

University of Nevada, Reno

**From Discord to Harmony: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Belief and  
Possibility in the Era of High-Stakes Assessment**

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by

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## **Abstract**

In an era when accountability frameworks linked to the outcomes of high-stakes standardized tests describe the success and failures of public schools, teachers are under tremendous pressure to raise test scores. In order to accomplish this, some teachers have been required to implement proscribed curricular programs and to use data from standardized test to target certain students for extra instruction aimed at improving proficiency outcomes. This autoethnographic study explores one teacher's beliefs about educational standards and how those beliefs changed when the Common Core State Standards were adopted in her state. The findings suggest that the teacher developed a strong peripheral belief that educational standards are not compatible with critical pedagogy or socially just outcomes for students. It is further suggested that this belief developed due to the complicated, and frequently conflated, relationship between standards, assessment, curriculum, and accountability. The teacher's beliefs were problematized when she undertook professional learning aligned with the Common Core State Standards. A discussion of implications for this autoethnographic research emphasizes the importance of teacher voices in educational policy and calls for a no-fault period of accountability while teachers explore the instructional implications of the new standards.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Adjacent Possible.....	5
Review of Literature.....	8
Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy.....	8
Review of Relevant Literature.....	12
High-Stakes Standardized Tests and Educational Standards.....	12
A Nation at Risk.....	13
Purpose and Scope.....	13
Research Base.....	14
Implementation.....	15
Standards.....	15
Assessment.....	16
A Critical Perspective on A Nation at Risk.....	18
Reading Excellence Act.....	20
Purpose and Scope.....	21
Research Base.....	21
Implementation.....	22
No Child Left Behind.....	23
Purpose and Scope.....	23
Research Base.....	25
Implementation.....	25
Critical Perspective on NCLB.....	28

The Codification of SBRR.....	30
Common Core State Standards.....	32
Purpose and Scope.....	32
Research Base.....	33
Implementation.....	36
“High-Stakes” Concerns.....	40
Instructional and Affective Implications of high-stakes Standardized Assessments.....	40
Classroom Practice: The Shift Toward Standardization of Instruction and Away from Educational Equity.....	41
Educational Triage: The Pedagogy of High-Stakes Assessment.....	43
Affective Impact: The Stress of Conflating Standards and Testing.....	45
Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge.....	47
Teacher Beliefs.....	48
Core and Peripheral Beliefs.....	49
Optimism.....	50
A Nomenclature for Teacher Knowledge.....	50
Methodology.....	53
Autoethnography.....	53
Participant in Context.....	55
Data Collection.....	56
Data Analysis.....	58
Limitations.....	59

Results.....	61
Extended Narrative.....	62
My Entangled Domain.....	62
A Cautious Departure.....	64
The Emergence of Critical Pedagogy.....	66
Mandated Triage.....	68
The Common Core State Standards: The Adjacent (Im)possible.....	71
A Transformative Experience.....	76
Introspection and Analysis.....	81
Optimism and the Critical Stance.....	81
Educational Triage: The Formation of Negative Peripheral Beliefs.....	89
Harmony: The Realignment of Beliefs.....	88
Discussion.....	93
References.....	97

*All of us live inside our own private versions of the adjacent possible. In our work lives, in our creative pursuits, in the organizations that employ us, in the communities we inhabit... Unlocking a new door can lead to a world-changing scientific breakthrough, but it can also lead to a more effective strategy for teaching second-graders, or a novel marketing idea for the vacuum cleaner your company is about to release. The trick is to figure out ways to explore the edges of the possibility that surround you. (Johnson, 2010)*

## **Introduction**

In classrooms today, educational standards and high-stakes testing have an enormous impact on teachers and their classroom practice (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Houchen, 2013; Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011; Tye & O'Brien, 2002;). Teacher preparation programs arm teachers with knowledge of pedagogy, theories of learning and cognition, and strong practice in lesson preparation; however, these skills and knowledge often atrophy upon entering the education system, unable to flourish in a climate of compromise, confusion, and frustration (Grindon, 2014; Imig & Imig, 2006; Kaniuka, 2009; Shannon, 1987 ). This autoethnographic study examines my struggle as a teacher to negotiate space for effective pedagogy in a climate dominated by skills-based educational standards (Dennis, 2008; Dennis, 2009; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Grindon, 2014) and high-stakes standardized assessment (Allington, 2002; Hillocks, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Because teacher and school effectiveness has become synonymous with the outcomes of high-stakes assessment (Imig & Imig; 2006), many teachers are forced into a narrow set of choices about how to approach their work. Educational standards describe and define for teachers the critical content students should engage with at particular grade levels; yet, despite the existence of educational standards, some states, districts and building leaders compel teachers to employ scripted or pre-planned programs chosen for

their alignment to standards and assessment (Dennis, 2008). The mandated use of curricular programs effectively strip teachers of any real autonomy or decision-making in their practice (Dutro & Seland, 2012; Giroux, 2009). A slightly less stifling iteration of the above practice is for teachers to use the adopted curriculum as a map for the scope and sequence of instructional outcomes, adding or substituting supplemental materials to the core curriculum (O'Donnell, Enrico & Spear, 2005; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Though these teachers exercise slightly more independence, the long-term vision of their pedagogy remains predetermined, and their lack of fidelity to the core curriculum leaves them vulnerable to pedagogical intervention from myriad specialists (ESEA, 2013, sec 1112 (a)(5)(a)). For students in either of these scenarios, academic content is frequently predigested and uninspiring (Dutro, Seland, & Bien, 2013). Still other teachers, nodding compliantly when faced with new mandates, participate in what Au and Gourd (2013) refer to as "creative maladjustment" (p. 18); they return quietly to their classrooms where they proceed to teach in accordance with their own vision and plan for their students. In these classrooms, students get to feel the spark of excitement that learning can ignite (Hoadley, 2007; Houchen, 2013). Simultaneously brave and reckless, these teachers, who refuse to sacrifice their own conviction about the quality of effective education, risk their own longevity in the profession in order to retain their sense of professional autonomy and integrity (Pennington, Brock, Palmer & Wolters, 2012). No matter which of the paths an educator chooses in negotiating this complicated landscape, it is all but certain that he or she will feel like they trapped in an "entangled domain"(Nespor, 1987).

Entangled domains are emotional, psychological, or intellectual landscapes characterized by competing messages, unclear criteria, unstable connections and

nebulous pathways (Nespor, 1987). Because of the competing messages teachers receive as they attempt to execute their work (Tye & O'Brien, 2012), modern classrooms can be considered entangled domains. I have spent all eleven years of my elementary teaching career in the entangled domain of accountability versus autonomy. The political and institutional conflation of standards, assessment and curriculum confused my professional identity and inspired conflicting feelings of righteous indignation and insecurity. Finding a way forward along this nebulous pathway has been a constant challenge.

When individuals are faced with entangled domains, “cognitive and information processing strategies do not work, appropriate schemata are disconnected and unavailable, and the teacher is uncertain of what... behavior is appropriate” (Pajares, 1992, p. 311). When teachers face uncertainty, they are highly vulnerable to making gut decisions (Phipps & Borg, 2009), which might not always be well aligned to teachers underlying beliefs and knowledge about teaching and learning. Teacher reflection plays a crucial role in helping teachers make strong pedagogical choices as they face complicated work environments (Jaeger, 2013; Schon, 1983; Zhao, 2012). Across my evolution as a teacher I have had to reflect deeply on my own beliefs about the functions and forms of schooling.

In the course of my struggle to navigate my own entangled domain, I formed an almost intractable, gut belief that educational standards are incompatible with the formation of critically oriented, socially just classrooms, the development of which I believe to be crucial to producing citizens whose feeling for their fellows is deeply grounded in humanistic compassion and whose agency is willingly used to advocate for the expansive application of the democratic principles upon which our society was

founded (Giroux, 2001; Giroux, 2009). In fact, the disconnect I perceived between educational policy and education's potential was so profound that it defined me as an educator, a learner and an advocate for more than a decade. Starting as a young teacher, I scoffed at the idea of educational standards; how could the word "standard, which Merriam Webster (2014) defines as "something that is very good and that is used to make judgments about the quality of other things" feel like a code for mandated oppression (something that is very bad). It is in full awareness of the need to leverage intentional reflection as a tool for understanding that I approach the current research autoethnographically.

Though I believed my negative attitude toward educational standards to be justified and fixed, I have recently found myself in the incredibly awkward position of promoting, advocating for and even celebrating a new set of standards, the Common Core State Standards, which I have come to believe are the best hope we have for transforming our current educational landscape into a place where all students flourish and are valued for the incredible diversity of experiences and cultural capitals that they bring to the classroom. This change in attitude has shaken the foundation of who I am as an educator and to some degree as a human being. It has made me question the veracity of my own perceptions and understandings and triggered deep insecurities about the stability of my self-concept. In my career, I have apologetically referred to myself as "uppity" whenever I asserted my autonomy and challenged mandates from superiors that I felt impinged on the rights of my students to quality pedagogy. I have a reputation as a "system-bucker" because of my tenacious reinvention of my practice under policy constraints. Yet, I find myself now employed as an implementation specialist, tasked with supporting other

teachers in efforts to align their instruction to educational standards. In order to proceed in my career with confidence, I am compelled to answer the question: How does a critical teacher convinced about the function of educational standards as tools of social reproduction, completely reverse course to become an advocate for the Common Core State Standards? Seeking to understand this profound shift in my beliefs has been a long, frustrating, and enlightening process, and my autoethnographic journey of understanding is the subject of this research thesis.

### **The Adjacent Possible**

Change, which is almost constant in the life of classroom teachers (Flores & Day, 2006), is frequently mandated and out of the teachers control (Tye & O'Brien, 2002; ); however, teachers can still choose within their changing environments how to meet the needs of learners (Au & Gourd, 2013). In order to discretely tease out these relationships, a theory of change that works equally well for describing the macroscopic cultural contexts of teachers as well as the microcosmic internal world of teacher beliefs and knowledge is needed. In order to frame my change over time, I will rely on a theory proposed by Kauffman (2010).

Stuart Kauffman, a theoretical biologist who studies the origins of life on Earth, includes in his models about the nature of evolving systems a theory about how autonomous agents interact in and with the systems they inhabit. Viewed in stasis, the “current actual” is a snapshot of any system as it currently exists; Kauffman defines the adjacent possible as the total of all outcomes of first order connections made by any autonomous agent in any given system. When a connection is created the result is 1) an adjustment to the current actual for the entire system and 2) a growth in the adjacent

possible for the entire system. In Kauffman's (2010) own words, "the Adjacent Possible is like a forever expanding house, where passing via a particular door from a room to another room, opens new doors in the Adjacent Possible which we explore" (paragraph 14). Kauffman himself has applied the theory of the adjacent possible to sociology, secularism, economics and technology. Adjacent possible theory has gained wider audience through the work of Steven Johnson (2010), who applies the idea of the adjacent possible to the world of ideation and invention.

Johnson (2010) gives a concrete example of how the adjacent possible affects ideation in his recounting of the history of incubators. Originally used in France for the nurturing of poultry, a 19th century scientist borrowed this technology from farming and applied it to medical science, using incubators for human children with low birth weight, lowering their death rate from 68% to 36%. Over a century later, incubators are standard equipment for meeting the needs of premature or ill infants across the globe; however, in developing countries, infant death rates remain high as incubators are prohibitively costly to fix, as the experienced technicians and parts are too expensive or too remote to be practical. Enter, Timothy Prospero, who redesigned the neonatal incubator from automotive parts resulting in an equally effective, life-saving technology, whose parts are readily available and that can be fixed without specialized knowledge.

Particularly powerful in its scalability, adjacent possible theory can be used to explore vast ideas and systems or microscopic ecologies and micro processes. Johnson (2010) states, "The adjacent possible is a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself" (p. 31). It is through the adjacent possible that ideation emerges over time. Johnson

asserts that most good ideas “start with a vague, hard to describe sense that there’s an interesting solution to a problem that hasn’t yet been proposed, and they linger in the shadows of the mind, sometimes for decades, assembling new connections and gaining strength” (p. 77). Johnson calls the evolutionary nature of ideation the “slow hunch,” which can transform into a fully realized thought through connection with new ideas or experiences. Though adjacent possible theory has never been used to describe change in school settings or teacher practice, I have chosen this model specifically for its utility in describing the complex, compounding, and ever evolving external and internal worlds that have shaped my development as a teacher.

The purpose of this thesis is to unravel a significant shift in my attitudes towards educational standards, which are, for better or worse, highly entangled and conflated with high-stakes accountability systems. Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature relevant to this work; topics explored include critical theory and critical pedagogy, standards and accountability since 1983; the impact of high-stakes assessment on instruction and teacher affect; and teacher beliefs and teacher knowledge. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for the research, in this case analytic autoethnography. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study in two sections: an extended narrative vignette and discussion of the three major findings of the study. Chapter 5 suggests implications for future research.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy**

Power relationships in schooling forever shape the “current actual” of teachers and limit the “adjacent possible” in teacher behavior. Critical theory intentionally problematizes the relationships and power dynamics in society that artificially limit the implementation of effective instruction in schools and can help identify ways in which deference to external authority by educators may be arbitrary, contributing to negative outcomes for learners (Apple & King, 1977; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Stanley, 2007).

Critical theorists have long challenged the goal of social reproduction in school (Freire, 2000), arguing that education should seek to elucidate inequities in society, emancipating and empowering those who have not enjoyed the privilege of power to recast themselves as agents of change rather than civic chattel (Apple & King, 1977; Apple 1978; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Luke, 2012; Morrell, 2008;). Freire referred to socially reproductive pedagogies as banking education, wherein the teacher made deposits of knowledge into the otherwise empty minds of learners. The goal was to ensure the correct knowledge was received and unquestioned; in post-colonial Brazil this banking model of education was essential to preserving race and economic inequities which so benefitted those on positions of power. In opposition to this model, Freire sought to institute a critical pedagogy aimed at equipping citizens with tools to resist oppression. This “pedagogy of the oppressed” unapologetically endeavored to create awareness of the arbitrary and institutional nature of inequity and encouraged learners to react against these social relics of colonialism. In Freire’s own words, “to surmount the

situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 47). Through critical experiences in schools, learners can develop the habits of critique and transformative action that might impact their own lives and those of other oppressed people.

Many notable scholars have described this pedagogy, aimed at destabilizing inequitable power structures and creating more truly democratic societies. hooks (1979) asserts that critical pedagogy can and should “transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote assembly-line approach to learning” (p. 13). The assembly line image that hooks offers evokes Freire’s banking education metaphor. Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2003), identify two examples of the boundaries reinforced by socially reproductive schooling practices; “critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and evolution of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” (p. 11). Culture otherness and poverty are both conditions that are largely socially constructed; the development of reflective awareness around both these and myriad other constructs of oppression is a major goal of critical pedagogy. Kincheloe (2004) agrees that at the heart of critical pedagogy is “the concern with transforming oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains that lead to human oppression” (p. 45). Inherently included in domains where power works to oppress are schools themselves, and teachers, by the very nature of their affiliation, must take care to mind that, even when it is against their intent, their roles make them complicit in these power dynamics.

The subtle, and often unintentionally, oppressive role that teachers play can be a roadblock to developing wide ranging critical pedagogy in school systems. Once awareness of this positioning is cultivated; however, teachers can choose to fight against oppression of their learners and themselves, which Freire (2000) suggests they experience by participating in the dehumanization of their students at an institutional level. When teachers act with institutional authority to enact institutional goals, the learner is positioned as an object or property of the institution (Freire, 2000, p. 75). Through resistance to authoritarian practices aimed at producing an homogenized educational product, teachers can reposition themselves as equal with their students, each taking responsibility for collective praxis, learning from and teaching each other in their turn. Through this praxis teachers can become transformative intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens (Giroux & McLaren; 1996). Apple (2009) highlights the importance of this work for both young people and adults alike, suggesting that citizens actively interrogate the “maps of reality” designed by dominant groups:

In order for dominant groups to exercise leadership, large numbers of people must be convinced that the maps of reality circulated by those with the most economic, political and cultural power are indeed wiser than other alternatives. Dominant groups do this by attaching these maps to the elements of good sense that people have and by changing the very meaning of the key concepts and their accompanying structures of feeling that provide the centers of gravity for our hopes, fears and dreams about this society. (p. 240)

Critical pedagogy intentionally helps students develop the analytical lenses and critical dispositions that help them understand how societies are structured, and how those structures are endorsed and reproduced through self-interest of the most powerful in society (Kincheloe, 2004; Luke, 2012; McLaren, 2005). At the heart of the pedagogy

described above is the belief that the oppressed are capable of critical thinking and that the cultivation of that faculty through collective problem solving in community can transform society. As Freire (2000) states, “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information” (p. 79). By engaging in dialogue about difficult problems, teacher-students and student-teachers can accomplish the ends of liberating education (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

The current study focuses on my beliefs and experiences as a single classroom teacher over the past 11 years. The critical pedagogy framework is essential for understanding my pedagogical evolution for two important reasons. First, my career began in 2003, just after the passage of No Child Left Behind (<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>); this legislation mandates that the effectiveness of schools be measured by the results of assessments aligned to state standards. This means that the attainment of a narrow set of outcomes has been the focus of educational product for my entire career. These outcomes do not include the development of critical disposition in students (Grindon, 2014). This puts a tremendous amount of pressure on teachers to act as bankers, depositing the most tested information into the mental bank accounts of learners. Secondly, my entire career has been spent in Title I schools that by definition serve large numbers of students living in poverty and that, coincidentally, also serve large populations of English language learners and ethnic minorities. These populations of learners are historically most at risk for failure on assessments utilized for accountability purposes (Kreig & Storer, 2006), and therefore more vulnerable to intensely focused banking education practices. Because this autoethnographic journey explores the confusion and tension that defined my practice as I tried to reconcile and

balance the demands of the educational system and the needs of diverse learners, critical pedagogy is an important frame.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Answering the research question, how does a critical teacher convinced about the function of educational standards as tools of social reproduction, completely reverse course to become an advocate for the Common Core State Standards? necessitated the examination of research surrounding three areas of educational inquiry. The key areas of inquiry that influenced the framing of the research results were 1) high-stakes standardized assessment and its relationship to educational standards; 2) the instructional and affective impact of high-stakes assessment, and 3) the role of teacher beliefs and teacher knowledge in how teachers do their work. The implications for educational equity will be addressed throughout the literature review.

**High-Stakes standardized tests and educational standards.** Educational standards have impacted the work of teachers for decades (Labaree, 2000). In an increasingly frantic cultural climate, high-stakes testing has become a significant accountability tool for evaluating the success of schools and teachers in meeting the outcomes proscribed by standards (Au & Gourd, 2013). This has meant ever diminishing levels of autonomy for classroom teachers, especially those who serve at-risk populations (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). In order to clearly illustrate the shifting power dynamics that have contributed to this reality, an historical look at educational standards and high-stakes assessment is presented. This overview will begin with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Committee on Excellence in Education, 1983)

and end with the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association & Council of Chief School State Officers, 2010).

*A Nation at Risk.* The controversial, yet highly influential, report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) titled *A Nation at Risk*, is an example of what Apple (2009) called a “map of reality” designed by those in power to advance their own interests. During Ronald Reagan’s presidency, America’s economic well-being was linked to the quality of public education; this brought school reform to the center of the domestic agenda would garner greater support from sections of the electorate who tended to lean Democratic (Biddle & Berliner, 1995, p. 148).

*Purpose and scope.* Authored by a panel of 18 citizens, which included government, economic, and educational leaders, the report warned of the deterioration of American public schooling, which was being “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity” (p. 5). The commission made five recommendations addressing the following areas: educational content; educational standards; time spent in schooling; improved teacher preparation; and leadership and fiscal commitment (NCEE, 1983, p. 32-41). These comprehensive recommendations acknowledged the unique needs of both gifted and educationally disadvantaged students (p. 32), included calls for greater training and compensation for teachers (p. 38), smaller class sizes for disadvantaged learners (p. 32), greater federal commitment of funds with minimal “administrative burden” to assist schools in their enormous public function(p. 41), preserving and extending learning time through effective management and placement of behaviorally

impacted learners (p.37), and greater burden on textbook publishers to document the effectiveness of their actual programs, rather than drawing upon a research base to lend legitimacy to their products (p. 38). Myriad other recommendations are culled from the testimony and commissioned papers reviewed by the Commission, recommendations that still live today in the language of subsequent reform legislation.

Research base. The robust research base that informed the Commission's report consisted of hundreds of hours of testimony from educational experts and upwards of 40 scholarly papers commissioned by the Committee itself (NCEE, 1983, p. 44-60). After considering all of the evidence, the Committee published several findings. In relation to educational content and expectations, the findings showed that secondary school content was unfocused and lacked rigor, leading to grade inflation without serious academic engagement, especially in math and the sciences. Another finding was that time in school was insufficient for competitive international outcomes. Finally, the research showed that the qualification of the teaching force was lacking; a concurrent hypothesis existed that inadequate teacher compensation was likely to prolong this reality, as teaching was not seen as an attractive career option for talented people who could excel in the private sector. Particularly troubling to the Commission were indicators that American high school students lacked sufficient science and math knowledge and/or writing skills to be competitive at an international level (p. 16) and that illiteracy rates were increasing, especially among minority populations. "13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United

States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent (p. 16). In light of these troubling trends the Commission called upon the public to consider their implication at the individual and the societal level.

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, p. 4)

The expressed purpose of this report as indicated in the above statement is to ensure the success of society and all citizens through an education that prepares students to be informed and productive members of the community, and the key recommendations of the report offered a clear and detailed map for how to achieve this outcome.

*Implementation: A Nation at Risk*, though it was not a legally adopted educational reform, influenced the way that state governments participated in their public education systems. The two greatest areas of impact were standards and assessment.

Standards. Standards represent one form of the guidance that *A Nation at Risk* suggests is critical to student success. Previous to 1983, many states already had educational standards in place; these state standards represented efforts to align educational outcomes across the many local educational agencies in a given state (Labaree, 2000). The National Commission on Educational Excellence (1983) questioned the competence of this guidance, suggesting that, in general, standards across

America might not be rigorous enough to ensure high quality outcomes. In response many states began efforts to revise their standards (Labaree, 2000). For example, Texas and New Jersey already had state level educational standards and made efforts to raise the rigor of their standards and developed curricular frameworks to support consistent and higher levels of academic achievement by controlling the exact content to be covered in the classroom (Seed, 2008; Valencia & Villareal, 2003). Delineating the content of schooling marked a departure from the largely fiscal role states had previously taken in education (Fuhrman, 2003), and came to be known as “top down” reform.

Assessment. Besides calling for increased rigor, *A Nation at Risk* recommended greater measurability in standards; this triggered reform efforts at the state level focused on the measurement of student proficiency with regard to state standards. The most progressive ideas involved the creation of multidimensional, open-ended tasks that allowed students to exercise their creative and analytical potential (Fuhrman, 2003); unfortunately these types of assessments had many drawbacks: 1) they were time consuming; 2) they defied efficient statistical analysis; and 3) were expensive to design, administer and score (p. 11). On the other hand, “commercial tests with multiple choice formats...are cheaper, take up less time and are better able to produce scores for individual students” (p. 11). One type of commercial assessment was already common across the nation; norm referenced tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the TerraNova and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) offered families information about aptitude or achievement (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Because norm referenced tests compare the performance of students each to the other at any given testing point, the data generated fall into what statisticians call normal distributions or bell curves, where about

half of students are expected to fall above the norm and half fall below, but it is not possible to fail the assessment. However, these tests are not designed to align with specific standard sets for any given state; rather, they are normed nationally. The demand for a new kind of commercial assessment grew in response to the calls for more competent guidance in educational standards.

Criterion referenced tests (CRT's) report information comparing students to a mastery or cut score, and the content of these assessments can be designed to align to any set of criterion or mastery objectives (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Because such assessments measure student mastery of standards based outcomes against a cut score, it is possible for students to either pass or fail these assessments (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). States began designing or purchasing CRT's that could be specifically aligned to their state standards, and the outcomes of these assessments, analyzed and reported at the state, district, school and classroom level, gave states a mechanism to describe the competence of the guidance students received at the school and classroom level (Imig & Imig, 2006). The faulty syllogism employed in these evaluations implies that the controlling factor in student achievement of the standard outcomes is the quality of the teachers and schools that deliver instruction (Greenblatt, 2004). Though there are myriad factors that contribute to variations in student achievement (Choi, Seltzer, Herman, & Yamashiro, 2007), schools and teachers began to use assessment results to limit student advancement and alter the work of classrooms (Au & Gould, 2013; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Dennis, 2008; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Schools denied grade level matriculation (Jacob, 2003; Valencia & Villareal, 2003) and diplomas (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) to students based on these data and the goals of teacher practice transformed from educating

children to training them (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Because of the dramatic, life changing and potentially punitive implications of these assessment data, CRT's became known as high-stakes assessments.

*A critical perspective on A Nation at Risk:* An easily overlooked phrase in the introductory statement to *A Nation at Risk* hints at a less explicit use of this report. The implications of the phrase "competently guided" can be seen in school reform efforts in the 30 years since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. Illustrative of Apple's (2009) insights about how dominant groups control public perception, *A Nation at Risk*, playing on the "good sense" of the populace, advanced the concern that American schools were not producing outcomes that would ensure America's long-term economic competitiveness on the international stage. Recommendation B, the call for "more rigorous and measurable standards" (p. 27), connects directly to the current research question. *A Nation at Risk* elucidates the neo-conservative and managerial perspectives that leverage schools as points of social reproduction (Freire, 2000); the fear that schools were not producing students fit for filling roles to maintain economic hegemony drove the public to embrace the need for tighter regulation of the forms and functions of education (Biddle & Berliner, 1995, p. 141-42). In the decades since its publication, *A Nation at Risk* has become synonymous with the beginning of federal and local reform efforts focused on testing results as indicator of quality in K-12 education (Fuhrman, 2003; Shanahan, 2014).

By centralizing decisions about educational standards and promoting mastery-based high-stakes assessments, reformers neglected considerations of equity and diversity among districts, schools, and communities (Howard, 2003). Examining commercial assessment with a critical lens, it is clear from format alone that these assessments run the risk of generating specious data about students' actual knowledge. Further complicating this paradigm of accountability is the genuine impossibility of a 50-70 question test to assess the full range of content and process standards students are expected to master at any grade or in any subject (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). So how have such data come to determine so much about American schooling? States offer CRT results as a "map of reality" by which the body politic can appear to understand the reality of education in their state. Valencia and Villareal (2003) offer an alternative view of this "map of reality; their study interrogates the impact of nearly twenty years of high-stakes testing in Texas on minority populations. In researching the implications of educational reforms put in place by then Governor George W. Bush, Valencia and Villareal found that students of minority status, even those who had completed sufficient coursework with average grades, were likely to suffer "adverse impact" in relation to standardized tests (p. 613). Many of these students were denied a diploma when they failed to pass the proficiency exam, a phenomenon also observed by Amrein and Berliner (2002), who revealed that, across the country, gate-keeping graduation exams existed with greater frequency in states whose ratio of African American and Hispanic students to Caucasian students was above the national average. Also, based on data trends from Texas, Valencia and Villareal (2003) assert that minority students in primary grades were twice as likely to be retained due to poor standardized test performance as their Caucasian peers. By

advancing the positivist assumptions made about the validity of high-stakes assessment data, groups deeply interested in the maintenance of the status quo have convinced those oppressed by them that achievement on these tests is synonymous with individual worthiness and efficacy.

Research investigating the effectiveness of high-stakes accountability frameworks that developed in the decade after *A Nation at Risk* further problematizes the paradigmatic control they gained in education. Amrein and Berliner (2002) examined correlations between learning outcomes on national norm referenced to outcomes on high-stakes criterion referenced testing across 18 states. In comparing the national scores that students in all 18 states earned historically, they found that even when performance on high-stakes state exams showed improvements in criterion mastery, national measures of learning, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), indicated no improvement in overall outcomes in 17 of these 18 states. Jacobs (2003) found similar trends in Chicago, one of the largest municipal education agencies to institute high-stakes assessment in the 1990s; this study showed that improved assessment outcomes on criterion referenced math tests did not translate into increased achievement on nationally normed tests. Because test content on CRTs can be easily altered in any individual state or municipality, gaming accountability structures by altering the criterion or assessment is a common occurrence (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). These findings cast doubt on the effectiveness of using single sources of summative data to assess the quality of education in American schools; however, failures of states to provide alternative assessments of educational effectiveness implied greater necessity for these types of measures.

***Reading Excellence Act.*** The *Reading Excellence Act* (1998) was the Clinton Administration's effort to address under-achievement in elementary literacy rates. This grant program offered flexible and substantial three-year grant awards to states to use toward improving literacy practices in their schools; it was intended to increase the number of students at risk for failure who received adequate reading instruction.

*Purpose and Scope.* With the expressed goal of improving reading outcomes for at risk students, the Reading Excellence Act legislation offered a specific six dimension definition of reading that included: phonemic awareness; decoding; fluency; background knowledge and vocabulary; comprehension; and motivation (REA, 1998, sec. 2252(4)(a-e)). States that made successful applications to the federal government submitted proposal's that described state's plans to 1) improve the quality of reading outcomes for at-risk students through targeted professional development; 2) increase the utilization of resources supported by "scientifically based reading research" 3) improve partnerships with families that might produce stronger educational participation from families whose children are at-risk of failure; 4) distribute resources equitably between rural and urban centers of need (identify sub-grantees); and 5) assess and report the effectiveness of sub-grant recipient implementation (sec. 2253(b)(2)). The allocation of federal funds directly to students most at-risk of failure echo the intentions of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's opening statement regarding the imperative of addressing equity in education.

*Research base.* The Reading Excellence Act called for curricular and instructional improvements informed by "scientifically based reading research" (REA, 1998, sec. 2254 (d)(1)(A)(i)). Section 2252(5)(A-B) defines scientifically based reading

research as being empirical work with either an observational or an experimental design. The call for research-based reading programs was a response to a well-documented literacy problem in the United States, similar to the statistics that caused so much concern for the NCEE as they crafted *A Nation at Risk*. The 1994 measure of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirmed a troubling trend: poor rates of reading proficiency among American students; a disturbing 44% were reading below basic level (REA, 1998, sec II). Adult literacy also seemed to be increasing, with an estimated 40 million adults attaining only the lowest levels of literacy. In order to ensure that grant monies brought maximum benefit to learners, the legislation required states making application to use instructional programs that would address all six dimensions of reading skills and practices. The term

*Implementation.* This legislation's focus on at-risk students represented an almost literal response to the NCEE's recommendation that more federal resources be made available to support struggling schools with minimal administrative burden. However, it seemed that the lack of specific accountability demands led to a paucity of quality reports about REA related outcomes. Of the few empirical studies published about REA outcomes, it appeared that states that received REA grants showed variability in achieving the desired outcomes. When sub-grant recipients chose highly-structured, researched-based programs like *Reading Recovery* (Clay, 1993) they saw strong results compared to schools in the same states who did not receive REA funding (Bell-Smith, 2005), while other districts who focused on improving teacher practice through professional development on balanced literacy and research supported pedagogies saw little change in classroom practice and therefore minimal gains in student achievement

(Shroyer, 2003). Mesmer and Karchmer (2003) attribute implementation problems to myriad factors, including competing initiatives leading to a fragmented focus for professional development and ineffective communication between funded sites and state governance. Variability among state-designed performance reporting made aggregating and generalizing REA's impact a difficult endeavor. This variability in reporting and performance measurement of reading interventions would be made uniform in 2002 with the advent of new education reform legislation.

*No Child Left Behind.* The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 was passed into federal law (<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>) four years after the Reading Excellence Act was passed.

*Purpose and scope.* The expressed purpose of this legislation, linked to the receipt of Title I funds, is "to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind" (sec. 1). Much like the Reading Excellence Act, this legislation used a multipronged approach. Preserving the focus on early literacy, programs based on scientific reading research, interventions for at-risk youth, family school partnerships, and assessment based reporting, NCLB sought to report annually on the progress states made in moving students toward greater proficiency. Two features of this legislation hold particular relevance for the current research. First, the accountability structures outlined for schools in Part A of the law, commonly known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and second, the focus on literacy outlined in Part B, subpart 1, the Reading First Initiative.

No Child Left Behind mandated that all states use the data from summative standardized tests (CRTs) to report on the achievement levels of students (sec.

1111(b)(2)(A)(i)). These achievement levels, in theory, would serve as an indication of the quality of instruction in the classroom (teacher effectiveness); one principal aim of this system, echoing *A Nation at Risk*, was to make sure that student populations with traditionally lower achievement rates received high quality instruction (sec. 101). With competent guidance from “highly qualified” teachers (sec. 1119(a)(1)) at-risk learners might cease to lag behind their more affluent peers. Under the NCLB framework of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), proficiency rates on standardized tests in 3rd, 5th and 8th grades were expected to grow by a certain percentage every year (sec. 1111(b)(2)), until by 2012 all children in tested grades would be proficient. Failure to make AYP for two years in a row resulted in the designation of a school as being In Need of Improvement (sec. 1116(b)(1)(A)). This designation meant significant changes to the structure and climate of schools, including a school choice program in which the district would pay to transport, at the request of a parent, students to an alternative, geographically proximal school that had received a favorable AYP designation (sec. 52429(a)). Schools In Need of Improvement also would see increased levels of outside oversight and decreasing levels of autonomy, possibly even ending with a complete take over of the building (sec 1117(a)(5)(a) & (b)).

A focus on early literacy is a key component of the No Child Left Behind Act (sec. 1201) just as it was in the *Reading Excellence Act* (1998). This focus was meant to ensure “that every student can read at grade level or above not later than the end of grade 3” (sec. 1201(1)). Also echoing the previous legislation, NCLB calls for states to choose curriculum that addressed the “essential components of reading instruction” (sec. 1201(4)) and mandates that such materials be based on “scientifically based reading

research” (sec. 1203(b)(4)(B)). The term “scientifically based reading research” refers to the findings of the National Reading Panel’s (NRP) effort to use research to define best practice in reading instruction (Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000). Though the term was originally used in the REA’s (1998) verbiage describing appropriate pathways to improve the acquisition of effective reading skills, a “complex system of deriving meaning from print” (sec. 2522(4)).

Research base. The National Reading Panel’s (NRP) report, called *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) reviewed reading research in order to identify practices that could positively affect students’ reading development. The report identified five essential skills that students must develop to become proficient readers: alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Pearson (2010) calls these skills “the Big Five”(p. 104). Of these, the first three are considered foundational skills, emphasized heavily as students are “learning to read,” while vocabulary development and comprehension receive more attention instructionally as students “read to learn.” The findings of this report provide most of the research base for the reading initiatives found in NCLB. Though the language “scientifically based reading research” is the same as the verbiage used in the Reading Excellence Act it is noteworthy that the NRP methodology only included research that employed experimental and quasi-experimental methods (NRP, 2000, sec 4, para 3). This essentially changed the body of research from which programs might be grounded.

*Implementation.* According to various reports of state implementation, Reading

First support positively affected learning outcomes for many types of learners across the country. Foorman, Petscher, Lefsky and Toste (2010) found that Reading First schools in Florida made significant improvement in the achievement levels of diverse students by the end of the third grade compared to schools that did not receive Reading First grants, a finding replicated by Torgesen (2009). Pennsylvania Reading First Schools produced similar positive outcomes; with almost a 25% increase in proficiency of at-risk youth over five years and an accompanying 18% drop in students reading below basic; 80% of Pennsylvania Reading First schools outperformed schools who did not receive grant awards (Bean, Draper, Turner, & Zigmond, 2010). Reports from all three states and the state of Nevada (Barone, 2012) found that reading achievement outcomes improved in proportion to the amount of time that Reading First programming was in place (Pearson, 2010). However, the results of the Nevada study, which encompassed six years of data rather than three which was standard for the other state reports, showed that during the last year of implantation achievement gains in primary grades regressed. This trend may or may not indicate a limit to the effect of Reading First programming, as similar data have not been analyzed for other states. Torgesen (2009) noticed a different, yet equally positive, outcome of the Reading First initiative: reduced rates of learning disability identification. As students received the skills necessary to read effectively through Reading First programming, the number of misidentified students decreased.

There were, however, several confounding factors that made it difficult to fully attribute positive student outcomes to Reading First programming. At the national level the successes reported by states seem to not aggregate into national gains (Gamse et al., 2008). One of these confounds has to do with a phenomenon called mutual adaptation

(Pearson, 2010); this is the tendency of change effects to be reciprocal. For example, mutual adaptation occurred in the work of Kersten and Pardo (2007). When examining classroom practice in a Reading First school, they observed that teachers allowed their classroom practice and philosophies to strongly influence Reading First programming, and, conversely, that Reading First program features also made a mark on established classroom practice. Another possible factor that may have contributed to differences between national and state results is “cultural cross contamination”(Pearson, 2010). Barone (2012) provides a clear example of cultural contamination in describing the Nevada implementation plan, in which schools identified for RF funding were paired with a similar school that did not receive funding. These staffs participated in Reading First training together and in many cases had similar levels of instructional support via locally funded coaches. This duplicative support structure may have made gains in Reading First schools difficult to distinguish from gains made in other buildings. In Michigan, Cortina, Carlisle, and Zeng (2008) noticed similar trends; although Reading First generally yielded positive outcomes, the size of impact was mitigated by factors such as school climate, administrator stance, and fidelity to programming. These results are consistent with Dickerson, Schuerich, McKenzie, and Skrla’s (2011) assertions about the important interplay between over all educational context and summative measures of learning outcomes.

Proponents of firm accountability structures based on standardized test data have suggested that summative testing data provides important information about potential areas of improvement in education. In Texas, accountability had been found to help minimize the effects of deficit thinking on district leaders and help orient systems toward

investigations of effective practices (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Aware of the tendency of critics to polarize accountability policies through the lens of equity, Schuerich and Skrla (2001) assert that advocates for assessment driven accountability do not believe that such data can be understood to pass judgment on individuals who are charged with the supervision of buildings or even individual classrooms; rather they suggest that these data can call attention to contexts in which scrutiny of the system might lead to adjustments or changes that benefit all students, especially those at-risk of failure. A study by Dickerson, Scheurich, McKenzie, and Skrla (2011) described positive practices across high-performing districts in three states. Their findings suggest that “coherent alignment of political, administrative, and professional systems provided a balance of pressure and support for the deep and sustained changes that were required to substantially alter traditional student achievement trajectories across the district” (p. 162). In these cases, using accountability data as the starting point for conversations about greater systemic alignment provided opportunities for at-risk students to benefit from the law as intended.

*Critical perspectives on No Child Left Behind.* Because the AYP designations for schools rely on data reported at the state level based on outcomes of CRT tests, the stakes for “high-stakes” assessment got demonstrably higher with the advent of NCLB. Unfortunately, the quality of assessments at the state level did not reliably reflect the content or rigor of the standards to which they supposedly aligned. Critics of the NCLB reform law and especially its reliance on high stakes assessment have come from statisticians, educators, and policy makers alike. In a review of 31 sets of state standards and their accompanying summative assessments, Polikoff, Porter, and Smithson (2011) found that roughly 57% test content in ELA was misaligned for either insufficient

cognitive demand (19%) or over-representation of tested content proportional to the standards set of the state (38%). In general over-tested material represented content that fell into basic skills categories (p. 24). If tests intended to assess attainment of standards are poorly aligned to the standards they are meant to reflect, there can be no rationale sound enough to support the use of their results to determine the quality of educational programs. Choi, Seltzer, Herman, & Yamashiro (2007) point out the paradox of a law which professes to concern itself with improving outcomes for historically low-achieving populations utilizing a metric (AYP) which fails to track the performance of low-achieving students to ascertain their growth rates, but rather compares one class of third graders to the next incoming class making no allowance for the different composition of individuals in each subsequent class. NCLB perpetuated a false analogy between proficiency and learning. The AYP model assumes that any student who hits the proficiency target must have had adequate instruction and any who failed to meet it did not achieve any important educational gains or receive competent instruction (Choi, et al., 2007). Stated plainly by Imig & Imig (2006), “teachers who raise scores will be judged to be high performing and determined to be highly effective” (p. 177). In actuality, this model fails to recognize the myriad factors outside of the classroom that contribute to student success in American public schools. Krieg and Storer (2006) found, through multiple decompositions of AYP data, that the mitigating factors in determining AYP outcomes were essential to student populations and completely outside of the control of the school personnel. These factors were ethnicity, educational and socio-economic status of parent, facility with English as a language, and geographic stability. These findings adequately problematize the high-stakes accountability framework of

NCLB that clearly attributes schools as the source of student failure (sec. 1117(a)).

Described by Greenblatt (2004) as “punitive and designed to identify problem schools without really dealing with the problems that are to be uncovered” (p. 40), NCLB deserved to be intensely scrutinized for the equity issues it reveals but fails to address. Achievement gaps exist between predictable populations, and must be considered as another way of privileging the achievement of white middle and upper-class students over the achievements and knowledge of their ethnically and socioeconomically different peers. Nichols and Berliner (2007) identify this statistical trend as a flaw in the “consequential validity” of high-stakes assessment. “We judge how test results are used, asking who gets hurt, who gets helped and is it worth it? As we hope we have made clear... considerable evidence is accumulating that test scores are hurtful and damaging” (p. 119). Unfortunately, serious public discourse around issues of equity raised time and again by critical scholars has not found wide audience, as the implications of these studies and commentaries challenge the meritocratic thinking from which the elite draw their power and which create the “map of reality” offered by NCLB. As Audre Lorde (1984) so famously said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 110).

*The codification of scientifically based reading research.* According to the National Reading Panel’s methodology, studies included in reported findings had to be 1) published in English in a refereed journal, 2) deal with reading instruction from grades K-12, and 3) utilize “*an experimental or quasi-experimental design with a control group or a multiple-baseline method*” [italics added for emphasis] (NRP, sec 4, Para 3). It can then be extrapolated that “evidence based” instruction was limited to quantitative

research, thereby excluding volumes of descriptive qualitative research data from consideration in informing educational policy and practice around reading instruction.

Though it is recognized by literacy scholars that there is value in utilizing multiple theories and models of reading to plan and reflect on reading instruction (Tracey & Morrow, 2006), the work of the NRP and the NCLB legislation seem to imply that the stage model of reading take precedence in elementary classrooms. The connections the NRP report makes to the ideas of “learning to read” and “reading to learn” echo the influence of the work of stage model proponents Chall (1996), Ehri (1991), and Frith (1985). Stage models describe reading along a continuum of skills mastery, where it is possible to understand a child’s current reading ability and instructional needs by examining what skills the student had previously mastered and skills needed to be developed next. The demand of NCLB that early literacy teachers utilize curriculum based on SBRR implies that curriculum should utilize a stage method, focusing on alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness and fluency in the primary grades, before shifting to the more complex skills of vocabulary acquisition and comprehension in the intermediate grades.

There have been several cogent critiques of the methodology and validity of the report of the National Reading Panel (Allington, 2002; Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Taylor, et.al, 2000). Though it does not serve the current research to revisit these critiques at length, it is relevant to recognize that the paradigm of “evidence-based” methods increased pressure to design or use instructional practices that focus on what is easily measured, which in turn validated the use of high-stakes assessments to measure educational outcomes, which in turn gave additional credence to curriculum design based

on SBRR as defined by the NRP's methodology (Allington, 2002). This circular thinking conflates the relationship between standards, assessment, and curriculum and devalues teaching practices that do not fit the recommendations of the NRP. Critical pedagogy does not concern itself with a bank balance (the assessments measure of how much knowledge has been deposited into the mind of the student), rather it attempts to develop more complex outcomes, outcomes that are very difficult to quantify. Years after the passage of NCLB and the Reading First Initiative, national assessment data continued to show that student achievement under the paradigm of SBRR remains static, despite state reports that most schools continued to make Adequate Yearly Progress, implying that ever greater numbers of students have achieved proficiency (ACT, Inc., 2006).

Troubled by decades long trends in national assessment results that revealed the apparent failures of three decades of state based standards reforms, mandated high-stakes assessment and fidelity to programs based on SBRR, the Governors of the United States of America convened in 2008 to attempt to improve educational reform efforts through collective action.

***Common Core State Standards.*** In 2010, a set of standards, the Common Core State Standards were finalized and made available for adoption by any state that might choose to use them.

*Purpose and scope.* Contemplating the variability in results from previous reform initiatives, The National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2010) hoped to create a comprehensive set of educational standards that would lead to "college and career readiness" for all learners (p. 7). Seven characteristics define college and career readiness: 1) demonstrating independence; 2)

building strong content knowledge; 3) responding to demands of audience, task, discipline and purpose; 4) comprehending and critiquing; 5) valuing evidence; 6) strategically using digital media and technology; and 7) understanding the perspectives of others., The NGA and CCSSO hoped that having a set of common standards might redress the variability of quality and content between state standard sets that were creating equity concerns across the country (National Governors Association, 2014). The variability of quality in disparate standard sets from state to state meant that some students in the United States of America were held to a different academic standard than others. The variability of content created similar concerns for equity, especially for transient populations of learners who could not be guaranteed a viable and coherent educational experience as they move from place to place. In content, the reading standards that address comprehension are more focused on analysis than previous standards, which focused on demonstration of understanding; while the content of the foundational skills aligns highly to previous sets of standards. (Porter, McMaken, Hwang & Yang, 2011).

Research base. The research base for the CCSS for English Language Arts is detailed in Appendix A of the standards document (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 36-40). Though the foundational skills defined by SBRR in previous standard sets are almost identical to those in the CCSS (Shanahan, 2014), the research bibliography contains only 8 sources describing reading foundational skills and the practices that support them, but these recommendations “are more specific in that regard than anything offered by NCLB” (p. 11). Because the stated goal of the standards is to produce students who are college and career ready, there is a significant presence in the research base of studies

that define the gap between what students can do at the end of high school course work and what is required at entry level college or career work, including the documenting of a gradual but definite decrease in difficulty of reading material over the last few decades in American schools (Achieve, Inc., 2007; Adams, 2009). ACT, Inc. (2009) found that 33% of students entering college would not be prepared to tackle college level reading; Bettinger and Long (2009) further found that with out taking remedial non-credit bearing courses these students had greatly diminished chances of success in higher education. These findings can be understood best in light of the Williamson's (2006) comparison of lexile levels of high school literature and content textbooks to entry level college and career texts and technical manuals, which revealed a "substantially higher demand" of students literacy skills in post secondary work that in high school (p. 2). These findings align with findings of the Reading Between the Lines study (ACT, Inc., 2006), which found that the controlling factor across gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status for acquiring the benchmark score of 21 (the score threshold at which students were likely to pass credit bearing courses upon entering college) was not control of any particular reading skill or strategy, but rather the ability to apply those skills and strategies in the unpacking of complex texts. This research clearly defines a problem in the current actual of schooling in America: students who cannot read college and career level material are less likely to be successful in those contexts. A reaction to research about the readiness gap, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) include a standard addressing text complexity; Anchor standard ten of the CCSS specifically requires students to read text of sufficient complexity for their grade level.

The research base of the CCSS has come under fire by numerous critics.

Gamson, Lu, and Eckert (2013) examined text complexity levels encountered by 3rd and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students over the last century and did not detect any decline in complexity of basal reading over the last 50 years. They question the veracity of research that has shown ever-diminishing levels of complexity in school texts over time. Moats (2013) impugns the empirical validity of the standards, pointing out that, with such a vast array of contributing minds, the standards represent not a record of best practice or current understanding of content, but rather a political and philosophical compromise with troubling implications. Bauerline (2013) offers a specific critique of this philosophical mismatch; he points out that the CCSS call for the reading and study of foundational texts. Such a demand flies directly in the face of reading scholarship of the last 30 years which has embraced and been defined by a multi-cultural, anti-foundational epistemology. Essentially scholars have agreed that there is no foundational body of written work that carries more value than another and the CCSS's suggestion that some texts are critical foundational reading is outdated by several decades. Also critical of the CCSS research base, Zancanella and Moore (2014) attempt to illuminate the "untold origins" of the standards; they assert that significant influence by "a person, a foundation, and a report" led to the genesis of the CCSS, whose unstated but implied purpose, they assert, is to set the stage for a national curriculum. Crowder (2014) agrees, worrying that the CCSS was designed to continue the history of political and corporate involvement in education for private gain; redefining what must be taught might create economic opportunity for publishers who can capitalize on the latest reform. Shanahan (2014) is less concerned with the imposition of national curriculum, pointing out that the CCSS, due to its broad description of learning outcomes, is less "like a curriculum or scope and

sequence guide to daily instruction” than the skill-based standards that preceded them (p. 11). Shanahan also points out, however, that the described outcomes of standards “can never be completely separated from the methods that might be used to reach them”(p. 10), and it is on this point that scholars have focused their most significant discussions about the CCSS.

*Implementation.* Unlike the skills driven standards that preceded them, which lend themselves to skills based pedagogies focused on direct instruction (Houchen, 2013; Kornhaber, 2004), the Common Core State Standards do not proscribe any particular methodology. “Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3). Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman (2012) point out this sentence in the introduction to the standards; they identify this as a “tremendous responsibility”(p. 2) and challenge teachers to be thoughtful practitioners in their work with students and the CCSS. Pearson (in press) problematizes this further by pointing out that documents published by CCSS author lead organizations might take pedagogical and curricular decision making out of teachers hands, even though the standards expressly assure that they won’t. “The question for the CCSS is whether they will deliver on their promise to cede to teachers the (or at least some of the) authority to determine how they will help their students meet the CCSS within their school settings” (Pearson, in press, p. 6). Bowman and Maloch (2011) reiterate the concern that the CCSS may lead teachers to ignore the myriad ways that students can gain important literacy competencies outside of strictly text dependent interactions. The common concern among scholars seems to be that in the

implementation efforts of the CCSS that the teachers may abandon effective practices in favor of trends, exacerbating the equity issues the CCSS claims to be attempting to alleviate. By this reckoning, implementation of CCSS might very well be the most important aspect of the standards.

Some scholars see the CCSS as providing an opening for teachers to re-enact, remember and re-learn pedagogies that are more student-centered and student-responsive (Bunch, Walqui & Pearson, 2014; Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Cervetti & Pearson, 2012). Cervetti and Pearson (2012) describe one such pedagogy: inquiry based instruction. They suggest that under the CCSS, literacy skills be leveraged as tools for inquiry-based approaches to content instruction. Inquiry practices are recursive; as students' reading and writing experiences work in concert with their hands on exploration of discipline specific concepts, both literacy and content knowledge improve (p. 581). Because inquiry-based instruction centers classroom practice on the student interest and cognition, it also opens the door for pedagogies that addresses social justice themes (Grindon, 2014). Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman (2012) point out that the CCSS can and should be implemented in "ways that strengthen student-centered, deeply interactive approaches to literacy... using reading and writing to pursue goals of personal and social significance"(p. 2). Inquiry and critical literacy practices, frequently sidelined in favor of drill and skill instruction under skill-based standards, are finding new life with the advent of the Common Core State Standards. However, if the possibility of a return to more student-centered pedagogies unites scholars in enthusiasm around the potential of the CCSS, then it is one particular text-centered practice that has divided them.

The CCSS's focus on text complexity has sparked significant dialogue about a

practice called close reading; this instructional strategy, and consequently the entire CCSS, has become a lightning rod for controversy. Close reading has been described as the careful analytic uncovering of the author's meaning and craft through multiple readings of text (Hinchman & Moore, 2013; Snow & O'Connor, 2013). Hinchman and Moore (2013) discuss the important role of teachers' knowledge about how meaning is constructed in their careful planning for successful close reading; for example, meaning can be variable between students for whom a text is seen as an isolated object versus students who view the text as a culturally situated object (p. 443). They assert that teachers who do not deeply understand the myriad factors that contribute to reading comprehension could do more harm than good in attempting to leverage close reading as regular part of classroom practice. Snow and O'Connor (2013) agree that knowledge demands are critical in considering close reading as an instructional approach. The authors dismiss claims that close reading can "level the playing field" for all learners, especially ELLs; pointing out that "close reading does not address the most important reasons readers struggle, which are lack of background knowledge and lack of familiarity with key vocabulary and low-frequency academic language constructions" (p. 3). They also caution that over use of the strategy with demotivated middle and high school students could further alienate them from their education by negating evidence drawn from other legitimate sources that might support their multiple points of view. These authors both agree that close reading has troubling implications, they do concede that when carefully planned, student-responsive, and thoughtfully deployed close reading could be a useful supplement to quality balanced literacy programs. However, without exacting understanding of the beneficial and challenging aspects of this practice equity

concerns could be greatly impaired.

Though it seems brazen after 20 years of standards and curriculum focused on reading skills acquisition to expect students to have valuable reading experiences by analyzing texts that they cannot decode, there is a reading theory that can help illuminate the value of close reading for all learners. In the past 10 years, a theory has been proposed that acknowledges the apparent relationship between early literacy skills and later reading proficiency, but challenges the assumptions of continuity and causality common in stage based models. Paris (2005) posits that reading skills can be conceived of along a continuum of constraint and that the degree of constraint governing each skill defines its trajectory discretely. Stahl (2011) summarizes thusly, “constrained abilities consist of a limited number of items and thus can be mastered in a relatively short time frame. Unconstrained abilities are learned across a lifetime, broad in scope, variable among people, and may influence many cognitive and academic skills” (p. 53). Alphabetic knowledge, concepts of print, phonics and high frequency word knowledge fall on the continuum as highly constrained skills; whereas vocabulary and comprehension are unconstrained skills. Some skills like fluency and phonological awareness exist in the middle of the continuum (p. 53-54). This theory calls into question the inferred causal links between early reading skill mastery and later success in complex reading tasks, suggesting a more complex relationship instead (Paris, 2005). In stage based models of reading, comprehension and vocabulary instruction occur primarily with text written at the student’s independent or instructional level (Tracey & Morrow, 2006), drastically limiting the complexity of both the words and ideas to which children reading below grade level are exposed. Stahl (2011) points out that vocabulary and

comprehension learning both begin in the first year of life, long before even the most constrained skills, and need to be specifically fostered independent of the teaching of constrained skills, the assessment of which (because they are easily quantifiable, which is not true of unconstrained skills) frequently determines the educational fate of learners in classrooms (p. 55). The constrained skills theory of reading supports the practice of close reading as being appropriate and valuable for all learners.

*High-stakes concerns.* It is unclear if the Common Core, despite its qualitative differences relative to previous state standards, will affect any real change in the way schools operate or in the outcomes they can create. Although common standards might mitigate the intense variability between states' summative assessment content, it is unclear if these particular standards, that lend themselves to more student-centered and critical pedagogies (Grindon, 2014; Kaplan, 2014), will actually transform the way school systems value and serve diverse learners. Some scholars have noted that while the standards are improved, the system of high stakes accountability of which they are a part will limit their ability to create demonstrable change (Shannon, Whitney, & Wilson, 2014; Welner, 2014); "the machine won't really be improved if you just improve the Standards themselves, not if that machine is designed to go about the job of school reform in a destructive and ill-advised way" (Shannon, Whitney, & Wilson, p. 296). Data that merely describes problems without illuminating the causes or suggesting remedy can't help but be divisive. If the assessments being designed to align with the CCSS fail to capture the deep potential of analytic and critical thinking that inform them, the data they generate may be just as destructive to school and classroom environments as the data from previously utilized state assessments.

**Instructional and affective implications of high-stakes standardized assessments.** In order to better understand the socio-cultural context of the current research, the instructional and affective implications of high-stakes accountability need to be described. Because the outcomes of high-stakes standardized assessments can impact the lives and functioning of schools, teachers, and students (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) and because those same assessments tend to be over-populated with items testing less rigorous and more skill based standards (Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011), the influence of these data in shaping teacher practice and attitudes can be significant.

*Classroom practice: The shift toward standardization of instruction and away from educational equity.* Accountability systems based on standardized test results influenced shifts in reading instruction related to the pressure to raise test scores (Au & Gourd, 2013; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Imig & Imig, 2006). Over the last 20 years, many states have sought out reading programs that offer uniformity to reading instruction across classrooms and schools (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Dennis, 2010; Kaniuka, 2009). The search for a “silver bullet” curriculum resulted in the adoption of reading programs that offer teachers and students “a one-size-fits-all” model that teaches to a standardized test rather than to the strategies and processes necessary for successful reading comprehension” (Dennis, 2008, p. 579). Shannon (1987) describes commercial reading materials and the copious amount of worksheets students are required to complete in the execution of the daily lesson plans. He asserts that materials like these, designed under the ethic of measurability, contribute to the “deskilling” of teachers who privilege the design of the materials over their own knowledge about how students learn (p. 320).

Teachers willingly accepted this technical control as simply “the way to teach reading.” Commercial teaching materials then controlled the program goals, methods of instruction, main source of texts for reading, and evaluation procedures without noticeable objection on the part of teachers. (p. 319)

It has been well documented that schools that serve populations most at-risk for failure (i.e., the poor and ethnic minorities) are more likely to have commercial programs in place that focus on mastery of skills (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Doutro & Seland, 2012; Doutro, Seland, & Bien, 2013; Houchen, 2013 ). According to Au and Gourd (2013) “test-based changes in classroom instruction negatively affect non-white students disproportionately and the pressure of high-stakes standardized testing are greatest in states with high populations of students from low income families” (p. 17.) Sadly, students who receive literacy instruction with skills based foci can develop dysphoric identities as readers and writers (Dennis, 2010; Duto & Seland, 2012; Duto, Seland & Bien, 2013; Houchen, 2013); though they self-report taking pleasure in reading, writing, or both, students will simultaneously express a belief that they are not good readers or writers. These self-fulfilling prophecies are direct by-products of instruction designed to cultivate test scores not literate citizens.

As classroom practices have shifted to align with high-stakes assessments, so too have teachers understanding of reading development and instruction. In an attempt to replicate a 1995 study surveying teacher beliefs and practices around reading, O’Donnell, Enrico, and Spear (2005) found a demonstrable change in teacher practice and beliefs about the nature of reading related to standardized assessment outcomes. Survey results showed that teachers in tested grades felt that the state’s accountability framework influenced their planning for reading instruction (p. 38) and that there had been “a

significant shift over the decade away from emphasis on the cognitive to emphasis on mastery of skills” (p. 39). Additionally, survey results showed that 44% of teachers in the 2004-05 school year subscribed to a philosophy of reading that assumes comprehension follows basic skills mastery. In the 1994 study, before the state’s accountability framework placed high value on high-stakes assessment, the number of teachers who self-reported holding this philosophy had been only 15%. A consequence of this change in teachers understanding of reading instruction has been a growth in the “null curriculum,” or what is left out of classrooms based on the choices teachers make (Kaniuka, 2009). Schools designated as low performing on state frameworks, the null curriculum has grown in direct proportion to the number of instructional minutes devoted to building student mastery of tested content, and has come to include subjects such as social studies, science, the arts, and PE. In regard to reading instruction, the null curriculum encompasses complex reading tasks that provide students with a context for practicing low-level skills (Au & Gourd, 2013). The null curriculum in place for disadvantaged learners robs them of the opportunity to develop reading competencies that have transferability to other contexts and content areas outside of the small world of the test environment (Perkins & Salomon, 1988).

***Educational triage: The real pedagogy of high-stakes assessment.*** As early as 1988, Madaus discussed the emergence of a pedagogy informed by the content of standardized tests; he called this “measurement-driven instruction,” and it is typified by an over-representation of tested content in academic tasks that students undertake. Classroom planning and practice driven by assessment data gave birth to a new practice: “educational triage.” Traditionally, triage is the practice of rationing medical resources

based on two factors: need and prognosis. In education, triage occurs when schools target particular groups of students for instruction based on proficiency prognoses related to high-stakes standardized tests (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Booher-Jennings (2005) describes educational triage in her study of literacy instruction in Texas schools. “Teachers divided students into three groups- safe cases, suitable cases for treatment and hopeless cases—and rationed resources to those students most likely to improve the school’s scores” (p. 233). Students targeted for intensive instruction are commonly called “bubble kids” as they are on the precipice of proficiency or so minimally proficient that they are at risk for losing ground on the next year’s assessment. Commonly referred to as “teaching to the test”, this sort of practice has been found to be more common in schools that serve populations with high percentages of ethnic and socioeconomic minorities (Hillocks, 2002; MacNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Moore & Hansen, 2001). Even though test item analysis can be useful for revealing the underlying strategies students might need to successfully navigate a test, it is not uncommon that test items are examined to design instruction directly aligned to test content targeted for improvement (Dennis, 2008).

Educational triage practices have frightening implications for educational, cultural, linguistic, and societal oppression of students deemed to have a poor proficiency prognosis. In actuality, the implications for bubble kids are equally disturbing; Kornhaber’s (2004) analysis of the use of high stakes testing results to justify increased amounts of isolated skills based instruction found that there is not a direct causal link between gains on high stakes assessment and operation of knowledge in contexts outside of the test environment. So while some students are denied equal educational access to

even the most loathsome, technocratic instruction, the students who are included do not receive any personal educational benefit. Rather, the institution borrows student energies and achievement to advance their institutional reputation (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Directing more educational resources toward some students and away from others for the purposes of accountability to an educational reform fails to realize the expressed intent of the reform itself, increased achievement for all learners. Freire's (2000) commentary on exploitive and manipulative systems like these are particularly prescient; "Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects in is humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression" (p. 54). Expressing a desire to intervene for and support learners who are at risk of failure in school by delivering instruction that will only serve the interest of the institution is a terrible exercise of the power of public schools.

***Affective impact: The stress of conflating standards and testing:*** No Child Left Behind's specious linkage of student performance on standardized tests to school or teacher quality has had disastrous effects on teachers' affect as well as their conception of quality instruction. Two specific effects on teachers have been increased stress and confusion about the nature of good teaching.

It has been well documented that when accountability frameworks privilege a single source of summative data, teachers and students experience unreasonably high levels of stress (Bol, Ross, Nunnery & Alberg, 2002; Cho, Wehmeyer & Kingston, 2010; Smith, 1991; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Yeh, 2006;). Tye and O'Brien (2002) studied teacher exodus from California schools. They asked teachers who had made the choice to

leave public education to explain their reasoning; “those respondents who already left teaching had ranked the pressures of increased accountability (high-stakes testing, test preparation, and standards)” as their number one reason for leaving, despite being considered effective in their work. One respondent noted, “With every year, I was required to teach more curriculum based on testing.” Houchen (2013) corroborates that the loss of autonomy in teacher practice contributes to the distress of teachers. In her work offering alternatives to the dominance of pre-packaged, skills based programmatic instruction offered to African American students in Florida, two –thirds of whom failed to achieve proficiency on state assessments, she states, “Nevertheless, this type of instruction proliferates as one kind of strategy-based pedagogy aimed at meeting the needs of students failing high stakes standardized tests in an ever-increasing climate of punitive practice for teachers and students alike” (p. 95). Feeling forced to implement instruction that they know, overtly or tacitly, to be bad for students creates feelings of crisis and conflict in teachers that are difficult to negotiate and confuse their professional self-concept.

In narrowing the criteria for assessing effective teaching to that which is easily quantified by standardized tests, modern reforms have effectively narrowed the self-assessment of teachers to disproportionately privilege these same data and instructional practices that are implied by them. Imig and Imig (2006) express the problem this way: “Although teacher [effectiveness] was once the subject of much consideration, during the past decade attention has shifted to a narrow definition of effectiveness based on the ability of teachers to realize... score gains on tests” (p. 170). In short, teachers evidence confusion about the nature of best practice because high-stakes accountability

frameworks influence them. Dutro and Selland (2012) studied reactions to pedagogy fueled by high-stakes assessment in Colorado, a proving ground for pay for performance teacher evaluation systems. They discuss the carcinogenic ability of high-stakes accountability to “[induce] teachers to teach in ways that contradict their own understandings of effective practice” (p. 341). Similarly, Fisher, Bol and Pribesh (2011) found that when schools embraced structures to nurture pedagogies of higher order thinking and promote deep discussion, teacher designed assessments mimicked the diminished rigor demands of summative high-stakes tests that define the state’s accountability framework. These teachers “seemed to equate high performance on standardized tests as a byproduct of challenging instruction” (p. 19). In actuality, instruction driven by test content has most often been found to be narrower and less rigorous, especially for at risk populations (Houchen, 2013; Remesal, 2011;).

The research about the influence of high-stakes standardized tests on instruction and teacher affect is further evidence that the “map of reality” (Apple, 2009) offered to the public about education in America is deeply flawed. *A Nation at Risk* and *No Child Left Behind* both recommend increased accountability of public education as a necessary measure to ensure equitable outcomes for all learners; when, in fact, the accountability system utilized to monitor the quality of outcomes has increased the disparity it purports to alleviate.

### **Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge**

The review of literature presented here establishes a lens for examining both teacher belief and knowledge. Flores and Day (2006) discuss the myriad factors that

collide as teachers attempt to understand their identities as educators. They state that this process is “multi-dimensional, idiosyncratic and context-specific” (p. 219). They describe “an interplay between different, and sometimes, conflicting, perspectives, beliefs and practices” (p. 219) that make this work particularly challenging. Acknowledging that beliefs and practices can problematize each other, each will be discussed briefly; key generalizations about belief will be shared; a belief called academic optimism will be defined, and a nomenclature for discussing teacher knowledge will be shared.

**Teacher beliefs.** A large body of scholarship, spanning the thirty years from 1960-1990), attempted to shed light on the roles of teacher beliefs in the execution of actual teacher work (Ernest, 1989; Lorti, 1975; Nesper, 1987; Roehler, Duffy, Herrman, Conley, & Johnson, 1988; Rokeach, 1968). The volumes of research that occurred over these years produced little consensus or agreement about the nature of beliefs, the boundaries of the vast bodies of knowledge required to do the work of teaching, or the directionality of the relationship between beliefs and knowledge.

Pajares (1992) synthesized much of existing literature about teacher beliefs. He found that there were several factors that complicate any cogent discussion about beliefs. First, he found there is tremendous variation in the way that belief is defined. Some defined belief as manipulated knowledge, other as the cognitive construction of experience, others still as an episodic record of significant learning with no explicit structure, while even still others argue that belief forms as a blend of cognitive representation, emotion and behavior triggered by that relationship. Further complicating the three decades long discourse Pajares was attempting to wrangle, it was uniformly agreed that teachers are influenced by both beliefs and knowledge as they plan and

implement instruction; however, there was again little agreement about the supremacy of either beliefs or knowledge in driving teacher behavior. Furthermore, scholars who previously studied belief systems of teachers had conflicting ideas about the mechanisms responsible for the formation of beliefs. Despite these disagreements about the nature, seat and supremacy of beliefs, Pajares was able to “make some inferences and generalizations... with reasonable confidence” (p.324). Though certainly all sixteen of Pajares’ generalizations have utility for understanding the current research question, three of these generalizations have particular resonance. First, beliefs must be inferred from action; second, belief change in adulthood is a very rare occurrence that is often associated with a gestalt shift, and third, central beliefs influence subsets of beliefs (usually called attitudes and values) that are connected to the central belief system.

*Core and peripheral beliefs.* Phipps and Borg (2009) discuss central beliefs and attitudes and values in their research about language teachers’ beliefs and practices. They use the terms core and peripheral beliefs. They assert, “tensions between what teachers say and do are a reflection of their [peripheral beliefs] and of the different forces that influence their thinking and behavior” (p. 381). They identify time, policy, and curricular restraint as factors that might cause peripheral beliefs to drift out of line with stronger core beliefs. Not surprisingly, they found that “where core and peripheral beliefs can be implemented harmoniously, teachers’ practices will be characterized by fewer tensions” (p.388). Critical pedagogues hold a central belief about the purpose of education that is at odds with the socially reproductive function of modern schooling (Freire, 2000). It cannot then be surprising that greater levels of tension and discordance, in particular, might mark the work of these teachers. However, as Apple (2012) suggests, hope makes

possible the work of cultural transformation (p. 250). Recent scholarship in optimism as a core belief suggests that a stubborn belief in one's ability to make a difference for students qualitatively effects teacher practice.

***Optimism.*** Recently there has been research into defining one particular academic belief, and how that belief affects teacher practice. The emergence of scholarship around academic optimism began in the assessment of school community systems (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006). This trait was defined and examined at the individual teacher level by Ngidi (2012), who defined academic optimism in individual teachers as “a teacher's positive belief that he/she can make a difference in the academic performance of students by emphasizing academics and learning, by trusting parents and students to cooperate in the process, and by believing in his or her own capacity to overcome difficulties and react to failure with resilience and perseverance” (p. 140). The results of Ngidi's correlative study, which sought to examine the existence of relationships between differing levels of academic optimism and 1) disaggregated biographical data, and /or 2) levels of humanistic/student-centered teaching, management and citizenship practices, indicated that there was a reciprocal relationship between high levels of academic optimism and student-centered/ humanistic pedagogical and managerial dispositions. These finding suggest that the presence of strong humanistic, student-centered practices in classrooms imply that the teacher exhibits similarly strong belief in his or her ability to foster positive student outcomes.

A deep belief and hope that education can be a lever for social transformation form the foundation of critical pedagogy. The teacher must believe that she can effect

progressive change while inhabiting a position of power in the structure she both dwells in and hopes to reform.

**A nomenclature for teacher knowledge.** Beliefs alone do not completely account for the choices teachers make in the classroom. Knowledge obviously informs teacher choices about curriculum, grouping, methodology, management, and assessment (to name only a few). The types of knowledge teachers use when making these decisions has been described discreetly by Shulman (1986), to whose typology I refer when analyzing the evolution of my practice over time.

Shulman (1987) analyzed changing demands of teacher knowledge in regards to standards for professional qualification from 1875 to the 1980s. He found that bodies of knowledge deemed essential over time for becoming a teacher shifted from almost entirely content knowledge in 1875 to almost no content knowledge in the 1980s. Acknowledging the obvious need for knowledge about both content and pedagogy, Shulman devised a classification system for understanding the types of knowledge teachers utilize in their work. These types of knowledge include a) content knowledge, b) curricular knowledge, c) general pedagogical knowledge, and d) pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). Content knowledge refers to the general funds of knowledge about the specific subjects taught; while curricular knowledge refers to teachers awareness of and understanding of the materials available to deliver subject area instruction. General pedagogical knowledge includes knowledge about the principles and strategies of teaching that transcend subject matter, and pedagogical content knowledge includes, as literally written, the combination of content and pedagogical knowledge that

teachers in “representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (Shulman, 1987, p. 9).

In the real world of education, teacher knowledge of all types comes into collision with myriad factors that are out of the teacher’s control. Context of teaching, student background knowledge, curriculum changes, scheduling, and accountability demands are all factors that affect what happens in the classroom. As teachers adjust to these, and many other factors, they must revise their approaches to instruction. In doing so, they utilize still another form of teacher knowledge that Shulman (1987) calls strategic knowledge. Developed over time as teachers work with students, strategic knowledge “comes into play as the teacher confronts particular situations or problems... where principles collide and no simple solution is possible.” The outcome of increased strategic knowledge is that over time teachers develop from maxim driven instructors into wise practitioners. It is in the expression of this strategic knowledge that teachers can push back against their own deskilling. When presented with curricula selected by a building or district administrator, a teacher who has developed and can express strong strategic knowledge, is better equipped to resolve the conflicts between the demands of curricula designers and other stakeholders and her own imperatives as a teacher.

## **Methodology**

Posner, Strike, Hewson, and Gertzog (1982) found that several conditions had to be met in order for a person to make significant changes to existing belief structures. Pajares (1992) summarized their findings. “First they must understand that new information represents an anomaly. Second, they must believe that the information should be reconciled with existing beliefs. Third, they must want to reduce the inconsistencies among beliefs (p. 321). By answering the research question, how does a critical teacher convinced about the function of educational standards tools of social reproduction, completely reverse course to become an advocate for standards based instruction? I hoped to reconcile an anomalous experience with my existing beliefs; thereby, reducing inconsistencies that had emerged about my own identity. In order to accomplish this I chose to utilize a research methodology called autoethnography.

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography centers the author as both researcher and subject in a search for understanding of the self in a socio-cultural context. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010) “As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography” (section 2, para. 1). From autobiography this methodology relies on the retrospective stories of the researcher as a fully immersed participant, stories specifically chosen for their relation to the issue under study, as an important source of data. From ethnography, this methodology requires that the socio-cultural context of the subject be described in enough detail as to illuminate the position of the subject in that context. “When researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made

possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity (section 2, para. 4).

For autoethnography to distinguish itself from simple storytelling it must consciously seek to bring itself into relation to its audience not through traditional conceptions of validity, but through resonance. “Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, section 2, para. 4). One way autoethnographers have attempted to meet this goal is through creating work that operates on the efferent aspects of the reading process; this has been called *evocative autoethnography* (Anderson, 2006), and is typified by the work of Carolyn Ellis, whose literary descriptions have become almost synonymous with the autoethnography itself. However, the roots and traditions of autoethnography cannot be so narrowly defined. Anderson offers an alternative approach, the creation of resonant autoethnography (p. 387); he calls this form of autoethnography *analytic autoethnography*.

Analytic autoethnography shares the traits of all autoethnography in that it positions the researcher as a full member of the research setting and seeks to make plain the presence of the researcher in the text; however analytic autoethnography adds a commitment “to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understanding of the broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006, p. 375). This commitment to exploring the self in relation to the social context permits analytic autoethnographers to offer insights about broader social phenomena that emerge from the data (p. 388). *The Body Silent* by Murphy (1987) describes the experience of one

physically handicapped individual in society, but through interrogation of the social world from the insider's perspective, also captures the formation of critical self-awareness of the researcher who gains significant self-knowledge in the process of analysis.

Five features of analytic autoethnography are discussed by Anderson: “1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, 2) analytic reflexivity, 3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, 4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and 5) commitment to theoretical analysis” (Anderson, p. 378). All four of Anderson's features are utilized and detailed in the following sections.

### **Participant in Context**

Like Murphy (1987), and in accordance with Anderson's (2006) first feature of analytic autoethnography, I am positioned as the complete member researcher, a full participant in the social world under study. In the fall of 2011, the time at which the research question formed, I worked in a rather autonomous 5<sup>th</sup> grade general education classroom in an elementary school that met the guidelines to receive federal designation as a Title I school. In addition to the high rates of students who received free and reduced lunch (100%), the school served a student population that was predominantly Hispanic (69%), 60.9% of the population received ESL support services, and 20.5% of the student population was identified as needing supports from special education programs. The particular classroom in which I taught mirrored the composition of the school in general except for a presence of higher percentage of students receiving special education services.

The district in which I work was in its first year of implementation of a new set of academic standards for English Language Arts, the previous state standards having been replaced by the newly adopted Common Core State Standards. Unfortunately, assessments for the next three years would continue to be aligned to the previous skill base of the old standards. This created some dissonance between what teachers were expected to teach and how students were to be assessed. The district had endeavored, the previous year, to address this concern by creating documents that cross referenced the new and old standards so teachers would be able to negotiate the conflict between the standards and the statewide accountability system (i.e., what the law required them to teach and how their effectiveness at meeting that aim was evaluated). The result was a rather lengthy, complicated document that provided neither clarity nor peace of mind. In the 2011-12 school year, the decision was made, that in order to alleviate confusion, all ELA instruction would simply shift to the new Common Core ELA standards. It was determined (or hoped) that Common Core aligned instruction would yield sufficient growth in skills as to not disadvantage teachers and learners in regards to their high stakes summative assessments.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of 1) autobiographical writing, 2) reflective journal writing, and 3) records of conversations with other teaching professionals.

Anderson's (2006) third feature of analytic autoethnography requires that the researcher have a strong narrative presence in the work; "the researcher's own feelings and experiences are incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed"(p. 384). For this reason, autobiographical

data were collected. I engaged in a lengthy process of narrative writing, making no attempt to limit the content or scope of my writing, allowing whatever material seemed germane to the research question to materialize into narrative. I ended up with a body of writing that covered not only the key event under study, but my entire career as an elementary school teacher as well. These autobiographies also met Anderson's fourth feature of analytic autoethnography, dialogue with informants beyond the self. The autobiographical data captured critical interactions between my students and myself, which were crucial in helping me explore the research question.

Reflective journals were kept because Anderson's (2006) second feature of analytic autoethnography requires commitment to analytic reflexivity. Analytic reflexivity is a commitment to understand the self, inside of the social world. Analytic autoethnographic interrogation of self and other may "transform the researcher's own beliefs, actions, and sense of self" (Anderson, p. 383). My reflective journals allowed me to keep track of my own conceptions of myself throughout the autoethnographic process, capturing my insights about my own identity, struggles and positioning.

The fourth of analytic autoethnography is the inclusion of dialogue with informants beyond the self (Anderson, 2006). As a part of my regular district position as an implementation specialist, I meet regularly with groups of teachers undertaking the same work I undertook in the fall and winter of the 2011-2012 school year. These meetings were an invaluable source of triangulation data, allowing me to ascertain whether the outcomes that so inspired my own enthusiasm for this work were isolated to my own classroom or were occurring in other classrooms as well. These data were recorded anecdotally in conversation logs.

## **Data Analysis**

The final feature of analytic autoethnography is commitment to an analytic agenda. This form of research is “self-consciously analytic or committed to addressing general theoretical issues” (Anderson, 2006, p. 387). I understood at the time that this research question was conceived that the work I had undertaken in regard to the Common Core State Standards had deep implications for social justice, and as such, critical theory emerged as the frame for early coding. Initial data analysis yielded further areas for analytic inquiry.

In order to establish areas of analytic inquiry, phase one of data analysis involved conversations with a Critical Friend, an intentionally chosen reflective partner committed to helping me improve my practice (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007). After the autobiographical data were compiled, I met several times with a critical friend to read and reread these autobiographies, discussing and identifying themes that emerged. We also sought to look for how the themes might be related to one another other. Stake (2005) describes this qualitative data analysis practice as classification and pattern recognition (p. 450). We created several graphic organizers in attempting to keep track of these ideas, and these organizers became a guide from which I began a search of literature. The big ideas we identified were teacher beliefs, standards, types of teacher knowledge, change theories, teacher identity, high stakes assessment, and power in schooling. As suggested by Stake, I sought triangulation data, which provide “multiple perspectives to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation”(p. 454). In order to triangulate the analytic levers I had compiled, I compared the emerging themes to the notes I had made about conversation with other

informants. I found significant resonance between my own experiences and those of other classroom teachers that I remained convinced that understanding the answer to the research question may help not only myself, but others, to articulate the profound learning brought about by these instructional experiments.

Phase two of the data analysis consisted of extensive reading of the research on the history of standards, high-stakes assessment teacher beliefs, teacher knowledge, and critical theory. In line with Anderson's (2006) caveat that analytic autoethnography should be characterized by analytic reflexivity, I made connections to research that resonated in a large way or had some grand explicative value for me as the writer. In other words, I focused on research and theory that was either explanatory or revelatory about the nature of my own writing. I then used the insights from those connections to direct further research and to edit the data pool or expand some of the autobiographies to be more illustrative of my own conceptions of my transformation. This process continued until my readings and re-readings of both the literature and my data coalesced into three distinct findings.

### **Limitations**

The current study is limited by its methodology; analytic autoethnographic results are not generalizable by definition, but they can, through analytic reflexivity and commitment to theoretical analysis, create resonance that helps illuminate broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). The voices of teachers, especially teachers serving marginalized populations, are often absent from conversations about the impact of policy on education (Apple, 2012), but it is exactly these voices that need to be included (Simon, 1992). A teacher's voice grounds theory in concrete experiences in ways that academics,

statisticians and policy makers can never do (Elbaz, 2005) and our understandings of the intersection of past and present can illuminate the “adjacent possible” that lies just out of reach in the future (Simon, 1992, p. 149).

## Results

For most of my educational career I toiled in an environment that prohibited the free expression and exercise of my core beliefs as a teacher. In fact, ten years in, I could not conceive of a reality where pedagogies of critical thinking, analysis and liberation would ever be compatible with academic standards, but I was wrong. In attempting to answer the question: How does a critical teacher convinced about the function of educational standards as tools of social reproduction, completely reverse course to become an advocate for the Common Core State Standards? three important findings were identified:

- Academic optimism drove me to discover my identity as a critical pedagogue; these two dispositions represent my core beliefs
- The conflation of educational standards, high-stakes standardized assessment, and school accountability created my peripheral belief that educational standards were antithetical to quality pedagogy.
- My positive attitude toward the Common Core State Standards is a result of the realignment of my core and peripheral beliefs.

The presentation of results will have two sections. First, I will share an extended narrative from my data set. This narrative data contains autobiographical declarations and reflections that clearly illustrate optimism and a critical disposition, a conflated disdain for both standards and high-stakes assessment, as well as distinct expressions of harmonious feelings during initial experiences teaching with the Common Core State Standards. Secondly, key data will be mined from the narrative and framed through the literature. Because analytic autoethnographic (Anderson, 2006) findings are constructed

as part of a recursive, analytically reflexive process of introspection and theoretical analysis, these results will contain relevant references to the literature that helped refine the insights.

### **Extended Narrative**

**My entangled domain.** I had thought upon entering education that the “current actual” (Kauffman, 2010) of my teaching life would be defined only by the needs of my students and my own knowledge of teaching and learning. My pre-service training program had taught me to deliver small group reading instruction by judiciously matching learners with appropriate leveled text, then guiding their thinking in order to build the tool box of reading skills and strategies used by effective readers (Chall, 1996; Ehri, 1995). This pedagogical content knowledge, a healthy book room, and current knowledge of trade books prepared me to teach groups of readers with substantial spans in their reading ability. I appreciated having a framework for instruction that responded to individual student interests and needs; I thought the “adjacent possible” (Kaufman, 2010) for my instruction would be defined by matching my own teacher tools to what students needed to learn, but I was soon to discover that, for public school teachers, policy determines to a large degree both the “current actual” and, consequently, the “adjacent possible” of classroom life.

In the 2004-05 school year, my second year of teaching, the newly adopted Houghton Mifflin Reading (Cooper & Pikulski, 2004) basal was thrust upon me. As I studied the teacher’s manual for the program, which was based on “scientifically based reading research” (p.iv), I noticed that, in comparison to the flexibility and responsiveness of the literacy methods I had used in my first year, the new curriculum

literally tied my hands as a teacher. It was paced at one short story (or excerpted chapter book) a week from the grade level basal, each of which had a corresponding set of leveled readers, ranging in readability from one grade level below to one grade level above the basal story (p. vii); the leveled readers connected topically to the basal story. The lessons were targeted toward one skill and one strategy per week (p. 28), and there were copious numbers of workbook pages to accompany each story (p. 26-57L). Though the series was not fully aligned to the Nevada State Standards, the supposition, communicated by the trainers from the publishing company, was that the partial alignment of the basal would be sufficient to improve outcomes on Nevada's CRT. I can say in all honesty that improving student test scores was not once a motivating factor in my choice to become an educator, but since the No Child Left Behind Act had been passed it seemed to be the only thing driving decisions about the work of teachers.

My "adjacent possible" altered drastically; no longer defined by the teacher/student/text/world connections I wanted students to explore, I was faced with innumerable tomorrows of an homogenized march of routinized, sterile, banal tasks and an endless stream of worksheets. (By the end of first month of instruction my students would have completed 83 worksheets related to the four stories read). I puzzled over my situation in attempt to find a way forward that would best satisfy the many stakeholders I served, while also meeting my own ethical imperative: to create learners who were critical thinkers and empowered self-advocates. I stared across a chasm between the pedagogical content knowledge I brought into my classroom and the curricular knowledge that I was being asked to utilize (Shulman, 1987).

I suddenly felt terrifically anxious. I had not yet enough experience to realize that this programmatic prescriptive response to high stakes testing was common (Dennis, 2008; Shannon, 1987). The Houghton Mifflin trainers assured me that students simply needed to master these skills and strategies and to become effective readers; once mastered, these tip and tricks would coalesce into a controlled system for regulating meaning in text (Chall, 1996). Because the National Reading Panel's recommendations had been made sacrosanct by federal law, the school district's Curriculum and Instruction department tasked all teachers with implementing the new reading series with "fidelity." There would be no avoiding the 83 worksheets. This new "current actual" meant that all decisions about text, lesson sequence, content, questioning, pacing and assessment had already been made by the publisher and my job was to follow the plan as written. Feeling irrelevant in my own vocation, I hoped that the publishers were smarter than me, because I was confused and scared.

**A cautious departure.** In these early days a ghost of a thought began to make its presence felt; something was wrong with the way I was being asked to accomplish my work, and it had to do with a disconnect between what I was being told about effective teaching and what I already knew how to do. Beginning to recognize that I was on the wrong side of the power dynamic, I had to make a choice: conform to policy against my own beliefs and the best interests of my students or ignore the mandates of the district and my supervisor and risk my evaluation. I could not explain my thinking clearly at the time, but I had what Johnson (2010) refers to as a "slow hunch" that skills based approaches would not produce results that were any better than the results I could get from using guided reading and book club strategies.

I chose to redefine my current actual by walking through a door that involved a negotiation between my curricular and pedagogical content knowledge. The story selection in the reading series (Cooper & Pikulski, 2004) wasn't terribly objectionable and each story had a companion set of leveled readers that could be used for small reading groups. Employing what Shulman (1987) would call strategic knowledge, I chose to follow the sequence of the basal, but use the student centered techniques I had studied to engage students with the text. I believed that I could concurrently satisfy the mandate to use the adopted curriculum and still serve my students individual needs. I was equally optimistic that the data would turn out well if I continued to cultivate powerful student cognition. However, my divergence from the teacher's manual did not go unnoticed.

One of my administrators asked to see me after a walk through one day; she pressed me to explain my practice. I admitted to consciously choosing to deviate from the basal because I found the skills driven instruction to be completely uninspiring to my learners; I added that I felt so strongly about the potential of the students in my classroom and the pedagogy I was using that I agreed to return to following the basal manual to the letter if the end of the year data indicated that my students were not achieving similarly to their peers. She allowed me to continue, with the understanding that I was willing to take responsibility for being out of compliance with district policy. My slow hunch continued to percolate as the high stakes assessment data supported my hopeful hypothesis: my students earned test scores that were indistinguishable from those of their peers who had received instruction from the basal with fidelity. My students receiving special education services presented a notable exception to this trend; they scored higher than their academic peers at our grade level.

Inspired by the successes of my students, I continued this general practice for the next few years, but my slow hunch had begun to indict the learning to read/reading to learn model that had been widely circulated as conventional wisdom (Chall, 1996). Functionally, this thinking was oppressing my learners by allowing them access only to content that they could decode fluently (the de facto definition of “reading” in primary grades in the building in which I worked); students would frequently enter my classroom with excellent decoding skills and reading fluently, but with absolutely no comprehension. Others arrived disfluent with poor word attack skills but seemed to understand text even though they made a large number of errors as they read. For either group of students delivering grade level content was a challenge, and for students doubly impacted by poverty and limited English proficiency this meant that grade level content might be delivered up to three grade levels below the syntactic and cognitive rigor required of their peers. This infantilization of othered learners was unacceptable to me, and I felt compelled to keep experimenting with practices that could help my students discover their deepest potential.

**The emergence of critical pedagogy.** In the spring of 2009, I began my master’s degree. At that time, my slow hunch collided with a very big idea. The embryonic theory I had been incubating, that skill based educational standards and their associated hitmen the Criterion Referenced Test (CRT) and canned curriculum reinforced social stratification rather than ameliorating it, was completely validated when I read Freire’s (2000) thoughts on banking education. I identified strongly with his assertions about the dehumanizing function of schooling not just for students, who were routinely identified in groups by test scores, but also for the teachers, who routinely are asked to divorce

themselves from care for the formation of full human beings in order to serve the ends of the state (i.e., high stakes assessment results). I could not fathom that I had not overtly acknowledged my own oppression. As I evaluated my practice again, through the lens of critical pedagogy, my “adjacent possible” expanded in directions that stoked the flames of belief that education could indeed liberate.

The new “current actual” emerged in my classroom. I explicitly stated to my students at the beginning of every year, that although we had differing capacities to negotiate printed text, we were all equally capable of thinking about interesting things (Paris, 2005). They understood and we agreed to develop our capacity to think collectively, while developing our individual reading abilities through intentional practice (Stahl, 2011). This practice occurred in small group reading with texts that were not as challenging, but developed context for the unit of study developed and reinforced students’ foundational reading skills while supporting content instruction. By adopting this lens for my practice, I had freedom to follow any connection we wanted to make.

My “adjacent possible” felt limitless. For example, in a unit about the Trail of Tears, we collectively studied first hand accounts of the Trail of Tears, representing multiple perspectives (a crucial practice in critical pedagogy is the developing student awareness of multiple perspectives); in small group reading students read more traditionally academic texts about the Cherokee people, Andrew Jackson, and Manifest Destiny. Students created a newspaper from the time period, with a wicked opinion and editorial section as a summative assessment of their learning. And the data just kept getting better. The more aggressively I implemented these strategies the more growth my students made. Feelings of paranoia that had plagued my affect through out the early

years of my career dissipated, replaced by a fledgling confidence born of my ability (finally) to articulate a theoretical foundation for my practice.

**Mandated triage.** Though I had argued for and was allowed relative autonomy in my private classroom practice, there were times during the day and year when the district required teachers to collaborate in data driven interventions. In accordance with NCLB, students identified as being at risk for failure were required to receive interventions too support proficiency (sec. 1202). Quantitative data drove grouping and planning for these instructional times. An analysis of assessment data (our school used the Measures of Academic Progress assessment (MAP) (NWEA, 2008) and the previous year's CRT results) revealed the proficiency prognosis for our students (Booher-Jennings, 2005). We then distributed the students into groups and distributed our time toward the groups most likely to achieve proficiency from our increased intervention (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

In my district and school, it was theorized that students' low test scores may not necessarily describe their proficiency, but rather describe a mismatch between the vocabulary of the classroom and the language of the standardized test. In order to raise test scores, it was common practice for teachers to use retired test materials as models for curriculum during targeted intervention blocks, a forty-five minute instructional period targeted toward increasing student proficiency rates. Interventionists (classroom teachers and paraprofessionals assigned to the role) presented targeted students with instruction in how to interpret "question stems." For example, "What would be the best new title for the story?" actually meant "What is the main idea of the story?" These blocks of instruction equally bored and demoralized students, or worse, reinforced in them the idea that ferreting out the correct answer to a contrived task equated to academic success.

I could clearly see that these practices added to students' oppression. Students who had previously met proficiency targets or who received special education services or ELL pullout services were not targeted for these types of interventions, receiving "enrichment" time (facilitated by teacher aides) or program service minutes, respectively, during the intervention block. (The only possible assumption here is that some students were not going to pass the assessments anyway, so why bother prepping them. When you plan for deficit, you begin to see deficit!) Exacerbating my outrage, the students who were likely to pass the test were the victims of educational neglect, but the neglect was viewed by the system as benign (as if such a thing could be!). My forced participation in practices so misaligned with my core beliefs about education led to deep feelings of resentment targeted at educational standards. Because of the deeply entwined relationship between CRT results, accountability, triage practices and the standards themselves, I attributed causality to the standards, after all they drove test content that drove the triage. I despaired: how were children from poor, ethnically diverse neighborhoods supposed to develop critical awareness when their school experience consisted of being told that there was one right answer, predetermined by an outside authority and that their success as learners depended entirely upon being able to identify that one answer?

During the "stretch run," a time period covering the six weeks or so leading up to the high stakes assessment, triage practices intensified as additional funding was allocated to at-risk schools for test preparation (Hillocks, 2002; MacNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Moore & Hansen, 2001). These monies were used to augment the amount of "test prep" instruction schools could deliver. At my school site, teachers and assistants worked

specifically with “bubble kids” outside of the regular school day (Gillbourn & Youdell, 2000). “Bubble kids” were identified based on their previous years CRT scores and predictive algorithms created for use with MAP results. If a student was close to passing or had barely passed the proficiency line the year before they were “invited” to participate, and promises of donuts for breakfast and Little Caesar’s (“pizza, pizza”) for lunch guaranteed a high hit rate for participation. It felt like a lie every year.

“Congratulations you have been selected to participate in this exciting opportunity.... blah, blah, blah.” I wish I could go back and apologize, or conveniently “forget” to send the letters home.

Curriculum for stretch run classes consisted of more basic skills remediation and even more training for test item types. The logic being that if we give them more of what already was proving to be ineffective that they would certainly score higher and we would be deemed an adequate school. Of course, this was not the case. Attendance for “stretch run” classes fell each week, (as it turns out even yummy treats could not compel students to suffer the same banal tasks on their Saturdays that they had to endure during the week). I can’t say I blamed them for dropping out; I secretly hoped by the end of the six weeks that no one would turn up for class, because even I did not want to be there. I resented the happy faced and bitterly deceptive song and dance I had to put on for the purposes of standards based accountability. My disdain for educational standards was intensifying, as it seemed to me that the standards, which were so skill driven, forced us to focus on data that described all of the wrong things about our learners. CRT results seemed always to highlight the impacts of cultural and linguistic differences students

brought to school with them, while ignoring their capacity to think critically and reason effectively.

**The Common Core State Standards: The adjacent (im)possible.** I first read the Common Core State Standards through a lens clouded by extreme negative affect about educational standards. Diverging from the skill based state standards to which I was previously accountable, the Common Core State Standards were qualitatively different. They were only ten, but what they lacked in number they made up in muscle. They each seemed to me a sort of super-standard which encompassed large numbers of the state standards rolled together into an amalgamated whole. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2 reads “Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text” (CCSS for ELA, p. 12). In our state for fifth grade, the skills necessary to enact the task described above cover eight different standards (state ELA standards: 2.5.1; 2.5.2; 2.5.3; 3.5.1; 3.5.2; 3.5.3; 3.5.7; 3.5.9). To some degree the CCSS were an answer to my frequent complaint that the Nevada State Standards tended to compartmentalize reading skills to the point that reading, as holistic process, was unrecognizable. But if I am being completely honest, these standards sparked in me a very deep insecurity. These were the skills I wanted my students to gain through my critical pedagogy, and though my students had shown success in gaining basic skills through my practices, it was still hard work to pass those “easy” tests. It took focus and drive and not a little bit of cheerleading. What would these new standards mean for us? Would my students look incapable? Would I look incompetent? From the well entrenched perspective of my “current actual,” standards

were designed to punish students from diverse backgrounds and the teachers who felt called to serve them, and though I was convinced I had gamed the skills based system, I was uncertain how to game these standards. It is still difficult for me to admit, but I felt like I was being challenged and punished at the same time. I needed to put up or shut up, and I was soon to be given a chance to decide which to do.

Early in September of 2011 an email crossed my desk, soliciting participants for a professional development opportunity aimed at developing capacity for Common Core State Standards implementation. My initial reaction was “thanks, but no thanks.” My inclination was to resist the change, having made it my practice for several years to utilize the “shut the door and teach” strategy of compliance. Because I anticipated continuing this practice, I was not interested in a sales pitch about the new standards. However, after considering it for a moment, I recognized an opportunity. I was being given a chance to know my enemy, to begin preparing my critique of the Common Core State Standards in a practical rather than a theoretical milieu. So I agreed to represent my school in this training.

At the beginning of Day 1, a few obligatory icebreakers revealed that the group represented a cross section of educators, who worked with fifth grade students across a broad range of demographics. We were first tasked with reflecting on and sharing the teaching strategies we employed for pre-reading. Around the table, we heard the litany of what has come to be called best practice. As a group we agreed that building background, setting a purpose for reading (i.e., main idea), previewing vocabulary, predicting the content of the text, previewing headings and subheadings, examining captions and graphic content and providing an overview of the main ideas all gave learners a platform

from which to begin reading. We were then asked to watch excerpts from a video discussing the role of pre-reading in the modern classroom. Secretly wondering which of our ideas would be most validated, we huddled in small groups around individual computers to watch and listen.

The mood became instantly tense as we listened to David Coleman, a man whom none of us had ever heard of, announce that he would make himself “as unpopular as possible” by torpedo-ing our best practices, denying them their lofty position in our esteem, and characterizing them instead as the building blocks of a mini-text that if attended to, supplanted the actual interaction between student and text we were attempting to facilitate (DC Public Schools, 2011). With my professional ego on the line, but my reason intact, I listened and considered the points this Mr. Who-Ever Coleman made, particularly about how valuable the task of wrestling with a complex text can be and how asking students to read first can reveal what needs to be taught. I had planned action research work around the power of student generated questions as a guide to planning reading instruction, so I, reluctantly, began to see his point. He summed up the Common Core State Standards as “reading like a detective and writing like an investigative journalist, that’s at the core of the work” (DC Public Schools, 2011). It was hard for me to argue with that reasoning as I utilized those very skills in coursework aimed at earning a Master’s degree. Work in college and careers depends upon understanding text and positioning yourself, your work and/or your organization in relation to those texts.

Intrigued as to where this might lead, I continued through the.... training isn’t really the right word... meeting is better, but really this 1/2 day gathering was simply an

invitation to consider and try something new. We were asked to read and discuss a sample lesson dealing with a complex text (complexity being measured here both quantitatively and qualitatively), Richard Feynman's "The Making of a Scientist." (Feynman, 1995). The lesson as written required students to read the text independently once and then to listen to the text once as the teacher provided a fluent model. Only then were any questions about the text to be asked (Hinchman & Moore, 2014). I previewed the text and was struck immediately by how rich it was. Beautifully phrased, the autobiographical essay explored the theme of scientific thinking, while also painting a lovely portrait of a parent child relationship. I could not think of a text present in my classroom whose quality could compare to Feynman's essay.

After a vigorous discussion about the equity implications for the lesson design, and the text and the questions that accompanied it, we were asked to initiate a little experiment. We agreed to take this work to our classrooms and carry out the lesson as written (though I did advocate for and was given the green light to allow students to choose to listen to a fluent reading prior to attempting their own independent reading). The group would reconvene in about two weeks to report on what happened. I was a little deflated as I had come ready to argue, but I was being asked to give honest feedback upon return. So I left, thinking: "Oh boy, friends, I'll give you feedback, alright! A whole dump truck full."

The idea of attempting this work was daunting to me, as I truly did not know how or if my students could cope with this material free from any sort of pre-reading support or extra reading to build context (Snow & O'Connor, 2013). I believed my high readers would end up driving the discussion centered on analyzing the text, while my struggling

learners and ELL students sat in the shadows, allowing their traditionally more successful peers to engage the text for them. I could not have been more wrong, what ensued was rather disequilibrating. Not only did all of my learners try, but students at all achievement levels, all language levels and all learning designations participated. The reliance of the lesson on well-written, text based questions asked after multiple exposures to the text, combined with my own facilitation of small group discussion, seemed to level the playing field (Snow & O'Connor, 2013). In fact, the lesson revealed to me strengths and weaknesses in learners from which my previous work had shielded me, particularly the reticence on the part of traditionally high achieving readers to examine or revise their thinking. Having to defer to the text, or a peer they perceived as less capable who had valid textual evidence, made them, for lack of a better term, angry. I could empathize as I had recently felt the same rage, having had my pedagogy and my place as a respected educational leader (in my small circle) challenged by that David Coleman and his Common Core State Standards. They must have felt they were losing their place at the top of the class and by extension a part of their identity to which they were understandably attached. At our follow up meeting I found many other teachers had had similar experiences regarding engagement and affective resistance.

I was uncertain what this meant for the “current actual” or the “adjacent possible” of my classroom practice. Was I going to jettison all pre-reading and instead engage text cold? How would this affect my research, which I now was starting to see a very aligned to the CCSS? How would this affect my role as a teacher/leader? Would I bring this information/experience to the staff? I was awash with questions, but did not feel that I had enough information from this single experience to even begin to answer any of them.

When a second round of the project was announced, I eagerly returned to continue my personal learning. Specifically, I wanted to try to understand what I was learning as it seemed to be interfering pretty strongly with beliefs I had held in place for the better part of a decade: the belief that standards based education was oppressive and harmful to learners marginalized by society, and that I understood the best practices for supporting and challenging these learners.

**A transformative experience.** From my experience with the Feynman lesson, I believed that my students could handle this work, and I was excited to have removed some of my initial negative affect approaching the second lesson. Or at least I thought I had removed it; until I saw the new text we were to study:

The New Colossus  
 Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"  
 (Lazarus, 1883)

It is not an exaggeration to say I wanted to cry. How were my students going to make sense of such a syntactically complicated and vocabulary dense poem? As a second language learner myself, I have an L2 vocabulary that is very functional, but very shallow. I know exactly one word for everything I need to say in Spanish, and that is

how I get by. I knew my students (from their personal writing) rely very heavily on general-purpose vocabulary (happy, nice, sad) in lieu of developing a more nuanced lexicon. How were they going to understand the imagery and references, with no historical background upon which to hang their proverbial cap. I was crushed; I could already feel the clouds of oppression gathering over my tiny classroom (Freire, 2000). My distress deepened as I read the first question from the prewritten lesson. “What is the rhyme scheme of the poem? What does that reveal about the structure of the poem?” (Student Achievement Partners, 2010). I panicked. What an arcane, boring and skill-based task!

Studying the lesson plan more, I decided to undertake the task myself and really examine the process of unpacking the rhyme scheme from the position my students would inhabit. What I discovered confounded me. It was so elegant; unlike the body of the poem, resplendent with academically dense words like “brazen,” “astride,” “refuse,” “pomp,” and “tempest,” each line ended with a simple word like “name,” “flame,” “free,” and “me.” Was it possible that an in road to such a complex text could be made simply by rhyming “poor” and “door”? I was trepiditious, but willing to give it a try.

Forty five minutes after the students first read the poem, they had discovered the poem had a rhyme scheme described as ABBAABBACDCDCD, that it could be broken into two sections, and that the first section had eight lines and the second section had six. All students completed the rhyme analysis independently and recorded group observations as I facilitated. And just as with the Feynman reading, learners of all stripes made equally impressive contributions. Two important examples came from Jacob and Anna. After reading the first question with the class, we wondered together what a

rhyme scheme might be. I thought the kids would recognize rhyme and attack from there, but Jacob immediately offered that a scheme was a plan. A classmate then deduced that rhyme scheme was a plan for rhyming. After finding and highlighting all of the rhymes in different colors and marking similar rhymes with letters, I asked the students to observe their work and notice things. Anna, designated as learning disabled, was the first to offer a thought, though shyly. “It’s a pattern,” she stated, (though it sounded more like a question). Others then began to name the pattern.

I would not say this work was easy; in fact, we all took a 10 minute break when we were done (mostly because I needed it!). It was one of the best and most humbling teaching moments of my life, and it happened with nary a mini-lesson, nor anticipatory set in sight. In fact, during the middle of day two, I discovered evidence of the danger of giving students too much (or the wrong type?) of background knowledge (or was it scaffolding?) as I said, I was becoming very confused about some things I was pretty sure I already knew.

As part of our exploration of question 3 from the New Colossus lesson plan: “The first eight lines of the poem compare two statues. Which lines are about the first statue and which about the second? What comparisons are made?” I reread the first eight lines of the poem and gave the students two minutes of partner talk time. I then asked students to share out their initial thoughts. Immediately two of my ELL learners, both of whom still received pullout services to develop their basic interpersonal communication skills, raised their hands. They reported that one of the statues was the Statue of Liberty. Two or three students shook their heads in agreement, but most looked skeptical. I directed the class to confirm or deny that assertion with text evidence. The engaged, focused

rereading that ensued staggered my teacher brain. Suddenly, there were shouts of “mighty woman” “with a torch” “world-wide welcome” and “harbor.” In fact they found evidence scattered throughout lines 3-8 of the octave, leading them to see that the first two lines were about a different (Greek, they established) statue.

Impressed with their work, I decided they had earned the right to some context around the “Greek statue” and shared with them an image of what the Colossus of Rhodes may have looked like; the image had been included in the lesson as optional material. When we returned to the question at hand, comparing the author’s descriptions of the two statues, I had a devil of a time refocusing our conversation to the text (where it had happily stayed for almost 90 minutes of instruction over two days) because the students wanted to leave the world of the text and focus instead upon their own observations of the image. Comments about the size of each statue began to dominate our discussion, and I had to perform pedagogical gymnastics to get back to the first eight lines of the actual poem. Once there, the conversation that followed was one of the richest I have ever been privileged to in my ten years in front of students.

Examining the text for words that show the authors point of view, we looked at lines 1 and 2 for descriptions of the first statue. The word “conquering” resonated with the students more so than the word brazen... This did not surprise me. So we then looked for words about the Statue of Liberty that either reinforced or negated the idea of conquering. The list they provided after table talk yielded the following words: “imprisoned,” “Exile,” “command,” and “mighty” leading to an initial agreement in the classroom that the statues were being compared and drawn similarly. And based on the

connotative meaning of the words the students had identified, I could not tell them they were wrong.

I paused trying to determine what to do: through totally sound reasoning about word meanings, they were right... how could I get them to interrogate that finding further? Then to my rescue came Jessie, another student with a diagnosed learning disability, who pointed out the first two words of the poem to us: “but it says ‘not-like.’” EUREKA! That was our in-road. I never would have seen it without him, but there it was: “not like.” I asked the students to see if they could find any more evidence to support the idea that the statues were not alike. We were directed by a higher achieving reader to look at more than one word at a time. Suddenly all of the words that had connotatively resonated with conquering, when looked at in context, showed a contrasting disposition toward the Statue of Liberty. “Imprisoned lightning” meant she was keeping people safe; “Mother of Exiles” that she was taking in the cast out; “mild eyes command” told us that there was no harshness, but rather compassionate concern in the description. The students then agreed the statues were not alike according to the author.

We had gotten to a cogent, literal understanding of the first octave, and it took contributions from all of us to do it. Yes, the traditionally highest achieving students helped us correct course occasionally, but those of whom the least is historically expected did the bulk of the driving. What I had once believed impossible: that educational standards could support high quality, transformative instruction now seemed “adjacently possible.” I could no longer fault the Common Core State Standards for its apparent flaws, because my fears about social justice were completely undermined by my own

experience in the classroom. In fact, my experience with this CCSS aligned lesson became, for me, a meditation on equity.

The following three sections detail the findings from the study. Evidence from the narrative vignette framed by literature reveals 1) the connection between my academic optimism and my identity as a critical pedagogue, 2) the negative effect that the political conflation of standards, high-stakes assessment and accountability had on my own beliefs about the value of educational standards, and 3) the positive effect that the realignment of my beliefs about educational standards and education as critical practice had on my attitudes toward the Common Core State Standards.

### **Introspection and Analysis**

**Optimism and the critical stance.** The vignette above paints the portrait of a passionately optimistic and critical educator, vaguely lost, then suddenly found again. Within my professional autobiography, these traits generally are expressed in tandem. Until I undertook this autoethnographic journey, I had not realized how central optimism had been the development of my critical lens as an educator.

In my first encounters with the Houghton Mifflin Reading basal, I expressed discomfort related to the stricture implied on my professional autonomy and my ability to deliver quality instruction; “I can say, in all honesty, that improving student test scores was not once a motivating factor in my choice to become an educator, but since the No Child Left Behind Act (2003) had been passed it seemed to be the only thing driving decisions about the work of teachers.” Though I could not name it explicitly at that time in my career, I understood that the school system was intentionally engineering results not related to the good of the student but to the good of the system itself. Apple (2009)

alludes to this practice by the powerful as advancing a “map of reality” for public consideration. Legitimizing the system legitimizes its reproduction. Booher-Jennings (2005) found this phenomenon to be pervasive in buildings struggling through high-stakes reforms.

Despite the obvious agenda behind the curricular choices forced upon me, I maintained a dedication to navigating the obstacles for the good of my students. This optimism is illustrated in the following excerpt; “I believed that I could concurrently satisfy the mandate to use the adopted curriculum and still serve my students individual needs. I was equally optimistic that the data would turn out well if I continued to cultivate powerful student cognition...I had what Johnson (2010) refers to as a “slow hunch” that skills based approaches would not produce results that were any better than the results I could get from using guided reading and book club strategies.” This willingness to resist the dehumanization my students, which made me “irrelevant in my vocation,” was a step toward guarding my full humanness as well as that of my learners; this idea, which Freire (2000) made explicit for me during graduate study, is further illustrated throughout the vignette.

The affective impact of high-stakes accountability emerged as a significant obstacle through out the autobiographical data. “I felt helpless and hoped that the publishers were smarter than me, because I was confused and scared... The new curriculum literally tied my hands as a teacher... I was beginning to recognize that I was on the wrong side of the power dynamic.” Though many more statements such as these could be culled out of the data, these three selections clearly illustrate that I was experiencing anxieties that are an all too common response to skills based standards and

high stakes testing in teachers across the nation (Bol, Ross, Nunnery & Alberg, 2002; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). They also demonstrate a emerging critical awareness that I was entrenched in battle for dominance and control; an understanding Giroux (2009) considers fundamental to reclaiming public education for the public, a public with a very different demographic face than the public of 1983. My optimism, however, is again evidenced in my response to this understanding; "I agreed to return to following the basal manual to the letter if the end of the year data indicated that my students were not achieving similarly to their peers." Gambling my autonomy on a high-stakes assessment results indicates a remarkable strong belief that I could make a difference for my students despite the barriers in my way.

In reflecting on the implications of leveled reading instruction for ELLs and students diagnosed with learning disabilities, my optimistic, critical disposition is further illustrated. "For students doubly impacted by poverty and limited English proficiency, [leveled reading] meant that grade level content might be delivered up to three grade levels below the syntactic and cognitive rigor required of their peers. This infantilization of othered learners was unacceptable to me, and I felt compelled to keep searching for practices that could help my students discover their deepest potential... I explicitly stated to my students at the beginning of every year, that although we had differing capacities to negotiate printed text, we were all equally capable of thinking about interesting things." My compulsion to find powerful instructional alternatives for *all* of my learners exemplifies my perseverance in the face of obstacles that frequently limit teachers' expectations of their students. My solution, to engage the classroom community at large in the exploration of engaging ideas and concepts supported by shared literacy

experiences demonstrates again my critical concern for students ability to form full human identities in the school setting.

During my autoethnographic process, I rediscovered an online discussion post from my graduate seminar on multiple literacies that further reveals the strong marriage of optimism and critical pedagogy in my teacher identity:

If you design a curriculum based on promoting civic literacy while exploring the issues covered in your adopted curriculum, your students will still have engaged with the standards, they will simply walk away from the content with a more personal understanding rather than a trivial one. And if the teacher police come to drag you to teacher jail, just ask them which knowledge they would like their child to have, trivial or conceptual (i.e. knowing the date and facts of the Boston Massacre or knowing that the sensationalist propaganda generated in the days after the event swayed the passions of the colonists so strongly that war in the colonies became almost inevitable)? Examining and analyzing successful public action from history might inspire more critical service learning when discussing current day issues. At worst our least successful students (according to high stakes test scores) will continue to look unsuccessful. Best-case scenario, they become more critical readers and thinkers, which will undoubtedly be evidenced on same said test. (Pennington, Brock, Palmer &Wolters, 2012, p. 73)

The above quote illustrates not only my optimistic view that critical pedagogy creates valuable learning and the overt reclamation of my personal and professional power, but also a complete transformation in my affective stance toward high-stakes accountability. The tongue-in-cheek reference to “teacher police” and “teacher jail” as well as the bold imagined confrontation with said “police” could never have been made by my early teacher self.

Academic optimism, the enduring belief that, despite all obstacles, one can make a positive difference in the education of one’s students (Ngidi, 2012), and critical pedagogy, the intentional interrogation of power relationships in society and how schools

are implicated in reproducing these relationships (Freire, 2000), are core beliefs that have driven the development of my teaching identity.

**Educational triage: The formation of negative peripheral beliefs.** The second finding of this autoethnographic analysis is that the conflation of educational standards, high stakes standardized assessment, and school accountability created my peripheral belief that educational standards were antithetical to quality pedagogy. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) provided the language to help me understand my deep discomfort with the intervention block and “stretch run” practices embedded at my school site.

Educational triage, the distribution of scarce educational resources based on a proficiency prognosis, is designed to advantage students who understand and participate in discourse of power; it singles out for greater success those most likely of succeeding and neglects those in most need of education. My autobiographical vignette captures the intense negative feelings that this practice provoked and also demonstrates that I understood the standards to be the direct cause of this indignation.

Triage instruction typifies the decontextualized skill based task that Perkins and Soloman (1998) indicted over a decade before the passage of NCLB and that MacNeil and Valenzuela (2001) found deeply affected equitable educational opportunities for students from minority and impoverished backgrounds. The research echoed my own interpretation of the de facto positioning of learners in the educational triage process; “Both practices [intervention and stretch run] routinely reduced students to educational objects rather than agents.” Passive receipt of any type of knowledge reinforces the banking model of schooling, but the particular test prep instruction that occurred during triage seemed to compound that effect in my eyes. “These blocks of instruction equally

bored and demoralized students, or worse, reinforced in them the idea that ferreting out the correct answer to a contrived task equated to academic success. I could clearly see that these practices added to students' oppression. My forced participation in practices so misaligned with my core beliefs about education led to deep feelings of resentment."

As these practices were driven by test content and design, which in turn was driven by the content of the standards, the standards became to default target of my indignation as I perceived them to be the de facto cause of exploitive academic practice.

The messages implied about students excluded from test prep practices reinforced my disaffected belief about standards as much as the nature of intervention instruction itself. "Students who had previously met proficiency targets or who received special education services or ELL pullout services were not targeted for intervention, receiving "enrichment" or service minutes respectively during the block. The only possible assumption here is that these students were not going to pass the assessments anyway so why bother prepping them. When you plan for deficit you begin to see deficit. Also, students who could pass were the victims of neglect, but the neglect was viewed as benign as if such a thing could be!" The incredulity and indignation that drips from these sentences, clearly indicates a perceived link between educational triage and unethical educational practice. In fact, there is no way to describe the practices of educational triage or teaching to the test using Schulman's definitions of teacher knowledge. It is not content knowledge as there is no subject except the peculiarities of the test; nor can this be called pedagogical knowledge as this practice yields no insight about how students learn. Certainly, there is no connection to pedagogical content knowledge, as there is no clear content under study for which a range of pedagogies might exist. This practice

defies explanation outside of its service to accountability policies. It is clear that the only application this type of “learning” has is on the high stakes assessment upon which the lessons are based.

The intense focus on transmitting knowledge of specious value outside of the testing environment to a small fragment of an already vulnerable student population solely for the potential benefit of the institution is exactly the sort of practice that critical pedagogy rails against (Apple 2009; MacLaren & Giroux, 1996) and that research has shown has deleterious effects on diverse learners (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Dutro & Selland, 2012; Houchen, 2013). My own ire about the “stretch run” structure aligns with these critiques. There are so many examples of sarcasm and disdain in the vignette data that it is difficult to choose one or two for illustrative purposes; however the following two examples speak specifically to my own self loathing related to participation in educational triage; 1) “promises of donuts for breakfast and Little Caesar’s (‘pizza, pizza’) for lunch guaranteed a high hit rate for participation. It felt like a lie every year. ‘Congratulations you have been selected to participate in this exciting opportunity... blah, blah, blah.’ I wish I could go back and apologize, or conveniently ‘forget’ to send the letters home.” 2) “I can’t say I blamed [the students] for dropping out; I secretly hoped by the end of the six weeks that no one would turn up for class, because even I did not want to be there. I resented the happy face and bitterly deceptive song and dance I had to put on for the purposes of standards based accountability. I was developing an intense disdain for educational standards and data driven instruction.” The guilt and self-aware hypocrisy I experienced in my role as an interventionist intensified my adverse beliefs about the relationship between standards and pedagogy.

This autoethnographic inquiry stemmed from a deeply held belief that standards embodied a systemic evil in our educational system, that academic standards could only be a tool of oppression yielded against my students and me. Through introspection and analysis it has become clear that this belief was not really the fault of the standards at all (though our state standards left much to be desired); rather, this belief emerged from the conflagrated and highly entangled relationship between standards and assessment, particularly the way that my school leveraged assessment results to sort and segregate students at each grade level.

**Harmony: The realignment of beliefs.** The third finding of my analytic autoethnography is that my positive attitude toward the Common Core State Standards can be attributed to a realignment of my core and peripheral beliefs as a teacher. This finding is related inextricably to the first two findings. First that I am an academically optimistic, critical pedagogue; this means I possess a core belief that despite any apparent roadblocks I must, can and will find a way to help learners develop their own voices which they can choose to raise in advocacy for a better and more just society. Second, I also possessed a peripheral belief developed through repeated acts of negotiating programmatic instruction and educational triage that educational standards are diametrically opposed to critical pedagogy (or any quality pedagogy). Evidence that the coexistence of these two beliefs has impacted my self-concept as a teacher is clearly presented in my narrative description of my interactions with the CCSS and the exemplar lessons I implemented in my classroom.

Pajares' (1992) synthesis of research on teacher beliefs found agreement that beliefs and behaviors influence each other, but that directionality is unclear. This might

be interpreted as a tug of war between belief and action. Phipps and Borg (2009) also allude to a sense of struggle when peripheral beliefs, those formed through experience, conflict with core beliefs; they assert that resulting confusion and anxiety can cause teachers to enact pedagogies that do not align with what they report to be the beliefs that drive and motivate them as educators. The disconnect between my core belief that education should be critical and transformational and my peripheral belief that standards “are designed to punish students from diverse backgrounds and the teachers who feel compelled to serve them” explains my initial anxiety about the Common Core State Standards. Even though I could recognize that “the CCSS were an answer to my frequent complaint that the Nevada State Standards tended to compartmentalize reading skills to the point that reading, as holistic process, was unrecognizable,” I resisted even considering their implementation because they represented a challenge to my peripheral belief about the oppressive nature of standards, which I understood only through the skill based lens of my experience. In my narrative I state, “if I am being completely honest, these standards sparked in me a very deep insecurity.” The narrative data go on to suggest that this insecurity stems from concerns that we (my students and I) would all fail. “These were the skills I wanted my students to gain through my critical pedagogy, and though my students had shown success in gaining basic skills through my practices, it was still hard work to pass those “easy” tests. It took focus and drive and not a little bit of cheerleading.”

Fear of failure, however, was not responsible for my hesitation. Rather, as Pajares (1992) reminded me through my analytical reflections, inertia was to blame; beliefs are deeply held and, in adults, do not change unless a significant cognitive or

affective event necessitates a reexamination of belief (p. 324). My mind and spirit completely balked at the notion that the Common Core State Standards might match my personal pedagogy! I had come to enjoy the implications of my belief system and I thought the tension I experienced during the NCLB era indicated great virtue in my relentless boundary pushing. Unable to freely operationalize my belief about the transformational power of education without fear of professional consequence, I embraced a teacher identity defined by contrariness. Descriptors such as uppity, rabble-rouser, troublemaker, cynic, firebrand, and radical were applied to me by both myself and others with varying degrees of pride and derision, but I didn't mind. It was absolutely true. I had accepted as normal and good the tensions I experienced on a daily basis, and I wore these labels, earned in expressing my discontent, as a badge of honor in the era or standards based reform. I had accepted that my "current actual" would always be limited by mandates and that my "adjacent possible" would be defined by the negotiations I made to simultaneously pay lip service to and defy the mandates of standards and accountability to the best of my abilities.

However, after undertaking the professional learning described in the extended narrative, I felt something new. Or perhaps it was different... a shift perhaps in a peripheral belief about standards? I had feelings of serious optimism aligned directly to standards based instruction. "I could no longer fault the Common Core State Standards for its apparent flaws, because my fears about social justice were completely undermined by my own experience in the classroom. In fact, my experience with this standards aligned lesson became, for me, a meditation on equity." I had experienced a gestalt

capable of causing me to reexamine my beliefs about educational standards (Pajares, 1992).

I felt compelled to share these learning opportunities with colleagues, friends, and anyone else who would listen. I began to advocate strongly for others to undertake this work with their students. I even tried to talk my principal into co-teaching the lesson in another class. I was excited about the standards and their potential to address the equity issues our students faced daily: the specter of low expectations and the manacles of programmatic instruction. “Yes, the traditionally highest achieving students helped us correct course occasionally, but the bulk of the driving was done by those of whom the least is historically expected.” I was, in a word, transformed. And though my colleagues expressed surprise that it was me bringing this information to them, no one was more surprised than me. I, as a teacher, felt liberated, like the department of curriculum and instruction was officially granting my autonomy. I could not wait to go and scream from the rooftops that our struggle was over and the new days of teacher empowerment had arrived! It was time to resurrect the art of teaching! But I simultaneously felt like I had to justify my feelings of enthusiasm with acknowledgments that I sounded like a completely different person. I found that before I could explain it to anyone else, I needed first to be able to explain it to myself, so I embraced whole-heartedly my research thesis as an autoethnographic investigation of what I had experienced.

It is obvious to me now, years after my initial question formed, that I have not actually changed at all; rather the world I inhabit has changed for the better. My perspective on the academic world that I have inhabited has crystalized such that I can now construct, in retrospect, a fuller portrait of who I am as an educator. The standards

now explicitly value the work I believe students deserve to undertake. I am experiencing, for the first time in my career, what Phipps and Borg (2009) describe as harmonious implementation of my core and peripheral beliefs (p. 388).

## Discussion

In light of the unique perspective that teacher voices bring to discourse about education, there are implications for further inquiry raised in the analysis of these data that should be discussed.

First, the relationship between standards and high stakes assessment remains at the center of school and teacher evaluation systems. The degree to which this relationship will continue to oppress teachers and students will depend to a large degree on the assessments offered in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. In the spring of 2015, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, which have been underdevelopment over the past three years, will go live across the country. The promise has been made that these assessments will align to the evidence based reading and writing called for by the CCSS. It remains to be seen how successfully these tests will be able to capture the complex thinking demanded by the standards. There is definitely a danger that, in lieu of assessing the full range of ELA standards, the final version of the assessment may default to over testing aspects of the standards that are easier to quantify, like so many assessment tools preceding it (Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011). An assessment that cannot capture the qualitative changes in teacher practice and student cognition implied by the CCSS will not improve the climate of tension that surrounds high-stakes accountability systems (Bol, Ross, Nunnery &Alberg, 2002; Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2010; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Smith, 1991; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Yeh, 2006). The utilization of outcome data from this assessment will

need to be examined to determine the degree to which it enhances or restricts the emancipatory quality of the standards.

Secondly, the operation and expression of teacher knowledge (Shulman, 1987) have been severely compromised in the last twenty years. This phenomenon can be attributed to the stress of high-stakes accountability (Fisher, Bol & Pribesh, 2011; Imig & Imig, 2006), the de-skilling influence of programmatic instruction (Shannon, 1987) and the slow formation of peripheral beliefs related to compulsory pedagogies (Phipps & Borg, 2009). It is clear that teachers of all belief systems have been compelled into some questionable practices in service of educational reform. The degree to which teacher knowledge may have been eroded and/or beliefs may have been affected by these systems cannot be predicted and is worthy of inquiry, as the CCSS will demand that teachers take a more active role in designing powerful learning experiences for their students than they have in two decades (Cervetti & Pearson, 2012; Grindon, 2014). In order to ensure that all learners can benefit from the higher expectations of the Common Core, teachers will need to be what Schulman (1987) called wise practitioners, who vigorously expand not only their content and pedagogical content knowledge, but who seek ways to apply that knowledge judiciously and in the service of quality learning when problems arise for which no simple solution is apparent. By seeking professional development in pedagogies implied by the CCSS teachers can begin to reestablish a firm foundation of pedagogical knowledge that may have been compromised over time. By participating in collective reflective practice with others, teachers can maximize the power of these new pedagogies, ensuring that the artifacts students produce reflect the outcomes intended by the CCSS.

Finally, teachers need to become strong self-advocates by adding their voices to the discourse surrounding educational reform. The effective implementation of the CCSS through pedagogies that honor student voices in learning could be crippled if teachers allow the same “maps of reality” (Apple, 2009) to dictate the way their work is perceived by the public. Many more narratives about the “current actual” of classrooms are needed to produce counter narratives to the ones being offered by the media and politicians. If teachers do not raise their voices in advocacy, they tacitly consent to being the objects of educational action, when they should instead be defining alternative pathways that maximize their agency. For example, in direct response to the questions raised above about accountability under CCSS and the erosion of teacher knowledge, teachers might leverage the power of their collective bargaining groups to demand a “no fault” period in accountability of three to five years. This “no fault” period would create a safe space for teachers to experiment with pedagogies that have long been absent from classrooms, but that may best serve the outcomes described by the new standards and, more importantly, the needs of their diverse and deserving learners. Another critical way for teachers to add their voices to debates about education is to attend or testify at legislative committee hearings and boards of education meetings. Periods of public comment and written testimony in absentia both enter teacher voices into the public record of discourse about educational policy.

Over twenty years ago, *A Nation at Risk* triggered waves of accountability-based reforms that have profoundly impacted the lives of teachers and students. The majority of my “current actual” in K-12 education has been defined by the limits of policies aimed at accomplishing a relatively narrow set of outcomes aligned to state standards and

measured by high-stakes standardized tests. This reality limited the “adjacent possible” of my instruction, often forcing me to compromise my core beliefs about the potential of education to create socially aware citizens in favor of implementing instruction that increased the systemic oppression of the learners I hoped to liberate. The resentment I felt about the impacts of high-stakes accountability systems and their implied pedagogies was incorrectly attributed to educational standards in general until I taught a lesson aligned to the Common Core State Standards. The power of that single lesson has caused me to reevaluate my beliefs about educational standards and to develop my understanding about the relationship between standards, assessment, accountability and classroom practice.

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