or silenced in her discursive practices and classroom interactions. In addition, I connect the micro-level analysis of Trudy's classroom and discursive practices to a contextual analysis of the school's disciplinary and administrative policies.

Professional Development of Urban School Teachers

In the 1990s, to address lagging educational standards, systemic inequity and lack of teacher autonomy in schools, US school reform initiatives recommended the creation of collaborative school–university partnerships (e.g. Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1990). Within the alliances, teacher research was highlighted as a way for school and university faculty to promote the professional development and *situated* learning of new and experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991); the alliances were seen also as a way to facilitate critical inquiry into the cultural practices of schools (e.g. policies and practices on teaching and learning) (Holmes Group, 1990).

To address questions and practices of unequal distribution among schools, many of the school–university partnerships were set up in lower socioeconomic school districts (Holmes Group, 1990). However, because dominant belief systems about social and cultural issues often prevail in schools and teacher education programs (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Nieto, 2000), these alliances have often perpetuated the *status quo* instead of exploring ways to redress issues such as the large gap in achievement between high poverty and low poverty schools (Willett & Rosenberger, 2004).

To grapple with some of these issues, a critical teacher education program in Western Massachusetts recently set up a federally funded school–university alliance of school administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and university researchers in state designated 'low performing' urban school districts. This alliance is called ACCELA (Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition). The main objective of the alliance is to engage in a system-wide dialogue on practices, policies and discourses that better support equitable teaching and learning outcomes for linguistically and culturally diverse students (Willett *et al.*, in press).

The ACCELA Master's programme in Education and Licensure in ESL and

Reading, which holds its seminars in the 'low performing' school districts, was specially designed to meet the local needs of its three cohorts of teachers and their students. The courses introduce teachers to inquiry-based research, second language and multicultural theories on literacy and language development, and sociocultural and critical perspectives on classroom interaction (e.g. Dyson, 1993; Gutiérrez *et al.*, 1997; Ibrahim, 1999; Nieto, 2000; Norton, 1997; Olsen, 1997; Solsken *et al.*, 2000; Willett, 1995). During the teachers' course work, researchers from the ACCELA university community work collaboratively with the teachers as their 'project assistants'. The teachers and project assistants gather data in the teachers' classrooms and analyse specific classroom interactions, curricular units, or contextual issues.

In my capacity as researcher and project assistant, I spent the past three years collecting data and building collaborative relationships with those engaged in the alliance. The ethnographic case study I present in this paper developed from my role as a 'boundary spanner' in the year 2003–2004 (Troen & Boles, 1995). In other words, as a collaborative partner in Trudy's research projects, researcher from the university community, and sometimes teacher helper in the classroom, multiple perspectives informed my ethnographic case study.

Conceptual Frameworks

This research project is undertaken from a *critical* standpoint. For 'criticalists' culture is a 'domain of struggle' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003), a battlefield where different groups contest for recognition within a societal hierarchical ordering of discourse communities (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1997; Gee, 1999). In schools and other institutions, race, class and gender often become the operating constructs that lead to a successful hegemonic division of the 'normal' versus the 'substandard' groups in discursive and social practices (Bloome & Clarke, 2004). For example, 38.8% of Latino male students dropped out of high school in 2002 compared to 13.7% of white male students (US Census, 2005). In other words, school cultural practices are situated within specific sociocultural contexts and ideological discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Gebhard, 2002, 2004; Gee *et al.*, 1996).

For the purpose of this paper, discourse refers to specific ways of knowing, acting, and believing that are co-constructed by participants of a discourse community (Gee, 1999). To communicate among their peers, teachers in a school, for example, use a shared terminology to describe their students or their own work; grade papers with a common set of rubrics; resist or comply with administration within a certain set of permutations. For Bakhtin (1981) and Volshinov (1994), all texts and utterances are multivoiced or '*dialogic*' in that they intertextually address past, current, and future discourses. When talking with their colleagues, teachers may interweave into their school discourse a completely different set of cultural references from another discourse they inhabit or anticipate.

The term '*intertext*' refers to the strands of discourses that are woven through direct quotation, negation or irony (Fairclough, 1992) into a unified message unit for a specific communicative purpose (Bakhtin, 1981; Kamberelis & Scott, 1992). By examining *how and what* threads of discourses are interwoven or silenced in

a text and how they interconnect with other texts, one can explore their dialogic and ideological nature. As a critical analyst, I explore in this article not only the discourses that are present in texts but also those that are silenced. For example, through a pattern of modality (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004) a speaker or writer can produce an authoritative and monologic voice through an occlusion of conflicting discourses or s/he can open to the inherent polyphony of discourses within a text (Bakhtin, 1981; Fairclough, 1992).

Research site

The population of the Western Massachusetts mid-size city in this research study is 156,983. The Latino student enrolment in the city's public schools is more than four times higher than it is statewide (Latino, 2004). The Willow school demographics in 2003–4 were 56.5% Latino, 22.9% African American, 18.7% White and a very small percentage of Asian and American Indian. Low income students made up 77.1% of the student population, compared with 27.2% in the state (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).

Willow Middle School, with 1,200 students, is divided into several small 'houses', an organisational trend developed in the 1980s to provide teams of teachers with more autonomy in implementing their own disciplinary and instructional regulations (Lipman, 1998). Trudy, the focus teacher for this paper, was a member of an 8th grade small house with approximately 100 students and a team of eight 'core' teachers. She is a French-Canadian American in her 20s with a background in theatre and play writing. I am an Irish native in my 40s with a background in literature, language education, and theatre. The focus group was an ELA 8th grade class of nine Latinos, four African Americans, one Ghanaian-American, and one Anglo-American, the majority of whom were classified as 'Special Education'.

Methodology

My ethnographic approach for this study was based on 'grounded data/thick description' of the literacy events and practices of Trudy and her students (Geertz, 1973). I spent approximately two hours bi-weekly from November to June 2003–2004 with Trudy and her students in the focus class. I also spent time with Trudy in her other classes, team meetings and with other Willow teachers in their classrooms. My data collection consisted of audio and video recordings of classroom interactions and interviews, my own field notes, scanned instructional materials, Trudy's ACCELA Master's course assignments, her research journal, and school and state policy documents.

I first did a close analysis of the entire set of data by assigning codes to emerging themes and patterns that related to questions of student identity and teacher positioning. I found that Trudy's research journal entries were focal 'leverage' texts to analyse because they referred continually to classroom events, ACCELA course work and her interactions with me.

In the second stage of my analysis, I created a focused set of codes for a line-by-line micro-analysis of each research journal entry and selected classroom transcripts. Systemic functional linguistics (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004) provided me with an additional analytic tool to closely analyse Trudy's texts. For example, by exploring the use of modals and words of appraisal (e.g.

use of would, could, will), I was able to determine what type of relationship Trudy was establishing toward her reader and her subject matter.

By using multiple sources, getting feedback from key stakeholders in the ACCELA project (e.g. ACCELA faculty and Trudy), and looking for inconsistencies and contradictions among sources, I was able to triangulate the data.

Analysis

From the data analysis, it is clear that Trudy's discursive practices at the beginning of the year drew primarily from a normative teaching discourse that positioned non-dominant students as deficit learners. At the end of the year, however, after completing several ACCELA courses on sociocultural theories of language and literacy development and working intensely with me as her project assistant, Trudy participated in a more dialogic discourse that afforded her students an array of literate identities (Norton, 1997). On a more macro level, Trudy's discursive practices very rarely included any references to the sociopolitical context of her work. This silence points to her participation in a normative 'top down' discourse that positioned teachers in the school district as passive followers of mandatory rules and regulations.

Spanish-Speaking Students as Deficit Learners: September to November 2003

The prospectus for incoming students to the ACCELA Master's programme states that the inquiry-based programme 'provides in service teachers working in elementary or middle schools with an opportunity to learn how to work better with English Language Learners in the mainstream classroom' (ACCELA, 2005). In the first few months of her research journal, Trudy constantly wonders who an ELL learner is and how she can help them develop 'correct English'. She also reflects on her relationship with Spanish-speaking students at Willow:

Subconsciously, I've had issues over the past year and a half with students whose primary language is Spanish. That was one of the major issues in my experience with the class of Hispanic boys with whom I worked last year. (*Trudy's Journal*, 10/30/03)

In this journal entry Trudy openly admits to seeing her students as problematic *because* they speak Spanish. Indeed, she seems to feel that her Spanish-speaking students must process language in a cognitive way different from 'regular' students: for example, she talks in an early October entry about consulting the special education teacher for help with Natasha because she is a bilingual student:

I asked Sheila Wilbert about how I teach her the change from Spanish forms to English if I don't know Spanish – and even if I did, I still feel confused, frustrated and helpless as to teaching her and helping her 'understand' the concepts. (*Trudy's Journal*, 11/07/03)

Her view of her Spanish-speaking students as deficit learners also extends to

a wider question about why they would be motivated to learning English at all. In a journal entry in October, Trudy asks:

Why would a teenager, whose native language is Spanish, care to write well? When and where are they going to write? (*Trudy's Journal*, 11/09/03)

The thematic organisation (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004) of this text (e.g. *Why* would, *When* and *where*) points to her appraisal of Latino adolescents as not interested in reading and writing English. Trudy sees her students as coming from – and going back to – sociocultural contexts where literacy is not part of everyday practices. It also positions the reader as subscribing to this same belief system.

In their discourse analysis and ethnography studies, Gutierrez *et al.* (1995) and Olsen (1997) highlight the prevalence of a teacher's normative discourse in urban school classrooms that constructs bilingual and Spanish-speaking students as needing 'monologic' scripts to assimilate them into middle-class literacy practices. In these early months, one can see that Trudy participates in such a discourse.

Consistent with this positioning of her Latino students as intrinsically unmotivated to learn English is Trudy's belief that literacy means the teaching of 'correct' English with 'standard' spelling and grammar. Repeatedly in her journal entries, Trudy writes about her students' inattention to grammar. After a lengthy discussion in her first graduate course about what literacy means, Trudy states:

Literacy means writing well and speaking well. It means using words to express thoughts clearly. If you cannot use Standard English conventions, you cannot express your thoughts clearly. If my students put a period after fragment, I cannot understand what they are trying to convey. (*Trudy's Journal*, 10/17/05)

Through a pattern of modality (e.g. use of modal verbs, appraisal and repetition) in this text, Trudy establishes an authoritative voice about literacy and what it should mean to her students. Her authorial stance in this journal entry corresponds very closely to the language used in one of the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks:

Students *need* to learn and use the conventions of grammar, usage, and syntax employed in standard English – the *form* taught in schools and by *educated speakers*. (MA ELA curriculum frameworks, 2001: 11)

Similar to Trudy's journal entry, the writer(s) of this text positions the one who speaks and writes 'standard' English as the 'educated speaker'. Wilson (2001), a scholar in English studies, believes that English teachers in the US rarely focus on the sociocultural contexts of language use in their teaching:

Our students are developing language values that privilege prestige dialects over vernaculars, equate Standard English with moral virtue and intelligence.

As one can see, encoded in the curriculum framework text and in Trudy's definition of literacy is the assumption that speakers of vernacular English or other languages deviate from the 'norm'.

Classroom Practices in These Early Months

In the classes I attended with Trudy during these early months, her anxiety about figuring out who exactly ELL learners were for her ACCELA research project triggered certain strategies in her class interactions: she asked her students questions about their linguistic background and whether that interfered or helped them in their readings. For a student creative writing assignment in early October, Trudy asked each of her classes to write about the language they spoke at home and the cultural traditions they followed in their community. In one class the students shouted back 'Spanglish!' and they teased one student about speaking African. In a journal entry, Trudy states that 'the actual question sparked an immediate response and all eyes and brains awoke like never before!' (*Trudy's Journal*, 10/05/03).

In her focus group, Trudy began helping students understand past tense formation by using her own elementary knowledge of Spanish to get them talking about changes in verbs. She began putting Spanish expressions she knew on the blackboard to show her students that she also was a language learner. In sum, Trudy began to make slight changes in her classroom literacy practices even in the first few months of her work in ACCELA. As we will see, Trudy's willingness to open to her students contributed to a shift in her understanding of her students.

Conflicting Discourses of Literacy: November 2003 – February 2004

In a journal entry in early November, Trudy's text instantiates an explicit tension in her competing discourses on 'good' English Teacher practices, which link closely to state documents such as the curriculum frameworks, and the way she interprets the ACCELA readings and discussions on meaningful and multiliteracy practices (e.g. Dyson, 1993; Gutierrez *et al.*, 1995; Moll *et al.*, 1992; New London Group, 1996). A few days before this journal entry I had given her an article that explored key challenges in teaching reading to 'struggling' students and ways to address them (e.g. in classroom environment, 'active' learning through use of scaffolding; see Ganske *et al.*, 2003). In the journal entry, Trudy contrasts what she perceives to be the key approach in this article with 'standard' English Language Arts practices:

I read an article today that Ruth gave me that said to concentrate on what these kids do know – bring in their background and interests in writing – then work from there. Maybe I'm focusing too much on grammar. On the other hand, I'm not!! They need to know how to write clearly and in complete sentences.

The texture of this paragraph (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) indicates a specific ordering and then potential disordering of the two conflicting concepts of 'good' writing instruction for Trudy. In the first two sentences she summarises the main point of the article by embedding it in reported speech (e.g. that said to concentrate on what these kids do know). Her next sentence uses a 'Maybe' as its theme, a modifier which already shows a certain distancing of the author from her ensuing statement about focusing too much on grammar. In her next sentence the negative existential verb and exclamation point (I'm not!!) highlight

her evaluative stance toward what she perceives to be as an ACCELA/Ruth type of discourse on learning that privileges students' background knowledge. However, in her final two sentences she opens to a more dialogic recognition and a hesitation between the two competing discourses:

Don't I have to concentrate on grammar before emphasising creativity – or at least balance them both? I don't know. (*Trudy's Journal*, 11/08/03)

This dilemma for Trudy, about whether to teach 'standard' English or activate students' knowledge first, was also embodied in the way she chose to teach academic writing/grammar as opposed to literature appreciation. Because academic writing and grammar were the most important components of literacy for Trudy (especially with pressure from high stake testing requirements), she enacted a very strict English teacher role when teaching it, especially in her first six months of the ACCELA programme. She used a high percentage of teacher talk with a frequent use of imperatives, negatives and instructional materials such as overhead transparencies and worksheets.

Feb 26, 2004 (*at beginning of class on essay writing*)

Trudy (*at top of class*): Marco, you are over here!

Andrew, sit down here.

Andrew, sit down.

Marco, get up and move

Or you go to Mr O'Driscoll for insubordination!

In contrast, when working with the students on short stories or drama, Trudy enacted a much more relaxed and facilitator role. Because reading literature for Trudy was separate from the 'serious' ELA teaching, here she could 'play' with her students.

November 25, 2003: Dramatisation

Trudy (*to group of actors about to enact a scene*): Marco is going to be the student director.

Trudy: Marco, where do you want the students? (*Marco gets the students to leave the classroom and to slowly come back and hide behind the bushes at back of 'stage'*)

In other words, in framing these literacy events, Trudy felt that one could either activate students' background knowledge in 'fun' events or work on serious ELA content such as academic writing and grammar. At this point of the year, merging the two approaches was out of the question for Trudy.

Gradual Shift in Trudy's Research Focus and Literacy Practices

For her ACCELA Practitioner Enquiry course in the first semester of course work, Trudy was often asked to reflect on how her teaching practice was relating to her students. In November Trudy's research questions began to focus on the cultural gap she perceived to exist between herself and her students in the classroom.

I wonder frequently if being a short, white, American woman affects my teaching and the way students who are Hispanic and African American relate to me. (*Trudy's Journal*, 11/10/03)

Linguistically, Trudy draws here from a modernist concept of distinct fixed cultural identities: she establishes a definite contrast between her racial identity and that of students. However, there is a change in how she represents the classroom dynamic and her students from earlier entries. No longer are her students the 'issue'; instead, she sees her own cultural values as perhaps contributing to difficulties she has with her students. In another entry in December, she wonders:

How does my cultural background affect my teaching practices of my students who are culturally and linguistically diverse? I know that so many times I just want kids to learn the way I know it. (*Trudy's Journal*, 12/12/03)

By January, Trudy began to focus on how she can design a more culturally responsive and integrated curriculum for her non-dominant students. To fulfil requirements for the second ACCELA course on second language and literacy development, Trudy decided to design grammar and writing curricular units that broke away from her previous framing and classification of 'standard English' classes. In one class, for example, she used large strips of paper, tape, and student team work to get the students' kinesthetically involved in creating 'correct' grammatical sentences:

11 January 2004: (*Johnny, Marco and Trudy working with strips*)

Johnny: They can't go out.

Trudy: Any other ideas?

Johnny: Yes. They can't go out if she lets them.

Marco: That doesn't make sense.

Johnny: They, they can't go out unless . . .

Marco: Unless she lets them go . . . oh, oh! I got it, I got it!

For her ACCELA course, Laura chose to transcribe and analyse segments of this particular class to demonstrate how verbal scaffolding among students and hands-on activities (Vygotsky, 1978) might promote more investment in grammar among her students. In one of her ACCELA reflection papers, she talked about still being unsure, however, of her students' interest in 'correct' grammar and of her own preoccupation with it:

Maybe grammar is not the most important tool for my students to learn. I have to learn to accept my students' literacy backgrounds instead of automatically deciding that grammatical skills are completely necessary in order to be a good writer. (*Trudy's reflection paper*, 02/04/04)

Literacy Events as Dialogic Process: March–June 2004

After discussing readings by educational scholars such as Dyson (1993), and Kern (2000) in her third ACCELA course, Trudy and her cohort were asked to identify an issue their students cared about deeply and identify a 'high-stakes' genre practice they could explicitly teach while incorporating the students' own interests and backgrounds. Surprisingly, the issue for Trudy and her students emerged when the class was reading a short story about an old woman and

her grandson. Trudy began talking about her grandmother's lonely hours at the window of a nursing home and the students began talking about their older relatives and their social problems such as lack of insurance, pensions, and illness. The issue galvanised the class into creating a newsletter that they wanted to share with senior citizens. In March, Trudy wrote about the unit:

Class is incredible. I love what I'm doing with the kids. We are working on an 'Elderly Newsletter'. I used verbal scaffolding, but let them figure out things for themselves. (*Trudy's Journal*, 03/30/04)

With Trudy's help, the students wrote expository articles, designed graphic images and produced their newsletter. In May, Trudy, the students and I went to a retirement community in the area to share the newsletter and to spend some time with the residents.

The result of this extended unit on senior citizens, an unexpected site of common interest for both Trudy and her students, was that the class developed into a more close-knit community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Trudy began to afford her students a wider range of literate identities (Norton, 1997).

When commenting on her students' involvement in the newsletter production in a journal entry in April, she writes:

Marco is so much better when he is up and moving. I really think he is a kinesthetic learner and a verbal learner . . . Andrew already wrote an article for the newsletter, and Johnny is doing a great job, as a always being a leader! I love this! (*Trudy's Journal*, 04/08/05)

To conclude this section, in my analysis of Trudy's research journals and classroom interactions, it is clear that Trudy developed a very different relationship with her students and understanding of her own role in the classroom by the end of the year. Even in her use of pronouns in her research journals, Trudy's shifts from a grammatical division of herself as the subject (I) and the students as the object (the students/they) to the use of a communal 'we'. For critical teacher education school-university alliances, these changes in Trudy's understanding of her students and her teaching practices indicate that collaborative inquiry projects can make a difference in the type of literacy practices that teachers and students enact. However, I now also examine strands of discourse that are absent or eclipsed in Trudy's discursive practices.

Silences and Gaps

For Eagleton (1990) and other critical scholars (Fairclough, 1992, 2003) probing ideological silences and gaps within texts is as important as analysing the manifest. Although my field notes and interviews with teachers over the year indicate that Trudy's 'small house' team in Willow instituted very problematic team policies during the year 2003-4, Trudy's multiple texts for the ACCELA programme (e.g. research papers, emails, and presentations) never addressed these issues until April 2004, and only then at my behest.

Some of the decisions made by her 'small house' team that directly impacted Trudy's classes were the abrupt changing of half of her students from one of her classes in November into a 'bad' block; a 10-day period when all students in the

house were not allowed to leave their classroom unaccompanied or to participate in school-wide events (e.g. Thanksgiving holiday celebration); widespread use of suspension either for three days in isolated carrels in the school or longer periods at home; and continual changes in classroom composition for scheduling reasons throughout the year. In her curriculum planning, Trudy had to deal, therefore, with an ever-changing group of students, even in the focus group that she thought would be stable over the year.

Why the silence about these issues in Trudy's journal entries? In one of our early discussions at the beginning of the year, Trudy described herself as 'at the bottom of the totem pole' because she was a second-year teacher. Silenced by her team members, Trudy refrained from commenting on these sociopolitical issues in her journal entries or other ACCELA texts. Through this omission she participated in a district-wide discourse about teachers: their work is relegated to inside classroom walls and they need to follow strict policies without question. Throughout the urban school district – at least in the schools I worked – a fear about job security and recriminations keep teachers relatively voiceless about school-wide or team-wide decisions unless they have gained a certain status with the administration.

In addition, Trudy saw her research world as separate from the sociopolitical context she inhabited at school. Although explicitly asked in her third ACCELA course to think about the sociocultural practices in the school that might serve as a stumbling block to a more dialogic curriculum, Trudy never probed macro-level issues of teacher autonomy, student tracking or marginalisation of students in her research.

When I came to her class on 7 April, however, Trudy was visibly upset about a new wave of student changes and even remarked to Marco, 'Life is not fair. And yes, I am angry too'. When I asked her to explain why she was so perturbed, she answered me in an extended journal entry.

Since day one of working in my eighth grade house, kids have been changed from groups. They are changed because of their behavior and if they are not doing their work. No group has been the same. I disagree with all the changes that have taken place. It has created chaos. Furthermore, there have been many issues with (teachers') scheduling and absenteeism. (Trudy's Journal, 05/07/05)

In this text, Trudy positions her students and herself as passive recipients of arbitrary decisions made by her team (e.g. kids have been changed; are changed). However, in the fourth sentence Trudy uses an active participant and process 'I disagree'. In more indirect references in the last line, she critiques her colleagues for changing the schedule for their own benefit. In the same journal entry, Trudy continues:

It has been a nightmare, and this week I finally put my foot down and went to administration. (04/07/05)

Although very nerve-wracked that she might lose her job, Trudy went to the principal to complain about her colleagues' treatment of students. The principal, in response, told her to 'hang in there' until the end of the year.

When I returned to Willow School in the fall of 2004, I had a hard time locating

Trudy. At her own request, she had been switched out of the 8th grade house and put in an ELA 6th grade classroom. When I asked her about the change, she told me that the principal and some other teachers had helped her get a transfer out. Trudy and I had to wait several months at the beginning in 2004 before we began our collaborative work again. She needed to learn a new 6th grade curriculum, a new set of team policies, new instructional materials and a new grade level.

Conclusions and Implications

For critical teacher education school–university partnerships such as the ACCELA Alliance, this particular ethnographic case study has several implications. First, it is clear that developing on-site Master’s degree programmes with inquiry-based collaborative and critical literacy courses for in-service teachers is an important *first step* in the process of developing critical and dialogic alliances among diverse stakeholders in a specific school system. The course work, inquiry research, and classroom support of a research assistant, influenced how Trudy constructed herself, her students, and her teaching practices. By 2005, her third year in ACCELA, Trudy’s praxis in the Master’s programme as a teacher/researcher had repositioned her as a contributor to dialogues with administrators, community and faculty members of the ACCELA alliance. For example, in May 2005, Trudy gave a multimedia Powerpoint presentation about her developing dialogic literacy practices to her principal, university faculty, and school district representatives.

However, critical teacher education alliances need also to explore how to actively work with teachers, administrators and other key members on the *silences* about institutional context in teachers’ discursive practices. Instead of feeling afraid to openly contest disciplinary, testing, and tracking policies in local school contexts, teachers need to be encouraged to document through careful textual evidence the effects of local and state policies on their students’ learning. Nationwide, teachers’ lack of autonomy to make their own decisions in the classroom is one of the top reasons for high turnover in urban schools (Ingersoll, 2004). Trudy’s lack of power to contest her small house team policies led to her withdrawal from the house: it could easily have led to her quitting the school. If she had left, the valuable work that she had undertaken in the ACCELA Master’s programme and in her own classroom would presumably have benefited a wealthier suburban school district.

The ACCELA Alliance, now in its fourth year, has developed an institute for administrators, set up dialogues among ACCELA teachers, administrators and teacher educators, and published research with teachers on their dialogic work in the classroom (e.g. Willett *et al.*, in press). The path ahead for the ACCELA Alliance, and for other similar critical teacher education partnerships, is fraught with challenges. However, in order to support non-dominant students when there is an increasing achievement gap between high-poverty and low-poverty schools (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004), remaining within the walls of the classroom is not an adequate response. As Smith (2002), an Indigenous scholar, states:

Taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voices does not help people improve their current conditions. It provides words, perhaps, and insights but it does not prevent someone from dying.

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