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Investigating the Lived Experience of Teacher Decision-Making: A Phenomenological Approach

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Investigating the Lived Experience of Teacher Decision-Making:

A Phenomenological Approach

by

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Presented to the Doctoral Department

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe third-grade teachers' experiences of instructional decision-making. Three third-grade teachers participated in a series of in-depth interviews designed to reveal what it is like to make instructional decisions in the complex environment of public elementary schools. Previous studies have examined a number of different factors involved in classroom instruction. The teachers in this study not only spoke about the factors that were common in the literature such as: curriculum, testing and teachers' beliefs, but also the way they responded to the tension created by those competing factors in their instructional decision-making. The study revealed four themes across teacher interviews: accountability to curriculum, pacing guides and tests; stress over meeting expectations; concern for students' learning and well-being; and support from others to take risks in decision-making. Teachers' responses to the decision-making factors added a phenomenological description of the experience of instructional decision-making that are broader than the existing factors in the literature. Teachers' words revealed how the factors are lived out in their classrooms as they described the tensions of instructional decision-making in today's high-stakes teaching environments. The experience of making instructional decisions is inexorably linked to the experiences of teaching, the study of which can improve teaching and learning.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Teachers make countless decisions each day. In fact, teaching is decision-making and the two acts cannot be separated (Shavelson, 1978). To understand the decision-making process of teachers is to understand teaching better. Examining decision-making on a cognitive level can help teachers analyze and modify their teaching (Calderhead, 1981). Many factors have an impact on teachers' decisions (Perfecto, 2012); some factors support autonomous teacher decision-making, while others constrain it (Griffith, Massey, & Atkinson, 2013).

While there are a number of studies on the various factors involved in classroom instruction, fewer studies examine the impact of these factors on teachers' decision-making (Palmer & Rangel, 2011). More than policies or programs, teachers have an impact on student learning (Griffith, et al., 2013). Researchers have found that it is teachers' decisions regarding policies and other outside influences that connect those factors to classroom instruction, which in turn have an impact student learning (Clough, Berg, & Olson, 2009). Several elements have an impact on the instructional decisions teachers make each day, including personal beliefs, policies, curriculum, testing and other mandates. How teachers manage all these considerations in their daily decision-making has a significant impact on teaching and learning (Perfecto, 2012).

Factors in Teacher Decision-Making

There are many factors involved in teacher decision-making. I examined a few of the factors prominent in the literature to inform this study, which was designed to reveal and describe the decision-making experience for teachers. Decision-making is a complex process, one that is both recursive and interactive (Clough, et al., 2009). Each of the decisions a teacher makes interacts with, influences, and is influenced by every other decision in the teaching and

learning process. The way teachers respond to the decision-making factors defines how the factors impact the instructional decisions and, in turn, the teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom.

Control over instructional decision-making requires autonomy (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Various factors, including curriculum policies, can restrict teachers' choices and add barriers to autonomous decision-making (Boote, 2006). These constraints on teacher autonomy create a "shrinking space" for decision-making (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Mandated curriculum acts as a constraint when teachers defer to publishers' directions regarding what and how to teach (Clough, et al., 2008). The curriculum can also be a support to decision-making if it aligns with what the teacher already believes about best practice. If the curriculum is not aligned with teachers' beliefs, then it will impact how teachers address students' individual needs while making decisions about instruction (Griffith, et al., 2013). Studies have shown that teachers must regularly contend with the tensions between what publishers tell them is best practice and what they believe to be best, as they balance mandated curriculum and programs with the realities of their classrooms (Griffith, et al., 2013; Perfecto, 2012). The ways teachers experience these tensions in their decision-making was a primary interest in this study.

Perfecto (2012) found that the teachers in her study made instructional planning decisions based entirely on the directions and objectives of the curriculum without considering modifications necessary for meeting students' needs. This is not to imply that teachers should not use curriculum to guide their instruction, rather, that in some cases planning decisions were made by over-relying on the curriculum to the detriment of the teacher's professional judgment. The planning decisions became their own constraints on teaching decisions that had to be made on

the fly. So many instructional decisions are made in the moment, and this study revealed how the experience of decision-making varies based on the setting of those decisions.

Research literature indicates that accountability standards constrain teacher decision-making (Quinn & Ethridge, 2006). State tests often become the strongest determinant of teacher decisions (Anderson, 2012; Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). Teachers have very little control over these outside forces that act on their classroom work. Teachers often make decisions to meet the goals set by outside forces, such as school districts, states, or schools (Griffith, et al., 2013). My interest was in the way teachers perceive and respond to these expectations in their decision-making. The extent to which these factors interact and influence teachers' instructional decisions is best understood from teachers recounting their own lived experience of making decisions. It is for this reason that I chose a phenomenological inquiry into teacher decision-making as a way to understand better the role and impact of these factors.

Decision-Making: My Own Experience

As an elementary teacher myself, I personally understand the complexities of the decision-making experience. Although I make daily instructional decisions surrounded by colleagues who are engaged in the same activity, the experience is not transparent. In order to understand deeply what the experience is like for other teachers, their stories need to be told. I enjoyed learning about educational phenomena through the narration of experiences.

Accountability policies and high-stakes testing may be sources of pressure felt by teachers in the district in which I conducted this study. Test scores are highly valued and carefully scrutinized at each school and grade level. In Oregon, The No Child Left Behind policy (NCLB) has been replaced with the Achievement Compact (Office of the Chief Education Officer, 2014). The Achievement Compact was created to ensure equitable outcomes at all

schools. It includes goals or key outcomes that include third-grade reading. This key outcome has created an added level of pressure to third-grade teachers. I was curious to learn how third-grade teachers experience the expectations of the Achievement Compact in the context of their daily decision-making. While the teachers in this study did not specifically mention the Achievement Compact, they did speak about the added pressure of preparing their students for testing the first time in an environment where test scores are so closely scrutinized.

As a leader in my district, I am often tasked with leading professional development about instructional strategies. Understanding how and why teachers make instructional decisions informed my work in this role. As a teacher for 15 years, I have participated in countless hours of professional development. At times I have found that the most worthwhile recommendations from those many hours are those I gain from my colleagues, not from the presenters. Recommendations built around teachers' perspectives and real-life experiences speak most clearly to my professional work, rather than those developed by someone outside my own context who presumes to know what is of value to me. There is little meaning in telling teachers what should be important to them without asking them about their own experiences.

My interest in this work also reflects my role as a doctoral student in teacher education. I believe that understanding the stories and thinking of teachers is crucial for designing meaningful training and professional development. In my experience, teachers' voices are missing from many discussions regarding educational policy, school reform, and the mission/vision statements regarding the purpose of education. It is teachers' voices I wanted to hear in this study about instructional decision-making.

Problem Statement

In this phenomenological investigation, I examined the lived experience of decision-making for a sample of third-grade teachers working in public elementary schools. This study adds a rich description of the experience of decision-making to the broader findings regarding decision-making factors found in the current literature. I investigated how teachers describe their experiences of instructional decision-making and the meanings they derive from discussing its process and significance in the complex environments of teaching. Examining how teachers responded to the multiple factors that are reported to influence teachers' decisions helped to explain how teachers live and work with factors in the classroom.

Research Questions

I designed this study to gain an understanding of teacher-participants' experiences as instructional decision-makers. My intent for the study was to discover teachers' perceptions and understandings of their experiences and the meanings they derive from reflecting on those experiences.

Research Question No. 1

How do third-grade teachers from public elementary schools describe the experience of instructional decision-making?

Research Question No. 2

How do teachers describe the factors that influence their decision-making?

Research Question No. 3

What meaning do teachers derive from their decision-making experiences?

Key Terms

I chose terms that were prevalent in my research on teacher decision-making, along with terms requiring definition within the context of this study. I provide context for these definitions with citations. These terms are relevant to my research design, the three major factors of decision-making addressed in the literature review, and the teachers' responses in the interviews.

Accountability policies: Systems that hold teachers responsible for student outcomes. (Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Quinn & Ethridge, 2006).

Common Formative Assessments (CFA): Assessments that are common to grade levels or courses, administered to students at approximately the same time. They are designed to be used by teachers to inform instruction (Ainsworth, 2010).

High-stakes testing: Student achievement results on state tests tied to teacher evaluations and the rankings of schools and districts. State test scores result in either rewards or sanctions (Crocco & Costigan, 2006).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): School reform policy passed into law in 2002 mandated testing of every child, every year, in grades three through eight. Reform decisions were to be made by states based on the results of standardized tests. All states were required to make adequate yearly progress and to provide plans to have 100% of the students meet the proficiency requirements in reading and math by the 2013–2014 school year. Schools not making adequate progress would face sanctions (Ravitch, 2010).

Rigorous Curriculum Design (RCD): A set of instructional units organized in a detailed structure intended to align standards, instruction and assessments (Ainsworth, 2010).

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC): Summative assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics.

Teacher autonomy: The freedom of teachers to make decisions based on their professional judgment (Boote, 2006).

Teacher beliefs: Teachers' judgments regarding education including their theories of knowledge (epistemology), teaching practices (pedagogy), student learning, and their own ability to promote student achievement (Pajares, 1992).

Limitations and Delimitations

This phenomenological study is limited in scope to the experiences of its participants. The focus is the stories teachers tell of their instructional decision-making experiences and the meanings they derive from sharing them. The understandings that developed from this study will not be generalizable to all teachers. I chose interviews as the only research method to use in this study; I derived descriptions of decision-making experiences only from the participants' stories. I chose not to include other methodological procedures such as observations or analysis of classroom or school documents because my interest lies in participants' perceptions of the decision-making experience. As is the case with phenomenological research, truth is based on what the participants say is true (Van Manen, 1990). As such, understandings developed through interviews are based on the self-reporting of participants. The value of the stories and the developed meaning depend on my skills as a researcher/interviewer.

I originally constructed my literature review around three factors affecting teacher decision-making (curriculum, testing, and teachers' beliefs), because those were factors that came up most often in the studies I reviewed on teacher decision-making. These were the same primary factors that revealed by the participants in this study. Investigation into the details

revealed in discussing the teachers' responses to these factors were also added to literature review.

This study was limited to a small sample of third-grade teachers in the McMinnville School District. I chose this district because I live and work in McMinnville; selecting participants from this district was necessary to allow me to complete the study in a reasonable timeframe. I conducted two in-depth interviews each with three participants. I chose third-grade teachers because I wanted to study decision-making in a grade level that is required to participate in state testing, a major factor influencing teachers' instructional decisions. I also wanted to study decision-making from the perspective of elementary teachers responsible for multiple subjects. I am interested in how teachers manage making decisions across subject areas. For this reason I did not include middle school or high school teachers, who generally focus on a particular content area.

Summary

I have outlined the complexity of teachers' instructional decision-making and presented some of my own interests in studying this particular phenomenon through interviews with third-grade teachers. I turn now to an expanded explanation of the major factors influencing teacher decision-making, including curriculum, testing, and teacher beliefs, in order to frame the context and importance of a study such as this. I chose these factors because they appear frequently in both the research literature on teacher decision-making and in the interviews with the teacher participants. These factors also align with my own observations in my work as a teacher.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Every action by a teacher is a result of one or more decisions. Teachers make countless decisions about all of the observable daily practices, such as classroom organization, classroom management, schedules, and procedures. They also make decisions about the more tacit aspects of teaching, such as lesson plans, classroom environment, the teacher's roles within and outside of the school building, and relationships with students, parents and colleagues. There are likely as many decisions as there are minutes in a teacher's day. Narrowing the examination to instructional decisions (those decisions teachers make about what and how to teach) still leaves a multi-faceted phenomenon for investigation. A number of factors influence instructional decision-making, each of which can be evaluated from a number of perspectives. Much of the literature on teachers' decision-making reveals that instructional decisions are affected by three major factors: curriculum, testing, and teachers' beliefs (Abrams, 2003; Griffith et al., 2013; Pajares, 1992). These three factors are the focus of this review.

Curriculum and Teachers' Decision-Making

Curriculum is both a subject of teachers' decisions and a factor that influences those decisions. Teachers make decisions about what curriculum to use and how to use it in their instruction, while the curriculum and its objectives and directions affect the decisions teachers make about its use. Curriculum is often cited as a primary influence on teachers' decisions because it can either support or constrain the process. When the objectives of the curriculum do not align with teachers' objectives, the curriculum can become more of a restriction on teachers' decision-making than a support for teachers in their practice (Griffith et al., 2013). Instructional

decision-making is also made more challenging as teachers regularly struggle to balance the curriculum with the realities of their classrooms and their own ideas about best practice.

Instructional decision-making can be further hindered when teachers perceive that the prescribed curriculum does not take into account the background knowledge and foundational skills the students bring to the classroom (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). When teachers defer to adopted textbooks for direction while planning their lessons, may find that this dependency constrains their ability to make the moment-to-moment decisions that are required while teaching (Griffith et al., 2013, Perfecto, 2012).

Curriculum is often determined by schools and districts. Curriculum policies that require fidelity to a given curriculum can serve to limit teachers' choices to the point where teachers believe that their professional judgment is being usurped by the publishers' discretion (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Packaged curriculum, with (often-times scripted) lessons, leaves little room for teachers to choose the approaches they think best. (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). When districts require teachers to implement curriculum with fidelity, teachers often feel pressured to rely on the pacing and stated goals of the curriculum, instead of considering the needs of the classroom and the individual student (Gitlin, 2001). Moreover, districts hold teachers accountable for using the mandated curriculum and reaching its objectives. This increased accountability to curricular fidelity has led to a reduction in autonomy, as teachers struggle between what the publishers say is best and what they believe to be best (Boote, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Griffith et al., 2013).

Concern for the whole student can also subvert the stated goals of the curriculum. Teachers are often persuaded by their accountability to the expectations of the curriculum to think of their students in terms of parts or attributes that need to be covered by curriculum

(Noddings, 2005). Curriculum that has been narrowed to the tested subjects excludes opportunities for teaching that encourages the social and emotional growth of students (Smith & Southerland, 2007). When the content of curriculum, and even the manner of the delivery of the curriculum, are tightly prescribed, teachers feel left out of the connection between curriculum and students. This sense of exclusion may have a negative impact their relationship with students (Harris, 2008).

When teachers are evaluated on the use of the curriculum and held accountable for their students' success on the assessments tied to that curriculum, the impact on teacher decision-making becomes even greater (Boote, 2006). This is especially true when teachers lack the training or the experience either to modify the curriculum to meet their students' needs or to justify these changes to their administrators. Objectives shift from fostering students' learning to passing curriculum-provided tests. Newer teachers feel especially accountable to the curriculum (Westerman, 1990). This pressure can lead teachers to feel resigned to following the curriculum to the letter, even if they believe there are better ways to teach. They come to believe that the publishers must know more than they do and that conformity is the only way (Duffy, Roehler, & Putnam, 1987; Westerman, 1990). This resignation often comes out of habit, as teachers become so accustomed to relying on the curriculum that they do not even realize that they have ceded to it much of their control over instructional decisions (Gitlin, 2001).

The autonomy afforded to teachers by their school administrators can mitigate the impact of curriculum on instructional decision-making. When teachers believe that their administrators trust them to use their professional judgment, they are better able to use curriculum as a guide rather than as a script. Teachers working in autonomous environments are mindful of the standards but feel freer to make their own decisions about how to teach them. These teachers do

not feel compelled to sacrifice best practice in order to remain accountable to the curriculum (Quinn & Ethridge, 2006).

Curriculum can also serve to help teachers make informed instructional decisions, but the literature does not provide much support for this idea. However, some researchers have investigated what curriculum *could* provide for teachers (Cohen et al., 2003; Davis & Krajcik, 2005). Curriculum can help teachers anticipate and respond to students' responses to instruction, support teachers' learning about subject area content, connect learning across content areas, and guide teachers in their attempts to adapt lessons to meet the needs of their students (Davis & Krajcik, 2005). Curriculum may provide learning opportunities for teachers as well as for students (Collopy, 2003). Remillard (2000) noted that curriculum has the capacity to make a greater impact on teachers' decision-making when teachers are able to go beyond the text and reflect critically on their instruction and the part that curriculum should play in it. Often the pedagogical thinking that is sparked by suggestions in the curriculum has to do with things that were never intended by the developers, who were simply providing prepared lessons and tasks (Remillard, 2000). Curriculum developers and publishers also have plenty to say in the course of promoting their products, but reports about curriculum as a constraint to decision-making are more frequent than reports about how teachers use curriculum to support their instructional decisions (Altwerger, 2005).

The Influence of Testing on Decision-Making

The federal No Child Left Behind Policy (NCLB) and the reforms that followed it place a high priority on testing (Ravitch, 2010). Although many states and districts have recently implemented policies that have waived accountability to NCLB, decisions about school reform are still based on the results of standardized tests. State test scores still determine whether

teachers, schools, and districts receive rewards or sanctions (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). These accountability-related policies hold teachers responsible for their students' performance on these tests (Quinn & Etheridge, 2006). Teachers are also trained to use test results to guide their instruction. It is not surprising, then, that testing has a significant impact on teachers' instructional decision-making.

The aims of policies like NCLB, which focus on testing and accountability, conflict with the goals of the twenty-first-century schools movement and the role many teachers aspire to play (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). Teachers feel pulled in opposite directions as they are told that they are responsible for producing positive test scores (Smith & Southerland, 2007) and at the same time encouraged to promote critical thinking, creativity, and innovation so as to prepare their students for the twenty-first century. The two goals appear to be mutually exclusive. Currently rewards and sanctions are provided for test scores and not skills, so following the standardized curriculum tends to be stressed at the expense of innovative instruction (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

Interestingly enough, the accountability that teachers feel with respect to test scores does not translate into an intrinsic sense of responsibility (Lauermann & Krabenick, 2011). Rather, accountability systems create what Wills and Sanholtz (2009) called constrained professionalism, in which the contextual pressures of teaching compel teachers' decisions. As is the case with curriculum-related expectations, teachers have very little control over the standards for which they are held accountable, and they often feel a tension between their own understandings of what makes for good teaching and the outside expectations of testing (Fischman, DiBara, & Gardner, 2006; Palmer & Rangel, 2011).

In responding to high-stakes testing, teachers have had their attention diffused by a multitude of decisions about individual tasks related to test results. These distractions can hinder their ability to conceive of their jobs in a holistic way (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006). The focus on testing affects the decisions that teachers make about instructional time in their classrooms. Teachers report feeling pressured by their districts to alter their teaching schedule to allow their students time to prepare for the test and also to choose instructional materials and lessons that have a format similar to that of the test (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Palmer & Rangel, 2011).

State testing has been found to contribute to the de-professionalization of teachers (Abrams et al., 2003). Teachers have reported that their accountability to state testing programs has led them to make decisions about teaching that have contradicted their own beliefs about sound practice. Although state tests are designed to measure students' ability to meet content standards, the literature suggests that it is the test itself and the accountability to the test, rather than the standards, that influence teachers' instructional decisions (Abrams et al., 2003; Pedulla et al., 2003). The value that administrators place on test scores reduces the value that they place on teachers' discretion over instructional decisions. Teachers do not dismiss the need for tests outright, but the degree of importance they ascribe to tests often does not match that of policy-makers and administrators. Teachers' willingness or ability to reconcile the pressure of testing-related accountability with their own sensibilities determines the impact testing has on their instructional decision-making (Grant, 2007).

High-stakes testing also promotes a narrowing of the curriculum that further constrains teachers in their instructional decision-making (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). In their teaching and in their allocation of resources they emphasize tested content areas at the expense of non-tested

subjects. The pressure of being held accountable for test results often leads teachers to parcel out content into isolated, test-friendly skills, and thereby to lose sight of the well-rounded, student-focused teaching and learning that best motivates students (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Placing greater emphasis on tested subjects at the expense of non-tested subjects also creates a greater reliance on teacher-centered instructional strategies (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). Studies have shown that state tests have a significant impact on teachers' instructional decisions and that they often drive the curriculum (Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Pedula, 2003).

Nichols and Berliner (2008) discovered that the pressure of high-stakes testing can alter the way teachers conceive of their students. Their findings indicated that teachers can regard their students as either “test-score increasers” or “tests-score suppressors” instead of as whole children who bring multiple skills, perspectives and values to the classroom. Testing inevitably influences the culture of the classroom and affects the relationships between teachers and students (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). The focus on testing and the resultant pressures on both teachers and students to prove themselves also influences the opportunities teachers have to create positive emotional connections with their students (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). This valuing of “results over relationships” constrains teachers' abilities to foster the social and emotional development of their students (Harris, 2008). When students feel that their value is determined by their test results, they are less likely to develop a strong connection to school and to their teachers (Roeser et al., 2000).

Griffith et al. (2013) found that it was not just the state test that influenced instructional decision-making but school benchmarks as well. Teachers based their decisions on the goals set by outside forces, such as the state, district, and school, instead of basing them on their own goals for their students. Teachers are trained to use the data from assessments to inform their

instruction. However, state tests are summative in nature, and the results are generally not available in time to be of any use during the school year in which the test is given.

Administrators often use these test results to make school-wide decisions regarding instruction and interventions for the following school year. Other tests given throughout the year are formative and are intended to inform teachers' instructional decision-making more immediately. Many schools use data-teams and small grade-level or subject-area groups of teachers, who meet regularly to analyze data from common formative assessments, to collaborate on instructional strategies, and to monitor student outcomes. This use of collaborative, deep analysis of data to infer students' needs is another factor that influences teachers' decision-making (Hattie, 2012).

Influence of Teachers' Beliefs on Decision-Making

The literature shows that researchers characterize beliefs in many different ways (Pajares, 1992). They hold beliefs about aspects of teachers' lives but disagree as to how to define them. Pajares (1992) reported on the difficulty of studying teachers' beliefs and on the confusing multiple understandings of beliefs found in the literature. Included in his review was a list of different conceptions of beliefs with respect to decision-making. These include: (a) beliefs are formed early and are resistant to change, (b) beliefs strongly influence both perception and behavior, and (c) beliefs must be inferred. Although beliefs are hard to define, and although they are usually held tacitly, they are nonetheless an important component of teachers' cognition. Teachers' practice is the manifestation of their decisions, which are at least in some part influenced by their beliefs (Fang, 1996). Kagan (1992) contended that learning about teachers' beliefs and their impact on decision-making may lead to a better understanding of what makes a good teacher.

A teacher's belief system may be a product of that teacher's upbringing, schooling experiences, training, or teaching experience, and it is also influenced by the curriculum and programs mandated in the district (Kagan, 1992). On the one hand, teachers' beliefs influence their decisions about curriculum, and on the other hand, curriculum helps develop their beliefs. Teachers' beliefs are shaped by their practices, just as their practices are influenced by their beliefs. Moreover, teachers' sense of self-efficacy increases when they experience success in their practices (Buehl & Beck, 2015). Because beliefs are not observable and must therefore be inferred or constructed from what teachers say, it is difficult to discern the relationship between beliefs and practice in such a way as to understand when and how beliefs affect teachers' instructional decisions (Pajares, 1992). To study the connection between beliefs and practices one must rely on the reporting of teachers who may be unwilling or unable to express their beliefs (Ertmer, 2005). Teachers may also inadvertently assign beliefs based on reflection on their practice. Instead of saying, "I did this because I believe. . . ." teachers may reason that "I did this, so that must mean that I believe." Teachers thus attribute beliefs to practices on the basis of post-practice reflections, instead of identifying beliefs that inform their decision-making before or during instruction (Eley, 2006).

It is not only teachers' cognition that must be considered when evaluating the influences on their beliefs and decision-making. Emotions also play a role. It is not only what teachers know about teaching and learning that affects their decision-making, but also how they feel about their practices. Teachers' beliefs influence their decisions, which, in turn, influence their emotions. As teachers make decisions in their daily practice, they develop feelings about themselves; teaching and learning are dependent on the perceived success or failure of those decisions. Those feelings then may change their beliefs or shape new ones (Gill & Hardin, 2015).

Much of the research on teachers' beliefs is concerned with the factors that contribute to the connection of beliefs to practice. Beliefs and practices influence each other in different ways, depending on the individuals and circumstances involved. Such factors as preparation, professional development, and experience can bring about a change in beliefs (Fives, Lcatena & Gerard, 2015). The realities of teachers' lives, including the curriculum and the accountability-related policies discussed above, support, constrain, or extend the ways in which teachers apply their beliefs to their instructional decisions (Fang, 1996). Studies have revealed that teachers often strongly endorsed practices that were not evident in their own practice (Fives et al., 2015). Teachers have attributed lack of alignment between their beliefs and practice to the restricted autonomy that results from mandated curriculum and high-stakes testing (Schraw & Olafson, 2002). Teachers' level of experience also influences the relationship between their practices and their beliefs (Buehl & Beck, 2015). Another explanation for apparent gaps between belief and practice has to do with the nature of beliefs. The inconsistencies between what teachers say they believe and what they are observed to do in practice may stem from the difficulty of correctly identifying and representing beliefs (Ertmer, 2005). When a teachers' actions appear to contradict an espoused belief, it may be that they applied a different, stronger belief without disregarding their belief system (Ertmer, 2005; Schraw & Olafson, 2002).

The relative influence of policies on teachers' decision-making depends on the teachers' ability or inability to modify their beliefs about teaching and learning to match outside expectations (Smith & Sutherland, 2007). Teachers must regularly balance and moderate beliefs about teaching and learning with outside factors (Fives et al., 2105). When their beliefs are not congruent with policy, teachers need either to modify the policy or modify their beliefs. Research shows that a change in practice requires a change in beliefs and that a number of contextual

factors determine teachers' responses to expectations involving the curriculum and testing (Smith & Kovac, 2011; Smith & Sutherland, 2007). Teachers may choose to accept directives as they are, to modify directives to match their beliefs, or to reject the directives and to align their practice with their own beliefs behind closed doors (Grant, 2007; Smith & Kovac, 2011; Smith & Sutherland, 2007). When teachers are expected to implement practices that are out of alignment with their beliefs about teaching and learning, their satisfaction declines. Consequently, skilled teachers sometimes leave the profession in response to the pressure they feel to suspend their beliefs (Fives et al., 2015). Teachers' beliefs strongly influence their instructional decision-making.

Conclusion

This literature review covered three key factors that influence instructional decision-making: curriculum, testing and beliefs, and the prominence of these components in the literature. The participants in this study also found these factors to be influential. They often mentioned curriculum, testing, and beliefs in their descriptions of their experiences of instructional decision-making. Their response to these factors was the most significant determinant in their instructional decision-making.

Chapter 3

Method

Introduction

This study was a phenomenological examination of the experience of instructional decision-making. Phenomenology is the study of lived experience. It asks such questions as, “What is this or that experience like?” (Van Manen, 1990). In this study, my intent was to provide a richly detailed narrative description of third-grade teachers’ experiences of instructional decision-making. To do so I had to ascertain the meaning the participants derived from recounting those experiences. Their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them led them to a deeper understanding of the phenomena associated with their decision-making.

The research questions were:

1. How do third-grade teachers from public elementary schools describe the experience of instructional decision-making?
2. How do teachers describe the factors that influence their decision-making?
3. What meaning do teachers derive from recounting their decision-making experiences?

Setting

The participating teachers taught in McMinnville, Oregon, a rural community about 30 miles south of Portland, which is home to the McMinnville School District, the site for this study. McMinnville School District has an enrollment of 6,605 students in six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Of the student population 12.6% are special education students, 15.2% are English language learners, and 56% students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Two of the elementary schools offer a dual language program, providing instruction to native Spanish speakers and native English speakers in both languages.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

I secured a sample of three third-grade teachers. I chose to focus on third-grade teachers as participants in this research for several reasons. First, I am an elementary school teacher myself, having taught all grades except first grade during my fifteen-year career. Second, I chose elementary school teachers because I am interested in the experience of instructional decision-making in classrooms where multiple subjects are taught. Making instructional decisions across subject areas adds a particular complexity to the decision-making experiences of elementary teachers that is different from that of single-subject teachers. I currently teach fifth grade and have never taught third grade in McMinnville. Third, I purposely chose a grade level that I do not teach in order to make it easier to find a sample of teachers who did not already know me. This latter decision enabled the study to benefit from an interviewing relationship that developed on its own merits. This lack of familiarity also reduced the assumptions I may have inadvertently made with respect to someone I already knew well (Seidman, 2013). For these same reasons, I did not include third-grade teachers from my own school in the sampling.

I also chose third grade because it is the first year in which standardized testing “counts.” Third-grade state test reading scores are highlighted in the Oregon Achievement Compact. The Achievement Compact is the alternative to NCLB and it puts a priority on third-grade reading scores. I was curious as to how third grade teachers experienced having their state reading scores designated as key outcomes, because I believed that this factor could exert a potentially significant influence on their instructional decisions.

I used purposive sampling to obtain the three participants for this study. Random sampling is generally done for large quantitative studies and is therefore not suitable for studies based on in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2013). There are only 15 third-grade teachers in the five

elementary schools in McMinnville other than the one in which I teach. I chose three teachers, each from a different school, in order to allow a wider representation of the phenomena across different schools. This strategy also creates greater potential for readers to connect their own stories to the stories shared in the study, which is the phenomenologist's answer to the generalizability features of other kinds of studies (Seidman, 2013). My objective was to have enough data to identify the themes that were common to all participants' stories, while also allowing for the uniqueness of each participant's account. Following is a brief introduction of each of the participants.

At the time of this study, Lisa had been a third-grade teacher in the district for more than 10 years. She was thoughtful and reflective about the educational policies, reforms, and frameworks that affect teachers' decision-making. Her perceptions of the flaws in the current educational system were apparent throughout the study. In her responses to my questions on the pressures related to accountability, Lisa spoke of feeling like either "a good little soldier," when complying with directives, or like "a criminal" when challenging directives. Although her decisions often reflected a response to the accountability systems that she regarded as ineffective or unjust, she expressed her desire to change the system rather than adapt to or accept its directives. She often spoke about her vision of how things should be. She sought situations that would increase her ability to enact change, first by changing school sites and later by taking steps toward securing a leadership position outside the classroom.

Meg was also a veteran teacher; she had more than 15 years' experience in second and third grades. She identified herself as being closer to retirement than not. She was driven by her belief in the humanity of her role as an educator and spoke often of her desire to educate her students' hearts as well as their minds. Much of her frustration as a decision-maker stemmed

from her inability to attend to her students' social and emotional needs because of accountability-related pressures. Meg's decisions often reflected acquiescence to testing and curricular directives, even though they stood in opposition to her own values. She said she felt conflicted by her desire to meet the expectations of her position while remaining faithful to her own beliefs.

Nicole had more than 20 years' experience as an educator in both public and private schools. She had taught all levels from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade and therefore brought a broad perspective to instructional decision-making. She felt some tension and frustration working within the current systems and was able to compare her most recent teaching experiences with times of less pressure. Nicole managed any tension she felt in her instructional decision-making by relying on the close working relationship she had with the other third-grade teachers in her building. She regularly planned instruction and shared materials with her grade-level team. She made instructional decisions to accept, adapt, or disregard district directives because of the support of her team members. Of all the participants, Nicole felt most confident taking risks in her decision-making.

I received permission from the administrators of the participating schools before presenting my research proposal to the third-grade teachers at each school. The three participants volunteered to participate in the study after reading about the purpose and goals of the research. Since participation required a substantial time commitment, I provided gift certificates to a local restaurant as an incentive..

Phenomenology

I will here provide a review of phenomenology—what it is, and what it is not—in order to provide a context for the design of my proposed study. Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience of a particular concept or phenomenon. Phenomenological research is

specifically intended to uncover the underlying meaning of the experience, to get at the essence of what it is like for someone to live that experience (Van Manen, 1990). In phenomenology, perception is reality (Moustakas, 1994). To be precise, it is the perception of the participants that is the reality and not that of the researcher. As the researcher, I helped organize and narrate the participants' perceptions for the reader, but I based my examination of instructional decision-making in this study on the perceptions of the participants. It is the participants' voices that are heard throughout.

Phenomenological researchers do not present empirical data that describe the facts of what happened. Phenomenological research does not create or prove theory. In the words of Van Manen (1990), "Phenomenology is not concerned primarily with the nomological or factual aspects of some state of affairs; rather, it always asks, "What is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced?" (p. 40). The present phenomenological study of teachers' decision-making examines the nature and meaning of instructional decision-making as it was experienced by three third-grade teachers; it does not provide a factual recounting of the acts or processes the teachers experienced. I did not simply ask, "What happened?" Instead I asked questions such as, "What was it like?" and "What does it mean to you?"

The value of phenomenological research lies in its ability to reveal and describe the meaning of everyday experiences. My research therefore provides an in-depth description of teachers' decision-making from the participants' stories and the meaning they constructed while recounting them. I hope that my description of the essence and the meaning of teachers' experiences of making decisions will lead to a greater understanding of teachers' decision-making.

Data Collection

I used in-depth interviews to try to understand the essence of the participants' experiences of instructional decision-making. Interviewing third-grade teachers provided the space and opportunity for teachers' stories to unfold, and it also created occasions for teachers to reflect on how they developed meaning through their recounting of their own experiences. My goal was not only to understand the experience of decision-making but also the meaning of the lived experiences. Seidman (2013) reports, "Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process" (p. 7). I believe that interviewing, although it is not the only research method available to phenomenologists, provided the best avenue for achieving the goals of this study.

Seidman (2013) has developed an interview model that I modified slightly for this study. The model capitalizes on the reciprocal relationship between the interviewer and the participant and allows both parties to explore and reflect on stories in order to develop meaning. The Seidman model recommends a three-interview process. I conducted two interviews with each participant, collapsing interviews two and three into a single interview for each person. Each interview was based on a phenomenological theme with related questions (Appendix A). Interview one is designed to elicit a focused life history in the area of interest. The guide questions for this interview are designed to provide a context for the participants' lives as teachers and decision-makers. An example of a question for this first interview is, "How did you come to teaching?" In this first interview, I spent time getting to know the teacher and building a relationship so that she would feel at ease talking about her life. I reflected what she said back to her so that she felt heard and knew that she had the opportunity to clarify or expand as she saw fit.

The second interview provided the details of the experience and allowed me to help the participants reflect on the meaning of their experiences. It was during this interview that I asked questions that guided the participants to recount stories of their experiences of instructional decision-making. The goal was for them to recount the experience as it was lived, rather than to retell the process or the steps they took. This was done to support a reconstruction of the details of the experience onto which understandings and meanings could be built (Seidman, 2013). With that in mind, a sample prompt for interview two was, “Describe a day in your life as a teacher making instructional decisions.” I also used questions and prompts to focus on the meanings the participants developed from recounting their experiences as instructional decision-makers. I carefully monitored my own reactions and feelings during the interviews to make sure that I was not stepping outside of the role of objective researcher, and to ensure that I was able to focus on the feelings and reactions of the participant. By recognizing my own feelings and reactions I could more easily set them aside and accept what the data presented, and not what my perceptions predisposed me to find (Peshkin, 1998). In essence, interview two was an opportunity for me to ask the participants to go back to the stories they had shared in interview one and answer, “What does it mean to you?” A sample prompt I used to support the participants in this goal was, “Based on what you shared with me about your experience as a decision-maker, what would you say feels most important to you about decision-making?”

I piloted the interviews with one of my third-grade teacher colleagues from the school in which I work. Doing so allowed me to practice the process and make adjustments before I began the study. The practice interviews were shorter than the actual interviews, but much of the process remained true to the design plan for the study. It was during the practice interviews that I decided to modify Seidman’s model by reducing the three interviews to two. I found that I was

able to address my research questions and to delve into the essence of the experience of decision-making in the course of the two interviews. I met with my colleague twice and used the information from the previous interview to guide the next interview. I then gave her a gift certificate to express my thanks for her support for my research..

I scheduled the interviews with each participant approximately two to three days apart per Seidman's (2013) recommendation. In so doing, I hoped to keep the interviews close enough together to maintain some connection and fluidity between them (Seidman, 2013). I completed both interviews with the first participant before moving on to the second and the third, using the information I had gathered from the first and then the second participant to inform the next set of interviews. I digitally recorded each interview and transcribed the interviews myself. Doing the transcriptions myself allowed me to get to know the interviews well and to begin to notice themes and understandings that would become important during my formal analysis of the transcripts. Although data collection and data analysis are sometimes discussed as separate pieces of the research design, with this study the two processes overlapped, as is often appropriate in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

I transcribed every word as spoken by participants. After transcribing, I closely read the transcripts and looked for statements that seemed to speak to the essence of the experience. Following Peshkin (1988) I recognized, embraced, and reported my subjectivity during both the analysis and those parts of the study that required me to make decisions, instead of attempting to bracket myself out of the study. Disavowing a connection to a study one is conducting is not only impossible, according to Peshkin, but trying to maintain a false distance is both dishonest and a disservice to the readers. Instead, I took notes regularly during my analysis, which allowed me to

be aware of and attentive to my subjectivity at all times. I recorded my observations each time I had a reaction to a statement or a circumstance that brought my experience into the study. I thereby became aware of the ways in which my feelings could shape the study, and so was better able to manage my subjectivity than if I had ignored or hidden it. By making myself aware of my subjectivity as I conducted research, I was able to identify where my study and I connected.

Before beginning the second interview, I shared with each participant my own understandings about her previous interview. I shared what seemed significant and asked if she agreed. The participants' input helped me focus on the meanings that they had developed. I conducted a final member-check after I had transcribed the interviews by inviting the participants to review a draft version of Chapter 4. I kept these member-checking conversations as brief as possible, because they added to the participants' overall time commitment and were not accounted for in the informed consent form. Member-checks are a critical aspect of research such as this, because the participants' statements are the focus of the study. Verifying the accuracy of what I had heard and understood participants to say added credibility to the study. Member-checking was an important part of the reciprocal relationship between the participants and myself, and it provided the three teachers with some ownership and control as partners in the study (Seidman, 2013).

Van Manen (1990) does not offer a step-by-step guide for analyzing data, but he does write about the search for themes. He refers to phenomenological themes as the "structures of experience" (p. 79). Moustakas (1994) provides methods for analysis that involve clustering statements into themes. The different themes become the basis for understanding the experience. For my study, this involved reading the transcripts of the interviews and looking for any statements that could reveal the structure of the decision-making experience. I then examined

these statements to develop themes or meanings vis-à-vis the whole of the experience. These themes helped me build phenomenological descriptions of the lived experience of decision-making for these third-grade teachers.

Seidman (2013) also recommends that the researcher read the interview transcripts carefully and mark what is meaningful. He offered two possibilities for the next steps of interpreting and sharing findings from phenomenological research. The first involves creating a profile of each participant. The second is a more conventional way of presenting qualitative data, and it is the method that I chose for this study. It involves making thematic connections between the statements found in the transcripts. In keeping with Van Manen's (1990) and Moustakas's (1994) discussion of the analysis of interview information, the tasks involve sorting meaningful statements found in the transcripts into labeled groups. The first themes I observed involved the identification of decision-making factors. The three teachers mentioned beliefs, testing, and curriculum as factors influencing their decisions. I was then able to evaluate the transcripts for the common responses the teachers had to these factors. The response themes were accountability, stress, concern for students, and support from administrators or colleagues. During the analysis I was able to find patterns within those categories and connections between the thematic groups.

Research Ethics

Each of the participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix B) indicating that she had understood the nature of the study and her part in it. The informed consent form included an invitation to participate, information on the time commitments involved, and a detailed description of how the information would be used and how privacy and confidentiality would be maintained.

I kept the participants' identities strictly confidential. During the study, I coded materials in such a way that if someone were to observe them they would be unable to connect them to a particular individual. I used pseudonyms and carefully managed any other identifying facts. For example, because there are so few third-grade teachers in the district, identifying the school a participant worked in by name would certainly have narrowed the possibilities and jeopardized confidentiality. In addition, I kept all materials, including digital recordings and transcripts, in a locked filing cabinet or in password-protected files on the computer in my home office.

The informed consent form also made clear how much of the information the participant provided might be used in the study. The participants needed to understand that I would not simply use snippets of their interviews, since the nature of the phenomenological study required that I use the participants' own words to develop the meaning of their experiences. Seidman (2013) has cautioned that many participants anticipate that only a few phrases from their interview will be used in the final study, so notifying them that I planned to make extensive use of the interview data was a necessary component of the informed consent.

Role of the Researcher

At the time of this study, I am a graduate student, and this research was part of the requirements of my doctoral degree. Although I had a vested interest in the successful completion of the study, I was also genuinely interested in the participants and their experiences. I was an elementary school teacher in the district where I conducted the study, and so I took precautions to limit my place in the study by choosing a grade level other than the one I taught and by choosing participants only from schools other than my own. I have several years of experience working in the district, which helped me to relate to my participants, but these years of experience also meant that I carried certain biases and preconceptions that could have had an

impact on the study. As I mentioned above, I actively attended to and acknowledged my own subjectivity throughout the study and worked to manage its influence. With the guidance of my chair and committee, I made every effort to ensure that the interview questions were not biased or leading, and that they were designed to elicit the participants' free expression of their experiences.

Potential Contributions of the Research

The existing literature on teacher decision-making includes studies on the process of decision-making, frameworks for decision-making, and discussions of the factors that influence decision-making. This study contributes a deeper understanding of the ways in which third-grade teachers experience making instructional decisions.. The factors themselves are well documented; my findings reveal how these factors felt in the moment-to-moment work of making decisions. To examine the decision-making experience from the perspective of teachers is to ask them to develop the meaning of that experience. My learning came from the meaning that the participants attributed to their experiences.

This phenomenological study is naturally limited in its scope to the teachers in the study. Their experiences cannot be generalized to the experiences of all teachers. However, the kind of learning that comes from this study can lead to new thinking about how teachers experience instructional decision-making. Connecting with teachers' experiences in this way could lead readers to consider ways to improve teacher training, focus professional development, and even reexamine school reform and educational policy. Teaching is decision-making, and understanding teachers' experiences can lead to a better understanding of what makes a difference in teaching and learning.

Chapter 4

Findings

Three third-grade teachers gave their time to discuss and reflect on the phenomenon of instructional decision-making in their classrooms. Each of them participated in two interviews. Interviews one and two were held a few days apart, and each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The teachers shared stories about their experiences of making instructional decisions in their classrooms, choosing anecdotes, reliving times of success and struggle, and making meaning as they spoke. As I transcribed and began to analyze the interview data, I wondered: “What do all of these experiences have in common? How might I weave them together to tell one story?” What I found to be common to many of the stories, both within and between the transcripts, was tension. Although every decision can be said to be a push or a pull in a particular direction, there was a strong feeling of tension present in these stories as the teachers narrated their responses to the factors that had influenced their decision-making.

In the course of the study, I discovered several factors that had broadly influenced the participants’ decision-making : their beliefs, understandings, and priorities; curriculum; and testing. These factors are roughly the same as those I identified in the literature review, and so I have chosen to use them as a point of departure for my presentation of the data in this chapter. I have organized these factors as I did in Chapter 2, and I have cross-referenced the teachers’ responses by means of parentheses in headings.

Within the major factors of curriculum, testing, and teachers’ beliefs, four key themes emerged from the participants’ accounts of how they actually made instructional decisions. These included accountability to curriculum, pacing guides and tests (accountability); stress about not meeting expectations (stress); concern for students’ learning and well-being (concern);

and support from others that enabled them to take risks in decision-making (support). My intention was to stay true to the three teachers' words while also maintaining organizational continuity. As a result, I have used quotations from the transcripts for headings in many places throughout this chapter, along with parenthetical references to the major themes.

In examining the first response theme of *accountability*, the participants indicated that they often chose to follow a directive because of pressures from curriculum, testing, or other district expectations. If expectations did not match their own beliefs about what was best for their students, the participants sometimes chose to accept them out of a desire to follow the rules or to trust the system, or because they thought that administrators were watching and they wanted to avoid conflict. In examining the second response theme of *stress*, the three teachers often spoke of feeling exhausted or overwhelmed by their responsibilities and by the decisions they subsequently made under stress. The third response theme of *concern* for their students drove the teachers' decisions related to curriculum or testing based on what they themselves sensed was "best" for their students. The final theme of *support* revealed that the teachers were more likely to take risks in their instructional decisions if they had the support of the other third-grade teachers in their building or of their building administrator. I have abbreviated these four response themes as *accountability*, *stress*, *concern*, and *support*, and I have referred to them throughout this chapter whenever I have applied them to my analysis of the teachers' words.

The goal of phenomenological research is to reveal and describe lived experience. As I have stated above, my goal was to allow the three teachers to tell their stories. However, as the narrator, I gave meaning to the experiences by organizing them in particular ways. All the themes I created from the teachers' stories are about the struggles they encountered as decision-making factors merged or collided with their own beliefs. As tensions emerged between the

teachers' own beliefs and outside factors, they responded by accepting a directive as it was, adapting the directive to meet their needs, or challenging the directive either outright or quietly. Their responses to the factors that influenced their instructional decision-making were complex, and they were not linear or predictable, even within a single participant's experiences. The stories give an idea of what it *feels* like for these teachers to make instructional decisions in a third grade classroom.

Teachers' decision-making, as these teachers expressed it, is organic, unique, and specific to the time and space of the decision-maker. The participants worked in different schools, with different administrators, and with different groups of students. They spoke of struggle and frustration in each conversation about instructional decision-making as they recalled responding to accountability-related pressure, stress over meeting expectations, prioritizing their concern for their students, or challenging directives with the support of an administrator or coworkers. Sometimes they encountered all four of these factors over the course of one day's work. At the same time, they demonstrated both passion and dedication to their students, rather than resignation or defeat. Meg said of her participation in this study, "It has been an amazing gift to me." Talking about what it is like to be a third-grade teacher in this time and place brought to light how decisions are actually being made in the high-stakes, high-pressure environment in which the participants teach. Teachers make countless decisions each day, and the three teachers in this study valued the opportunity they had to slow down and tell the stories of those experiences. In taking the time to reflect and to tell their stories they gained new understanding, and so did I. The purpose of this study is to pass along those understandings so that the conversation can be opened to other teachers and stakeholders interested in responding to the factors that affect instructional decision-making. This chapter examines four different factors that

were challenges for the teachers in this study. It begins with a presentation of the data on the role of teachers' personal beliefs, and then moves on to discuss data related to curriculum, testing, and other expectations. The ways teachers responded to each of these factors is the focus of the analysis in this chapter. The four response themes of accountability, stress, concern, and support are explained in the following sections within my analysis of each teacher's quote.

The Role of Personal Beliefs, Understandings, and Priorities

Teachers bring to their classrooms the backgrounds, experiences, and training that make up their personal beliefs about teaching and learning. Previous studies on instructional decision-making have revealed the difficulty of trying to separate teachers' beliefs from their practice (Eley, 2006). Beliefs are not apparent when one observes practice, and researchers can only discuss them with teachers who are willing to reflect on their practice and to isolate their own beliefs from the other factors affecting their decisions (Ertmer, 2005). The teachers in this study reflected in-depth on the role their personal understandings and beliefs played in their instructional decisions. They provided clear examples of instances in which their personal beliefs competed for priority with several outside factors in the decision-making process. Likewise, they shared the feelings they had with respect to occupying the tenuous space between their own beliefs, understanding, and priorities and the outside expectations of testing, curriculum, and accountability to district directives. The three regularly made decisions in favor of either their own beliefs or the expectations of the district. Whenever one of them mentioned making a decision on the basis of her own understandings rather than outside expectations I could see the impact that her beliefs had on her decision-making. The participants' accounts indicated that they frequently experienced a conflict between what they believed to be best for their students and the

expectations of the system. Their stories illustrated what this incongruity felt like in their daily practice—a balancing act.

Academic needs—Meeting students where they are. The three teachers spoke of making instructional decisions by navigating the spaces between where their students are and where the district indicates they need to be. The problem, they said, is that the final destination is not easily agreed upon nor is the means for the journey. There are many ways to get from point A to point B, and choosing a route became more difficult when they did not feel ownership of the district’s designation of point B, for reasons explained later in the chapter. The pressure the three teachers felt to get their students to meet an academic benchmark within the time designated by the district was increased by their perception that the benchmark and its deadline were often unreasonable and inappropriate. The participants wanted their students to reach their own potential, and they believed that the measure of success should be different for each student; but the district’s blanket expectations did not account for students’ diverse needs and backgrounds. They also want to give priority to their students, using their own experience as educators to guide their decisions, but they also felt the pressure of remaining in compliance with the frameworks and expectations handed to them. Hence their struggle between beliefs and accountability.

“When it is something that I know is going to be tracked and followed. . . .”

(Accountability). Lisa often digressed into a discussion of the larger political and systemic challenges that teachers face, instead of focusing on the decision-making experiences that were under her control. The data that I collected from Lisa’s interviews illustrate the complexity of teachers’ decision-making. Her stories indicate that she sometimes chose to follow district directives, sometimes made modifications to the directives so as to meet her students’ needs, sometimes chose to circumvent the directives quietly, and sometimes sought the support of her

administrator when she wanted to challenge a particular directive. The following exemplifies her response to the pressure of accountability:

I think it is trying to take what my teacher brain knows is best for the kids that I am working with and mitigate that with the expectations I am given, particularly when it is something that I know it is going to be tracked and followed, and I am accountable for presenting evidence and information and data on. When I have to do that, then there is a certain extent that I have to do what I am told, you know? And I can't always do it the way I need to. (Lisa)

In this example, Lisa explained situations where she would comply with district expectations by responding to the pressure of accountability. If she were expected to present evidence regarding a particular assessment or standard, then she would include it in her plans, even if it was contrary to her own beliefs about what her students needed or were ready to do. Lisa often spoke about decision-making in terms of what she felt she could get away with. In this example, she expressed her response to accountability when she knew someone was checking. She and the other teachers in this study specified that they were more likely to take risks in their decision-making if they believed that they would not be made to answer for those decisions. They indicated that accountability would often trump their professional judgment.

The participants also experienced dissonance between their student's academic abilities and the district's expectation of where the students were beginning their journey toward mastering third grade standards. All three teachers disagreed with the district's understanding of what constitutes point A for their students, since not all students begin in the same place. They also expressed their frustration over preparing students to meet a benchmark they believe is unfair, unattainable, and of little value to some students.

“But I am going to be off my map and non-compliant.” (Accountability). The participants affirmed the research documenting the inequities in students' backgrounds and

family lives that advantage some and disadvantage others (Lubienski & Crane, 2010). They faced real dilemmas in deciding how best to teach to what students know, when there are significant differences in their background knowledge. Studies have confirmed that these differences play a critical role in determining learning success (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). But, according to the participants, the district ignored this component in setting its expectations.

My kids are coming in lower and lower, and I think it is the perpetual motion of trying to follow this model, and we are not getting where they need to be. And I know this as a teacher, and I know that I need to stop and go back and build some foundation. And that is what I want to do, but I am going to be off my map and non-compliant and [I will have to] go to these meetings and not be able to share with the other teachers in the district. . . . Sometimes I want to just say, ‘This is where these kids are reading,’ and ‘This is where these kids are with math.’ I just have to scrap everything and go from there. (Lisa)

In this example, Lisa was describing a situation in which she would feel compelled to submit to the district’s pacing guide so that she would be able to indicate compliance to administrators and be in step with other teachers. Although she wished to respond to her concern for her students, this desire competed with the pressure to conform. When she felt her actions in her classroom were going to be noticed, she would submit to the district’s expectations, even if doing so contradicted her personal beliefs and her concern for her students’ needs. Lisa and the other two teachers indicated that they knew knew their students and their academic needs well, and that they felt constrained in using that knowledge to inform their instructional decisions. They said they understood the futility of trying to teach to a standard if the students lacked the foundational skills to access that standard, but they often felt pressure to move on in order to keep up with expectations, to keep themselves accountable rather than concern themselves with their students’ needs; and so sometimes their students got

left behind. They did not feel that they had the luxury of allowing their students to set the pace but rather felt bound to the pace set by the state test and the frameworks built around it.

The model Lisa referred to is the one that the district had adopted, namely, Rigorous Curriculum Design (RCD) including Common Formative Assessments (CFA) and the accompanying pacing calendar. The model's content units were written by teachers according to a very specific design provided by the author of Rigorous Curriculum Design (Ainsworth, 2010). The curricular units are intended to align standards, instruction, and assessment. Each unit includes pre- and post-assessments—CFAs—that are required to be given and analyzed at about the same time throughout the district. The teachers in this study felt that RCD was more about assessment than instruction. The skills that were assessed in RCD units often did not reflect what these teachers felt was important, even though the authors of the assessments were also teachers. The data analysis is done by data teams at building grade-level meetings. The results of these meetings are shared with building administrators, and sometimes across buildings, throughout the district. The participants reported that they felt this data analysis was a means of checking up on them, and that this sense of accountability influenced their instructional decisions.

The RCD units are scheduled so as to promote mastery of each of the priority standards prior to the Smarter Balanced state test. The rigorous Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are new to the district, and the transition from the Oregon state standards to the CCSS has created gaps in students' learning between grade levels. Third grade CCSS, and the curriculum designed around those standards, anticipate that students have mastered second grade CCSS. The teachers and students in second grade were still working with and often struggling to master the Oregon state standards. The participants believed that a true and realistic understanding of where their

students are is missing from the district's expectations. They struggled to discern how their own understandings of their students fit into their instructional decisions.

Lisa indicated a response to accountability in her anxiety about being “off my map and non-compliant.” She was referring to the pacing guide that the district mandates teachers to follow. The pacing guides are particular to each grade level. Third grade teachers have some input as to the order of the units in the guide, but the number of units and the time allotted for each unit is determined by district administrators. The decisions are made with the state test in mind, so that all standards are covered prior to the administration of the test in spring. Also, teachers meet with district leadership and third-grade colleagues across the district to discuss data and RCD units. This is another check-up on compliance with the pacing guide, and another indication of the application of pressure with respect to accountability. All three teachers referred to their personal struggle with the pressure to keep on pace with a schedule that did not match their own beliefs about their students' needs. They regularly made choices that would either keep them on course or cause them to veer off the schedule of the pacing calendar.

“I went to [my principal] and said, ‘This is what I want to do.’” (Support, Concern).

In this particular district, decisions about instructional design were often made by district administrators and then handed down to teachers. When the designs ran contrary to the participants' beliefs about what was best practice for their students, they responded according to what seemed warranted by the situation. Lisa talked about making changes to reading instruction to better fit her students' needs. In the following example, her own beliefs took priority in her decision-making, and she chose to seek support from her administrator in order to challenge the district framework. Her observation indicates the difficulties she had in scheduling reading time with multiple assistants and groups.

I again didn't believe that this is the best model all of the time. I thought that my kids needed groups a few times a week, because they obviously needed instruction at their level and to be reading at their level. But I also needed time to do whole group lessons to teach main concepts and big standards and these overriding things that they all need to be practicing. I didn't have the opportunity to gather information and reflect on what their needs were. So I did something pretty similar with that. I went to [my principal] and said, 'This is what I want to do with my EA time. Are you okay with that?' And so I am alternating that. I have a couple days a week with whole group lessons, and then I break down the practice component to meet the kids' needs, and then we do the leveled reading groups on the other days, and we alternate throughout the week. (Lisa)

In this example, Lisa's response flowed out of her concern for her students' needs. She discerned that for the EAs to have exclusive control over her students' reading instruction was not beneficial. She stood against the "drift" that happens when district mandates for EA time and curriculum concerns can overtake teachers' instructional time, moving them away from the students who need them most. In this case, the support of her principal enabled her to propose a different instructional plan to ensure that she had time with all of her students. In a later discussion, Lisa revealed that she changed buildings so that she would have the ability to make these kinds of changes with the support of the building administrator. She had not always felt supported in her instructional decision-making in her previous position. Because of this, she often felt compelled to respond to accountability-related pressures, diligently following the district guidelines rather than taking risks by responding to a concern for her students' needs based on her own professional understanding. Her discomfort over making decisions against her own judgment was the impetus for her request for a transfer.

"Not shutting down because it doesn't make sense." (Concern). The teachers in this study thought that it was important to ensure that their students had the foundational skills to support new learning. They spoke of their struggle to balance their own understandings of their

students' skills with the expectations set forth in the curriculum. Meg talked about the struggle to address her students' needs and her understandings about their level of academic achievement in the course of implementing a curriculum that was divorced from any personal understanding of her students. A case in point is *Engage New York*, a math curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards, which is available for free on the internet and includes daily lesson plans with specific instructions for the teachers. At the time of this study, the district recommended it as a resource to supplement RCD, and the curriculum proved to be a place where the struggle between students' needs and external curricular plans collided for Meg.

So, as a third-grade team across the district we have really embraced *Engage New York* and how that matches the standards. But I also want to make sure that the kids who are not able to master those standards are getting what they need to get there. I have kids that are still struggling with number sense in third grade so I have to make decisions about how I am going to serve those kids who are ready to move on, but also serve them to make sure they are continuing to learn math and not shutting down because it doesn't make sense. They don't have the building blocks. (Meg)

She responded on the basis of her concern for her students' academic needs, instead of capitulating to the pressure of accountability. It is common to have students of different levels of ability in a given classroom. Meg and the other teachers spoke about the difficulty they had in addressing the different needs within the curriculum that was provided for them. They felt that the lessons in *Engage New York* did not include avenues for differentiation, and that the pacing guide assumed mastery of the lessons within the designated time. The struggle to get all their students to meet the same benchmark at the same time is not unique to these teachers or to this district. This is just another place where teachers in this study felt conflicted in their instructional decision-making. In instances where the demands of the curriculum conflicted with their understanding of their students' needs, the participants decided either to move at the students'

pace by responding to their concerns, or at the curriculum's pace by responding to external pressure. Each decision was complex, and the three teachers' responses were dependent on the particular circumstances.

The teachers in this study said that they felt tension over the apparent inconsistency of their responses to the factors that influenced their decisions. They thought that they must consider not only how they could teach or reteach a concept so most students would understand it, but also if and how they could do so within the district's framework and calendar. Their responses express the themes of concern for students and attention to accountability.

The participants' comments took into consideration the role of their own beliefs, understandings, and priorities with respect to academic needs as they made instructional decisions. They worked to balance their own beliefs with the external expectations of curriculum and testing. The following section recounts the participants' reflections on the ways they tried to balance their beliefs about their students' emotional and social needs with those external academic expectations. As was the case with their beliefs about teaching and learning, the participants' beliefs about the need to educate the whole child competed for priority with the demands of curriculum and testing. The themes of accountability, stress, concern for students, and support of colleagues emerge in the three teachers' accounts of the decisions they made regarding their students' social and emotional needs. If and how the teachers in this study responded to their students' emotional needs was dependent on the situation.

Social and emotional needs—The whole child. The participants' accounts give evidence of the variety of responses they had during their attempts to reconcile their personal beliefs about their students' academic needs and the external expectations of curriculum and pacing. It bears mentioning at this point that district programs or mandates fail to address another area of consideration in teachers' decision-making, that of the whole child. The teachers in this study agreed with those researchers who contend that the social and emotional development of the child is as important as his or her academic development (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). The disagreement between the participants and the district seemed to be about the fundamental aim of education. The participants agreed with those researchers who charge that schools are responsible for the development of the whole child, and that students should not be parceled into parts, some to be covered by curriculum and others to be ignored (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). The transcripts of my interviews with the participants revealed that the district had, in effect, told its teachers that the district's primary goal was to have its students pass the standardized tests. Since social and emotional well-being are not quantifiable and are therefore not measurable on the state tests upon which schools are judged, they do not figure in the district's expectations as passed on to its teachers. In fact, the participants indicated, the district's academic expectations leave no room for anything non-quantifiable, even though emotional intelligence has been shown to be a greater indicator of success in life than GPA or test scores (Rogers, 2014). The participants strove to include these emotional and social skills in their instructional decisions in the classroom. They believed that it was important to focus on how students feel and interact in the world, and not just on their reading or math skills. They described situations where they felt able to respond to their students' needs and situations where they felt constrained by accountability.

“I am not educating their hearts at all.” (Accountability). Meg’s frustration stemmed from her struggle to respond to her concern for her students rather than the external pressures of district mandates in this high-stakes environment. The expectations placed on her with respect to testing and curriculum led her to sacrifice her belief in the importance of educating the whole child.

I am not educating the child, the whole child. I am educating their brain, but not their heart. Again, if kids do not know how to be in the world they will never be able to hold down a job. . . . Yes, I can give you mandates and yes, I can do things to get you involved, but it is all heady. These kids, I am not educating their hearts at all. There is no educating their hearts or teaching them how to be in the world. I am teaching them how to do math and reading and probably some other stuff, too. [When there is explosive behavior] I should be having the conversation when it is over to go, ‘Let’s just check in. How is everybody doing? You know that that I am going to keep you safe.’ But there is no time. I keep telling myself that there is no time. We’ve got to get back to math. We’ve got to finish this. (Meg)

This example demonstrates the decision-making response theme of accountability. Meg made a choice not to address the emotional needs of her students because of the pressure she felt to keep up with expectations related to academic pacing, even though she agreed with research indicating that the way teachers respond to and interact with their students has a profound effect on their students’ emotional, social, and academic development (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). Meg believes that the way she responds to her students is critical to her perceived role as an educator, and that it is her role to develop the whole child and support her students’ growth socially and emotionally while they are in her care. When there was explosive behavior or distress in her classroom, her instincts told her to address the situation and spend time helping her students learn to understand, monitor, and express their feelings. She wanted her students to feel safe and cared for. She also had the nagging pressure of this intervention time impinging on the pacing calendar. She shared many examples, like the one above, of situations in which she felt thwarted

from doing her duty to her students by a responsibility to fulfill the expectations of the curriculum. In such situations she had no time to attend to her students' non-academic needs.

The teachers in this study felt that there was little room in their instructional day beyond what was mandated by curriculum, pacing calendars, and testing. They believed in the importance of the social and emotional well-being of their students, but they often felt pressure to ignore the needs of the whole child in order to keep up with the district's expectations. Their beliefs about what was important were too often subjugated by these external expectations, which discouraged and squeezed out of the day any activities not directly tied to standards or to the development of the skills her students needed to pass the state test.. The high-stakes testing environment sent the message to both teachers and students that the purpose of learning is to pass a test (Nichols, & Berliner, 2008). The participants' comments revealed that they were getting that message loud and clear. They believed that they had no time for creativity or for activities that promote good feelings, positive relationships, or a love of school.

“I just need to build that time in, because they loved school that day.” (Concern, Support). The following anecdotes provide examples of the response theme of valuing students' well-being over conformity to the district's directives, of choosing joy over rigor. Here the priority in instructional decision-making was the students' happiness and love of school and not the need to stay true to a pacing calendar.

We have so little time for science, but we were trying to do the moon phases, and we decided to do an Oreo cookie thing for the moon phases. So they each got four Oreos and they took them apart and the one that was all black was the new moon, and the one that was all white was the full moon, and they scooped around and made crescent moons and gibbous moons. They did that, and they had so much fun. It was the day that conference started, and took like 30-45 minutes, and we kept saying, 'No we don't really have time for this.' I am so happy that we did it, because they had so much fun. And I realized that we just don't have a lot of fun anymore. We just don't. And it opened my eyes a little bit. I felt so good that day.

I left and I felt happy. You know, I just need to do more fun things with them. I just need to build that time in, because they loved school that day. I loved school that day. I think it was a good thing. (Nicole)

Science is not a tested subject in the third grade. The participants thought that district leadership regarded science instruction, along with art and other non-tested content areas, as extraneous, even though it is included in the standards.. The Oreo activity that Nicole did in her classroom was not part of an RCD unit or the pacing calendar. She said she wanted to get some science content into her day and chose to go outside of the pacing calendar to do an activity that she knew the students would enjoy. This example also showed how Nicole responded to the support of her team. She made this choice because she had that support, which she said reduced the feeling of risk for her. She felt the same external pressures as the other participants but has felt more comfortable and confident responding to these factors when making instructional decisions with her team.

“And I give myself permission to do it.” (Concern). The participants had difficulty giving up apparently *non-essential* activities because of the value they believed they provided for their students, as the following observation (by Meg) indicates.

Because, seriously, I do an activity every year called craft day. I invite retired teachers and some relatives and they come in and kids rotate through stations, and they do art all morning long, little crafty things. And they live for this. I tell you I had the students that I had last year on the first day of school tell me, what are you looking forward to as a third grader this year? Oh my gosh, craft day was the first thing out of their mouths. And every year I tell myself, I am not going to do it. It is too much work. And it is. It is a lot of work to prepare. But every year something happens. I have had a student come up to me in the middle of the day and go, ‘This is the best day of my life!’ And I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, it probably really is. . . . These kids, and I just think, ‘Wow, I can’t give it up.’ And I give myself permission to do it because I don’t do art any other time of the year. . . . And there is no joy and there is no how to be except a student. They are only

learning how to be studious. They are not learning how to be in this great group of community members.’ (Meg)

Craft day has been a tradition in Meg’s classroom for years. She spoke passionately about the community connections, the sense of belonging, and the sheer joy it brings to her students and herself. She continued to make time for craft day, even when it was not tied to any particular academic standard or did not fulfill any requirement in the pacing guide. She said what really struck her in discussing it was that she really had considered giving it up. Each year, she made a deliberate choice to go against district expectations, knowing that the time the activity took would cause her to fall further behind the pacing calendar. This was not the sort of decision that Meg felt would get her in any trouble, and she was not concerned with “getting caught,” but she felt it was significant and so she gave it much thought. She struggled to respond to her concern for her students rather than to the pressures of accountability to academic expectations. Indeed, the participants often spoke of feeling as if they were getting away with something anytime they made a decision based on their own beliefs instead of on the basis of the district’s framework. The teachers in this study shared a concern, which is supported in the literature, that to focus on testing to the exclusion of other experiences can cause students to believe that any skills outside of those required for testing are unimportant (Nichols & Berliner, 2008).

The participants spoke about finding space in their instructional decision-making for their own beliefs and understandings, particularly those related to their students’ academic capabilities as those related to as their social and emotional needs. They felt the tension between their beliefs and the district’s expectations as they decided what to teach and how to teach it. They considered their own understandings about the needs of their students as they decided which factors to

ignore and which to prioritize each day. While they made these instructional they had to take into account feelings of accountability, stress, concern for students, and support from colleagues and administrators. They felt present in some of the decisions they made and quite disconnected in others. They felt best about their instructional decisions when they were able to make those decisions in response to their own professional judgment of their students' needs, when they were able to respond to their concern for their students. They felt less comfortable and less connected to the decisions they made in response to the pressures of testing and the requirements of the curriculum, constraints that they believed to be entirely divorced from the students in their classroom.

Nicole decided to respond to her concern for her students and let them “play” with science concepts “because they loved school that day.” Lisa responded to the support of her administrator and to her concern for her students by approaching her principal about the problem with (EA) exclusively teaching her most needy students, so that she could “have the opportunity to gather information and reflect on what their needs were.” Meg responded to her concern for her students when she decided to go ahead with craft day, so that her students could experience “joy” and learn “how to be in this great group of community members.” These teachers' words indicated that their own sense of what was best for their students was a strong factor in their struggle to incorporate their concern for their students into instructional decision-making. At times, the three were willing to challenge externally-imposed constraints as long as they had the support of their team or administrator. They also expressed their desire to take risks on behalf of their students, to make decisions informed by their own professionalism and concern for their students, rather than always being guided by accountability to external factors such as curriculum plans. Some of their responses to their students' needs were made quietly behind closed doors,

and other were made by actively adapting or changing directives. These decisions were not without tension or conflict, as indicated by the participants' constant awareness of outside pressures. The following section illustrates how teachers responded to the role and weight of curriculum as another factor on their decision-making. They made decisions regarding curriculum in response to their feelings of accountability, stress, concern for their students, or support by administrators or team members.

The Role of Curriculum in Instructional Decision-Making

The teachers in this study responded to three curriculum-related factors: the search for appropriate materials, the race to keep up with the mandated pacing guide, and fidelity to Rigorous Curriculum Design or other curriculum programs. For them, the relationship of curriculum to instructional decision-making had less to do with which curriculum to follow or how closely to follow it, and more to do with the existence of curriculum per se. Because of its commitment to Rigorous Curriculum Design (RCD), the district purchased very little commercially produced curriculum. Although commercially produced curriculum may contribute its own problems for autonomous teacher decision-making (Crocco & Costigan, 2007), the absence of such curriculum had the most profound influence on the teachers in this study. The pacing calendar associated with RCD also factored greatly into the three teachers' decision making. The district did recommend resources for those RCD units, but teachers did not have access to a complete package of teacher's guides, lesson plans, and student materials for each content area. The teachers at each grade level wrote the curriculum for that grade level under tight constraints. The required format included Common Formative Assessments and two to four student tasks for each priority standard within a content area. Teachers were charged with providing the day-to-day materials needed to teach the standards laid out in each unit. The

participants indicated that many units were not complete at the time that they were scheduled to be taught. They explained that the rigorous pacing calendar was created on the assumption that the students had mastered the standards of the previous grade level. They reported that they were asked to trust that following the pacing calendar and implementing the RCD units with fidelity would adequately prepare their students for success in third grade.

The expectations with respect to curriculum were not coupled with the provision of materials for teachers to use in their classrooms. The district did not provide the materials needed for daily lessons, so much of the teachers' time was spent searching for and creating materials for their students. Access to materials played a significant role in the participants' decision-making, and it determined their responses, especially those related to such issues as finding materials, sticking to the pacing calendar, and creating curriculum within the RCD model.

Materials–The search. The three teachers expressed their frustration over the amount of time and effort that went into searching for and creating materials to aid them in their teaching. Lack of time was the decision-making factor they mentioned more than any other. They spent hours on Google searches and websites like teacherspayteachers.com in order to teach to the standards and expectations set forth in the pacing calendar. They indicated that they found the expectation to create curriculum and teaching materials taxing and that it weighed heavily on their instructional decision-making. The participants also indicated that they often made instructional decisions in response to the exhausting and overwhelming tasks of searching for and creating materials.

“I don’t have what I need to do my job.” (Accountability, Stress). Although RCD is touted as providing teachers with freedom and a sense of ownership, the teachers in this study said that they would rather have been provided with a variety of teaching materials created

according to the standards and given the freedom to choose among them. They based many of their instructional decisions on the availability of materials. “Can I find it?” or “Can I make it?” were some of the most common questions they asked themselves.

I think I feel most successful when I find something that works. And I am searching constantly. I know all the websites because I am gathering curriculum. I am not handed it. I get an RCD unit now and then. And in third grade many of them are not done. And there are CFA's [common formative assessments] that are not prepared, but the pacing calendar says we are supposed to give it. So I think it is frustrating. I feel frustrated by that. I don't have what I need to do my job. I have to go create it. I have to find it. And the most satisfying part is when I find something that works. But it sure would be nice if I had something that was already available that was proven to work, that covered all the standards, so that I wasn't having to search and create and pull it all together. . . . It feels like a lot of work because it is not necessarily things that are there for us. Things are not there for us to use. I can give you an example. We just started weight and measurement. We don't have beakers. We don't have scales. We don't have rice. We don't have beans. We don't have all of these things they say we should have to make this work. But in order to follow the pacing calendar we need those things. (Meg)

Meg's example provides evidence of two response themes, accountability and stress.

Hers was an example of a response to accountability to the pressure to stay true to the curriculum. It involved stress because Meg had difficulty finding and creating appropriate materials. Although the literature indicates that the requirements of curriculum have often interfered with autonomous decision-making (Boote, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Griffith et al., 2013) and that teachers often felt constrained by the curriculum and the materials that they were required to use, Meg expressed a different frustration that was reported by all three participants: lack of materials. Having to use packaged curriculum and materials often leaves teachers feeling that their professional judgment is disregarded (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Although they did not have to work with commercial curriculum, the participants experienced a similar sense of loss of autonomy in contending with the lack of teaching materials. Similarly,

although some teachers struggle to choose between what publishers say is best and what they themselves believe is best (Crocco & Costigan, 2007), the participants struggled between what they believed to be best and the time they had to find or create materials to meet their students' needs. The three teachers' comments indicated that they often had no time to consider best instructional practices because they spent so much time searching for materials. They made choices in response to the stress of searching and creating.

“I have tried everything I can.” (Stress, Concern). Time and ease of access to materials were factors considered by all three teachers in deciding what to teach and how to teach it. They learned that one of their first considerations must be the availability of materials. To find such materials they tended to search the internet rather than their own bookshelves or those of the teacher resource room. They felt disconcerted that teachers in today's classrooms under the expectations of Common Core State Standards were relegated to searching for the basic tools to do their job in the same manner as any member of the general public with access to the internet.

Google has been my friend. Google has been my huge friend. Then I bring those things to my team, and then I look at where they are at. I did this just yesterday. I have this little girl who for some reason has not grasped fact families. So I printed out some worksheets and I told parents at conferences that I would send some worksheets home with her and just work with her on it and show her the relationships. . . . I have tried everything I can think of to kind of get her through this but number sense is not there. . . . She needs to have that first. So I really do Google. (Meg)

This example reveals a response theme of concern: Meg addressed her student's need by passing on to her parents the materials she had found on Google, so that the parents could work with these at home. It indicates two problems: the lack of teaching materials and the lack of time in the classroom to help struggling students. Meg therefore made her decision in response to stress. The avenues teachers use to find their materials may not be as relevant to instructional

decision-making as the time it takes to find and create the materials, but the teachers in this study were very aware of the part that materials play in their decision-making. As Nicole expressed it,

“Do I have access to something? Can I make it tonight?’ Those definitely factor in.

‘How much is it going to cost on Teachers Pay Teachers?’”

The participants considered the time it would take to find or create materials when they were making instructional decisions. They needed to choose materials that would allow them to teach to the standards within the time provided to them in the pacing calendar. In addition, they had to take into account not only the appropriateness of the materials, but also how they would fit into the allotted time. The three teachers’ comments about materials demonstrated that they made decisions on the basis of three response themes: accountability, concern for students, and stress.

Pacing calendar–The race. All three participants talked about the impact of the pacing calendar on their instructional decisions. They also felt that the expectations set forth in the pacing calendar were based on preparation for the state test at the expense of the students’ best interests. They also believed that the pacing calendar for third grade was unrealistic because it asked them to disregard their students’ needs and to ignore their students’ academic capacities. The calendar also required regular grade-level meetings to process data gathered at designated times. The results of these meetings are passed on to building administrators.

“Do I have to keep up with this?” (Accountability, Concern). The participants felt pressured into following the pacing calendar, but sometimes they decided to deviate from it or to abandon it in order to meet their students’ needs. However, they regularly made instructional decisions in response to the demands of the calendar. Meg has this to say about her efforts to

balance her instinct to respond to her concern for her students with the pressure she felt to stay with the pacing calendar:

If they [students] are not engaged, if they are not participating and they are all over and they are not getting the concept, then I need to back up and figure out where the problem is. And I make that decision, but it is hard because we have a pacing calendar. So I am thinking, ‘Do I have to keep up with this?’ (Meg)

Meg’s frustration echoes the struggles all three participants faced in determining the instructional strategies that would best address their students’ needs, while bearing in mind the time they were allotted in the pacing calendar to bring their students to mastery.

“We like to stay close to it, but we feel like we can fudge lines.” (Support, Concern).

The participants indicated that they were able to make instructional decisions about the pacing guide in response to support from their colleagues. They felt more able to take risks in their decision-making when they were able to do so along with their team members. Nicole explained that she and her team members often made instructional decisions regarding the pacing calendar after conferring with one another. Sometimes these decisions deviated from the pacing calendar, but she and her colleagues always felt the presence of the schedule.

We like to stay close to it, but we feel like we can fudge lines. Like we felt we needed to do narratives a little bit more, so that there wasn’t one narrative that they wrote. We thought it was important for them to write several before moving on. . . . I think it is the pacing calendar and the RCD units, because we know we need to be here by a certain point, and it is just how we are going to do it. What is going to help them learn to summarize and come up with a central message with supporting details? What kind of practice things can we do to get them there? So I think that really drives us. (Nicole)

Nicole reported that she felt more freedom and autonomy with literacy than with other academic content areas. She and her team were able to make instructional decisions in response to their concern for their students’ needs in reading and writing. The team used the pacing

calendar and RCD units to guide them, but they felt that they were able to make their own decisions about how to meet expectations. Nicole also felt confident about veering off schedule when she made those decisions in conjunction with her team. This was another example of a choice made in response to support from her team trumping accountability to the pacing calendar.

“It is about making sure that math unit is on track with the pacing calendar.”

(Accountability). The participants reported that they often made sacrifices in order to keep up with the pacing calendar. Here again they felt conflicted in their instructional decision-making. Although they did not agree with the deadlines dictated by the pacing calendar, they still felt obliged to honor them above other factors that they held in higher regard. Their comments revealed the pressure they felt to make instructional decisions in response to the pacing calendar rather than on the basis of their concern for their students.

I think it comes into play in, ‘I see you’ve got 10 stars and you’ve earned a party, but we’ve got to get through this math so we are going to have to postpone it.’ It has gotten to where it is not about celebrating successes that we have as a class behaviorally and making really great decisions. It is about making sure that math unit is on track with the pacing calendar. (Meg)

Meg was responding on the basis of her sense of accountability. Although she concurred with the findings of studies indicating the importance of teachers valuing the non-testing-related skills of their students (Nichols & Berliner, 2008), Meg said that she realized that she had often gone against these values in responding to the pressure of the pacing calendar. She believed in celebrating her students’ successes in developing social and behavioral skills, but felt constrained by the expectations of the curriculum. She echoed the feelings of the other participants in reporting that she just did not have time to have these celebrations or to do anything outside of

the pacing calendar. All three felt pressure to compromise their values in favor of staying in compliance with the pacing calendar.

The combination of a lack of teaching materials and a rigorous pacing guide hindered instructional decision-making. The participants often found themselves unable to make instructional decisions on the basis of their concern for their students, because they felt restricted by the dictates of the pacing calendar. These time constraints reduced their options for finding or creating materials and also impeded their ability to respond to their concern for their students' needs. As a result, they tended to let their decisions be determined by stress.

Curriculum/RCD—Too much and not enough.

All three participants expressed frustration over RCD and declared that teachers should not be writers of curriculum. They were overwhelmed and frustrated by the responsibility of not only writing all of their own curriculum under the very rigid guidelines of RCD, but of having to implement it all at once as well. Because of these expectations, they regularly had the sensation that they were building the plane while flying it.

“They would not be successful on OAKS.” (Accountability). The participants wanted to develop curriculum that was matched to the standards, but they felt that the expectations of RCD were too demanding. They also expressed frustration over the time that they spent writing units that they later had to rewrite after becoming aware of their shortcomings during implementation. They made choices in response to feeling accountable to RCD or in response to feeling the need to surrender to any curriculum that provided them with something to follow.

I think the reason [for the frustration over RCD] is that we are not curriculum writers. I was a part of a lot of the RCD units that we wrote. We all were. And we did them and realized: this is garbage. This is horrible, and somehow the whole entire third grade team missed a whole lot of really important, essential things. We realized at the end of January, and it was so frustrating. We had to set things

aside and teach the way we know how to teach, or we knew that they would not be successful on OAKS [Oregon's standardized state test]. (Nicole)

According to Nicole, groups of teachers would spend hours creating the assessments and tasks that were part of the RCD units. Yet the RCD units, even when completed, often did not provide them with much, and what was provided did not work well in the classroom. The RCD units written under rigid guidelines did not lead to student success. Interestingly, Nicole's response shows that she based her decision on the requirements of the state test and not on those of the curriculum, but hers was a response to accountability nonetheless.

The literature indicates that teachers often feel constrained in their decision-making when they are held accountable to packaged curriculum (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Other studies confirm that when teachers' choices are restricted by curriculum they feel deprofessionalized and devalued (Cocco & Costigan, 2006). The teachers in this study felt a similar loss of autonomy, even when they apparently had a great deal of freedom to create curriculum.

“Who is going to get their way? (Accountability). The respondents felt pressure to create a curriculum that would meet everyone's needs and would be followed by everyone in the same way, which, ironically, was the common complaint about the commercially produced curriculum that RCD was designed to avoid. Third grade teachers from each school came together to write the RCD units according to the program's rigid guidelines, which, according to the respondents, left little room for creativity or innovation. The standards were dictated to the teachers, and the teachers followed the steps to create assessments for those standards. The district leadership expected the units to be implemented at the same time in largely the same way across the district.

So, you know, my students are very different from the students on the other side of town, and I don't need to approach things in the same way they need to

approach things, and they can do things differently than I can. Putting us in that room and saying, ‘Do it!’ has become almost a battle. Like a fight it out, ‘Who is going to get their way?’ kind of thing. (Lisa)

Lisa expressed how difficult it sometimes was for her to make decisions in response to a concern for her students, as she grappled with the realities of the curriculum’s influence on her decision-making. She explained that the RCD units were meant to be universally applicable, i.e., without differentiation and without taking into consideration differences in student populations. Although groups of teachers worked on the units according to the guidelines provided, the result often reflected a single point of view rather than a collaborative effort. Each teacher considered her own students’ experiences, values, and beliefs when contributing to a unit. All contributors believed that some tasks and assessments for a standard would be more effective in one teacher’s classroom than in that of another, and, as Lisa reported, the final decision would often be made by the strongest personality in the room.

“We are trusting that those curriculum writers knew a lot more than we do.” (Accountability, Stress, Support). According to the participants, ***many teachers***, for want of any other readily available ***curriculum, clung to Engage New York and followed it faithfully, grateful to have something to rely on each day.*** They were happy to trust that the curriculum writers knew more than they did. Research has shown that teachers tend to rely on curriculum and that they defer decision-making to publishers (Duffy et al., 1987; Westerman, 1990). Nicole had this to say about her experience with *Engage New York*:

Well, we are following *Engage New York* and we are trusting it. We are trusting that those curriculum writers knew a lot more than we do when we were doing RCD. We are just trusting them. And it is rigorous, and we did not think it would go over well, like after the second or third week, we looked at each other and said, ‘Oh my gosh, no!’ But then we said, ‘Let’s just trust it.’ (Nicole)

Nicole made instructional decisions in math in response to both her sense of accountability to the math curriculum and her feeling of support from her colleagues. The participants described *Engage New York* as being quite rigorous and packed with daily lessons. Initially, Nicole, her team members, and their students felt overwhelmed by the lessons. She explained that the students struggled with the fast pace of the curriculum, and that the teachers were not seeing good results. The decision of Nicole and her colleagues to trust the curriculum writers and continue to follow the curriculum comports with findings in the literature to the effect that teachers often took comfort in allowing the curriculum to shoulder the responsibility of instructional decisions (Gitlin, 2001). Nicole's trust in the curriculum illustrates decision-making in response to a sense of accountability to the curriculum and in conjunction with the support of a team.

“When that doesn’t work, what do you do?” (Concern). Lisa understood her fellow *teachers’* desire to follow a prepared curriculum, but she felt cautious about relying on *Engage New York*. She was worried about trading decision-making in response to accountability to one factor for surrender to another. She wondered what instructional decisions should be made when neither curricular choice satisfies teachers’ concerns about their students’ needs.

That is kind of where I am stuck this year, where I have started moving away from some of that [curriculum] because I haven’t felt that just following it, which I think some people are wanting to do, because we all got so frustrated with trying to build our own. Now, I am not faulting anyone for that. We spent two years writing these curricula, and then we are like, ‘This isn’t working. So let’s just pick one that somebody else wrote and let’s just follow it.’ And I get that. But then when that doesn’t work, what do you do? (Lisa)

Lisa explained that when *Engage New York* was introduced, many teachers regarded it as a life raft, and so they deferred their instructional decision-making to the curriculum. She understood why teachers would respond to pressures related to accountability and to the desire to

surrender to the curriculum. Nevertheless, she was concerned that relying heavily on one prepared curriculum to meet the needs of all students posed as many problems as relying on teachers to regularly find and create all materials. Her response was based on her concern for her students. Lisa believed that teachers need to review and evaluate critically any curriculum before incorporating it into their instructional choices, but she realized that many teachers felt too exhausted and overwhelmed to approach the math curriculum in that way. She often spoke about her frustration with the larger systems, without indicating any specific action she took in response to the problems she perceived.

The role of curriculum in instructional decision-making for the teachers in this study aligned with the findings of the literature on autonomous decision-making, namely, that autonomous decision-making requires the freedom to make adjustments to curriculum according to teachers' beliefs and understandings about what their students need (Boote, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Griffith et al., 2013).

Curricula such as RCD and *Engage New York*, the pacing calendar, and the lack of teaching materials all influenced the participants' instructional decision-making, as they responded to pressures related to accountability, stress, concern for their students, and support from their colleagues.

The Role of Testing in Instructional Decision-Making

During the year in which this research was conducted, third-grade became the first state-tested grade level. That year the school district in which the participants' taught, along with many other districts, was using the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Smarter Balanced (SBAC) was the national standardized test used to assess those standards. This was also the first year in which students would be taking the SBAC instead of the OAKS, Oregon's standardized

state test. The tests differ in many important ways. To begin with, the OAKS test assesses the Oregon state standards, not the CCSS. Second, the OAKS assesses reading and math, using only questions with multiple choice or selected responses, whereas the SBAC uses selected responses, short-constructed responses, and longer constructed responses. Many of the questions on the SBAC require written responses, even in math. Third, the SBAC assesses language arts, which includes reading and writing, as well as math. Finally, the OAKS provides immediate feedback of results, whereas the SBAC does not. Both the OAKS and the SBAC are done on a computer..

Students, teachers, schools, and districts are all judged on the basis of test scores. The pressure filters down from the state, which rewards or penalizes schools and districts according to their students' test results (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). The emphasis that the participants' district places on state test results had an impact on the decisions they made about what and how to teach, and about what to leave out of their daily plans. They made instructional decisions in response to their accountability to the test, stress, their concern for their students, and the degree of support they received from their administrators and colleagues.

Pressure—On teachers and students. The district's stress on the tested subjects of math, reading, and writing to the exclusion of all other subject had a strong influence on the participants' own instructional emphases. Even when they did not believe they had a personal stake in the test results, they could not avoid feeling the strong presence of the test in their daily instructional decisions. All three often made decisions about what to include in or exclude from their lesson plans in response to the looming pressure of the test. They believed that they had no time for anything that the district did not regard as being directly tied to success on the test.

The teachers in this study indicated that the test and the pressure they felt in response to it were a constant presence in the classroom. This sense of accountability sometimes conflicted

directly with their concern for their students' needs, and the resulting tension had an impact on their instructional decisions. They spoke of a personal resistance to reacting to the pressure of the test, but they found that the pressure was ubiquitous. Their frustration was evident throughout the interviews, and what vexed them most was having to go against their own beliefs, knowledge, and instincts in order to get their students ready for the test.

“It feels high stakes every day.” (Accountability). All three teachers admitted to responding to the pressure of the test by making instructional decisions directly tied to the test. They said that this was especially difficult to do this year because of the new test. Meg mentioned the added difficulties of preparing students for a test with which she was unfamiliar.

It feels high stakes every day at some point, because I am looking at these standards and I am thinking, ‘Oh my gosh! I just did this random little verb thing and some of them still don’t get verbs.’ And I think, ‘Oh, my gosh! They need to know this for the test.’ I mean I have never done this test either, so I think the high pressure comes from that as well, because I don’t know what I am teaching to. Because you do teach to the test. I know, I have been there. I do it. I get. Because you have to. You have to teach them how to take a test and how to take that test. And I don’t know a lot about it. So every day I feel like it is high stakes.
(Meg)

Meg explained that this pressure led her to make instructional decisions that would provide her students with practice in the skills necessary to succeed on the Smarter Balanced. This required an understanding not only of the content of the standards but also of the manner in which the standards are assessed. Her students needed to develop both academic skills and test-taking skills. Meg had difficulty in addressing these needs because she herself was unfamiliar with the test. Because of the high value the district placed on test scores, the teachers in this study felt driven to focus their instruction to that end.

“Did I give them what they needed?” (Concern). Lisa strove to respond to her concern for her students rather than to the pressure of the test. In years past, the OAKS test had been given up to three times in a given school year. Between each round of testing, teachers would provide targeted intervention aimed at improving test scores. All resources were directed toward raising students’ scores in order to improve the school’s standing. Lisa hoped that this push would diminish this year because SBAC is only given once and scores are not reported right away.

But although in the back of my head I think, ‘This doesn’t matter. You can move away from that. It’s okay.’ I feel that testing pressure, but I try to put that pressure on myself in an alternate way to say, ‘Has this kid really come to their potential for what they should be doing in this subject this year? Where they should be going and what they should be doing. And did I give them what they needed? Did I notice enough that Johnny hasn’t been able to multiply since October, and have I really done enough to help him get there? Or did I drop the ball and just let him kind of flounder in math for the rest of the year?’ you know, and kind of let that go. But I can’t lie and say that the pressure doesn’t exist with testing. I am hoping with Smarter Balanced it will start to go away, because we won’t get the scores until August, and who is going to care anyway? We aren’t going to have, ‘These kids didn’t pass so let’s get them in an intervention group right now and make sure that if we just pound testing on them for three weeks they will do better next time.’ Some of that will go away this year, I am hoping, and we can really just focus on using our in-classroom data and our data team structure and our individual reflection to go, ‘Did they get from this point to this point? Are they doing better? Are they progressing? Are they seeming stronger and more confident?’ That is where I would like the pressure to be. (Lisa)

Lisa’s story illustrates her struggle between responding to accountability-related pressures and responding to her concern for her students. Lisa and the other teachers in this study reported that they preferred to focus on student growth rather than test scores as they made their instructional decisions. They found it especially difficult to maintain this focus during testing. The three teachers’ personal priorities did not match the district’s priorities, and

this influenced teachers' instructional decision-making daily, and especially in the push to raise scores in the spring. Since administrators and teachers will not have access to SBAC data this year, Lisa hoped that she and her colleagues could focus on information from their classrooms to assess and address their students' needs, and that their concern for their students would prevail over accountability-related pressures in instructional decision-making.

“We have all these other things that we really have to teach other than the standards to get them to the test.” (Accountability). The teachers in this study explained their belief that the SBAC is not appropriate for third-graders and wrestled with the pressure they felt to prepare them for something that they themselves were philosophically opposed to. They also struggled with feeling ill-prepared to get their students ready for this new test. Not only did they have to teach the content, but also the particular testing skills specific to SBAC. They also felt obligated to prepare their students to handle the pressure of the experience. These third-grade teachers believed that the huge expectations and the limited preparation time were phenomena experienced only in tested grades. All three said that the test scores were not important to them personally, but that they did feel pressure from the district, and that that pressure was a major factor in their instructional decision-making.

I think that it is different [in third grade]. Solely due to, not where they don't want everyone to achieve, but because I think we have additional components that don't exist in fourth and fifth as much. It is the first year of testing. Our kids have never had time, had the opportunity to do that, to feel that kind of pressure. So just training them to be able to handle that is part of it. To be able to do more and more of that work on the computer. . . . they are just so young and they haven't had very much of that, and our demographics with as many low-income kids that we have, they don't have that kind of practice at home on technology. So we have all these other things that we really have to teach other than the standards to get them to the test. We really have to actually teach them how to physically be doing what they are supposed to be doing during that testing time. (Lisa)

Concern for her students drove some of the decisions Lisa made with respect to the test. Beyond the academic expectations, students are required to use technology skills on the SBAC that were not part of previous tests' requirements. Lisa worked to make instructional decisions that would enable her not only to conform to the academic standards but also to provide her students with the practice on the technological skills they would need in order to apply what they had learned in the testing environment. Standardized testing is new to third-graders, and this year the three teachers thought that the work they needed to do to prepare their students for the SBAC had increased exponentially. In helping their students to develop the requisite academic and technical skills they did not think that they could rely upon any prior knowledge or experience. The expectations related to the test had a profound impact on the participants' decisions about what to teach and how to teach it.

“You don’t want those kids in your room because they bring your scores down.”

(Accountability). The pressure associated with standardized tests can cause teachers to regard their students as either “test score increasers” or “test score suppressors”, and it can challenge the relationships teachers have with their students, according to a study by Nichols and Berliner (2008). In discussing a struggling student who was working well below grade level, Nicole talked about how her decisions regarding that student were different now than they would have been years ago when testing pressure was not a strong factor. The pressure to have her class produce favorable test scores affected the way she thought about her students and influenced the decisions she made. Sometimes it also diverted her attention from an individual student who needed help to a push towards having as many students as possible succeed on the test. She did not feel that she had the luxury of dedicating time and resources to one struggling student when she was accountable for the test scores of her entire class.

It [testing pressure] definitely feels different, because ten years ago I would have been really concerned about him a [struggling student], and we would have met, and I would have had individual conferences with him every day, and he would have gone to flooding [several educational assistants “flood” into the classroom to read with small groups of students] or Title One [reading intervention] or whatever was going on. And now it is just a terrible feeling, but you don’t want those kids in your room, because they bring your scores down. And then you get yelled at from all sides because your class is not up to par. And it is like, ‘I did not get to set my composite. I didn’t get to decide who is in my class. Somebody else did that, and I ended up with all these low kids. And I am doing the best I can, and they are growing. They are doing things. They are learning, but they are not where the district says they should be.’ So yeah, I do feel a lot more pressure now than I ever did. (Nicole)

Nicole expressed the feeling that many teachers had of carrying all of the responsibility for their students’ test scores while also having very little control of the multiple variables involved. Nicole understood the ramifications of not meeting district expectations and she was honest about the impact that had on her instructional decisions. Other studies have indicated that teachers become conditioned to avoid the sanctions tied to poor test scores (Quinn & Etheridge, 2006), and this tendency was evident in stories shared by each of the teachers in this study. Other studies have indicated that testing diverts teachers’ attention from other learning considerations, such as student growth (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006). The teachers in this study spoke about their own desires to focus on student growth, while at the same time feeling thwarted by the district’s narrow focus on test scores. The pressure the three teachers felt influenced their decision-making, as did their concern about the pressure their students were feeling. These pressures related to accountability and to concern for their students had an impact on the three teachers’ instructional decisions. All three felt that testing put too much pressure on their students. They themselves felt pressure to prepare their students for success, and not just because of their fear of being judged by the district, but also because of their concern for the spirits of their students.

“I don’t want them to freak out. Poor things.” (Concern). The following comments by two of the participants bespeak their concern for their students. The first points out that the various standardized tests, such as TESA, OAKS, and now Smarter Balanced, have increased the pressure on both teachers and students. The second brings to light how strongly students can attach their identities to test scores and the pressure teachers face to respond to their concern for their students’ confidence and self-esteem.

I mean I can’t completely let it go. I can’t completely say, ‘I don’t have to worry about testing. I am just going to let it be this thing once a year and I am not going to worry about it.’ When I started teaching it was like that. What was before OAKS? It was the TESA. I know, I gave it. I have no idea what happened, because that pressure did not exist, and you just threw them on the computer, and they clicked a bunch of buttons and then it was like, ‘Let’s get back to what we were doing in our social studies unit.’ So that has changed. You can’t completely ignore it. Because I feel for the kids, too. Again, because I do not want to put them in front of this thing in May and just say, ‘Do your best. You’ll be fine. Just get it done.’ I don’t want them to freak out. Poor things. (Lisa)

Lisa’s words showed her longing for the days when she felt testing was just another task her student’s performed in a school year and was not given more weight than the learning they did all year. She bemoaned the awareness her students had of the value placed on the test. She and the other participants felt as accountable to their students as they did to the district.

The teachers in this study indicated that the instructional decisions they made with respect to the test were as much in response to their concern for their students and how they felt as to their own sense of accountability for the results. Regardless of their personal feelings about the appropriateness or relevance of the test, they knew that the nine-year-old students in their class were required to face it in the spring.

With OAKS they got to take it three times, and when I did it in the past and a kid didn’t pass, they were just nervous. They didn’t know what to expect, and their nerves got the best of them. They don’t get that shot this time. Whether the nerves get the best of them or not, they’re done. So, I feel that pressure that they get one shot and one shot

only. I don't get the opportunity to reteach. I just feel all of this pressure for them to be successful, and I feel all this pressure of 'What do I do if they are not?' For them. Because kids take these things hard. I have seen it and I have held them when they cried and said, I thought they did it. And they make up stories about themselves academically, and it is hard, and so I feel that pressure too. A lot of pressure. (Meg)

Regardless of the efforts the three teachers made to ensure that their students felt valued for all of their qualities, their students bore the weight of the expectations vis-à-vis the test. Meg's anecdote brings to light how strongly students could tie their self-worth to their test scores. To Meg and the other two participants this test-related pressure seemed omnipresent, and their concern over their students' emotional well-being compounded this pressure.

The test had an impact on the three teachers' instructional decisions because it drove curriculum and was the catalyst for district mandates. The three were worried about test results for themselves and for their students. When discussing testing, all three brought up, without provocation or prompting, the district's practice of recognizing and rewarding success on the test. All three were passionate in their distaste for the practice, while also agreeing that it does influence their instructional decisions.

Recognition and rewards for scores—Misaligned values. At the beginning of each school year, the district holds a "Welcome Back" celebration for all district personnel. Each grade level at each school has its test results projected on a large screen. All teachers and schools who performed well on the state test the year before are recognized. Teachers who had classes with 90% or more students meeting or exceeding the benchmark for the test are announced and asked to stand up. Schools with tests results that earned them the distinction of being "Model Schools" are presented with checks.

“They say it isn’t about the test scores, but it is.” (Accountability). All three participants expressed disdain for the district’s practice of recognizing and rewarding test scores. They thought that it valued test scores to the exclusion of all else. They did not agree with this focus, for it made them feel pressured and judged, which in turn influenced their instructional decisions. That is, they often allowed their sense of accountability vis-à-vis the test, and not their own desires, to determine their decisions.

The district also participated in a Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) or an Incentives for Effective Educators (IEE) grant. The grant provided bonuses for participating teachers based on certain criteria. One of the criteria was whole-school state test results.

Well, the district meeting at the beginning of the year, ‘Stand up’. . . . I hate it! Hate it! I think it is bad for the people who have to stand up. It is bad for the people who don’t get to stand up. It is awful all the way around. And then, ‘Stand up, model schools.’ No! Everybody loses when we do that. Everybody does, and I don’t want to see those numbers. I don’t want to see numbers from other schools. In the old days your class took a test, and you never saw the results. You never saw it. The following year the teacher would say at conferences, ‘Oh here is your child’s results on last year’s test.’ No judgment on the teacher. No judgment on the school. It’s just how your kid did. One test. And it is just not how it is anymore. A lot more pressure. . . . Right or we can’t get the TIF grant money if your school doesn’t do well enough. It is all. . . . They say it isn’t about the test scores, but it is. It is all about test scores. (Nicole)

This event set the tone for the new school year. The three teachers all heard the message that the goal of education is positive test scores. The district’s attention to test scores inevitably influenced their instructional decision-making, despite their personal beliefs about the test. The district’s priorities become the three teachers’ priorities, and this frustrated them

“The only results I am supposed to look at are those testing results.” (Accountability). Meg spoke often throughout the interviews about how highly she valued the social and emotional development of her students. She said she wanted her decisions to be made in response to her

concern for her students but often felt constrained by other district expectations. She was discouraged by the way the district did not celebrate, or allow room for her to celebrate, her students' non-test-related successes.

I used to feel really sorry for people that had to go to jobs that they felt really tense and like, 'I have to do all this stuff.' Teaching has always had some tension, but the tension always kind of felt good, because I felt like I was going somewhere with it. I was getting results from it. But, now the only results I am supposed to look at are those testing results. Not that this kid over here didn't toss a desk this week, because I talked to him and validated him. Not that this kid who got hit in the face with a volleyball, who would normally end up in a screaming, yelling match, realized that didn't really serve him and he came to class calmly. I should be celebrating those things. But do I take the time to really do that? I can't. (*Meg*)

Meg's words showed her desire to respond to her concern for her students and the push she felt to respond to the pressures related to the test. She felt that fewer and fewer of her own values were present in her instructional decision-making, and confessed that the more she reflected on her decision-making for the purpose of this study, the more she realized how much she had given up.

The participants often thought that each instructional decision was less a choice among practices than a choice among responses to factors such as personal beliefs, curriculum-related expectations, and testing pressure. They had to take into account curriculum and tests, stress over meeting expectations, concern for students, and support from colleagues or administrators as they decided what to teach and how to teach it. They admitted that they sometimes allowed their desire to comply with the school district's directives to triumph over their desire to follow best instructional practices or their concern for their students. This acquiescence applied to all of the district's expectations, and not just to those that had to do with curriculum and testing.

The Role of Other Expectations on Instructional Decision-Making

The teachers in this study spoke about trying to balance their concern for their students' needs with the many external expectations that the district placed on them. The district's directives often dictated how they were to teach, rather than providing guidance for their instructional decisions. The participants all agreed that they were asked to do more and more in less and less time by policy makers and administrators who did not seem to understand the students in their classrooms. They considered these expectations to be unrealistic and believed that they caused stress for students and teachers alike.

“So I oblige.” (Accountability, Stress). Time, and the lack thereof, showed up as a consistent theme in the data. The participants simply did not have the time or the energy to do anything other than base their decisions on the district's directives. They believed that their administrators did not understand the time expectations placed on teachers. The system's rigorous standards placed a huge demand on teachers, leaving them feeling exhausted and stressed. As Meg's account indicates, the participants based their instructional decisions on the availability of time and resources.

I don't think they really get the amount of time and effort put into one day of teaching. I have 27 kids. If I do three worksheets, that is almost 100 papers to grade. And that is daily. If I do four, because I have 27 kids and I have to be doing something to make sure that I am checking for understanding, and they have things to do while I am working in small groups. I am correcting those papers and I mean, homework? I agree that homework has its place, but it is the parents who want it. So I oblige and I am correcting those papers because I believe if the kids are doing the work they deserve immediate feedback. *(Meg)*

Whenever she planned a task or assignment for her students Meg needed to consider the time it would take to find or create the materials, the time it would take for the students to complete the exercise, and the time it would take for her to provide feedback. She had to balance

the amount of time for each of those steps with the value of the task. The fate of the tasks was often determined by which values she chose to respond to: her sense of accountability to the district or her concern for her students.

“It is harder to make those relationships.” (Accountability). The teachers in this study thought that they were losing time not only for the performance of their daily tasks, but also for building relationships with their students. They believed they were often choosing between responding to the district and responding to their concern for their students. Nicole explained the change she has felt in her classroom.

I find that because everything is so rigorous now, we don't have time to relax and have fun as often as I'd like. That it is harder to make those relationships. I greet my kids in the hall in the morning and I shake their hands, but it is like I try to remember things about them like, nice haircut or we missed you yesterday, things like that. I am trying to make those connections there because in the classroom . . . you used to have time to sit and share our connections with books, and you got a glimpse into their lives. I don't have time to do connections. They did it in first and second grade. They should know connections. We need to move on. That kind of thing. There is just not time to enjoy them, you know? (Nicole)

The district's expectations reduced the time Nicole had for relationship-building with her students to the few moments of greeting in the hallways before school. Even the opportunities for personal connections with students that used to be built into literature studies have been lost, because relationships are not part of the standards. She had to set aside conversations about books, that used to develop into conversations about students' lives, to make room for other activities related to the third-grade standards. She increasingly made her decisions in response to accountability-related pressures and not on the basis of her concern for her students.

“I feel the stress of having to get all of this stuff done.” (Accountability). The participants regarded the standards, and especially CCSS, as being overly rigorous, unrealistic, and not developmentally appropriate. Moreover, they had no control over these standards and their opinions about them had no bearing on the reality of the district’s expectations. Their personal beliefs added further to the frustration they felt in their instructional decision-making. They felt that they had to justify every choice they made in relation to CCSS, and they had difficulty making instructional decisions that took into account both the demands of the CCSS and the realities of the abilities and backgrounds of the students in their rooms. Meg spoke about the effect of these expectations on her students.

Oh my gosh, these kids! I can see the stress. What worries me is that, and I have put some thought into this, I have looped with these kids, granted I have seven new kids, but when I try to get them to talk, they are resistant. And I don’t think they trust themselves with all this hard stuff. I don’t think they feel as comfortable saying what they are thinking as they did last year. And maybe part of that is me, because I feel the stress of having to get all of this stuff done. (Meg)

Meg’s concern for her students had to compete with other factors when it came to decision-making. She could see that the expectations reduced her students’ self-confidence. She noticed that her students were much less willing to take risks. She recognized that the stress she felt was passed on to the students, and that they were more concerned to get the “right answer” than to express their own ideas. Under the pressure of meeting all of the district’s expectations, of teaching her students the correct answers to the questions on the standardized test, Meg realized that she had inadvertently sent the wrong message to her students,.. She expressed doubt in herself as she recognized that her decision-making in response to accountability-related pressures had affected her students’ responses in the classroom.

“I don’t want my kids to be in their own little bubble in third grade.” (Accountability, Concern). The participants understood the need to prepare their students for the world in which they are living, even if they wished the world were different. They struggled to respond to the allegiance they felt to their students. Lisa had this to say about balancing the district’s expectations and her students’ needs:

But then I am trying to balance that with where they are realistically at, helping them grow from where they are realistically. So that is why last time I said that the balance between kids’ needs and standards come into play for me. I need to make sure that everything in the standards gets out there in some capacity, whether it is foundation levels and build from that, because I know that they are going to go on to fourth and fifth grade and need to have at least a piece of that to take with them. . . . I am trying to balance all this pressure with the standards and the expectations and the testing because I don’t want my kids to be in their own little bubble in third grade and leave here and not be prepared or not be exposed to anything beyond that. (Lisa)

Lisa indicated that she made her instructional decisions in response to her concern for her students and within the accountability-related pressures she felt. She sensed an accountability both to the standards and to her students’ ultimate welfare.

In this chapter I have provided a layered description of the three teachers’ experience of instructional decision-making within the thorny climate of competing priorities. Four different factors influenced their decision-making: their own beliefs, the curriculum, testing, and miscellaneous additional expectations. Following is a summary of these factors as they relate to instructional decision-making.

Teachers’ Beliefs

During times of tension between their own beliefs about their students’ needs and the district’s directives, the participants’ decision-making was determined either by a response to their sense of accountability to external demands or a response to their concern for students’ needs. The direction the decision-making took in response to this misalignment varied from one

instance to another. One teacher did not respond in the same way each time she was confronted with a disagreement between what she believed and what she was told to do. The teachers in this study appeared to be very aware, if not always comfortable with, the decisions they made in response to either accountability or concern for students. The decisions they made out of their concern for their students were at times bolstered by support from administrators or colleagues. Lisa was able to make instructional decisions in response to her students' needs by seeking the permission of her administrator to modify the systems and structures mandated by the district. Nicole was able to take risks in her decision-making by working in concert with her colleagues to respond to concerns for students that lay outside the parameters of the district directives. The teachers in this study reported that they often felt pressure to make decisions that did not align with their beliefs about their students' academic needs.

Curriculum

The three teachers also responded to curriculum when making instructional decisions. All four response themes: accountability, concern, stress, and support were present in the data on the influence of curricular expectations on instructional decision. The participants often made decisions in response to pressures generated by the curriculum and the pacing calendar. When they responded to external pressures instead of their concern for the welfare of their students they became frustrated. At times, they felt so overwhelmed and exhausted by the requirements of the curriculum that they made decisions in response to stress. They also made decisions based on what they had the time or the energy for, sometimes at the expense of what they believed to be best for their students. However, sometimes they were able to make decisions solely in response to their concern for their students. Nicole made such decisions whenever she thought she had the

support of her grade level team. However, at times that support led Nicole to make decisions that aligned with curricular expectations.

Testing

Testing affected the participants' instructional decisions by causing them to respond either to accountability-related pressure or to their concern for their students' welfare. The three teachers reported feeling accountable to both the test and their students. At times they made decisions about what to teach and what to leave out of their day in response to testing-related pressure. They were concerned about how their students' test scores would reflect on them, and they made instructional decisions to avoid being negatively judged. They also made instructional decisions that reflected their concern for their students and the effect that high-stakes testing was having on their students' feelings of self-worth.

Other Expectations

The teachers in this study responded to other expectations, such as those of the Common Core State Standards, while contending with the realities in their classrooms. Class size, parental demands, the district's expectations, and the lack of time and resources all affected their instructional decisions. They reported feeling accountable to a variety of expectations. The frustration they encountered as they struggled to meet all of the demands placed on them was compounded by lack of time and by lack of understanding on the part of their administrators. At times, they surrendered to exhaustion and stress by making instructional decisions based on the availability of time and resources. They also made instructional decisions in response to their concern for their students. They worked to prepare their students for fourth grade so that their students could feel confident, and so that the teachers themselves would be judged favorably by their colleagues and administrators.

The act of making instructional decisions is fast, furious, and invisible to the observer. The task of constructing narratives of decision-making that would describe and reveal new understandings was not easy, but it proved meaningful for both the participants and the researcher. Moreover, as the relevant literature indicates, the factors of curriculum, testing, standards, and beliefs about students' needs also have an impact on the decision-making of teachers outside of the district in which the participants taught. The participants' stories brought to light the different ways in which teachers experience these factors and respond to them while making instructional decisions in the classroom. The participants provided outsiders with a window on their classrooms, with a perspective that they otherwise would have missed. Although they constructed their own meanings from reflecting on and discussing their decision-making experiences, they also hoped to provide the people who create the circumstances under which their instructional decisions are made with a better understanding of the effect of their administrative decisions.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

The lived experience of instructional decision making of third grade teachers is complex and important to understand for both the teachers themselves and for the people and structures that influence their decisions. With this in mind, I have collected for the purpose of this phenomenological study, by means of personal interviews, the stories of three third-grade teachers. Each of the three teachers shared her experiences over the course of two in-depth interviews. My analysis of the interviews uncovered the factors that influenced the participants' decision-making and their responses to those factors. Through an in-depth analysis of the data collected, I answered three research questions:

1. How do third-grade teachers describe the experience of instructional decision-making?
2. How do teachers describe the factors that influence instructional decision-making?
3. What meaning do teachers derive from their decision-making?

The data revealed that beyond the simple identification of decision-making factors lay a deeper, textural description of the teachers' experiences. The three participants spoke not only about the factors that are frequently mentioned in the literature, such as curriculum, testing, and teachers' beliefs, but also about the way that those factors affected their decisions. Their responses to the decision-making factors added a phenomenological description of the experience of instructional decision-making that is broader than the existing discussion of factors in the literature. The teachers who participated in this study were able to reflect on and derive meaning from those experiences.

Four themes emerged from the participants' responses to the factors reported to have influence on instructional decision-making, namely, accountability to curriculum, pacing guides, and tests; stress over meeting expectations; concern for students' learning and well-being; and support from others to take risks involved in decision-making. If the district's directives did not match the three teachers' own beliefs about what was best for their students, they often responded to accountability-related pressures to avoid negative judgment or conflict. They spoke of feeling exhausted or overwhelmed by their responsibilities, and at times they made decisions in response to stress. They also indicated that they were more likely to take risks in their instructional decisions if they had the support of the other third-grade teachers in their building or of their building administrator. Concern for their students' welfare also influenced the participants' responses to the decision-making factors. Each teacher responded differently to the factors, and the factors themselves were dependent on whom the teacher concerned was serving as a decision-maker in a given situation. The three teachers' descriptions of their responses to the factors provided new learning.

More often than not, the three teachers described the experience of making instructional decisions as stressful, frustrating, and defeating. A preponderance of the data indicated that the participants responded to accountability-related pressures when making instructional decisions. When faced with a discrepancy between their own beliefs and expectations related to testing or curriculum, all three overwhelmingly responded to their sense of accountability to external expectations, rather than to their feelings of concern for their students or the support provided by colleagues or administrators. They responded to accountability-related pressures by making instructional decisions based on the test rather than on their understandings of their students' needs. For example, in response to test-related pressure, the three teachers dedicated class time to

teaching tested subjects, and often at a pace that was set to accommodate the test rather than students' needs.

This is not to say that the three disregarded their students' needs, but they found it difficult to prioritize their beliefs about their students' needs when they were faced with pressures that contradicted those beliefs. Both the content and the style of their instruction were often determined by the state test. They concentrated on the subject matter to be tested and on the skills necessary for navigating the new test format. This meant excluding other content and learning that they themselves valued. They felt unable to engage their students in activities that would support social and emotional growth, develop positive relationships, or engender joy and a love of learning. The rigorous demands of testing led them to focus on tested skills to the exclusion of everything else. The pressure they felt to make instructional decisions that went against their professional judgment caused them to feel uncomfortable and disengaged in their decision-making.

Not surprisingly, the participants' descriptions of testing as a decision-making factor—they spoke of making decisions about what to teach, how to teach, and what to ignore based on the expectations of the standardized test—aligned with the literature. Indeed, studies have shown that teachers respond to the pressures of high-stakes testing by adjusting their instruction to fit the test (Abrams et al., 2003; Ballet et al., 2006; Palmer and Rangel, 2011). They have also indicated that because teachers were held responsible for their student outcomes, they allowed the test to dictate both the content and the manner of their instruction (Quinn & Etheridge, 2006; Plank & Concliffe, 2013).

This study was able to uncover the way accountability pressures were experienced by the participants as they made instructional decisions. The findings not only correlated with the

literature identifying testing and curriculum as significant factors in instructional decision-making, but also revealed the factors that motivated the three teachers to respond to those accountability pressures. It was not the expectations themselves that the three were responding to, but the perceived consequences of failure to meet them. For example, if they were unable to keep up with the pacing guide, they would be embarrassed in front of their peers. They also feared receiving negative evaluations from their administrators if they were not following curriculum directives or if they had poor student outcomes. The stories and examples the teachers shared indicated that they responded to accountability-related pressures in their decision-making in order to avoid negative judgment by administrators and peers. The participants responded to their sense of accountability to the test, curriculum, pacing calendars, and other district mandates because of the value attached to these factors by others, not because of their own personal regard for them.

Other studies have confirmed that autonomous decision-making is constricted when teacher evaluations are tied to teachers' use of curriculum and their students' test results. Such a strategy causes teachers to think that they need to prove themselves (Boote, 2006; Roeser et al., 2000). The volume of data from this study supporting instructional decision-making in response to accountability-related pressures matched the findings of a number of studies in the literature that examined accountability. There is no shortage of literature regarding the impact of testing and curriculum-related expectations on teachers. However, what sets the present study apart is the depth of the textual descriptions of the struggle of instructional decision-making in today's high-stakes environment.

Also noteworthy was the juxtaposition between the prevalence of data supporting the participants' response to accountability and the scarcity of data showing their response to support

from administrators. The lack of support correlated with the lack of agency the three teachers felt. They appeared to lack confidence in their own ability to enact change in response to their beliefs and concerns for students. One of the three teachers, Lisa, offered examples of specific structural changes she brought about after receiving the support she sought from her administrator. She described approaching her principal on two separate occasions about making significant structural changes to math and reading instruction. The data also mention insignificant or minor changes that the three teachers made in instructional decisions in response to support from peers. They also show that that grade-level teams found strength from grade-level teams to deviate from prescribed pacing guide schedules, but these data were also relatively scarce. A significant finding of this study is that the majority of the data revealed the participants' strong discomfort in their decision-making in responses to pressures related to accountability. However, there was very little evidence that they took much action to counter that uneasiness or to try to change the situation, although they felt free to describe their discomfort and frustration.

The teachers in this study identified their own beliefs as a factor influencing their instructional decision-making, but the findings indicated that personal beliefs frequently played only a secondary role. In fact the three teachers most often spoke of their beliefs as a cause of frustration and anxiety, as something they felt pressure to disregard in the face of the demands of the standardized test and the expectations of the curriculum. They did, however, experience moments of empowerment when they made decisions in response to their beliefs about students' academic or social and emotional needs. But these moments were largely overshadowed by the distress they experienced over their perceived inability to respond to their beliefs about their students' needs. They said that their priority in decision-making was their students' needs, but

their actions often did not support that claim. This gap between belief and practice is supported by studies that have identified the issue as a restriction of autonomy resulting from mandated curriculum and high-stakes testing (Abrams et al., 2003; Schraw & Olafson, 2002). This study goes beyond the literature that merely identifies the relevant factors in that it provides a layered description of how these factors are experienced by teachers, who are the agents responsible for implementing programs and directives. The participants' decision-making experiences reveals how the factors are lived out in classrooms.

Curriculum was another factor that was both identified by the participants and supported by the literature. The data indicated that the three teachers felt stressed by the demanding pace of the curriculum. All three spoke of feeling overwhelmed and frustrated by expectations that were made all the more unrealistic by a lack of time and resources. The findings revealed that the participants made decisions on the basis of whatever prepared curriculum was available or, if it was not, whatever they could find or create in the time available—instead of on the basis of their professional judgment of their students' needs. Other studies have found that teachers sometimes deferred to publishers and refused to rely on their own judgment about best practices (Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Duffy et al., 1987; Westerman, 1990). Pressures related to accountability, which were compounded by other realities in their classrooms, such as insufficient resources, added responsibilities, and not enough time led the participants to make decisions that were more reactive than reflective. This study not only confirmed that curriculum is a factor in teachers' instructional decisions but also revealed how curriculum expectations make teachers feel and respond in their daily practice.

Evident throughout the data was the participants' genuine concern for their students. They experienced tension in their decision-making because their beliefs and their concern for

their students were undermined by the demands of mandatory structures of accountability. The misalignment between their beliefs and the realities of these structures of accountability led the three teachers to describe their instructional decision-making experiences as stressful and frustrating. There was little evidence that they took action taken to rectify the gap between their concern for their students and their accountability to directives.

An interesting and revealing finding of this study came through my analysis of the data on the participants' metacognition, in which the asking of questions played a dominant role. The three teachers often ended their comments with questions and expressions of self-doubt. They were anxious about factors that they felt forced instructional choices that were ineffective or unjust. They posed questions about what to do and how to change the systems they were frustrated with, as if they were appealing for answers. They wondered aloud about what to do to help their students or what to do about curriculum or programs that were not serving their students' needs. There was evidence in other areas of discussion that the three teachers actually did have the answers but that they simply doubted their ability to execute change. All three were veteran teachers who spoke with confidence about their understandings of teaching and learning. The findings indicated that they worried about making decisions in response to the pressure of accountability, but that they did not feel sufficiently supported or empowered to make changes to the system that had created this environment—hence their reaction of self-doubt and questioning.

Another revealing finding on the participants' decision-making came to light when I compared the strong presence of data related to certain themes with the shortage of data related to others. I found little data to illustrate the teachers' actions in response to their concern for their students' needs or their experience of support from administrators. This lack of data indicates that the teachers in this study focused more on their frustration and lack of agency than they did

on trying to find a response to the tensions they experienced. Much of their talk about their concern for their students' needs had to do with what they felt they should do or wanted to do in their decision-making had they not been thwarted by other factors. This finding suggests that further research needs to be done into the possibility of making changes to systems that foster teachers' feelings of powerlessness. Throughout the study, the participants spoke of feeling constrained in their decision-making. More often than not, they made instructional decisions in light of directives related to curriculum or testing, even though those directives conflicted with their own beliefs about what was best for their students. School environments that allow teachers to attend to the expectations placed on them, while still maintaining professional discretion in their instructional decision-making, will benefit both teachers and their students.

Each teacher in this study responded uniquely to the tensions between her beliefs and the realities of her situation. These unique contributions gave rise to a richly layered description of the teachers' decision-making. Lisa spoke of changing roles in order to enact change in the systems that she viewed as ineffective or unjust. She did take some initiative as a classroom teacher to make changes, but felt restricted by her inability to make more significant structural changes. She envisaged herself in a leadership role that would allow her to foster an environment that would allow other teachers to make instructional decisions based on their own professional judgment. She hoped to support and empower teachers to be the kind of decision-makers she longed to be. Instead of complying with or resisting the system, she chose to change the system in ways that affected her own students and classroom. However, she did not address the root causes of the injustices she identified. All stakeholders need to be invested in developing ways to empower teachers to invoke their professional knowledge, skills, and beliefs on behalf of their students.

Meg realized how much of herself she had given up by making decisions in response to accountability-related pressures rather than out of concern for her students, especially her concern for their emotional and social needs. Her participation in this study prompted her to work to retrieve some ownership of her decisions. In responding to external pressures, she made instructional decisions that ignored the emotional and social needs of her students. Attending to testing skills and keeping to the pacing guide left her with no time to teach other skills or to nurture positive relationships. Developing the emotional intelligence of her students had always been at the core of Meg's identity as an educator. She felt she had lost some integrity to the high-stakes environment in today's schools, and she vowed that she would make more authentic decisions that would match her own values. The meaning Meg developed from discussing her decision-making led her to begin making changes to the way she responded to the systems. Meg confessed that she was grateful for the experience of participating in this study and for the changes that the experience had brought about in her. In reflecting on her experiences she realized the extent to which she had departed from her true teacher-self. She said she would go back to school and find a way to get closer to her true self as a teacher.

Nicole did not seem to feel compelled to make any changes. As long as she was in step with her third-grade colleagues, she felt comfortable with her decisions. She mentioned some frustrations but indicated that she felt they just came with her job. She spoke of longing for the good old days and definitely had strong feelings about the difficulty of making instructional decisions in today's school environment. If she resisted the system, she would simply do it behind closed doors with the support of her team. She experienced some of the stress and worry that the other teachers had spoken about, but she mostly took it in stride and seemed content to ride out the last few years of her career. Nicole considered this year of the new standardized test

to be a “freebie year,” because the results will not be available until the following school year.

When asked about the pressures on instructional decision-making she said,

Life is too short. I think even 10 years ago I would have been, ‘Oh no!’ But now it is pretty much like, ‘You do what you do, and I can still close my door and enjoy my class and enjoy my teaching and enjoy my job,’ and that is what it comes down to.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study regarding the lived experience of instructional decision-making are limited to the experiences of three third-grade teachers and are not generalizable to a larger population of teachers. The implications of this study are limited, but they could lead to new thinking about the reality of instructional decision-making in the classroom and inspire further investigation into what makes a difference in teaching and learning. This study provided some valuable insights into how third-grade teachers describe the experience of instructional decision-making. The factors that influence instructional decision-making are better understood within the context of the teachers’ response to those factors. Teachers’ decision-making is the essence of teaching, so the experience of making instructional decisions is inexorably linked to the experiences of teaching and learning. Much can be learned about changing and improving learning in the classroom by attending to the decision-making experiences of teachers.

The participants’ stories led me to a better understanding of how teachers experience decision-making and also opened up more questions about why the three teachers responded in the way that they did. The data showed the regular tension between their beliefs and the other factors that impact decision-making and revealed a pervasive feeling of powerlessness and lack of agency: the teachers’ ability to respond to their students’ needs out of their professional beliefs, values, and judgments was very limited. As far as my own practice is concerned, this study has made me more mindful of the instructional decisions I make as I reflect on the reasons

for those decisions. The findings also raised questions regarding the circumstances that would allow teachers to enact agency and make systemic changes in response to their own beliefs. Investigating these questions further could provide helpful insight to policy-makers, administrators, teacher educators, and teachers.

Appreciating teachers' decision-making experiences allows policymakers to understand how their reforms are received and carried out by teachers in the classroom. The success of any educational reform is dependent on using teachers as the agents of implementation. Creating a stressful environment in which teachers feel frustrated and fearful may not be the most productive way to enact change.

Realizing the reasons for teachers' responses to reforms could lead policymakers to consider changes that would provide more sustainability for their programs. Further investigation into the ideas uncovered in this small study could add to the larger conversation about education.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Study

Further research may help administrators understand how they might create environments that promote teachers' confidence and sense of agency. Administrators have the capacity to shape a school's environment in such a way that it has a positive effect on teachers' responses to decision-making factors. Fostering trust and autonomy provides teachers with confidence and with ownership of their role as decision-makers, which only leads to positive outcomes for students. The findings in this study indicate the restrictions the three participants experienced in their decision-making. If conditions of stress and frustration do not represent what administrators desire, understanding the underlying conditions could help them to make changes to school environments. It would be valuable to follow up this study with a similar study that asks administrators about instructional decision-making. Appreciating decision-making from an

administrator's perspective could help lead to understandings about how to improve schools for teachers and students.

Future researchers may also want to investigate the relationship between the factors and the response themes that were brought to light in the present study. For example, they could evaluate how accountability and stress relate to each other and how that relationship may vary according to circumstance and according to such factors as testing, curriculum, and teachers' beliefs. There is much still to be discovered about the interplay of the various factors involved in instructional decision-making and teachers' complex responses to those factors.

Teacher educators could help their pre-service students understand the factors that affect teachers' decision-making and learn how to manage their own responses in ways that are best for them and their students. Teacher educators could also use research data to provide pre-service students with the skills necessary to have agency, participate in positive and productive collaboration, and develop habits of reflection. Once teachers enter the field, they often get caught up in the business of teaching every day and lose sight of larger ideas about purpose and mission. Teacher educators could remind pre-service teachers to be mindful of the decisions they make and of how they are responding to the many factors that have an impact on instruction.

Teachers who are already working in the field could benefit from reflecting on their own decision-making experiences and evaluating how they are responding to the various factors that affect their classroom practices. Purposeful reflection empowers teachers to be proactive, leading to growth and change. Understanding the experiences of instructional decision-making shared in this study could help teachers understand how they are making instructional decisions. Teachers should learn how to respond to their own beliefs and values so that they are better able to make decisions that empower them instead of making decisions that increase their sense of obligation

to systems they see as flawed. Teachers could learn to see the possibilities in their responses to decision-making factors.

This study presents findings on the decision-making experiences of three third-grade teachers. These teachers' stories inspire deep reflection on teachers' responses to the policies and programs that influence instructional decision-making. It is imperative that educators and stakeholders talk to one another about instructional decision-making and the impact it has on teaching, learning, change, and what is best for students. All stakeholders need to be concerned not only with the tangible elements of education but also with how these factors are experienced in the classroom. Simply identifying the factors that affect instructional decision-making is not enough. Limiting dialogue to bemoaning the existence of troublesome factors such as new standards, testing, and curriculum requirements does not lead to actions that improve students' learning. Understanding how teachers experience these factors is imperative to creating the environments that will allow instructional decisions to be made in the interest of students rather than out of fear or powerlessness. New thinking about how teachers experience instructional decision-making will lead to a better understanding of what can actually make a difference in teaching and learning.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interview One:

Talk about how you decided to become a teacher.

How did you choose your teacher-education program?

How did you choose elementary school?

How did you come to teach in McMinnville?

Describe a day in your life as a teacher making instructional decisions.

Describe a particular instance of deciding what to teach and how to teach it.

What factors can you recall went into that decision?

Describe a time when you felt autonomous in your instructional decision-making.

Describe a time when you felt less freedom in making instructional decisions.

Describe a time when you were happy with an instructional decision you made.

Describe a time when you felt frustrated by an instructional decision you made.

When does decision-making feel high-stakes?

Interview Two:

Based on what you shared with me about your experience as an instructional decision-maker, what would you say feels most important to you about decision-making?

What does it mean to you to be a decision-maker?

What factors do you feel most commonly affect or drive your decisions?

What about our discussion about decision-making surprised you?

What new understandings have you developed regarding your decision-making as a result of our discussion and your own reflection?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

A Phenomenological Investigation into the Lived Experience of Teacher Decision-Making

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to provide you with information you may use to decide whether or not to participate in this study and to record the consent of those who do agree to participate.

RESEARCHER

Lynn Abeln, doctoral student at George Fox University

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of instructional decision-making of a sample of third-grade teachers.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

The design of this study requires a significant time commitment from its participants. If you consent to participate, your involvement will include two 30-minute interviews, each scheduled a few days apart. There will also be additional time required for member checking, adding up to 15 additional minutes for each interview. The interviews will be digitally audio-recorded and your consent to participate in this study includes your consent to being recorded.

It is important to understand that the nature of this phenomenological study requires that your own words be used to develop the meaning of your experience. There will be extensive use of the information you provide in the interviews. Your consent to participate includes your consent for the use of extensive use of your words in the publication of Lynn's dissertation.

RISKS

The small nature of this study makes it difficult to guarantee complete confidentiality. It is possible that readers of the study may know what you reported. I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality and protect your anonymity. I will use a pseudonym that you choose throughout the study. I will provide opportunities for you to read and review the study in order to provide feedback and remove any details that you feel might jeopardize your anonymity.

BENEFITS

The possible benefit of your participation in this study is the opportunity to gain a better understanding of your own decision-making and to add your voice to the understanding of instructional decision-making.

Beyond the benefits to you personally, the kind of learning that comes from this study could benefit the educational field by contributing deeper understanding of the experience of

instructional decision-making from teachers' perspectives. This learning could lead to new thinking about ways to improve teacher training and professional development, as well as add other viewpoints to approaches to school reform and educational policy.

As a token of appreciation for your participation in this study, a \$30 gift card for a local coffee house or café will be provided to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Due to the nature of this small, qualitative study, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Others may know what you report. You will select a pseudonym and all materials will be coded in such a way that if someone would to observe the materials they would be unable to attribute them to a particular individual. The codes will be used when working with and discussing the data. All materials, including digital recordings and transcripts, will be secured in Lynn's home office.

RIGHTS

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and there will be no penalty should you decide not to participate. There will also be no penalty if you choose not to continue in the study after participating in an interview.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research findings will be published in a doctoral dissertation as part of the degree requirements at George Fox University. Data from the study may also be used in other publications at a later time.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study will be answered by Lynn Abeln (503-560-3202) or her dissertation supervisor, Dr. Susanna Steeg (503-554-2839).

Your signature on this form indicates that you understand the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and you voluntarily agree to participate as a research subject. By signing this form, you agree to assume any risks involved. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. In signing this form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing below, you are granting to the researchers the right to use the digital recordings of your interviews for presenting and publishing this research.

Participant's Signature: _____

Participant's Printed Name: _____

Date: _____