DECISION MAKING IN SCHOOLWIDE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND THE COMMITTEE OF GRADUATE STUDIES
OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Nicholas S. Meier
December 2005
Signature Page
ABSTRACT

Research in educational teaching, learning, and school effectiveness over the last twenty years has pointed to schoolwide professional learning communities and shared decision making as effective means of improving instructional quality. This research coincides with the experiences and beliefs of many school practitioners and reformers, as well as theoretical work in schools as democratic institutions. However, research into the implementation of such ideas has also pointed to the difficulties in bringing these ideas into practice. If a school is to be a collaborative community that engages in shared decision making, then differences in beliefs about educational goals, values, and pedagogy cannot be ignored. However, managing such differences is not part of the culture of most schools. Negotiating such conflicts often leads schools into difficulties.

This dissertation examines how two schools known for their strong collaborative communities and histories of shared decision making negotiated decision making and contestation. The research examined how the structure and culture of the schools supported (or did not support) effective management of contestation over decisions as well as examined several particular instances in each school in which important decisions were made by the professional community. I collected data through interviews with the teachers, observations of teacher meetings, and examination of school documents over the period of an academic year.

This study found that a complex set of cultural and structural factors combine to foster effective decision making. In particular, this study highlighted the importance of certain factors in these schools’ ability to effectively manage the decisions and issues that arose. While on the one hand, the shared values and goals of the schools helped keep discussions focused in a forward direction, it was also important that the teachers felt safe to express differing opinions. In both schools it appeared that teachers believed there was such a climate — a climate that was based on getting to know each other well and building trust among staff members as well as a trust in the administration’s willingness to listen. This trust had to be earned over time. Both of the schools had forums for meeting frequently and procedures for making decisions in which teachers felt included in the process. Size of the staff was a major differentiating factor between the schools.
The smaller size of the New Initiatives staff made it easier to carry on full staff
discussions, and meant that they did not use a representative system. Given the larger size
of Caesar Chavez, a representative body appeared to be necessary. However use of a
representational system meant that teachers did not have the same level of ownership
when decisions were made by this body. In both schools the ability to select staff was
important in building and maintaining a culture of shared values, vision and goals. However choices over hiring may also have the effect of reducing positive diversity.

The policy environment that these schools found themselves in impacted greatly
their ability to fully realize the potential of being a schoolwide professional community.
With the move toward standardization of curriculum and standardized tests narrowing the
focus of curriculum, teachers and schools are having less say over what decisions they
can make. If the important professional decisions are taken out of the teachers hands,
much of the purpose of a professional community is lost.

This study adds to the knowledge base on the subject of decision making within
schoolwide professional communities in ways that can be useful to researchers, policy
makers, and practitioners. For practitioners, it offers practical insights as to how these
communities have created cultures and structures that support effective decision making
in their schoolwide professional communities. For policy makers it provides an outline of
the issues such schools confront, providing useful ideas for how to support such efforts.

Besides providing a better understanding of the workings of such communities,
this research raises questions about the dialectic between homogeneity and diversity, and
between autonomy and collaboration. It also points to the complexity of effective of
dialogue and discourse around decisions for which there is contestation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In many ways writing this dissertation felt like a lonely solo adventure during my long hours in front of the computer and pouring over my notes. However, this dissertation could not have been carried out without the help and support of a cast of, while not thousands, a great many.

One of the reasons I picked the topic I did is that I like spending time in schools in the company of teachers. I must thank the many teachers (and non teachers) at each of the two school sites for making me feel welcome, for the generosity of there time, and for letting me be an observer in the day-to-day workings of the schools. My informal chats with “New Initiatives” principal “Grace” gave me so much food for critical thought. She always listened with interest to my ideas, and provided me with new insights.

To Linda Darling-Hammond, my advisor, I am grateful for her ability to both give me insights, challenge me to improve my work and live up to high standards, while simultaneously being a supportive cheerleader. My other committee reading committee members, Shelley Goldman and Ann Lieberman I also must thank for their listening to me talk through my ideas and ask me the questions needed to keep my work focused.

Bindu Pothan was especially helpful during the data gathering portion of my dissertation. She volunteered countless hours helping me devise the coding scheme, listening to me discuss my hypothesis, and helping review and code interviews. Her clear sharp mind was a wonderful help. And she kept claiming I was doing her the favor by letting her participate in my research!

My writing group partners, Ruth Chung and Donielle Prince were invaluable. They listened to me as I talked through my initial ideas, helping me refine the drafts of each chapter. In turn, I learned much from listening and reading as they progressed along in their own research. Our regular get-togethers in the Bookstore Cafe meant I had to have drafts to show them!

I also could not have done this without the help of my editor and long time friend, Randall Studstill. Not only did he help turn my awkward prose into the appropriate academic lingo, he forced me to clarify my thoughts and organize my ideas. His calm and
authentic presence and advice got me through some critical periods in my writing process.

To Pat and Bill Dement I owe my survival through this process. They opened their home and hospitality to me, providing me with a second home throughout the five years of this program. Pat kept me sharp-witted as we tackled the New York Times crossword the mornings I stayed there. Above and beyond their hospitality, company and friendship, Bill's unending support included being my committee chair, and being willing to venture into the world of education.

I owe a deep gratitude to my wife, Elizabeth Good, who not only put up with my being a student again for these five years, but was there for me in my times of difficulty as well as occasionally stepping in to be my copy editor. To my mother, Deborah Meier, I am also indebted. She has been an incredible mentor, always as interested in my own topic as I was. Her insights always forced me think deeper and wider.

And this is not to mention the many friends—Brett Knupfer, Marty Krovetz, Mark Gordon, Krishna Roman, and Claire Joy, to name a few—who let me share my thoughts and ideas with them and offered me advise and moral support along the way.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................... 1
The Research Problem ........................................................................................................................... 2
Research Questions ............................................................................................................................... 5
Significance of Study ............................................................................................................................ 5
Structure of Dissertation ...................................................................................................................... 6
CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW .... 7
Professional Community ....................................................................................................................... 7
Shared Decision Making ...................................................................................................................... 12
Contestation in decision making .......................................................................................................... 16
Cultural and Structural Factors of Contested Decision Making ......................................................... 22
Structures ........................................................................................................................................... 25
Conceptual Model ............................................................................................................................... 29
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................ 32
Research Design ................................................................................................................................ 34
Site Selection ....................................................................................................................................... 35
Data Collection .................................................................................................................................... 37
CHAPTER FOUR: NEW INITIATIVES CHARTER SCHOOL ................................................................. 44
The School .......................................................................................................................................... 44
School Culture of Collaboration ............................................................................................................ 49
Governance and Decision Making ....................................................................................................... 67
Contestation and Decision Making ...................................................................................................... 73
New Initiatives Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 94
Summary .............................................................................................................................................. 101
CHAPTER FIVE: CAESAR CHAVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ......................................................... 104
The School ......................................................................................................................................... 104
Structures of Collaboration ................................................................................................................ 108
Whole school collaboration ............................................................................................................... 113
Effect of Hiring Practices on Maintenance of Collaborative Culture .................................................. 120
Issues of Contestation ...................................................................................................................... 124
Conclusions .......................................................................................................................................... 143
CHAPTER SIX: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS ......................................................................................... 146
Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 146
Culture................................................................................................................................................ 148
Conflict Stance ................................................................................................................................. 153
Structures and Processes ................................................................................................................... 160
Trust and Opportunities to Interact ..................................................................................................... 167
Time .................................................................................................................................................... 171
Size Matters ......................................................................................................................................... 177
Dialectic of shared values vs. diversity ............................................................................................... 179
Interdependence of Factors ............................................................................................................... 180
Autonomy and the Policy Context ...................................................................................................... 180
The Decisions .................................................................................................................................... 182
Conclusions ......................................................................................................................................... 193
TABLES

Table 1: Data Collection ................................................................. 41

FIGURES

Figure 1: Framework of Decision Making in Schoolwide Professional Community ................................................................. 31
Figure 2: Blueprint of New Initiatives classroom buildings .................. 49
Figure 3: Teacher tenure a New Initiatives ...................................... 67
Figure 4: Revised Framework of Decision Making in Schoolwide Professional Community ................................................................. 218
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

[School reformers] fail because they have regarded conflict as a problem to avoid rather than inevitable and valuable byproduct of substantive change.”

(DuFour & Eaker, 1998)

Developing schoolwide professional communities is considered one of the most promising means for reforming or improving schools (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Hord, 1998; Klonsky, 1995; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann & Associates, 1996). Such professional communities are seen as “learning communities” in which teachers learn together to improve practice (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Louis & Marks, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Teacher professional community offers the opportunity to empower teachers to improve teaching and learning through collaborative action. DuFour and Eaker (1998) claim that as a community teachers “work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.” In theory, this leads to improved practice, which in turn should lead to improved student achievement (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996).

Despite their promise, schoolwide professional communities that live up to their potential of improving practice and student achievement are difficult to build and sustain (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). The research indicates that there are a variety of reasons that make creating such communities difficult, for example, school size, the culture of independent practice, and resistance to change. Yet, even when these factors are overcome schools still have difficulty creating effective schoolwide professional communities. Schoolwide professional communities involve shared decision making; they force teachers to confront differences of practice, pedagogy, and belief. These differences are likely to lead to conflict and contestation. Such contestation is a necessary condition for effective decision making — a group is more likely to make good decisions when diverse views are presented and debated. Many schoolwide professional communities, however, are unprepared to successfully manage
conflict. In practice, then, contestation often inhibits rather than facilitates effective decision making. Creating and sustaining effective schoolwide professional communities presents a unique challenge to school reformers.

Given that creating effective schools requires making effective decisions, understanding the conditions of effective decision making is important to school reform. In this dissertation I look at two schools that are considered to have successfully implemented schoolwide professional communities. Studying these schools helps to identify the conditions that make good decisions possible or more likely to occur. By illuminating the conditions of decision making in these two schools, this study informs our understanding of the factors that help make schoolwide professional communities and schools successful.

The Research Problem

Numerous obstacles to school reform efforts have been well documented, from institutional resistance (Meyer & Rowan, 1978) and lack of external support (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Meier, 2000; Sarason, 1996), to internal resistance to change (C. H. Weiss, Campbone, & Wyeth, 1992). As obstacles to general school reform, these variables are likely to inhibit efforts to build and sustain schoolwide professional communities. School size can be another obstacle to developing successful schoolwide professional community. There is a large body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of reduced school size in improving a myriad of factors (Bickel, 1999; 1995; Howley, 2000; Klonsky, 1995). Reducing school size improves achievement, increases attendance, reduces violence, and increases positive attitudes towards school, especially for minority students (Bickel, 1999; 1995; Howley, 2000; Klonsky, 1995). In addition, reforms — such as developing strong schoolwide professional communities — are easier to carry out in small schools (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). With respect to schoolwide professional communities, it seems that group decision making, in which all parties feel not just buy-in but ownership, works best when the group is small enough for all to meet together and carry on one conversation (Meier, 1995). The advantage of smaller schools over larger schools when it comes to group decision making may explain
why strong, effective schoolwide professional communities are rare to find outside of small schools (Bryk et al., 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann & Associates, 1996). Schoolwide professional communities are more difficult to maintain in larger schools, whereas research indicates that teacher professional communities are a central component of successful small schools.

Even when everybody is “on-board,” there is agreement among the staff that they want to build such a community, basic institutional constraints have been lifted, and the external support is there, success is still far from certain. Lack of knowledge about how to sustain change (Lonnquist & King, 1993; Newmann & Associates, 1996) and shared values that do not support the change process (Achinstein, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann & Associates, 1996; Westheimer, 1998) can interfere with a community’s ability to bring about needed reforms to improve the quality of teaching and meet the needs of all students.

One of the major obstacles to building and sustaining effective schoolwide professional communities is internal conflict (Achinstein, 2002; Letgers, 1999; Lonnquist & King, 1993). Schoolwide professional communities require teachers to engage in conversations and decision-making roles that are new to them. Teachers are forced to confront differences of practice, pedagogy, and belief that previously could be hidden behind closed doors, ignored, or tolerated because they did not influence one’s own practice (C. H. Weiss et al., 1992). These differences are likely to lead to conflict and contestation. This is especially true for those schools attempting to enact high standards for traditionally underperforming students. Major changes in the norms and culture of traditional schooling are likely to raise contestation over ideas and decisions. Teachers may have different beliefs about what the problem is, about how students learn, and about how best to address these issues. Many researchers have noted that successfully maneuvering such conflicts without avoiding important issues or destroying the community one is trying to build is a major roadblock to reform (Achinstein, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; King, Louis, Marks, & Peterson, 1996; Reed, 2000; C. H. Weiss et al., 1992). As noted above, contestation is an essential part of effective decision making — strong schoolwide professional communities depend on it. However, because
contestation is difficult to negotiate, contestation is more likely to be an obstacle to effective decision making. Successful schoolwide professional communities — schoolwide professional communities that make good decisions and improve schools — therefore depend on effective conflict negotiation.

The goal of this study is a better understanding of the conditions of effective decision making in schoolwide professional communities. This study investigates two schools, one larger and one smaller, that engage in extensive purposeful collaborative practice among the teaching staff, and that have practices of shared decision making. I examine the culture and structures that support, guide, and contextualize the decision making process in both schools. Studying these schools helps identify the factors that make effective decision making possible. Since good schools require good decisions, investigating the conditions of good decision making is an important component of school reform. I argue that the cultural norms of the professional community in regards to conflict, and the structures that are put in place to manage the decision-making process, all mediate how such conflicts are expressed, received, and acted upon in that community.

My work has been inspired by the positive implications of contestation – its potential to promote school reform rather then oppose it. Contestation can be used productively to help find better solutions to the issues at hand. This is particularly important for decisions and discussions around teaching, curriculum, and pedagogy. As a teacher said when I interviewed her about her school’s redesign effort, “When I think of successful school reform, it is teachers that can teach.” Pedagogy and curriculum are at the heart of what a school does. It is what and how teachers teach that most directly affects students. Just as students are said to learn better when they can collaborate with their peers, this is equally true of teachers. Who better to learn from than one’s colleagues who are working with the same population of students, addressing the same issues?

As an elementary school teacher, I always looked forward to being able to talk with adults. I enjoyed discussing ideas about teaching with my colleagues, learning from them, sharing what I was doing, and ideas I had. I taught in four different schools in as many districts in my fourteen years of teaching. While I found ways to converse
professionally with my colleagues, these discussions were by and large informal, outside any official structure of the school. While it has become common for teachers to utilize methods that encourage their students to learn from each other, it is uncommon to find schools that are designed so that teachers can do the same on an ongoing and regular basis. This study addresses some of the difficulties that teachers encounter in trying to enact this change.

Research Questions

School improvement depends on strong schoolwide professional communities — communities that are able to make effective decisions. Research suggests that certain conditions enhance the likelihood for making productive decisions. In particular, decision making processes are more effective when they include contestation and conflict and effective conflict negotiation. This dissertation examines decision making processes and the factors that affect those processes in the context of two schoolwide professional communities. The central questions I ask are:

• What conditions of a schoolwide professional community promote or inhibit effective decision making?
• How does school culture support conditions of effective decision making?
• How do school structures allow the expression and productive negotiation of conflict and contestation?

Significance of Study

Because strong schoolwide professional communities improve schools, understanding the factors that contribute to (or diminish) the effectiveness of schoolwide professional communities is an important educational concern. Though many variables have been identified as affecting Schoolwide Professional Community success and failure, conflict is one of the most significant. This is because even when institutional support is in place, schoolwide professional communities are often unable to negotiate the conflict essential to effective decision making. Strong and effective schoolwide
professional communities depend on certain conditions, in particular, the presence of conflict and the ability to negotiate conflict. Understanding the factors that promote these ideal conditions is therefore an important issue in school reform. This study is significant because it investigates the variables that influence the decision making process in two schools in somewhat different contexts. Studying two schools with reputations for strong schoolwide professional communities contributes to our understanding of the conditions that support effective decision making, create productive schoolwide professional communities, and improve schools.

Structure of Dissertation

In Chapter Two, I describe the conceptual framework of this study. I review the literature on professional community, school size, shared decision making, the effect of conflict on decision making, and cultural and structural factors related to conflict and decision making. In Chapter Three, I explain the study’s design, methodology, data analysis, and limitations. Chapters Four and Five are case studies of two elementary schools, New Initiatives\(^1\) and Cesar Chavez. In these chapters, I discuss the schools, their cultures, decision making structures, and decision making processes. My cross-case analysis in Chapter Six presents general findings on how cultural and structural conditions in both schools impact the decision making process. Chapter Seven outlines the broader conclusions that can be drawn from this study and well as some of the questions it raises, and discusses its implications for policy, research, and practice.

\(^1\) Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure the confidentiality of the participants in the study.
CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter outlines some of the major research findings on professional teacher communities. I examine what is known about teacher professional communities, how they are defined, and the evidence for their effectiveness as a reform strategy. I then outline what is known about shared decision making, since professional community implies the use of some form of shared decision making. Next I examine research on conflict and contested decision making in organizations and schools. Finally, I consider the issues of structure and culture regarding contested decision making in teacher professional communities.

Professional Community

What we know

Bellah and colleagues (1985) define community as “A group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it” (p.333). A more detailed definition of a teacher professional community is provided in the next section.

Much of the work on teacher professional community is found in research on teacher professional development. According to Gary Sykes (1999), “Whereas professional development initially was regarded as one among a number of coequal policy instruments for promoting change, it is now reckoned as the centerpiece” (p.152). Professional development is therefore considered a major part of the answer to our schools’ educational problems (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Little, 1982; Meier, 1995; Talbert, 1993). Leaders in the field of professional development and school reform call for improvement in the knowledge and skills of teachers as the most effective means of improving the quality of instruction. The qualities that these reformers associate with effective professional development are many
of the same qualities that define a professional community: collaborative practice, an inquiry stance, and deprivatization of practice.

In the last ten years especially, teacher professional communities have begun to be studied in depth. As opposed to just five to ten years ago, there is now a fairly well developed theoretical literature on what a teacher professional community is, and what features it does or should have (Cook, LaFors, & Post, 1998; Grossman et al., 2000; Kruse et al., 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Westheimer, 1999). This literature has focused on such features as sharing a common vision, deprivatizing practice, collaborative work, and collective responsibility for students. There have also been a few empirical studies examining quantitatively the effectiveness of these communities for improving student achievement (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Little, 1982; Louis & Marks, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). These studies have generally found positive effects. More common are the case studies examining one, or comparing several, professional communities. Some studies focus on the development of such communities (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Grossman et al., 2000; Letgers, 1999; Stokes, 2001). These studies all agree that building such communities may take years. Some studies focus on the structures of such communities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stokes, 2001; Westheimer, 1999), finding that explicit structures, meetings and procedures were necessary for successful communities. Others have investigated how values affect professional communities’ impact on learning (Achinstein, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Westheimer, 1999). These studies find that certain professional community values reinforce the status quo and traditional practices, while others reinforce reflection on practice, innovation and collaboration. Bryk et al. (1999) found a high correlation between the climate of trust in a school and the level of professional community, based on survey of several thousand teachers in over 200 elementary schools in Chicago.

Other studies were primarily intended to describe and outline the features of a specific professional community (Lockwood, 1995; Lynn, 1994; Talbert, 1993), each describing the individual case as an example for others to learn from.

While there have been relatively few studies testing the effectiveness of teacher professional community to improve student achievement, those few that have been done
show promising results. Judith Warren Little (1982) was the first to systematically study the principles behind teacher professional community (though she used the term “collaborative practices” rather than teacher professional community, many of the practices she identified are the same ones now used to describe teacher professional communities.) She found that the schools with more collaborative practices had higher student achievement.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine professional communities of practice defined mostly in terms of high school departments. They found that when there was both external support from the district (and the state) and internal support from colleagues for innovative practice, the likelihood of such practice increased. Without both external and internal support, innovative practice was much more difficult to sustain, and much less likely to be attempted. They differentiated between “weak” and “strong” professional communities and “traditional” versus “innovative” ones. It was only in the “strong innovative” professional communities that they found positive overall effects for students. In this study, though, most of the communities were departmental rather than schoolwide, as they took place primarily in large comprehensive high schools.

Louis, Kruse and Marks (1996), in conjunction with Newmann and Associates (1996), did a comprehensive and well designed study focused directly on the issue of the effectiveness of schoolwide professional communities on student achievement. In that study, they found that schools that fit their definition of professional community (see Appendix B) were more likely to engage in authentic pedagogy. They used teacher surveys as well as observation to discern the level of professional community, and observational and interview data to measure the level of authentic pedagogy. In another analysis of that same research, King, Louis, and Peterson (1996) found that schools that engaged in shared decision making were also more likely to have high levels of authentic pedagogy. Of the twenty-four schools in the study, the six schools defined as engaging in shared decision making were among the top eight in attributes of school-based professional community. Furthermore those schools that were higher in authentic pedagogy had higher levels of student achievement (using performance based measures),
indicating again a positive correlation between teacher professional community and student achievement.

These studies, overall, support the claim that teacher professional community is an effective avenue of school reform. It helps schools meet the needs of diverse student populations and increases teacher learning. Schools with professional communities are more likely to successfully enact other aspects of school reform, such as ongoing professional development (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Little, 1982; Louis et al., 1996; Louis & Marks, 1996; Rowan, 1990), authentic pedagogy (Louis et al., 1996; Louis & Marks, 1996; Rowan, 1990), and shared decision making (King et al., 1996).

As teacher professional community is not the norm in schools in the United States, schools that decide to embark on the path of building strong professional communities are likely to run into difficulties. A lack of clearly defined roles and blueprints for this new structure causes uncertainty and disequilibria. Sarason (1996) most eloquently and convincingly writes of how difficult the change process is: “Changing power relationships is always unsettling, stormy, and even destabilizing (for a time at least). If we have learned anything about human behavior it is that we resist change even though we proclaim its necessity” (p. 338).

**Definition of schoolwide professional community.**

To operationalize my definition of teacher professional community, I borrow the framework laid out by Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1995). While many researchers have used and defined the term in a variety of ways, the framework of Kruse et al. is the most fully explored and explicated definition. This definition arose out of their fieldwork studying schools attempting to enact such communities. The attributes they list — *shared values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning* and *collaboration* — are reiterated in different forms by the majority of other researchers and reformers in the field of teacher professional community (Achinstein, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sykes, 1999; Westheimer, 1999). Kruse et al. also list certain necessary structural conditions: *time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures, and teacher*
empowerment and school autonomy. Many of these structures are considered imperative by other researchers and reformers interested in teacher professional community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Krovetz, 1999; Meier, 1995; Newmann & Associates, 1996).

Kruse et al.’s framework (Appendix B) is used here as a means of determining whether the schools in this study can be defined as having a schoolwide professional community.

School size

While not explicitly included in Kruse et al.’s (1995) definition, their research indicates that school size is a structural quality that may be important to building schoolwide teacher professional community. The empirical evidence gathered so far seems to support this assertion. Bidwell, Frank, and Quiroz (1997), for instance, find that teachers in small schools are more likely to engage in collegial relationships. Many empirical studies find a correlation between school size and the likelihood of finding strong professional communities (Bryk et al., 1999; Louis et al., 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Rowan, 1990). In these multiple-site studies, strong schoolwide professional communities are found almost exclusively in smaller schools. Many of the theoretical arguments for small schools are based on the fact that faculty size needs to be small in order to build professional community. Deborah Meier (1995), the founder of many small urban public schools serving mostly underprivileged students, and a prominent school reform advocate, argues that the staff needs to be small enough to sit around a table together — for her, that means no more than about 20 teachers. According to Linda Darling-Hammond (1997), “shared time for planning, professional development, and governance” — all attributes of teacher professional community — “is more extensive in the [small] restructured schools” (p.185). Louis, Kruse and Marks (1996) put it this way:

Large school size adversely affects teachers’ ability to know and talk with one another. Meetings of the school [faculty] become difficult in large schools. Thus the smaller schools and elementary and middle schools tended to be more effective in creating professional community than larger schools, especially in high schools… Making significant reductions in school size and complexity can strengthen
professional community and bring significant improvements in student achievement. (p.196)

Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) did an empirical quantitative survey study on Chicago’s elementary school’s during the site based management reform of the 1990s, looking specifically at professional community. In this study they analyzed the survey results of 5,690 teachers in 248 elementary schools. They found that, “Among all the factors considered, small school size stood out as being an important facilitator of professional community” (p.767).

In my examination of the case studies on teacher professional community, almost all the ones that were done in large schools examined communities that consisted of groups of teachers — such as departments (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), leadership groups (Dunne & Honts, 1998), voluntary groups (Grossman et al., 2000), interdisciplinary teams (Letgers, 1999), or grade level teams (Westheimer, 1999) — rather than schoolwide communities. One case study done on a large high school described the four year attempt to build professional community as a failure (Lonnquist & King, 1993).

In this study, I examine one smaller school where extensive schoolwide collaboration takes place, and another larger school where much of the collaboration takes place in subgroups. A comparison of these schools helps to determine how variation in the size of school communities impacts decision making structures and the effectiveness of the decision making process.

Shared Decision Making

While a professional community is more than merely a means of jointly making decisions, professional community does involve shared decision making, in that professionals “control… conditions of work” (Louis, Kruse, & et al., 1995). Schoolwide professional communities are predicated on the assumption that teachers are empowered to make meaningful decisions about curriculum practice and pedagogy. Rowan (1990) posits that the “loose-coupling” of the past is coming to an end. One direction this has taken is the increased standardization of pedagogy and practice, with more states
adopting statewide curriculum, and many districts or schools expecting or dictating particular pedagogies and instructional methods, or even scripted lessons. The pressures of standardized high stakes tests have added to this. Many educational reformers believe that these measures undermine the professional status of teaching.

On the other hand, a counter reform (that can also be seen as an attempt to hold teachers accountable) has become popular since the mid 1980s. This reform is based on a bottom-up vision of democracy and decision making. It argues that those closest to carrying out the decisions need to be involved in making the decisions (Sarason, 1996). While this model of school reform has been around for at least the last 100 years (Dewey, 1900/1990), over the last twenty years different forms of this strategy have been instituted at various levels. These go by many names, such as site-based management, school-based management, and shared decision making. These models look different each place they are put into practice, with varying implications. Some of these reforms move the locus of control from the state or district to the school, but lack any particular model for teacher involvement. Some of these reforms are predicated on involvement of a broader range of stakeholders, such as parents, community organizations, and even the business community.

For the purpose of this study, I am primarily interested in models concerned with teacher involvement. Advocates of teacher professional community work under the belief that teachers, as the professionals closest to the instruction of the children, are in the best position to make curricular and instructional decisions about the students they teach. While schools make decisions about many issues, this study is concerned with decisions regarding teaching and learning. Several large school reform organizations include the principle of shared decision making by teachers as a central component of their philosophy, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative. Many states or individual districts have encouraged such reforms. These include California’s Restructuring Initiative SB1274, New York City’s site-based management reforms of the 1990’s, and Chicago’s mandated site-based governance, which included a large role for parents and community. Throughout the country there are probably thousands of schools attempting some level or form of more inclusive decision
making. Along with this has come theoretical work on these approaches. Some authors claim that we cannot prepare students for a democratic society without practicing and modeling democratic forms of decision making (Meier, 2002; Pearl & Knight, 1999; Reed, 2000). Others focus on the argument that teachers cannot act as professionals if they do not have the power to make the important educational decisions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Louis et al., 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Mostly, shared decision making is predicated on the assumption that teachers are in the best position to know what their particular students need (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Meier, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994; Sizer, 1984). In many cases, though, teachers may not actually possess the knowledge base, or internalize the norms that define what it means to be a professional.

Empirical evidence for shared decision making

The empirical evidence for shared decision making is mixed at best, with most researchers arguing that there is just not enough good research to establish if such reforms have lived up to their promise of improving student achievement (Brown & Cooper, 2000; Education Commission of the States, 1995; Murphy, Evertson, & Radnofsky, 1991; Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1996). In a summary of the studies done as of 1995, the Education Commission of the States (1995) found that “of 800 studies of SBM [site based management]… just seven included any quantitative assessment of student performance. Only two of these studies established a positive link” (p.23). According to another analysis, “Examining the instructional outcomes of participative decision making yields generally equivocal conclusions” (Smylie, Lazarus, & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996). One limitation of studies on this issue is that site based management, school based management, and shared decision making can mean different things. “The definition of SBM varies widely; in fact, many of the models that have been adopted do not actually involve the local management of schools” (Education Commission of the States, 1995, p.23). Therefore many of these studies do not address the impact of teacher influence on decision making.
If we look particularly at studies that focus on teacher decision making, we find more positive results. In a study on Seattle Public Schools (Ramey & Dornseif, 1994), teachers in 21 schools were surveyed as to the level of SBM in their schools. These levels were then correlated to general student achievement and the reduction in the achievement gap between minority and majority students. They found a curvilinear relationship — early implementation was related to lowering achievement levels, while longer implementation correlated with improved achievement and a reduced gap. Another large scale study on SBM done in Illinois (Brown & Cooper, 2000) correlated length of implementation with teacher satisfaction for the program and found positive results. Teacher satisfaction may not mean better student achievement, however.

Smylie et al. (1996) did a five-year longitudinal study of the seven schools in one district in a midwestern city involved in shared decision making. At first glance their results showed little or no overall improvement in student achievement across the district. However, when analyzed based on the degree of implementation some interesting results appeared. Student achievement (as measured by standardized tests) improved in those schools that had higher implementation and where decisions were focused on instructional practices and student learning.

While two studies found no change in student achievement (Jenkins, Ronk, Rude, & Stowitschek, 1994; C. H. Weiss, 1993), these were both short term studies, looking at results after one or one and a half years, respectively. The two studies showing positive effects were longitudinal — up to five years in length. In fact, the curvilinear relationship found by Ramey and Dornseif (1994), with student achievement going down originally and then improving over time, may explain the poor results of the short term studies.

Newmann and Associates’ (1996) examination of the influence of shared decision making on teaching and student achievement is probably the most comprehensive study of this kind to date. They examined 24 schools — 8 elementary, 8 middle and 8 high schools — that were “restructuring for intellectual quality.” Various different researchers looked at different aspects of the schools. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were done on the schools using interviews, observations, surveys, as well as test scores and other outcome measures. King et al. (1996) looked in particular at the data on decision
making. They divided the decision making practices in the 24 schools studied into four categories: Balkanized, laissez-faire, consolidated, and shared. Shared was found to be the most effective form of decision making for creating schools with high scores on authentic pedagogy. In turn, using data from this same study, Marks, Newmann, and Gamoran (1996) found that authentic pedagogy correlated with higher student achievement.

A general conclusion suggested by these studies on SDM is that when shared decision making is loosely defined, poorly implemented, or newly implemented, one is not likely to find positive effects on student achievement. When shared decision making is tied to teachers making decisions in regards to curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy, and is given time to develop, then positive effects are generally found. These findings are still based on only a few studies. More needs to be known about how involvement in decision making improves practice. One of the goals of this study is to shed more light on this subject, exploring in particular the effects of contestation on decision making.

Contestation in decision making

Like schools, businesses and other organizations have embraced, to some degree, participatory decision making. Peter Senge (1995) makes this call to businesses: “Only with the support, insight, and fellowship of a community can we face the dangers of learning meaningful things” (p.53). Seymour Sarason (1996) claims, “The other thing we [the private sector] learned… is that you cannot achieve your goals unless all members at all levels of the organization meaningfully participate in some important way in the organization’s affairs” (323-24).

From the research cited above, it might seem that all we have to do to reform schools is create small schools with schoolwide professional communities and shared decision making. The situation, however, is not as simple as this research seems to suggest.

DuFour and Eaker (1998), a superintendent and researcher respectively, have been involved in building and writing about schoolwide professional communities for many years. They warn us that “[School reformers] fail because they have regarded
conflict as a problem to avoid rather than an inevitable and valuable byproduct of substantive change” (p.14). They claim that the unwillingness to meet conflict head-on is a major obstacle to creating effective schools. With all the talk of building consensus, the need to be a community, the importance of trust and the importance of tolerance for differing views and cultures, many groups strive to come to quick and easy agreement. This claim is reiterated not just in the literature on school change but also in the organizational literature in general. De Drue and De Vries (1997), based on empirical research on group conflict, point out that, “Conflict parties often deny the existence of an issue, or reduce its importance in order to avoid dealing with it” (p.11). On the other hand, they demonstrate that if conflict is dealt with constructively, “Reduced short-term efficiency may be compensated by improved long-term effectiveness” (p.73). This conclusion supports the findings on school site-based management. Judith Warren Little (1990) warns, “The success of joint activities often requires open levels of conflict that can be tense and uncomfortable. Such difficulties make successful meaningful joint work in schools a rare occurrence” (p.519). Other organizational and social psychology researchers report similar findings — that avoidance of conflict is common, but it is at the expense of improved decision making (A. Amason & Schweiger, 1997; De Drue & De Vries, 1997; Nemeth, 1986; Tjosvold, 1991; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). Researchers on school reform looking at conflict in the natural settings of schools note the same pattern: schools avoid group conflict at the expense of confronting difficult issues (Achinstein, 2002; Lieberman, 1995; Little, 1993; C. H. Weiss et al., 1992; Westheimer, 1999).

Schools attempting to restructure themselves or build on these notions of democratic decision making and collective responsibility often are unprepared for how difficult the process is. In particular, they may be unready for the conflicts that arise when there is contestation over decisions. As pointed out above, difficulties in enacting more participatory forms of decision making are not exclusive to schools. In any library or bookstore are shelves of books on conflict management aimed at businesses and other organizations; resolving conflict is a major societal concern. Since in some ways schools share the basic characteristics of other organizations, the research on conflict and contested decision making in those organizations should be relevant to schools as well.
This literature indicates what organizations that are able to effectively negotiate conflict and contestation look like.

What makes conflict in organizations more or less productive? The literature on this question has tended to stress the following issues: task vs. affective conflict, decision-making procedures, alternatives considered, and team diversity. Although at one time organizational conflict was viewed as being negative, researchers have come to the conclusion that certain types of conflict — which they label as task-oriented or cognitive — have positive potential. On the other hand, what they call affective or personal conflict generally leads to negative outcomes (A. C. Amason, 1996; Cosier & Rose, 1977; Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, & Bourgeois, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1997; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; van de Vliert & de Dreu, 1994). Of course, as the literature points out, it is not easy to keep task-oriented conflict from becoming personal (A. C. Amason, 1996; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989). It is probably unrealistic to think that people will not have some affective or emotional stake in any situation involving conflict.

Some researchers argue that conflict is good because it forces a group to consider different points of view and alternative solutions (Janis, 1982; Nemeth, 1986). As Janis shows in his book *Groupthink*, groups can arrive at disastrous decisions when they fail to seriously consider multiple alternatives. Nemeth (1986), using an experimental design, demonstrates how minority dissent can help groups consider alternatives, which then leads to better decisions. Based on these observations, additional research has focused on how to make task-oriented conflict work most effectively and how to keep the affective dimension from adversely affecting decision making.

In order for conflict to be productive, the literature suggests procedures for effectively using and managing conflict. Some of these suggestions concern the decision making process itself. For example, research generally notes that some form of consensus building works better than majority rule or hierarchically based decision making (A. C. Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Thompson, Mannix, & Bazerman, 1988/ though read Eisenhardt, 1997 #106 and Schweiger, 1989 #107 for a more nuanced look at the issue of consensus). I will not go into the disadvantages of hierarchical decision making.
here (refer to the section on site-based decision making for a review of this issue within the school context), but the reasons against majority rule deserve some attention. According to the research, majority rule often leads to fractionizing of the organization into camps (Thompson et al., 1988). Each camp has little stake in taking the arguments of the other side seriously as long as they can gain a majority. Thompson et al. demonstrate that teams using consensus rather than majority rule come to better decisions.

The research recommends that certain steps be taken before a group begins the decision-making process. For example, there should be some procedures in place for assuring that everyone’s voice is heard and that multiple alternatives are considered (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Janis, 1982; Nemeth, 1986; Schweiger et al., 1989). Criticism tends to be viewed negatively in groups where a decision making process involves only one alternative. Janis’ work illustrates the danger of this through historical analyses of the decisions to invade Cuba (resulting in the Bay of Pigs) and to escalate the Korean and Vietnam Wars. If only two alternatives are considered, it is likely to become a contest between the two sides. Eisenhardt and Schweiger’s research on decision making procedures in executive groups supports this finding. When groups are open to multiple alternatives they are more likely to consider a wide range of possibilities and utilize the best of each. This research also points out that just asking “does everyone agree?” can lead to false consensus. When important decisions are being made each person’s view should be individually elicited.

Several researchers also point out that important decisions should be preceded by frequent opportunities to meet and collaborate, preferably in varying configurations (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Janis, 1982). Eisenhardt’s study of decision making in actual organizations shows a strong correlation between multiple forms of meeting and getting to know each other and coming to good decisions. Janis also recommends this strategy based on his study of different decision making processes and their respective outcomes (see Stokes, 2001 for an excellent example of how this works effectively in a school setting).

The research notes that productive decisions are more likely to occur in groups that share a common goal (Cosier & Rose, 1977; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Jehn et al.,
Incompatible goals among group members increase the chances that conflict will have negative results because the parties see the conflict as leading to winners and losers. If, on the other hand, the conflict concerns how best to realize a shared vision or common goal, then conflict can be viewed in a positive light, as it helps all members achieve that common goal. (Many school reform advocates have highlighted the importance of a shared vision in the school context. See especially the work of Kruse et al, 1995). The group also must define the problem in such a way that it takes common ownership of it. If members of a group define the problem or solutions as outside their control they are less likely to find useful solutions (Janis, 1982; see Achinstein, 2002 for a full discussion of this in the school setting).

Several researchers argue that it is important that the members of the group know each other well and share a certain degree of mutual trust (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Janis, 1982, though Janis offers a warning regarding this as well). They claim that without knowing each other well, members are unlikely to express strong points of view and if they do, it is more likely that misunderstanding will occur. Meier (1995, 2002) makes a similar argument when she explains how the staffs at her schools are able to productively engage each other over difficult issues by first building strong bonds of trust. These same researchers point out that insular relationships among group members can also lead to negative consequences.

Team or organization diversity also has a strong effect on decision making outcomes, either positively or negatively depending on the type of diversity (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Pelled et al., 1999). Jehn et al., in their study of 92 work groups, find that social category diversity positively influenced decision making, while value diversity had a negative effect. The negative effect of value diversity is unsurprising given other findings on the importance of a shared vision or common goal. Pelled et al. look at which type of social diversity in particular is most positive. They find that functional diversity and age have positive effects on the outcomes of task conflict, while race and tenure diversity can increase emotional conflict with negative implications for decision making effectiveness.
In conclusion, the research indicates that productive decisions are most likely to occur in groups whose members (1) know each other well, (2) have built trusting relationships among themselves, (3) are working toward a common goal, (4) have taken ownership of the problems facing them, (5) have developed a process to ensure that many voices and alternatives are heard, and (6) use a consensus model of decision making. The research also suggests a tension between two important variables correlated with decision making effectiveness: team diversity (which increases the likelihood that the decision making process includes consideration of different views) and the need for shared value and goals, since decision making processes tend to break down when team diversity is too great. Effective decisions require understanding and balancing these two opposing variables.

Many of the above studies were done in experimental situations where relationships are short-term and real investment in the task is likely to be weak. Are results in natural settings, where the members of the community have a long-term investment in the decision and in the relationships with the other group members, likely to be the same? In natural organizations are people more or less likely to listen to minority opinion than in artificial settings? Are there ways to mitigate groupthink in highly stressful job situations such as teaching? This study is intended to shed light on some of these questions.

This study focuses on conflict and decision making within schoolwide professional communities. My emphasis is on decisions pertaining to the beliefs, values, practices, and pedagogy of the school. In traditional schools, conflict and dissent over these issues cause less overt problems. Due to the top-down structure, management can ignore dissent through edict. Conversely, because of the prevalence of the private practice model and “loosely-coupled” management system (Lortie, 1975; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Weick, 1976), teachers can ignore the edicts behind their closed doors. “Whereas historically, teachers could retain their private practice and diverse beliefs behind closed classroom doors, innovations that supported collaboration opened up such differences to scrutiny and often resulted in conflict” (Achinstein, 2002, p.100). Additionally, differing
views and values are acceptable in traditionally governed schools because no need is seen for consistency from classroom to classroom on many of these issues (C. H. Weiss et al., 1992), or if it is, administrators and policy makers mandate such conformity. It is these types of conflicts that are brought to the fore in a schoolwide professional community that has embraced shared decision making and collective responsibility for students.

In this study I focus purposely on dissent and decision making — or what I refer to as contested decision making — in the area of teaching and learning. Schools may have conflicts and dissent on many issues. As the research has demonstrated, though, it is the decisions over teaching and learning that affect student outcomes (Jenkins et al., 1994; Ramey & Dornseif, 1994; Smylie et al., 1996).

Cultural and Structural Factors of Contested Decision Making

In order to build an effective schoolwide professional community, the evidence so far points to the importance of knowing how to negotiate the contestation raised by collaborative decision making. In this next section I discuss certain factors that may mediate how a school manages decisions (See figure 1 at the end of this chapter).

The factors I explore are culture and structure. I will be using each term in a particular way. By culture, I refer to a schoolwide professional community’s norms and beliefs regarding how conflict and dissent should be received and handled. Structural factors refer to the structures that have been implemented to allow for discussion and decision making, and rules or procedures in place for those discussions and decision making.

Cultural stance toward contestation and dissent

“The culture of the schools is one which makes it unsafe to bring up controversial issues that implicitly or explicitly are critical of existing practice and call for change” (Sarason, 1996, p.328). As this quote attests, the climate or culture of schools generally discourages dissent and contestation over ideas and practices. This may in part reflect the institutional nature of schools (Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1996). On the other hand, some schools’ cultures seem to be able to overcome this tendency and are able to raise
controversial issues, as well as critique and change existing practices. Some of the research on professional communities has explicitly explored this issue.

Carol Reed (2000) did a case study of four schools involved in shared decision-making reforms to study issues of teachers and power. She found that some schools had cultures “that value consensus and cooperation, that pay attention to individual comfort levels” and found that these groups were ill-prepared “to deal with the inevitable conflicts caused by trading individual authority for the collective capacity of a democratic process” (p.160). While she found different levels of inclusiveness and participation in decision making in the four sites, some with substantial teacher input and initiative and others where the structures were just developing, she nevertheless concluded that:

most of their activity, including their definitions of shared decision-making, barely stretched the current boundaries of schools and schooling. In these four schools, as elsewhere, the advent of shared decision-making yielded something less than the paradigm shift hoped for by its advocates (p.156).

Like many other contributors to the organizational literature (Nemeth, 1986; Tjosvold, 1991; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997), she suggests training in “the skills to deal with the inevitable conflicts caused by trading individual authority for the collective capacity of the democratic process” (p.160). One skill that she considers particularly important is the ability to negotiate.

Betty Achinstein (2002) developed a framework to describe schoolwide professional communities along a continuum of conflict stances. From her two case studies she found that the cultures of the two schools varied greatly with regard to how they dealt with conflict and dissent. She referred to this difference as their Conflict Stance. The two ends of the spectrum on this continuum are Avoidance Stance and Embracing Stance. In her framework she defines the avoidance stance as places where problems are externalized, with low levels of expressed dissent, that do not question the status quo, limit public debate of contested issues. Schools that epitomize the embracing stance, acknowledge and own problems, expect and encourage divergent views, that challenge the status quo and create multiple public forums for public debate of ideas.

Achinstein attempts to show that going too far on either end of the spectrum is detrimental and that each side has positive elements. On the avoidance side are the
stereotypes of small town thinking, similar to the organizational literature’s definition of
groupthink (De Drue, 1997; Janis, 1982; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). These types of
communities value harmony and getting along. These findings are also confirmed by the
social psychological literature which finds that conflict avoidance leads to the short term
gain of group harmony, although it can be at the expense of finding the best long term
solution (De Drue & De Vries, 1997; Levine & Moreland, 1998). Achinstein finds higher
levels of teacher satisfaction and lower turnover in this community, which she posits is
related to the cultural value placed on conflict avoidance.

On the embracing end is a community constantly embroiled in discussion and
debate, lacking any consensus and with high levels of stress. The school she described as
more conflict embracing had high levels of staff turnover, and even those that did stay
admitted to high stress levels.

Despite Achinstein’s attempts to present a nuanced picture of each stance, with its
positive and negative aspects, it is clear from her descriptions of the two schools that she
sees the conflict embracing one in a more positive light. It is the one she describes as
constructively attempting to meet the needs of the most needy students. She makes it
clear that only through a conflict embracing stance can a community be considered a
learning community, which is one of the central aspects of most definitions of a
professional community.

Westheimer’s (1998) case study of the cultures of two schools’ professional
communities is in many ways similar to that of Achinstein’s (2001). In his study, he does
think a distinction in types of dissent is important, though he makes a slightly different
division than Achinstein did, in his section titled Difficult People or Different Beliefs.
Westheimer distinguishes between dissent “based on differences of… substantive opinion
and [dissent] based on differences in commitment, understanding and abilities” (p.116).
The latter pertains to conflicts over how different people or parties view others, not in
terms of their beliefs, but with regard to style of discourse or perceptions about whether
others are doing their share. He does make the following warning, however: “Reader
Beware: this is a matter of interpretation. One man’s … voice of reason … is another’s
notion of a troublemaker” (p.116).
Westheimer also differentiates the cultures of the two schools in terms of their beliefs about dissent. In one community (which he labels communitarian) he finds that dissent is voiced in publicly legitimated spaces and participation is “widespread and extensive.” On the other hand, he finds that “openly specified beliefs result in self-selection; some teachers [in this school] leave the community” (p.123). In the other school (which he labels liberal), a wide range of beliefs is allowed to coexist, but participation in public forums is “limited and selective” and dissent “rarely voiced in public forums” (p.123). These appear similar in many ways to Achinstein’s embracing and avoidant stances respectively.

Both Achinstein and Westheimer find turnover to be higher in the community with more public dissent, though they give slightly different reasons for the turnover: stress (Achinstein) or self-selection to a specified mission (Westheimer). Virginia Cook (2002), in her study of new teacher socialization, also found a high degree of self-selection turnover in teacher professional communities that had strong shared values, norms, and practices.

Achinstein’s framework of avoidant and embracing stances the sites is used as one lens to understand how each of these schools has handled the issues confronting them. This framework helps identify cultural norms concerning conflict and contested decision making. I have not assumed, however, that the same stance is taken to all conflict in any given community.

Structures

In this section I discuss the structures schools use to make decisions. While it is clear from the research that effectively negotiating conflict requires more than changing decision making structures, both the educational and organizational literature speak to the need for structures and forums to handle conflict. Sarason (1996) indicates the frequent absence of such structures: “I was not in schools long before I realized that the tradition of frequent and regular meetings to discuss… any meaningful issue did not exist” (p.360). Below I outline what some of the literature has to say about providing such forums. My discussion of structure will focus on two issues: (1) types of forums and
how these either promote or suppress the expression of viewpoints and (2) what rules and procedures are used in those forums.

Laura Stokes (2001) did a detailed case study of one school, examining the structures and forums that it put in place to help work through the difficult issues facing a school attempting to maneuver the change process. While she used the term “teacher inquiry” rather than professional community, the characteristics of the school fit my definition of a schoolwide professional community. In her work she found that this school developed five inquiry methods (or forums), each with its own strengths and weaknesses. One of her major findings was that it took three years for the school to learn how to be an effective learning community, and five years to fully develop its systems. This is consistent with the finding on the development of site based decision making referred to above. Stokes does not advocate one particular method. Her research suggests that no one system by itself works — it takes multiple forms of inquiry to successfully confront difficult issues as a learning community. This finding corroborates other research in the organizational literature.

In the previous section I mentioned Westheimer’s conclusion that the content of the school’s belief system matters. Another of his major conclusions is that structures matter. He uses “the term planned inclusivity to indicate the presence of structures that prod teachers to take part in the professional life of the community” (p.142). He notes that if participation is left up to the individual, some will choose not to participate for a variety of reasons. He found that one school had structures that encouraged or insisted on participation, while the other did not. The former led to the collective form of community, whereas the latter led to the liberal form of community.

Achinstein (2000) also sees the mechanisms to handle contestation as an important influence on what type of community develops. “Different structures and procedures engage teachers communities in very distinct kinds of conflict discourse” (p.110). The communities she studied were distinguished by which issues each allowed to be brought up for public discourse. In the more traditional community these were “primarily organizational/technical problems like strengthening discipline procedures” (p.110). In the more social change oriented school “an array of mechanisms to address
conflict brought debate into the public arena and allowed multiple points of entry for teachers…. [This] allowed teachers to confront each other over the school’s shortcomings” (p.110). Another difference had to do with how decisions were made. In the former school, procedures for decision making were unclear, with confusion over the difference between consensus and majority rule. In the latter, there was a clear understanding and use of a consensus model of decision making. Nemeth’s (1986) work in social psychology on minority influence supports the use of consensus, where everyone has to agree. He found this increases the likelihood that minority viewpoints are considered. The organizational literature also supports the use of consensus over majority rule for effective decision making (Thompson et al., 1988).

Power has mostly been defined as power over others. Through her fieldwork, Reed (2000) developed a theory of power as capacity, or in schools engaged in shared decision making, group capacity. “Power can be viewed as a community of individuals working together across interests and stations in life to help each other operate at maximum potential, a definition that fits the egalitarian culture of the school” (p.98). In order for this to happen Reed proposes that teachers learn process skills to better handle the conflicts that she found were inevitable and even necessary in the process of school reform. “Each of us [teachers] needs to know several processes for building consensus. Each of us must acquire the specific skills used in mediating conflict. We must learn the differences among aggressive, assertive, and passive behavior in interpersonal interactions” (p.160). Reed argues that learning to deal with conflict and effective decision making takes capacity building. According to this thinking, there needs to be structures in place to teach teachers these skills.

School size is also likely to be an important structural feature. In large schools the ability for everyone to participate and be heard is much more difficult. More forums and avenues for input are needed for everyone’s voice to be heard. In large schools there is more likely to be a representational system for making whole school decisions. In large schools departmentalized forms of community are likely to form with their own culture and values. In larger schools subgroups inevitably form. Meier (1995), a founder of five successful small schools built around strong schoolwide professional communities,
claims that “a group works best at somewhere between 15 and 20 people. By this standard… staff size should top at around 20” (p.53). In the social psychological literature it has been found that “there tends to be more conflict in larger groups, whose members are less likely to reach agreement about controversial issues. And cooperation is less likely in larger groups” (Levine & Moreland, 1998, p.422). Committees are unnecessary in schools that are small enough since the entire faculty can sit down together to make each decision and engage in the dialogue. Consensus can be arrived at with everyone at the table having had a say. This may explain why much of the research on professional communities has looked at departments, voluntary groups, or interdisciplinary teams, rather than whole schools, since few public schools are small enough to meet the above criteria.

The above research indicates that clear structures, various formats for participation, encouragement of all to participate in the decision making process, and consensus forms of decision making are all aspects of communities that have communal values and that such communities are more likely to lead to innovation.

Time is another structural factor with significant effects on contested decision making. Much of the research has pointed out that building community takes time. Stokes (2001) referred to this in her research. Grossman and Wineburg (2000) did a long term study on a professional community made up of an interdisciplinary team of social studies and English teachers that they were involved in facilitating. They found that the group went through several stages of development before reaching maturity, that is, the stage in which they could constructively handle conflict and disagreement. The social psychologist Tuckman (1965, as cited in Levine & Moreland 1998) came to a similar conclusion in his longitudinal studies on small groups, and listed five stages groups went through before reaching a mature stage in which they could deal with conflict positively. In addition, the research on successful site based management only showed positive results after several years of implementation. This research suggests that one must be careful to consider longitudinal factors when drawing conclusions about professional communities.
Conceptual Model

The need for school reform has led many educational reformers to professional development models. The literature reviewed above demonstrates that the most effective professional development happens in the context of schoolwide learning communities. Furthermore, these schoolwide communities are most likely to be found in small restructuring schools. The attempt to restructure, to engage in shared decision making, and to engage in being a professional community all contribute to making contestation more public, thus increasing conflict. I then reviewed the literature on how the culture and structures of the community can influence the type of community that develops. The type of community has strong implications on the effectiveness of a community’s decision making processes.

This study uses these conceptions of culture and structure to understand how schoolwide professional communities handle contested decision making; it investigates the cultural and structural factors that impact the decision making process. I examine such communities under somewhat ideal, yet real conditions. By ideal, I mean a school that is consciously attempting to restructure itself to meet the needs of its students, and that has a reputation of having a functional professional community. By real, I mean that the school is public, with relatively the same monetary resources as other schools in similar communities.
School-Wide Professional Community
- De-privatized practice
- Building shared values
- Collective ownership

leads to

Contestation over Decisions

is mediated by

School Culture & Norms
- Interdependency
- Diversity vs. Unity
- Conflict ownership
- Trust level
- Deprivatized practice
- Shared Mission and Values

Structures & Procedures
- Decision making process
- Venues
- Protocols
- Agenda setting
- Leadership structure
- Time to meet
- Places to collaborate

Leads to outcomes in which:
- important issues are addressed?
- issues are fully examined? (viewpoints/evidence)
- there is satisfaction with decisions?
- there is time and place to express dissatisfaction?
- stated vision and values are honored?
- changes in practice are likely to improve?
- educational experience of students is enhanced?
- there is follow-up to examine effectiveness?

Figure 1: Framework of Decision Making in Schoolwide Professional Community
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on how schoolwide teacher professional communities make decisions on issues that effect the teaching and learning in the school—that is, that are centered on pedagogy and practice. In particular, I examined areas where it was likely there might be contestation and dissent—areas where questions are raised that have no easy solutions. While there has been a fair degree of literature investigating professional communities per se, very little research has been done specifically on how the difficulties of decision making and conflict are worked out in ways that help build, rather than tear down, such communities (Achinstein, 2002; Reed, 2000; Westheimer, 1999). An understanding of this requires an in-depth look at the day-to-day working of such communities. For that reason I used a qualitative case-study approach, spending most of a school year at the two sites collecting my data.

The findings of this study are particular to the sites under investigation. Much of what they do must be understood in relation to the schools’ particular circumstances and contexts. For this reason, a little background into the larger political and policy climate that these schools were working under is in order.

At the national level, and especially in California, we are currently in a period in which schools were subject to top-down state wide reform and under enormous, high stakes pressures to standardize curriculum and succeed on standardized tests. The No Child Left Behind Act has become a major hurdle for all schools that serve predominantly low-income minority students. Even if these schools show progress, as both New Initiates and Caesar Chavez have done, it does not necessarily protect them from sanctions, as the sanctions are based on meeting a particular cut-off score, and the bar gets raised each year. Both of these schools serve some of the most disadvantaged students, have a fairly high transience rate, (which means they are held accountable for the progress of students that they did not teach the previous year), and have large numbers of students for whom English is their second language, all factors which make achieving high enough scores to meet the federal targets on standardized tests particularly difficult. Yet under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation these schools are
required to meet the same test score levels as the most privileged schools. Both schools have shown gains over time on such tests. However, under NCLB gains do not matter, only whether one is above or below the target scores. And the bar gets raised each year. Furthermore, during the year of this study, the public schools in California, which have been chronically under-funded, had been hit by the largest budget cuts in decades. These factors influence how teachers view their jobs, and the resources they have to carry out the practices outlined in this study. The two school studied were both under pressure to raise their standardized test scores and under the threat of serious sanctions if they failed to do so. The major threat to New Initiatives as they teachers, for example, was the threat of loss of their charter status. A new state law made standardized test scores as one of the criteria for denying continued charter status. The teachers at New Initiatives equated loss of charter status as loss of New Initiatives, as they did not believe that if it was reabsorbed by the district it could continue the practices that they believed made it a unique and worthwhile place to work. For Caesar Chavez that threat was given as possible reassignment, and forcing a standardized scripted curriculum on the school. Again, for most teachers there it would mean the end of the what they saw as unique and powerful about the school. This threat had a real impact on curricular decisions as well as the climate and degree of stress felt by staff members. These factors form a backdrop against which the finding of this study must be understood.

The individual district of each school is also an important context influencing its policies, decisions and culture. Districts vary in how much control they exert over their individual schools, and of course, on what they require or expect their schools to do in terms of particular forms of pedagogy as well as forms of school governance. For instance, one of the two schools had dependent charter status that gave it more leeway in terms of district policy on curriculum, yet it was still bound by district and state assessments. The other school was part of a medium to large sized district that played an active role in setting school policy, including decisions over programs and curriculum.

According to Yin (1984) qualitative studies are well suited to “how” and “why” questions, and “generalizable to theoretical propositions… and the investigator’s goal… to expand and generalize theories (p.21).” This study is asking such questions. Given the
assumptions about professional community outlined out in the literature review, professional teacher communities are most successful when they work collaboratively on issues directly related to the quality of instruction. As I have illustrated through this same review, collaborative decision making is difficult to implement, in particular due to the difficulties such communities have when they are confronted with conflict. Therefore, my emphasis was on developing a deeper understanding of how these two school develop and sustain a culture of collaboration. Within these collaborative cultures, I asked the question of how these two collaborative communities confronted contestation around their decisions over teaching and pedagogy. In doing so I compared these finding with current theories on conflict and conflict resolution, as well as theories on school reform, to see how well they fit and in what ways these theories needed to be altered, modified or expanded to better understand how teacher professional communities in small schools can use contestation to promote, rather than block, their efforts.

Research Design

For these case studies, I borrowed extensively from ethnographic methods. “Policy research that focuses on outcomes but fails to describe and interpret the processes of transformation... gives little explicit help in planning their own changes” (Talbert, 1993, p.62).

“Researchers who are not ‘grounded’ in a group’s culture may ignore or dismiss events that are meaningful to the group’s members and perhaps misinterpret the events they do try to analyze” (Levine & Moreland, 1998, p.429). The ethnographic method entails getting an emic perspective on the case being studied. This means getting at how the people in the culture view what is being studied. While this case study used ethnographic methods, it is not an ethnography. The purpose goes beyond just describing how the teachers in these schools view collaboration, decision making, contestation, and school change. I investigated the views of the actors, but I went beyond that to see how what they are doing fit with what is known from other fields and past research, and developed hypotheses about what an effective schoolwide professional community might look like.
These questions can only be fully addressed through a qualitative frame. To do so, I immersed myself in the cultures of these schools, particularly in the places where decision were made and where teachers engaged in collaborative practice, to understand the processes teachers used and the stances these teachers took.

Site Selection

My study is focused on a particular type of teacher interaction—collaborative decision making around issues of classroom practice and pedagogy in a schoolwide professional community. Since such communities are rare in public schools, this study used a purposeful selection of sites. These sites are not meant to be random nor representative of schools in general or even of public schools in general. Rather they were selected to serve as specific examples of a certain type of interaction that others interested in such practices may learn from and in relation to which theory can be examined and generated.

For this reason I selected schools that I had good reason to believe had strong schoolwide professional communities, and that regularly engaged in professional conversation and decision making around issues of classroom practice and pedagogy. In selecting these sites, I used reputation and recommendation from organizations and people involved in school reform in the area, my personal experience as a long time teacher and school reform activist, as well as school self-identification. I visited these schools prior to my research to get a sense that such a community existed. I also selected sites that served predominantly low-income neighborhoods and whose student population include a substantial number of students from marginalized groups. I did this for two reasons. First, these are the schools most in need of improvement, as these are the students that have been identified as least well served by our school system as it presently functions. Second, in confronting the historical and present difficulties in raising the level of achievement of these students, it would be likely that the schools would have to tackle issues to which there were no simple right answers.

My familiarity and depth of knowledge of New Initiatives, one of the two schools, was considerably deeper than of Caesar Chavez, the other school. I had had a three year
professional relationship with the school district during which time I became familiar with the school. These were the first three years of the school’s existence. For two years prior to this study I engaged in a case study investigation of New Initiatives for a separate research project. Through this history of involvement with New Initiatives, I developed a relationship of trust with the staff as well as a degree of knowledge about the culture of the school that meant that I had a very well developed inside knowledge of the school and its culture prior to this study. This school was founded on principles of democratic and consensus decision-making and had built in a minimum of an hour a day for professional development and teacher collaboration. This made it a particularly rich site in which to gather data for this topic. While it serves a population that is heavily Latino, most of whom are in the process of learning English, New Initiatives also had slightly under ten percent each White, African-American and Vietnamese students. Over 70% of the students qualified for free or reduced meals. The staff had about 23 classroom teachers and approximately 450 students.

From my previous research I knew that New Initiatives had to grapple with some major decisions in the past regarding its educational program and curriculum. A couple of years ago, due to dissatisfaction with their dual language program’s effectiveness in helping students learn a second language, they decided they needed to change the program. However there was contention over both what the main problem with the program was, and what should be done about it. Many of the staff had a lot of time and energy invested in the program. Through a process of site visitations, research, examination of their data, and then some difficult discussions, they were able to develop a new model—a school-wide two way immersion program. While getting to this decision was not easy, it appeared that this was a decision that in the end everyone was willing to support. This case provided evidence of both the difficulties of bringing up disagreements and the staff’s ability to work through those difficulties, and demonstrated this site as a place engaged in the type of practice this study was designed to investigate.

New Initiatives also very consciously used assessment data to drive decisions. While it had recently decided it could not completely ignore standardized test scores, more informative were the in house reading and math assessments. While the scores were
not where they wanted them to be, they were demonstrating improvement over the years, especially when desegregated by students who had spent several years at the school.

The other site, Caesar Chavez Elementary, was less diverse, being over 90% Latino. Caesar Chavez had a larger staff and student body, with nearly 700 students and about 35 classroom teachers and several more support teachers. It also had a clear reputation for having a strong professional community. The school was built 16 years prior to this study as a professional development school in a collaboration between the district and the local state university campus. More recently they had been involved in a project with a university-based research organization on issues of equity in teaching that helped teachers to learn to collaborate effectively through working with grade level teams. Caesar Chavez, like New Initiatives, had allocated significant time for teachers to collaborate. Due to its size, Caesar Chavez engaged in less whole school collaboration. This meant that more of the focus at this site was on grade level subgroups and the leadership team.

Like New Initiatives Caesar Chavez also looked closely at their assessment data, and like New Initiatives has been showing steady improvement in student achievement. Again, though, that improvement has not always kept pace with the ever increasing bar set by the NCLB act, a bar which few such schools have been able to reach.

Data Collection

Data came from a variety of sources. This “triangulation” of data is recommended for the case study approach (Krathwohl, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1984). I used interviews, observations, and school documents as my main sources of information.

Throughout the year I spent an average of one or two days a week at New Initiatives. My time there was spent mostly observing in grade level meetings, midday-block staff meetings and professional development, doing interviews, as well as occasionally brief classroom observations. I took extensive field notes during these observations and interviews. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The meetings were audio-taped, and portions were transcribed. I was able to interview about
three-fourths of the teachers. Most of the teachers not interviewed were first year teachers whom I felt would be less knowledgeable about the school structures and culture.

For the first half of the 2003–2004 school year the only access I had at Caesar Chavez was to staff meetings and “Key Planner” (the leadership team) meetings. These generally took place on alternating weeks. During the second half of the year, I was able to observe and audio-tape the majority of the monthly release time grade-level collaboration meetings. It was during this second half of the year that I did the majority of the interviews. I also spent some time informally observing in the staff lounge during lunch breaks. I had virtually no opportunity to engage in classroom observations except as part of a few grade level collaborations which included group peer observations.

**Interviews**

The main source of data was the professional staff, i.e. the classroom teachers and other credentialed support staff, as the unit of analysis of this study is the professional staff as a group. At New Initiatives I interviewed 14 teachers, 13 of who were classroom teachers, plus the principal. I did not interview the first year teachers, of whom there were five, and there were four other teachers who either wished not to be interviewed (two) or we were unable to schedule a time to do so (two). I was able to interview 12 of the almost 40 members of the professional staff members at Caesar Chavez. I also interviewed a previous principal. Due to both time constraints, my less deep relationship with the school, and other factors within the climate of the school during the year of this study, many teachers were reluctant or unwilling to be interviewed.

The interview questions focused on what issues the teachers perceived as salient in the school (see Appendix A for a copy of the interview protocol used). I asked the teachers first how they came to work at the school. Next I asked them to describe the ways in which they collaborate. I also asked them to describe their procedures for making decisions and to describe how actual decisions have been made. During the interviews I took extensive notes. Virtually all of the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded (there were a few technical mishaps where the audio-taping failed! In these cases I relied on the extensive notes I typed during the interviews). The coding went through an
iterative process, from starting with my initial ideas of the important issues, informed by the ideas I developed over the course of the study. As I analyzed and coded the data, the codes were further refined and new codes emerged. The qualitative software package NVivo was used for the coding of the data.

**Observations**

I observed teacher meetings, both official and unofficial, whenever possible. At New Initiatives this meant I was at the majority of the release time collaboration periods of grades kindergarten through grade three as well as an average of one midday-block staff/professional development meetings per week. At Caesar Chavez, I attended the majority of staff meetings and key planner meetings throughout the year. During the second half of the school year I attended the majority of the grade level release days. I also attended a few whole school planning sessions and professional development sessions. I took extensive handwritten notes, collecting quotes verbatim whenever possible as well as making audiotape recording of a majority of these meetings. These meetings and collaborative gatherings were the main focus of my study, as it is the structure, group process and dynamics that I was interested in. These were analyzed by theme and topic. Portions that were particularly salient to the topic of this study were transcribed and coded. I also was able to do frequent brief classroom observations at New Initiatives. The classroom observations helped me understand the context of issues the teachers were discussing. Although I would have liked to do more, I was only able to visit classrooms on a limited basis. At Caesar Chavez my classroom observations were limited to instances where grade level teams were engaged in peer observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Initiatives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 Grade level meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20+ Staff and PD meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A Leadership team meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100s Emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Artifacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Data analysis began from the time I began my fieldwork through the entire writing process. In qualitative case studies, analysis is an ongoing, iterative process (Huberman, 1993; Yin, 1984). In doing a previous year long case study of New Initiatives I began my understanding of the issues at that site as well as developing my qualitative case study research skills. In that study, I needed to constantly revise and update my analysis and coding as I gathered more data. I used the feedback from the participants to further refine my study.

I took extensive field notes on each visit and throughout interviews. I then created summaries and memos from those notes and from my memory of my observations and interviews. For coding and more refined analysis work I entered the data from those notes, memos and transcriptions into an NVivo database for coding. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that “The analyst starts by coding each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible” (p.105). As my analysis developed, the coding schemes became further developed and revised as necessary. My research questions guided the development of the coding schemes, especially in the initial stages. As the process progressed, the coding depended more and more on the patterns that emerge from the data itself.

As I developed theories to best interpret the data, I also made an effort to investigate what other alternative hypotheses might also explain the data. To the extent that I cannot rule out alternative hypotheses, I have tried to be open to alternative ways of interpreting the events.

During the research itself I would discuss my thoughts with certain key people at each site. I had frequent discussions with colleagues to further my understanding and to “bounce my ideas off of.” I had a colleague who reviewed my data as it was collected and worked with me in the creation and development of the coding schemes and identifying key issues and themes. I met with members of my dissertation committee for additional feedback. I worked with a peer writing group during the writing of the dissertation for additional feedback on my findings. I also showed drafts of my work in progress to members of each site as a check on the accuracy of my description as well as another
perspective on the analysis from an insider perspective. If there was disagreement as to my interpretation of the data, this gave me an opportunity to review those findings based on that feedback.

Subjectivity & Limitations

The fact that I had much more limited access at Caesar Chavez acted as a limitation. At New Initiatives I was able to use a portion of a staff meeting to have a lengthy discussion of my research, what I would be asking from them, and taking questions in regards to any concerns they had. At Caesar Chavez my introduction was limited to stating my name and giving them a one minute description of my topic. The principal was very concerned that my research would impact teacher time, and wanted reassurance that I would make my presence as unobtrusive as possible. I was also required to get separate permission from each group to observe and audio record their meetings. For the grade level groups this took half of the school year. It also gave me few opportunities to build any sort of relationship with the staff. This meant that many fewer teachers were willing to go out of their way to grant me interviews, as was evidenced by the fact that I was able to interview less than a third of the teaching staff.

The issue of subjectivity is always present in any research endeavor. In qualitative case study research it is particularly important to be aware of one’s own biases and subjective perspective (Peshkin, 1991). When one has a hypothesis it is easy to notice supporting evidence and ignore what does not fit (Krathwohl, 1998; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). As humans it is virtually impossible for us not to have preconceived notions and beliefs. This is especially true when we are engaging in research in an area in which we have a certain expertise. That expertise helps us to understand how to focus our inquiry, and understand what we are seeing, but it can also lead to seeing what we want to see or expect to see.

I spent fourteen years as a classroom teacher myself. I have been involved in school reform during my entire career. This involvement and knowledge gave me strong views in regards to school reform issues. In the past several years here at Stanford I have made it a point to learn as much as I can about my topic of research. Furthermore, I have
worked and been involved with the staff of one of the schools under study since the
school’s inception eight years ago. I am a long time friend with several staff members at
the other. Therefore, many of the people on that staff were aware of my views on many
issues. It also means that I was aware that people I care about would be affected by what
I wrote and said in this dissertation.

Lofland and Lofland (1995) point out that entering the research as either naïve or
knowledgeable each has its advantages and disadvantages: “Be neither discouraged nor
overconfident about your relationship, it is simultaneously an advantage and a drawback”
(p.23). In terms of drawbacks, my prior relationships may have led interviewees to tell
me what they thought I wanted to hear, or to have hesitated to express views that they
thought would displease me. Secondly, they may have assumed I had certain shared
knowledge or assumptions, and therefore not fully elaborated their answers to my
questions. My personal feelings of loyalty to these people with whom I have worked and
developed trusting relationships may have clouded what I saw or reported. On the other
hand, my knowledge of the culture and setting has helped me focus more easily and
quickly on the factors important to this study. In the case of New Initiatives, my prior
relationship with the school shortened the time I otherwise might have had to spend
building trust and getting beyond the relationship building that often constitutes much of
first interviews (R. S. Weiss, 1994). At Caesar Chavez, my lengthy teaching experience
with a similar population of students may have helped build my credibility and trust.

I took certain precautions to overcome these drawbacks. Using triangulation —
various sorts of data—to confirm what I learned from any one source is one. As I saw or
heard data that led me to accept a certain hypothesis, especially if they confirmed my pre-
existing biases, I tried to look for disconfirming as well as confirming sources of data.
My colleague who helped me review the data acted as another check on my conclusions.
By working with a writing group, I received feedback on my ongoing analysis. This
feedback helped alert me to my biases and assumptions. Direct feedback on my tentative
analysis and drafts from the participants has also served a similar function.

Many qualitative researchers advise looking for counter examples (Becker, 1998;
Huberman & Miles, 1994) as a check on assumptions. This means that when I think I
found evidence supporting a particular hypothesis, I purposely looked to see if the opposite was also happening.

While it is probably impossible to completely overcome one’s subjectivity, through these methods I hope I was able to minimize the risks involved.

Through the various techniques that I have laid out in this section, I hope I have created a study that is credible and that paints as accurate a picture as possible of the events under investigation.
CHAPTER FOUR: NEW INITIATIVES CHARTER SCHOOL

New Initiatives Charter Community School in many ways exemplifies the issues raised by studies of schoolwide professional community. New Initiatives has most of the attributes needed for setting up schoolwide professional community, and it has in fact put most of the required structures in place. In its seven years of existence it has had to work through some important issues. In particular, the school had to change a major program, to settle conflicts caused by a clash of norms, and to adjust to a new statewide testing system whose implementation was accompanied by the threat of sanctions. In this chapter I examine how the school manages contestation and conflict. First, I will describe the school’s culture and how this culture defines and influences the way certain issues are handled. I explain features that have been built into the school structure in order to strengthen its culture. Then I will discuss the issues already mentioned—changing a program, addressing a clash of norms, and adjusting to a new testing system—in order to discover how the school culture works in practice. Finally, I provide a summary of what can be learned from New Initiatives about successful conflict management in schoolwide professional communities, as well as some of the limitations they still face.

The School

New Initiatives Charter Community School is located in a working class, low-income neighborhood. A drive through this economically and ethnically mixed neighborhood reveals both low-rent apartments and small, well-kept single-family homes. The school itself has a very pleasing design. It was built in 1996, eight years before the date of this study. Its architecture signals immediately that the planners of the school were not tied to the usual institutional forms. The buildings are a refreshing white stucco in front, with high domed ceilings. The campus is made up of four buildings, or “houses,” with names suggestive of native American culture. Three of the houses are alike, each with six classrooms arranged around a “great room.” The fourth house has two classrooms, but is mainly devoted to administration, offices, a staff lounge, and a
professional development center, though from the outside it is identical in structure. The four buildings surround a central quad containing a small amphitheater, planters, and picnic tables (see Appendix C for a school layout map). The campus is at the intersection of a major thoroughfare and a residential side street. On two adjoining sides are parking lots, and on the other two sides are a blacktop playground and a grass playing field. It is obvious that a great deal of thought and expense went into planning and building the whole complex. There was a high level of community support in the district, and the school construction was funded by a local bond initiative. At the time, a two-thirds majority was required to win a school bond initiative.

Demographics

New Initiatives has approximately 450 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Until the 2001-02 school year it went through fourth grade. Then the school expanded by opening one fifth grade class for students who had come through the bilingual program. English-only fourth graders were transferred to the middle school for their fifth grade. In the 2002-03 school year, the school expanded again into the sixth grade. They are now a K-6 school, though there continues to be the option of transferring to the middle schools as early as fifth grade. The school is approximately 80% Latino, 8% White, 7% Asian, and 5% African-American. Seventy-two percent are eligible for free or reduced meals. Seventy-four percent are English language learners (ELLs)\(^2\). Almost all the ELLs are Spanish speakers, though there about two dozen limited-English students of other languages, mostly Vietnamese. It should be noted that many of those counted as fluent in English are more or less fluent in a home language as well, usually Spanish or Vietnamese. There are no official figures for this group.

There are 22 teachers at New Initiatives. Nine are Hispanic, twelve White, and one Asian. All are fully credentialed, unusual among schools that serve mostly low-income, minority students. New Initiatives’ nine Hispanic teachers represent forty percent of the teachers, compared to a statewide average of about fifteen percent. Besides the 22 classroom teachers, there are a few other support personnel who would consider

\(^2\) This and other demographic data on the school comes from Ed-Data website, www.ed-data.k12.ca.us, retrieved on 12-22-04.
themselves part of the New Initiatives professional community. There is a reading specialist who has been at the school since the beginning, and previously was in charge of most of the language arts professional development. There is a part time speech therapist and part time psychologist whom the school shares with other district schools. Both of these have been with the school for several years. As credentialed staff they often take part in the midday-block meetings, as well as other professional development activities.

Architecture and Physical Layout

We designed the facility to be a flexible space, a lot of provision in the architecture for team teaching and teamwork…. It’s pretty visible. Visceral and visual. (Grace, interview, 2/28/02)

The physical plant impresses visitors. The walls are clean and bright, and the carpeting is new. Rooms are brightly lit and the high, domed ceilings confer a feeling of spaciousness. The classrooms are a third larger than standard California classrooms, at over 1200 square feet each. Recognizing that projects and hands-on curriculum would be easier in a larger space, the planning team decided to have the larger classrooms and great rooms instead of a central library and a cafeteria. Each classroom also has a wet area with a sink, supporting arts and crafts. There is built in audio-visual equipment as well as computers for student use. And in each house there is a kitchenette. Clearly, the facility supports the constructivist pedagogy of the founders.

The physical layout, with the classrooms surrounding a common room, allows ready access from classroom to classroom. While It is possible to close off classrooms with partitions, most teachers leave their rooms open. The result in practice is constant communication, if only visual, between rooms. “Our walls are open and our desks are right next to each other. I mean, it's literally—I'll even go over and ask throughout the day ‘The student did well today, how did they do on your side?’” (Judith, interview, 3/18/04). This has been especially true with the current dual immersion model where teachers who share students can easily talk on an almost moment to moment basis about what is going on, if need be.

3 All names used are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. I have used first names throughout, as teachers almost always referred to each other and the principal by first name.
Since we’re right next door to each other and just on a day-to-day basis we just turn our chairs around and let each other know what is going on or checking in or letting them know this kid had a problem with this and he goes to your classroom “Can you make sure you follow up?” Things like that. The whole day I know what is going on with the kids in her class and she knows what is going on with kids in my class and it’s is really good because halfway through the day they switch⁴. (Monica interview 10/16/03)

But here, [as a new teacher] I had people coming in at recess, I had people coming in at lunch, “Is there anything I can do? What do you need help with?”… I think the open classrooms lend themselves to that, because you can peek inside without it taking up a recess. You don’t have to walk down the hall and knock on someone’s door or go in someone’s door and maybe they’re not there. All you have to do is see if their light is on and go in and check with them. I think it was easier for them to help because of that. That was a big difference. (Christine, interview, 2/28/02)

Figure 2: Blueprint of New Initiatives classroom buildings. Gray lines represent accordion walls.

History

The history of the school begins in the early 1990s, when the school district realized its need for a new campus. They passed a local school bond to raise funds for a new school and to make renovations on several older schools. Then, instead of just

⁴ In the Two-Way Immersion model the students switch teachers and classrooms midday from an English speaking environment to a Spanish speaking one (or vice versa).
building another generic school building and hiring a principal to occupy it, the superintendent decided to be a little more bold. She gave the principal of one of the elementary schools a year to plan for the new school. This principal, Grace, who was something of a visionary, described her mission this way: “The superintendent said to me, essentially, she wouldn’t want to walk onto this campus and see something she’s ever seen before.” She admits that she could not bring about something totally unknown, but still, beneath some typical structures are “a lot of atypical discoveries that we made along the planning process in relationships that we built. We’re not there yet, but we’re moving towards that.”

Grace was given the freedom to hand pick her staff in collaboration with a district committee. She met with this staff weekly during that planning year. Even prior to this, the initial district planning team worked with the architect so that the building would reflect the vision.

When Grace put out a call for teachers to join the staff, she found a lot of bright, idealistic teachers. Many were young and fairly new to the profession, but others were older and more experienced teachers, all looking for something different. Founding member Connie, one of the reading specialists, joined because “philosophically it sounded like it was going to be child centered, with more integrated curriculum. I wanted to be part of it” (interview, 10/30/01). Carolyn, a primary grade teacher, says, “I went to Grace’s presentation at the district. I really liked what she had to say. It was real challenging, and a lot of things were still unknown. I really liked that” (interview, 3/4/02).

The Mission and Philosophy

New Initiatives opened its doors in the fall of 1997. In its short history, it has already become known as an innovative school, featured in news articles, research reports, and documentaries. Some of the attention was due to their extensive use of technology. But many observers were impressed by the project-based constructivist curriculum, the bilingual-bicultural focus, and the deliberate provisions for on-going professional development.

5 Teaching in the Digital Age: School Leadership, (Film) produced by the George Lucas Educational Foundation. 2000
New Initiatives was founded on the principle of collaborative practice. Decision-making would be democratic, based on a model of consensus. All classroom teachers would agree on important schoolwide decisions that affected the educational program and curriculum. In order to facilitate this collaboration and decision making, there is scheduled in the middle of every day an hour-long professional development and meeting time. This midday-block has been the forum for decisions about curriculum, social activities, and far-reaching commitments like the dual immersion language program, as well as the ongoing professional development.

In its collaboration and joint decision making the school has arrived at key beliefs that are its own defining characteristics. For example, the school believes that students should be active learners. The arts should be included and integrated into the curriculum. At the same time computers and other technology should be part of daily activity. In their time at the school, all students should become bicultural, bilingual, and biliterate. In addition, Principal Grace continues to infuse in the culture of the school the idea that New Initiatives should be a fun place to work and learn for staff and students.

School Culture of Collaboration

New Initiatives was founded on the principle that teacher collaboration is key to the success of a school. As a result, the school incorporates structures that support its particular school culture. In this section, I will examine the culture of ongoing professional development and teacher collaboration that is central to the school’s mission. The discussion will cover such things as meeting times, collaboration in teaching, and leadership roles. The culture of the school also includes the kind of discourse it encourages: not only when things are said, but how they are communicated. How teacher attrition may be related to the school culture is also considered.

To begin, in the following paragraph a teacher describes what it was like to enter the cultural atmosphere of New Initiatives.

You come out of a credential program and they’re like, “oh, collaborative work and collaborative thinking and collaborative decision making, that’s just the norm now in the teaching” … and you get to these schools. Okay collaborative, does that mean once a week we get together and we swap stories about what
we’re doing with the kids? It hadn’t been until coming to New Initiatives when I really truly [got a] baptism into collaborative work in general. I remember the first couple of weeks [our grade level team] got together, we couldn’t even decide what color to make flyers that we were giving out… we were like “Wow, this is going to be a long road.” I remember it getting to the point where we were finishing each other’s sentences as far as just a group that had worked together for nearly the last 2-1/2 years, half a year of planning together and two years of a program that we’d written and worked on and invented and pulled from different places… It was such an amazing process to come to that point. This has truly been a learning laboratory for me as far as working collaboratively. (Elizabeth, interview, 12/9/03)

**Trust, Fun and Getting to Know Each Other**

The principal, Grace, believes that in order to create a collaborative culture, it is important for staff to get to know each other. She facilitates this goal in various ways. One part of the equation is having fun; Grace purposely organizes ways for the staff to have fun together. As democratic small-school reform activist Deborah Meier (1995) observes, if the staff know each other well they can trust each other enough to disagree, and yet know that the other still means well. Grace made a similar point when interviewed by a small school development team.

You’ve got to have a lot of fun… The democratic process is really messy. You’re going to have governance that involve a lot of people. You’ve got to be okay with having a mess every once in a while. But if you have the relationships people won’t walk away so mad that they don’t trust you anymore. What happens in controversy is, I don’t really know you and we don’t agree, so we have a disagreement and I walk away saying “I don’t trust her.” But if I know you and we have a disagreement, I walk away saying “I can’t quite get what she says but I’m going to think about it a little more.” So that’s where if you can get into some of these activities that just build relationships around fun…. Teamwork comes around sweating together and leading together and crying together and laughing together on real meaningful stuff which is what you are right in the middle of. So that’s where your unity is going to come. Don’t shy away from that. That’s my speech. Break bread together. We eat a lot. (Grace, interview, 3/2/04)

Other staff comment on the influence of this social aspect on the school culture as well:

We do things together… I’ve been to an old theatre in downtown Stanford one night to see a really old Cary Grant movie and we all went to a hamburger place. About thirty of us met there. We went to a racecar track place one
evening and we all raced on this track with each other. We went to a baseball game about three weeks ago on a Friday night. We do a lot of things together. It’s fun. (Rita, interview, 5/21/03)

“Grace has fun activities planned: kayaking, horseback riding…. One of Grace’s essential learning, part of our culture, is fun. She’s the queen of fun, she leads us right in the direction” (Lisa, interview. 11/15/01). “We see each other so regularly—I mean you really can’t go into your room and let it fester” (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03). In these ways Grace’s goal is to create what Sergiovanni (1994) refers to as Gemeinschaft, or community, rather than the cultural Gesellschaft, which by contrast would be the kind of formal organization that is more common in public schools. The Gemeinschaft of New Initiatives permeates its culture, as is apparent from its general lack of concern or interest in formal structures and processes, or as Grace put it: “We tend to informalize the formal around here” (interview, 2/28/02).

**Professional Development**

For me the strength I've seen at New Initiatives is the fact that it is a learning environment. Everyone here told me this, everyone does see themselves in this light, that they're still learning, you learn everyday, you improve everyday. That sense of it's okay to make mistakes, it's okay to be learning; It’s one of the things that I really like about this school. (Eva, interview, 11/14/01)

For the first time in my career I feel like a professional. (Lisa, interview, 11/15/01)

The collaborative culture at New Initiatives is strengthened by its ongoing multifaceted professional development. In encouraging this development New Initiatives uses in-house professional development sessions, outside workshops, consultants, visits to other schools, peer collaboration, leadership opportunities, and academic coursework. It is understood that staff have a collective responsibility to improve the quality of instruction for all students. Connie was attracted to New Initiatives because she could sense this feeling. “I was excited to come to New Initiatives where they wanted to do an in-house model… where learning goes back and forth between the teachers and the coaches. I believe this is an effective model” (interview, 10/30/01).
Midday-block

The midday-block is the scheduled hour per day during which the staff meets together. It may be the most innovative feature of the school. New Initiatives has more built-in time for collaboration than any other school I know. All teachers are without students from 11:00 AM to 12:30 daily. One half-hour of this time is officially lunch, while the rest is given to collaborative planning and professional development. The staff lounge is large enough for the entire staff to meet as a whole. Thus it can be the dining room and then at 11:30 become the professional development room. In this way no time is taken for assembly; many of the staff are already gathered when it is time for the meeting to start. In fact, conversations and topics taken up at the official meeting may have started informally over lunch. Such extensive face-to-face interaction itself goes a long way towards building a sense of schoolwide belonging and fostering the camaraderie which makes it easier to work together. The frequency of meeting, in effect daily, sustains ongoing collaboration: what gets started in one session can be developed and built on, rather than being allowed to fade away or lose momentum over a few days—or even weeks—while waiting for the next meeting, as is common in many schools.

The exact way the daily time is used has varied from year to year, and even from week to week. During the year covered by this study, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays were usually used for whole staff professional development. Mondays and Fridays were for individual or grade level planning. In the first half of the year, Tuesdays were used for work on the curriculum design method Understanding by Design (UbD). Understanding by Design is a method of backward planning, or designing curriculum around a “big idea.” Staff member Monica led these. How that came about is an example of how the principal practices shared leadership.

Grace [the principal]… encouraged me…. She’s like “Okay, go, go for it! Do it!” It’s like “Wait a minute, I was just asking,” and she’s like “Well, we need somebody to do it so, okay, go ahead!” Then the next meeting, “Well Monica is going to take the baton and run with it.” And I’m like “Oh I am?” So I guess I am! Her encouragement has made all the difference, (Monica, interview, 10/16/03)
These sessions tended to be fairly interactive. Monica would explain an aspect of *Understanding by Design*, and then the staff would individually or in grade levels teams discuss what this might look like for their curriculum. As a fellow teacher, Monica wanted to avoid being seen in a hierarchical role.

It doesn’t feel that awkward… I really think that here is different from other places…I really feel like people are genuinely interested and have genuine questions and I think that everybody’s here to see what else we can learn from each other… I’m just teacher … I am always an equal with everybody. (Monica, interview, 10/16/03)

Thursdays were devoted to language arts. Debbie, a consultant hired the previous year for that purpose, led these. One area of concentration was a schoolwide writing curriculum; the staff had agreed that writing needed to be improved. Debbie was entrusted with selecting the program, training and coaching the staff, and then holding them accountable for its implementation. Holding staff accountable in this way was a departure from past practice. In the past, teachers individually or in grade level teams could decide how far and how fast they would implement curriculum.

Right now, everybody in 3rd through 6th is doing the same [writing] unit and they should be on the same page at the same … every kid should produce a published piece of writing by the end of October and that—that is kind of new. That wasn’t the way it was before. (Connie, Literacy Specialist, interview, 10/16/03)

The professional development sessions themselves were less interactive than in the past, with Debbie taking on more of the role of an expert. This approach was more didactic than some were used to. “I’m just trying to think how that’s changed somewhat this year. In the [literacy] meetings that we’ve had mostly this year that have been… really more top-down” (Susan, interview, 1/26/04).

Despite these changes, the staff I interviewed clearly agreed that they appreciated and needed Debbie’s expertise.

One of the things that I think has really changed the school over the last couple of years is the guidance that we’ve gotten from Debbie. I feel like she’s making me and us better teachers. (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03)

In the second half of the year Debbie left, and Tuesdays were then given to Spanish language study. The *Understanding by Design* planning moved to Wednesday and
Thursday. Time was given to studying Spanish because some teachers felt that they were not modeling a high level of educated Spanish.

It came out of a couple of teachers were passionate about this issue. They felt that if we were going to have this dual immersion, we needed to be good models. We should expect top quality [language] ourselves. I am lacking—I never took Spanish grammar. I know idioms and how to speak fluently—I grew up speaking Spanish, but not grammar. I was raised in the United States, went to school here. Some people who learned Spanish as a second language know the rules better than I do. So we realized—it was a hot tropic, for a while. Finally, Grace, in her wisdom, said, let’s do something, let’s do a grammar class. (Elizabeth, interview, 12/9/03)

While most of the Spanish language teachers are native speakers or fully fluent, some had not studied formal Spanish grammar and literacy. At the same time, a class in basic Spanish was provided for teachers who knew little or no Spanish.

When a major decision needed to be made, the midday-block was the time for discussing it. For example, when the staff was dissatisfied with the old bilingual program and was looking for a way to change it, the midday-block time was used for deliberation. Again, when some staff felt dissatisfied with Debbie’s style of professional development, they called a meeting during midday-block time, which was followed up by two more meetings. In the spring, when staff needed to work on what the dual immersion program would look like in the fourth grade, the midday-block time was used for this task. As one teacher explained:

We see each other as a staff at least 3 to 4 times a week. We talk. We go over philosophy. We go over math or reading or writing together. There is a lot of communication and then to top it all off we have that beginning of the year retreat, which I think also kind of gets people on the same page. I think there is so many chances to communicate. (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03)

Open Classrooms

Aside from formal professional development, teachers at New Initiatives learn from each other in and through their practice. They have broken the “closed door” private practice mentality of teaching, and instead made their teaching public. The architecture of the school, with its open and adjoining classrooms, encourages this move. In many schools, when an adult enters a classroom everything comes to a stop, and the teacher
attends to what the visitor wants. At New Initiatives, teachers and students are used to adults wandering in and out of classrooms; everyone goes on with their business.

The design of the classroom space gives teachers easy access to each other’s classrooms as well as space for natural interaction. In the classroom buildings, six classrooms radiate like spokes around the large central great room. The wall between a classroom and the great room is a sliding partition, often kept open (see figure 1). With the walls open, a person standing at the center of the great room can see into all six classrooms. The whole arrangement provides for continuous interaction.

With my Spanish partner, we’re just next door. We talk every minute of the day. We’re talking about something. But with my English partner, with Judith, we’ll meet at lunch if we need to… or she’ll come to my room and I’ll show her something. (Sarah, interview, 12/3/03)

“Our walls are open and our desks are right next to each other” (Judith, interview, 3/18/04). “Mainly the way that Laura and I—fourth grade is a lot more walking over to each other’s classroom after school, literally just for like five, ten minutes and just talk. Share ideas with each other” (Daniel, interview, 5/14/03).

A climate and culture of ongoing communication becomes self reinforcing. Conversations that are started in one context can be continued and built on in the other contexts. In other words, the sum is more than the parts. Observation of the formal grade level collaborations revealed that the subjects taken up there were not just picked up from the previous formal meeting, but were following up on things that had gone on in the interim, since the teachers had been in constant communication the whole time.

This also means that the way one teaches is not private. Other teachers, at least those in one’s building, see each other’s style and methods. They are no longer reliant on solely second hand information to have a sense of one another’s teaching. While this raised the potential of allowing teachers to speak to each other’s practice more directly, I cannot say I saw any direct evidence of this.

Grade Level Collaboration

When asked about collaboration, teachers generally spoke about their own grade level teams.
We work together in grade levels, planning. The way we’ve worked is just planning everything. I mean, from the daily lesson plans, to the monthly plans, to the exhibitions, to the, you know, everything. It’s kind of what we’ve been about. (Cindy, interview, 5/20/03)

The implementation of the dual immersion program has had an impact on the level of grade level collaboration that takes place. In the dual immersion program, presently implemented for grades K through 3, the teachers work in language pairs. Each teacher has a group of twenty students in the morning, and then a different group in the afternoon. Students hear English from one teacher and Spanish from another. Each group of students includes both native Spanish and native English speakers. In this program the teachers need to coordinate their own practice with the other teachers who see the same students. Two kindergarten teachers described their experience during a joint interview:

EVA: You get to collaborate with another teacher and luckily you learn a little bit more about the kids that way. Because everyone has their strengths.  
ELIZABETH: And sharing observations or: “Did you notice that so-and-so grips his pencil...” things like that, that really help out. It's that second opinion, someone daily to reflect with and compare notes with. (interview, 11/14/01)

While grade level collaboration has been part of the culture of New Initiative from the beginning, the dual immersion program brought this to another level. Grade level collaboration is where the teachers’ day-to-day work goes on, where the teachers make the decisions over which they have the most control.

At each grade level the teachers have the equivalent of one day per month to meet. This day can be broken up, and the meetings taken weekly, every other week, or monthly. The teachers are released from their classes by specialists or substitute teachers to make the meetings possible. The lower grades have more teachers per grade level, and they have the exigencies of dual immersion as well. During the year of this study, first and third grade teachers met twice a month for a half day, while kindergarten and second grade met monthly. I attended 7 of 9 meetings of the kindergarten team; 12 of 18 of first; 4 of 9 of second; and 11 of the 18 meetings of the third grade team. These were mostly used as planning periods, with teachers working out the schedule of what would be taught when, and how to coordinate their efforts, as well as planning the curriculum for the exhibitions, based on the Understanding by Design protocol. Occasional tasks done in the
meetings included assessing student work, preparing materials, and making copies. The atmosphere was generally very informal. The agenda was usually prepared at the time of meeting and often was little more than a checklist of tasks. There was little concern about following a prescribed order or time. Even when they listed times by items, these were ignored as often as not. Besides these release times for planning, midday-block was at times used for grade level collaboration. Often the Monday midday-block time was used for this. It was not infrequent for the professional development sessions to include time for grade levels to work on planning based on the topic of the session. Not infrequently they even call after school meetings themselves when they feel it necessary.

Each grade level had a slightly different tone and spent the time in slightly different ways. The following notes are from my observation of one of the first grade meetings. Student projects would soon be due for the upcoming biennial student exhibition night, and the teachers discuss how to use the remaining time. The following conversation focuses on getting the projects done in time for the exhibition. This is typical of the type of joint planning that goes on.

LUCIA: Did you guys do this, the graphic organizer, as whole?
[various no’s]
ANN: We were going to do that after they did their presentations of their murals.
LUCIA: Okay.
JACQUELINE: We’re going to do review when we’re done, but we’re not done—
LUCIA: Because I had it as that what we were going to do.
[several people are talking at same time over Lucia – agreeing, I think]
JACQUELINE: It was planned to be done, [Lucia: yeah] and when they come back to—
LUCIA: —it’s a reality when they come, it’s a different—
JACQUELINE: We didn’t have to review, because it wasn’t done.
LISA: On comprehending…
ANN: Okay, if we finish our murals— so how long did it take you, Lisa, to do your murals?
LISA: Mm, a week.
ANN: Five days, or working on it? [Lisa nods]. Okay, so if we finish by next Thursday, the murals. Think we can do it.
(transcript, third grade collaboration, 1/7/04).

The next excerpt uncovers some underlying disagreement about using praise as a motivator.
JACQUELINE: Should we make an announcement when kids who’ve passed [the multiplication table tests]. Make a list, like when they’ve read a hundred books. They do that [LUCIA: A certificate, yeah] in first grade and kinder. [LUCIA: The book–] they put the names on the newsletter.

LUCIA: Oh, yeah. Should we do that. [to Ann, who shook her head] You don’t like that.

JACQUELINE: You’re not putting the names of who didn’t pass.

ANN: Well, the fact that they’re not on the list, you know who didn’t pass.

JACQUELINE: Well, but at least you give positive reinforcement to the kids who’ve done it.

[several voices at once, inaudible]

ANN: I don’t know. I’m not sure I like that. I mean just think— I don’t know.

LUCIA: Well, for me, I’m definitely a believer you need the certificates for the reading.

ANN: Well, certificates. But announcements in the newsletter, I’m not sure.

LUCIA: I guess it’s another way of parents realizing their kids not there. And it’s not something that’s out of this ordinary that they can’t get their child to learn.

JACQUELINE: They’re so proud when they see, “Oh my names on the newsletter.

LUCIA: Yeah, they do.

ANN: Well, of course they are.

[Lisa has entered and asks something unrelated – the conversation about certificates and names does not come back up during this meeting].

(transcript, third grade collaboration, 1/7/04)

The topic of recognition as a legitimate motivator is raised, but then sidetracked. As far as I could tell, the issue was not brought up again during that school year. Despite these differences coming up occasionally in meetings, there was no attempt to follow through on underlying differences. The time is used mostly as a common preparation time, with a practical focus. In general, it is not used as professional development time, to refine practice nor to consider different beliefs about teaching practice.

Leadership

Part of the idea of the collaborative culture is that every teacher is a leader. Teachers at New Initiatives are encouraged to take leadership roles in a variety of ways. For instance, they share their work and expertise at conferences. Two New Initiatives teachers presented at a conference of educational leaders and union representatives in Mexico on the ways New Initiatives uses technology to improve education. New
Initiatives staff are often asked to speak at other charter schools, sharing their ideas and experiences. One teacher explained that having to show off or explain to others what they are doing is an incentive to go back and live up to the ideals they express. If there is a professional development need, and it is believed that a staff member can lead in that area, they do so. Two examples of this during the year of this study were where Monica led the professional development in *Understanding by Design* and Silvia led the Spanish language tutorials.

The teachers consider it within their power, and actually their responsibility, to be aware of and find solutions to weaknesses in the school. In general it is the teachers who have investigated and decided on new curriculum. In separate sections, two examples of teachers taking this role will be explored. One example is where they decided there needed to be a change in the bilingual program. The second example was where they felt the behavior of the literacy consultant was detrimental to the school climate.

While the teachers are encouraged to take leadership roles, they show little to no interest in moving into formal leadership positions. For example, in the fall of the 2002 school year Grace announced that she was going to leave at the end of the school year (though she ended up staying on). The staff was concerned about who would replace her, but none of them expressed interest in applying for her position. In fact, I am not aware of any teachers moving into an administration position. Their expressed interest is in teaching and working directly with students.

It is possible that this is related to the hiring. The teachers hire for those who are collaborative and seen as getting along easily—being team players. Being principal of any school, and especially a visionary charter school, takes strong leadership qualities. It could be that those who exhibit those qualities are less likely to be selected to work there.

*Rules of Discussion*

During the year of planning before the school opened, the initial staff jointly developed a set of school norms. They printed these norms on laminated cards as a reminder (see Appendix E).
When we developed our school [in the planning year], we developed these [showing me the card with the school norms]…. We developed it through a game. We were just the first eight. (Tracy, interview, 11/8/01)

One of these norms is, “Yakety yak, DO talk back.”

“Yakety-yak do talk back.” Don’t sit in meeting, then talk in your room. It takes a while for new teachers to get used to that. “Can we really do this?” Absolutely. We had a few teachers a few years back tell me “Don’t come on too strong,” and they ended up leaving, and they put it on that. But I think it was other reasons. (Lisa, interview, 11/15/01)

All the teachers I talked to expressed their approval of the “talk back” motto. It appeared to me that in the practical outworking of this norm there were unwritten but strong rules of discussion. In other words, there were accepted ways for introducing new ideas or expressing differences of opinion. The general guideline perhaps could be expressed as avoiding confrontational language. For example, ideas should be posed as questions rather than statements. Violation of these unwritten guidelines of discourse seems to cause more internal conflict and stress than anything else I witnessed. The following quotations hint at this possibility.

It’s all in how you do it. There [are] so many people here who have very strong political views or opinions. You always have to be aware of who you are talking to and how they might—you have to make sure you take the other person’s perspective or you could get yourself in big trouble. (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03)

I think people are sensitive they don’t want to offend anybody. But I think on the other hand everybody is pretty sensitive to wanting to be inclusive and include everybody and not wanting people to feel that they don’t have a voice or they are not part of it. (Monica, interview, 10/16/03)

I feel I have learned that you don’t have to worry about voicing your opinion. You have to be careful maybe about the way do, and make sure that you’ve thought things through. (Eva, interview, 11/14/01)

My observation of many midday-block meetings, covering several years, and of over a dozen grade level release days, was that the norm of non-confrontational discourse was not often broken. The following exchange illustrates how teachers use non-confrontational phrasing while expressing disagreement. The setting is a planning
meeting of kindergarten teachers. Two teachers consider how strongly they should stress to parents the advantage of keeping a child in the bilingual program for the long term.

**JULIA:** I think the most important thing [the parents] should come away with is the need to commit [to the program] You’re not going to see as high results at first, but if stay with it, they will be more successful.

**CHRISTINE:** The only concern I have… I agree 100% but, we have never presented it as having to stay. (Kindergarten collaboration notes, 5/20/03)

In this exchange the second teacher expresses a difference of opinion, but only after first acknowledging complete acceptance of the other’s idea.

Another instance comes from a meeting to discuss the how the dual immersion program would look for fourth grade, there was serious concern about the pros and cons of using a two teacher versus one teacher model. Many, if not most, of the teachers were well versed in what the research and literature had to say on the subject. While teachers expressed their views on the merits of each approach, everyone expressed their viewpoint in “professional” manner, stating their argument while acknowledging the merits of the opposing view.

Here is an extended (though edited) transcript of that meeting, which illustrates this form of accepted discourse.

**SUSAN:** And of course, the big question, you know, contained classroom or, you know, switch?

**SILVA:** The first time you guys mentioned this, I was thinking: Oh yeah, that would definitely make more sense, because you have so many bodies to move and house everything for two classes. The only thing that I’m worried about … if they associate you with both languages, that it’s easier for you to get lost in [Susan: sure, sure] that would be my only concern.

**SUSAN:** Oh absolutely. I think that’s the concern.

...**LAURA:** I just know for like the big kids transitions are really hard. I mean they’re very social and when we’re in the class, it’s easy to transition in the class from nook to desk. But, I mean, we’ve tried switching or combining and crossing over to another classroom, and oh my goodness it takes— I mean the kids— [several people interrupt simultaneously]

...**SUSAN:** …I mean I’m looking more at having sixty kids is what we have [various voices]. We have sixty you have forty. We have thirty now, so [X: ...sixty] sixty kids that you have to do— I hear a lot of complaints about forty. [X: with like—] And I know it’s hard for thirty. That means sixty running records
MONICA: And the concern about that is because, I mean, one of the reasons might be your kids are not used to it.
SUSAN: I think that they’d learn. I mean know that— I’m thinking more of the getting to know sixty kids, which is hard to get to know.

MONICA: Do you think that the solution for you guys might be that maybe that would be a good time for looping to start? Because if, you know, more kids it’s harder to get to know them, maybe that would really be beneficial. [several voices at once] [X: good point]
Susan: I’m just— that’s what we’re here for, brainstorming. And I don’t have any solutions yet. I’m not saying that—
SUSAN: … I see pros and cons to both.
[several talking]

SUSAN: …that’s another thing, teaching fourth grade for the first time that the kids have— I mean, I have thirty to one— that’s really hard. they all require so much more attention because they are used to being one in twenty.
LAURA: Yeah, that’s the hardest transition. They’re also going through a lot of changes of, a lot of things come into play with just— in fourth grade. It’s just a hard grade level for them, being—
Robin: I just want to say developmentally, one of the reasons they don’t switch in fourth grade in other schools is because they believe that by fourth grade you should know you speak Spanish at this time and English at this time. And I know at [another two-way immersion school] what they do is that they do it by subject.
RUBY: … we’ve both seen, we student taught for a longer part of student teaching in a 4-5 combination class. And they were AM/PM models so they did fifty-fifty everyday and I think it went really well. It was really successful in the class that I was in. Every teacher is different…
GRACE: I can remember when we first started in the first couple of years when Amber and Paul teamed. At fourth grade. And they switched the kids, for Spanish and um, math, they switched for math. Paul did math and Amber did language arts. And it was the transition took a long time…. This is why it’s good to hear what you’ve seen of other places.
CONNIE: My daughter went to a private school and what they did was they moved the teacher. They didn’t move the kids. The kids had their own space. The teachers, they had foreign language teachers at the —
Silva: We did talk about that one time. And the only problem with that is the print. [several inaudible comments] you know, if you’re teaching in English or in Spanish, but I think—
SUSAN: I think looping starting in 4th-5th is [inaudible] I miss looping.
Julia: Just as a devil’s advocate, I was a bilingual teacher where I had a heritage bilingual class. Where I had Spanish and English. And it was a bear to keep
track of English reading and Spanish reading and of writing, the grouping. It was, it was, it was tough. 

RACHEL: I don’t think it would be any worse than planning for sixty kids. Because we do forty groupings, you know what I mean? … But I think that there are certain things that you can’t slide on. Let’s say you have the self-contained. I don’t think it would be to get in the frame of mind, “Oh I didn’t finish this before lunch. I’ll just finish it after.” Because then you’re muddling up the fifty-fifty. I think … you really do have to plan and really make sure that you have a very clear idea of how much there is in each language. Because if you start sliding things, it’s going to skew — and really that’s one of the important things about the fifty-fifty model. I think no matter which way you decide to teach the class.

…

CHRISTINE: Do you think that would be easy to do for the future, like, I’m thinking long-term? Would that be something that would be easy for incoming teachers to do?

LAURA: I think if we have—

SUSAN: … model. We’d be establishing what we find. And how it would be workable. Yeah. [several talk at once. Inaudible]

GLADYS: (family services): And I, I feel like that— my own opinion is that when you’re— you’re role playing when you’re the teacher. You’re either the Spanish speaking teacher or you’re the English speaking teacher. My personal feeling is that it’s too easy slip and slide if you break role. That’s my thought.

LAURA: But as a teacher we also have to also know the responsibility.

GRACE: Okay, so then it’s Ruby and Ann. Is that maybe you want to meet independently with Laura and Susan and that Laura and Susan you develop a model schedule over a two week period and bring that back. Because I think all of us who have been here for awhile have a certain uneasiness about a promise to, to do a percentage or do — that’s why I like the project-based, because that’s what failed us before was sort of a good intention of doing L1 and L2 in certain increments. So there is some — part of what you hear is that history thing, “Oh that didn’t work.” But I think it might have worked had we been a lot more structured around what that twenty percent and thirty percent and forty percent looked like. So, if you would do that and bring it back to the staff, and then we can get a better picture of what [inaudible], and use the two people that have seen it in action up over the hill. Is that a fair way to bring it, not to a decision today, but to the next, the next step of scrutiny? (Midday-block transcript, 4/24/04)

In the end they trusted the judgment of the fourth grade teachers to come up with a plan.

When the norm on non-confrontational discourse is broken it is likely to be commented on. For instance, when a teacher raised the questions whether they needed to
be better models of Spanish, there was a negative reaction based on the presentation of her complaint.

I was told rather strongly that that wasn’t okay… Because I guess I used the word … the word ‘wrong’ was wrong. And I felt a little put off because it seemed like they were more worried about my choice of word rather than maybe looking at what I was trying to say. (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03)

Although admonished for her manner of expression, the complaint was heard. Silvia was then asked to lead professional development sessions to improve the teachers’ Spanish.

In the following quotation Eva reflects on a discussion about changing the bilingual model used at the school.

At that particular DI [dual immersion] meeting where you were trying to say what was going right, what was not going right, and people were taking it personally, so it was very hard to be try to be open-minded or to try to be open, or try to… That was really strange. But I don’t think that’s in general the way people are. (Eva, interview, 11/14/01)

These examples show that on the one hand there is a strongly held, explicit belief that a person should speak their mind and that issues should be brought to the table, expressed and codified as Yakety yak, DO talk back. On the other hand, there is a strong norm for using congenial forms of expression and avoiding any didactic or confrontational tone when stating an opinion. There was a double need to express differences while not doing so in a confrontational manner.

Attrition

Attrition has been a serious issue at New Initiatives. Each year the school loses about a quarter of its teachers, and of new teachers about half do not stay beyond their first year. These numbers have stayed about the same since the opening of the school. A graph of the teacher tenure is bimodal; most teachers have either been at the school since the beginning or else have been there for only one or two years. Few teachers fall in the middle. “So we came with 11, I still probably have 8 left… Then 20 to 1 hit, so we had to layer on a lot of new folks fast. And that peripheral group, they don’t stay” (Grace, interview, 3/2/04).
Why do teachers leave? There is more than one explanation. Teacher turnover is high in general in schools in this area. The school is in an area with one of the highest housing costs in the nation. New Initiatives hires a large percentage of young female teachers, and many have left for more affordable communities when they planned to have families and buy a home. Some have had spouses who have taken jobs out of the area, and moved for that reason—again more likely to happen with a young staff.

Since New Initiatives has a particular mission and requires its teachers to work together, teachers who do not fit well with the culture leave, either because Grace counsels them out or because they decide on their own that this is not the kind of school they want to work in. Grace explained that some of the teachers who started with the school had felt constrained in traditional schools, and saw New Initiatives as an innovative school where they could try their own thing. However, they found it was not a place to try “your own thing,” but rather one was expected to do things the “New Initiatives Way.” In time these teachers left.

They wanted to do their own thing. “Own thing” doesn’t really fly around here. (Connie, interview, 10/16/03)
I think they left or over the years have slowly left. If it’s not a fit it’s not a fit. I think for them to be happy they needed to move on. (Monica, interview, 10/16/03)

People that didn’t like it left, so she [Grace] could get somebody new in (Daniel, interview, 5/14/03).

One newer teacher had a more nuanced perspective of how the bimodal aspect may add to the difficulty of teacher retention.

This is a great school, [yet] we tend to get a lot of turnover. It is tight and close. In traditional schools you get thrown in, you don’t go out to movies and stuff, yet still in traditional schools teachers stay. Here when I first came, I felt like an outsider. You feel left out. Over time I got to know people. It doesn’t surprise me because I am not the type that warms up quickly. Last year it was hard. Inside I felt left out, even though I tried to go to events, I felt like a stranger in an already formed family. I was a guest. As they got to know me I felt better. As someone new would feel like I didn’t belong and might look for a new job. It is also the parents. Sherry had the experience of the parents attacking her. It is a community thing, they like the old. She was new, didn’t know her yet. I got attacked by one or two parents doubting my ability, “Why aren’t you like the teacher last year?” It is somewhat of a closed community…

It was hard. (Jacqueline, interview, 3/15/04)

Then there were some teachers who Grace just decided were not good teachers or did not fit. For those she just didn’t renew their contract.

The thing I respect is that she lets people go. I’ve never seen that before. Other principals transfer them using chicken ways, by making their life hell, pressure them so they’ll leave. I had never heard of asking a teacher to leave, or not renewing them. If she thinks they should not be teaching she doesn’t just transfer them to be someone else’s problem. That’s harsh and difficult to do, and I know that it makes her nervous. She doesn’t pass the buck, It shows she cares about kids. (Lisa, interview, 11/15/01)

Grace [will] fire anyone she sees is not doing the work, which a lot of principals, they are reluctant to do it because it’s very sensitive issue. But I think Grace is good with that. She’s very tough with that. That makes the school better I think, the whole teaching environment better. (Jacqueline, interview, 3/15/04)

While in some schools a principal’s willingness to push out teachers might create fear or anger, at New Initiatives it only seems to have instilled respect, at least among those who stay. Yet they do see the turnover issue as a problem that still needs to be solved.
Why is there so much movement by teachers, not holding enough teachers back the next year? What did we do wrong? or why are teachers moving away from our school? What’s happening? How did we fail the teachers that left? What can we do differently? How things are changed to hopefully help improve that for the following year? Like last year we had several teachers move. How could we change it to help them, to build more their confidence being here? (Lucia, interview, 2/7/02)

Governance and Decision Making

The governance structure of any group is the official stance on how contestations and differences are to be decided. New Initiatives was founded on the idea that it would be democratic and use a consensus form of decision making. Both terms, “democratic” and “consensus,” mean different things to different people. What matters is how they are interpreted in practice. This section will look first at how the school chooses its teachers; that is, How are the members of the professional community selected? Then it will look at some of the forms and procedures used to make decisions within the school.

Hiring

Current teachers are directly involved in hiring new classroom teachers. There is a rigorous interviewing process whose purpose is to select people who fit the New Initiatives Way (including being qualified teachers). This interviewing process developed from the hiring process the planning team used to select the original staff. All returning teachers are invited to take part. Grace does the initial paper screening of applicants, and applicants who are possible candidates are invited to interview. In the year covered by this study there were fifteen candidates for six openings, and almost all returning teachers participated in the interview process.

Candidates came to the school at the end of the school day. They received packets with information about the school and an outline of the interview process. Then there was a brief individual tour of the school led by a couple of teachers. The tour was followed by three stations through which candidates rotated. One station was an individual interview conducted by two or three teachers. Interview questions covered several themes, such as literacy, teacher professionalism, being a “team player,” and
working with community and parents. The second station was a kind of interview called
*instructional conversations*, again with two or three staff members. Instructional
conversations are more informal than the question and answer style of the first interview.
Prompts include such questions as, “Explain how you connect reading to writing,” “What
kind of literacy practices do you disagree with?” or, “If you know within five minutes
that your lesson plan is a flop, what do you do at the sixth and beyond?” My observation
was that some of the conversations were similar to the interviews, while others were
closer to natural conversation. In the third station candidates prepared written answers to
two questions about their knowledge and use of technology. Bilingual candidates were
asked to answer one of the questions in Spanish.

After all candidates had rotated through the three stations, the process moved to
its most innovative phase. Here the candidates participated in a simulated group process
so the staff could see how the candidates worked together. The process is accomplished
in a fishbowl setting. The fifteen candidates were divided into three groups. Each group
was observed by a selection of staff, and a fourth group of staff went from group to
to group, getting a comparative perspective. Other years there have been only one or two
fishbowls. In years with very few candidates staff members have joined the simulation to
make up its number.

When the interview process is complete and the candidates have been sent on
their way (and after a dinner break provided by Grace), the staff meets to discuss the
candidates and to decide which of them will receive an offer. The basic criterion is
whether a candidate has qualities that correspond to the *New Initiatives Way*. Appendix F
includes sample interview questions, writing prompt, simulation prompt, and candidate
rating instrument from a New Initiatives new teacher interview session. In what I saw of
these discussions, the staff showed a real respect for the process. They took seriously
their job of looking at each candidate’s strengths, weaknesses, and potential fit with the
staff and the school culture. After all, these would be their colleagues, and they would be
working with them closely.

The following are some illustrative comments made during the discussion: “I
thought she was really like passionate and vivacious. She just has a lot of math
experience and very little other experience. She’s very open to, to learning.” While the staff was serious about their task, the meetings were full of laughter and joking. One teacher said about another candidate, “You saw the ponytail and you were sold!” to a staff member whose husband has a ponytail (meeting transcripts, 4/24/04).

I asked Grace how well the process worked, and she replied:

We still have significant turnover. But far less turnover has to do with the core match than just life interfering with staying here. We always give people a tour. You can’t walk through our architecture and not see how we designed it for team teaching and teamwork. That right there can have some people leave. It’s pretty visible. Visceral and visual. (interview, 2/28/02)

The method that has been reviewed is the normal route for hiring, but not every new teacher goes through it. If teachers leave unexpectedly or enrollment grows, and new teachers are needed at the last minute or midyear, Grace can do the hiring, either on her own or with one or two staff members. During the year of this study a third grade teacher left a month into the school year. Grace did the initial screening and then put the third grade team in charge of interviewing and selecting their new colleague. Interestingly, no one I interviewed expressed any misgivings about the principal making these decisions on her own. Staff do not question Grace’s prerogative as principal to make certain decisions. For one thing, Grace has earned an enormous amount of trust and respect from her staff and from the community. It is also true that the staff has never expressed concern about procedure.

Email

In some schools staff meetings are composed mostly of the principal sharing administrative trivia. While there is some of that at New Initiatives, it is kept to a minimum. With meetings occurring almost every day, rather than once a week or even once month, the proportion of time needed for such details is much smaller. New Initiatives has also found that relying on email can reduce the burden of trivia. Matters that are purely informational, or decisions that Grace feels are not worth spending group time on, are handled by sending out an email.

So much of the decisions that the school [makes] are on email and — I mean it’s kind of a joke that if you don’t check your email too bad! You check it all
day long … because decisions are made within half an hour sometimes. You just have to keep up. Probably more on emails than staff meetings, I would say, that decisions are made (Lisa, interview, 11/6/03)

If somebody has a great idea, and just wants to know what everybody else thinks, before even discussing it maybe we’ll just send an email out, see what the major feeling is of the staff. If you need something, you just send out an email. It’s more than just going over a meeting and the minutes or something; it’s kind of a forum almost. We can throw out ideas. (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03)

In order to make this work, it requires both having the technological infrastructure to support it and keeping that technology working and up-to-date. It also means training the staff to depend on it. As is stated above, often the only way teachers receive certain information is through the email, so they soon learn that they had better check it regularly.

**Schoolwide Decisions**

In many schools, especially those committed to site-based decision making, a lot of time is devoted to developing a procedure (C. H. Weiss, 1993). From reading other case studies and from my own experience as a teacher, I find that there can be many complaints in regards to the process, be it problems with the process itself, or with whether the said process is being fairly or properly used. Accordingly, schools that adopt a shared model of decision making can, and often do, spend most of their initial collaborative time working out the procedural aspects of the new model. New Initiatives was different in this respect. The only evidence of time spent on this subject was from reports of the initial gathering of the staff in the planning year, and in the drafting of the charter during the 1998-1999\(^6\) school year. In drafting the charter there was extensive discussion about how they would govern the school as a charter. Looking at the functioning school after the charter was accepted, I observed no change in how teachers were actually making decisions and working together. When I asked about the process of governance at the school, the teachers did not show much interest. They said that the

---

\(^6\) The school was not initially a charter school, but decided to become one to make it easier to implement many of their innovative ideas without having to get waivers or permission from the district or the union.
process was more or less one of discussion until agreement was reached, an informal sort of consensus.

MEIER: Is there a particular decision making process here? How do you see the process of how decisions are made?

SARAH: Like five minutes before the decision has to be made. Depends on what it is. Little things get decided really fast. Big things—we’ll meet about it. That’s a great thing about having the middle of the day, we can all come together and meet on something, and discuss it and we can come back the next day and do the same thing… so we can keep working at something until it does get resolved. It’s not like we just see each other once a month at a staff meeting and then we have to wait until the next month to talk about it again. Here we just have time to go over it and then it gets solved a lot faster…. There is not really one way. I don’t know—it’s just talking—a lot of talking.

MEIER: So is there a formal process where you go—where you vote or—?

SARAH: Once in a—yeah, Sometimes it’ll come—there’ll be a little vote or something. Usually it seems like everyone just agrees.

MEIER: So there is no particular formal process that you use?

SARAH: Not that I’m aware of. (Sarah, interview, 12/3/03)

Formal as in? I mean, when I think of formal I think of like a yea or nay vote. I wouldn’t say that. It’s more open discussion and input given to come to a conclusion. But, there is no formal structure like meeting called to order, keeping… taking votes or this is what we need to talk about and we’re going to take a vote, what we’re going to decide on after that. It’s usually talked about and then a conclusion is made or a decision is made after the talk. Sort of a discussion is summed up into what the main point was and that’s what we go with. (Daniel, interview, 5/14/03)

We have a different way here. We kind of just talk about it as a whole staff. We agree or disagree, we discuss and when everybody’s on the same page or the majority of us are on the same page, then we go about and make the change. We don’t have a formal way of, where “everybody raise your hand” or where “let’s turn in a ballot,” or whatever. We just make our decision as we go. That’s just the way the staff is. That’s just built in, an expectation of the staff. Just the way we are. That’s they way we’ve always been… from the beginning of New Initiatives. (Saul, interview, 11/29/02)

On major issues more may be done to ensure that everyone is really heard from and that all are in agreement. However, mostly things are informal. A striking example is that a year after the school began its full, two-way immersion program, I asked how the decision was reached. Was a formal vote or consensus method was used? I got several
different answers, each interviewee admitting that they weren’t sure. Still, they expressed satisfaction with this how the decision was made.

This “making the formal informal” approach to decisions appears to be accepted, even preferred by the staff. They accept Grace as the boss whom they trust. They are confident, based on experience, that she will listen to their concerns. But they also see her as having the final say. Grace defines this process as “organic” or “informal:”

We tend to informalize the formal around here… To me informal is always more readily responsive to changes that should be made. I prefer conversations... I think it’s really valuable to have conversations on the fly, and then time for everybody to mull over and then come to a consensus, as it feels like we’re moving toward the time that people have enough information.

(Grace, interview, 2/28/02)

While this style appears to work here, it may be dependent on the deep sense of trust that the current principal holds. One wonders if this informal style will be sustainable with a new principal. Many experts and researchers on organizational decision making believe that a formal process is needed to ensure that all voices get heard and to guard against the dangers of groupthink.

*Program Evaluation*

Every two years the staff at New Initiatives evaluates the school and its programs directly. In this way the budget and resource priorities are decided. The classroom teachers complete a survey in which they rate all the programs functioning in the school. They also suggest ideas for new programs or other improvements. Grace forms a committee of volunteers who tabulate the survey and report the results back to the staff. If there is consensus that a particular program is not working the program is dropped from the budget. The programs people want to keep or to initiate become the subject of a second survey. Each teacher ranks the programs in order of importance, and the results are summarized as a staff rank order. It is Grace’s job to go over the budget and fund as many items as she can, working from the top down.

Only classroom teachers participate in this evaluation process. Grace explains: “It’s all about what happens in the classroom… if the teachers feel that that support
provider or that support program is not valuable, then no point in having that person vote for themselves.” She reflects admits this can be a difficult emotional process at times.

It [can be] tough. For instance, for the first four years we had a full-time student service psychologist... I had to tell her we were no longer going to fund her... It can be a major emotional moment... This year the money that would have gone to fund the psychologist went to buy a lot of different [classroom support people]. (Grace, interview, 2/28/02)

Grace herself is evaluated through this process. “I’m in there [the survey]. If I’m doing a good job, I get to come back for two years.”

While teachers assign the budget and program priorities, they leave the particulars to Grace. For example, in the matter of support personnel they leave it up to Grace to find the programs and hire the people. As she says, “I do the to-do list that’s generated” (2/28/02).

Contestation and Decision Making

New Initiatives believes that teachers should be directly responsible for important decisions about curriculums and instruction. The school also agrees that such decisions should be reached in a collaborative manner, using a form of consensus. What all this means in practice is the real question. In the following are described three examples of how the New Initiatives culture of collaborative decision making has worked out when confronted with conflicts or other major issues that needed resolution.

The Bilingual Program Decision

New Initiatives has consistently sought better ways to meet the needs of its students. The school serves a traditionally low-performing student population, and they are not satisfied with this level of student achievement. When they find that what they are doing is not effective, they are not afraid to change. One example of such change is the radical alteration in the school program that took place due to dissatisfaction with the bilingual program.
The bilingual program initially in place at New Initiatives was in some ways an experimental program. It was a hybrid of various types of bilingual programs, a mix between a maintenance program for Spanish speakers, and a Spanish enrichment program for English dominant students. It was meant to become a full two-way immersion program by the upper grades and middle school. Many teachers accepted the model in theory, but it was still a model that had never been tried. The plan for Spanish speakers was basically the same as is found in most maintenance bilingual programs. This type of program has a strong research base. But the idea of increasing the second language content yearly for the dominant language group was untested. The proposal was to start Spanish speakers off with 90% of their instruction in Spanish and 10% in English. Year by year the percentage of English would rise, becoming 50/50 by third or fourth grade. At the same time English speakers would start with 90% of their instruction in English and 10% in Spanish, and year by year rise to the 50/50 proportion that was the goal for third or fourth grade, at which point the classes would be mixed with half native English and half native Spanish speakers.

According to many of the teachers I spoke to, there had been talk about doing a full-fledged two-way immersion program from the beginning. Some of the reasons I heard about why this did not happen appear in the following quotations from bilingual teachers of the original planning group. “It was what we wanted at first but Lisa [the district Title VII director who wrote the grant] didn’t think we could get the parents to go for it” (Ruth, interview, 10/30/01). “One question was: how could we maintain being a neighborhood school and force students to be in a dual immersion program?… We couldn’t [do the full-fledged two-way immersion program]. The [Title VII] grant wouldn’t let us.” (Susan, interview, 11/27/01).

---

7 A maintenance model is a bilingual program that is dedicated to preserving and maintaining the native language of the English language learners. In a maintenance program both English and the primary language of the students are used throughout the program. The idea is that the students will become biliterate and bilingual. This is in contrast to the great majority of bilingual programs that are transitional, meaning that they only use the native language until the student is believed to have enough English to transition to an English only classroom. At that point no effort is made to develop or maintain the students’ primary language. In those programs most students lose much of their primary language.
The bilingual teachers who were in favor of a full two-way program in general said that it was the district administrators who wouldn’t allow it. It seemed that to do a two-way immersion program it would need to be a magnet program, and the district did not want magnet schools; they wanted one program for all schools. Lisa, the Title VII director, confirmed this version as well—that model was a compromise between what the bilingual teachers wanted and what the district was willing to do.

**Staff Struggles with Program**

For the first four years, New Initiatives continued the bilingual model outlined by the Title VII grant. They tried hard to make it work. For the first three years they received some support from Title VII to help plan and implement the model, as well as funds for materials and professional development. The number of classes were half to two thirds of each grade level in the program. Even so, talk of switching to a full dual immersion program continued into the first year of the school, and the staff looked into the possibility of changing the model. The following quote is from my field notes during the first year: “New Initiatives was interested in doing a mixed class 50/50 type model. Grace finally met with Lisa to discuss it, and Lisa said it might be okay, and she would discuss it with Washington to see if it was all right with them” (field notes, 11/20/97). It is interesting that while I have records of the subject being discussed in at least three meetings during fall and winter of 1997–1998, when I interviewed teachers four years later, no one I interviewed mentioned that previous attempt.

In the first few years of the program, decisions were made in large part by the individual teachers in the program. How many classes there would be on the English dominant side was determined by a combination of the number of students from the previous year, but also by which teachers wanted to be involved. If a teacher wanted to be added to the program and could convince the parents, they were invited to join. A second grade English side teacher told me, “I wasn’t part of the Dual Immersion program before. I talked my parents into it” (Tracy, interview, 11/8/01). Each grade level determined among themselves how they would arrange the scheduling for the program—when they would switch students, for how long, and what would be taught. They followed the
general guidelines of the program and discussed matters with the rest of the two-way program faculty.

At first, meetings for the two-way bilingual program were not integrated into the school’s overall meeting structure. Instead, an additional meeting was scheduled outside that structure. The two-way bilingual program included a significant proportion of the staff, and the school had a strong belief in bilingualism and biculturalism. Yet the program was initially not seen as an integral part of the school. To be sure, the program had started in the early grades and worked its way up. The program began with one English and one Spanish teacher for each of the first three grades, or six out of about 22 teachers. Over time more staff were involved, and the program was gradually integrated into the school. Eventually midday-block meetings were scheduled for issues specific to the bilingual program.

Although New Initiatives had some success with its initial program\(^8\), there continued to be a struggle. By autumn 2000 most teachers felt that the program was not working. The problems they cited fall into three basic categories. First, they doubted that the model would succeed in making students academically fluent and biliterate in a second language. Second, they questioned the division of the school into two programs. Third, they questioned the way students were divided into three: the Spanish side of the Dual Immersion program, the English side of the Dual Immersion program, and then the English only program.

English-speaking students were having some success with Spanish, but not nearly as much as was hoped. Moreover, teachers did not see the program improving. Saul commented on the progress of the first group: “There was one class that was pretty good, that achieved the goal. They were the first that went through. Maybe it was the enthusiasm of being in the first group” (interview, 11/29/01). Later groups weren’t doing as well. Veteran bilingual teacher Susan put it his way: “We were not getting more that light conversation, we were not able to get content vocabulary to be really dual immersion. It was an add-on” (interview, 11/27/01). It was becoming obvious that English dominant students were not reaching a level that gave them access to the

---

\(^8\) As evidenced by in-house test results of Spanish acquisition by the English dominant students, and both in-house and standardized test results of academic and English learning by the Spanish dominant students.
academic content of the third, and especially the fourth, grade. In the same way Spanish speakers were not achieving a high enough level of English. As Saul commented, “They weren't picking up enough English. The percentages weren’t working” (interview, 11/29/01).

While most teachers blamed the model, there was some feeling that there was a lack of follow through or commitment by some teachers. According to Saul, “It became an enrichment instead of part of the curriculum. That’s where we dropped the ball on that one… I remember teachers not following through, not being held accountable for their part of the program” (interview, 11/29/01). Susan, a veteran bilingual teacher, spoke of “one teacher that sort of sabotaged it. It affected two years of kids. She’s someone who is no longer here” (interview, 11/27/01). But most teachers blamed the model. In describing the old program to a consultant, one teacher said, “We had a dual immersion program before, and we found the Spanish wasn't enough” (meeting observation notes). An English side teachers said, “The way it’s been the last four years has been iffy” (informal conversation).

Concerns about the model went beyond just the issue of language. Grace put it this way, “Falcon House was not dual immersion, they got the parents who were not involved, the more difficult kids” (informal conversation). Connie, the literacy specialist, said, ”That kids were tracked, [that’s what] I really had a problem with” (interview, 10/30/01). Informally, some of the teachers of English only classes expressed to me that they felt left out and separate, since most of the school had shifted to the two-way bilingual program.

Deciding to Change

In Fall 2000, during the weekly dual immersion staff meeting, the principal announced that there seemed to be consensus that the model was not working. She called on the teachers to start meeting regularly to decide what they wanted to do and come up with a plan. In that meeting Grace comes off as very forceful, and there seemed to be some thought that maybe they should give up the bilingual program altogether, unless they could come up with a better plan. One teacher said, “It was pretty gnarly, we almost
dropped the whole thing” (Ruth, interview, 10/30/01). When I asked another teacher whether there had been serious consideration of dropping the bilingual program, she said, “We felt strongly that we wanted to continue a dual immersion program. The question was, are we or aren’t we? The alternative was a traditional bilingual program… but no one seriously wanted to do that” (Susan, interview, 11/27/01).

This was not an easy question for the teachers. Five years of working with the program had led many of the teachers to feel invested in it. As has been shown, there were differences of opinion about how successful the program was and what were its main shortcomings. It is not surprising that the meetings to discuss changing the program were tense. Two newer staff members described one of the meetings this way: “That particular DI [Dual Immersion] meeting, where you were trying to say what was going right, what was not going right, and people were taking it personally,” “That was really strange, but I don’t think that’s the way people are” (Eva and Elizabeth, interview, 11/14/01). Clearly these meetings were more emotionally charged than was typical at New Initiatives. The norms of non-confrontation and dispassionate expression were at times broken. Saul remarked, “That one time everybody had to put into it because it was a big decision. We had to change something” (interview, 11/29/01). This time it was not okay to sit back and be quiet. In fact, most researchers on decision making recommend such insistence on participation.

The staff decided they needed to research their options. Groups of teachers were sent around the country to look at different models. One team visited Coral Way School in Florida, which had the oldest two-way program in the nation. The team that visited Coral Way was excited about what they saw, and their report seemed to turn the tide. As Carolyn, another of the original bilingual teachers, put it, “the decision to change the program came from the feedback… about [Coral Way’s] 27-year-old 50/50 model” (interview, 3/4/02).

In general, for important schoolwide issues this basic process is followed: They discuss the issue, share ideas, and explore the possibilities until it becomes clear that a consensus has been reached. I asked several teachers if in this case they followed their general informal discussion model or if more formal process was used. What was
consistent was that of the people I asked, none were really sure! One thought they had taken some sort of vote by raising their hands, another thought they might have written down their votes on a piece of paper, while a third thought they used their usual consensus model. However all three answers were given in a tentative tone and making it clear that they couldn’t be sure they remembered correctly.

Once the decision to adopt a new model was firm, Grace asked for volunteers to be the kindergarten teachers who would start the new program. Following the way of letting those most involved in something make the decisions about it, Grace let the volunteer group itself begin the planning process.

In contrast to the original program, the entire staff feels ownership of the dual immersion program. All were involved to some extent in choosing and planning it, and all realize that they will be part of the program in the years to come. It is no longer just another program at the school, but is considered to be an essential part of the school’s identity.

In Fall 2001, I attended four of the Thursday dual immersion meetings to get a sense of how the new program was being integrated into the school structure. The usual agenda for the meetings was for the dual immersion teachers to take turns “checking in” and telling how it was going in their classrooms. Following the check in, the meetings supported the program in different ways in each of the meetings I observed: they focused on a philosophical topic, a guest speaker, a presentation of a lesson planning idea, and a variety of classroom issues.

By 2002–2003, the year primarily covered by this study, the program had reached third grade. At the Fall retreat preceding that year, the parameters of the two-way model were discussed. Each grade level then met separately to outline how the model would look for them. What kind of basic schedule could assure a 50/50 language split? The individual plans were then presented to the whole group.

In Spring 2003 similar planning was undertaken for the coming year, when fourth grade would be included. The big decision to be made here was whether to continue the two teacher model, with students switching in the middle of the day, or to go with self contained classrooms, with the same teacher switching which language they use. They
devoted one meeting to a discussion of this issue (an edited transcript of that meeting appears in an earlier section of this chapter).

This issue illustrates how the staff moved from the attempt to implement a bilingual model they had inherited, to deciding it needed to be changes, through the change process, and into the initial implementation of the new model. It is a demonstration of how the staff used their decision making and consensus model in the service of this process.

When New Initiatives opened its doors the bilingual program was not integrated into the school. Teachers did meet regularly to develop the model. Many of the meetings were separate, often above and beyond the regular times set aside for meetings and collaboration. Grade level teams could work out particulars on their own, as is usual at New Initiatives, in agreement with the principle of teacher autonomy and freedom in a context of collaboration and accountability.

As the bilingual program grew, it became integrated into the whole school. This integration was accompanied by tension between those in the program and those not in the program. The divisions were mostly a matter of no longer feeling unity, rather than philosophical disagreements about whether a bilingual program is desirable in the first place. Still, when tension surfaced, it was accompanied by questions about the effectiveness of the program. The staff was willing to confront these problems directly, and the principal raised the issue publicly.

Some of the meetings were tense and difficult, but this is probably as it should be. Participants were invested, they were encouraged to express themselves, and they did not agree at all points about the program. It would have been unnatural if there was no tension. At times the norm of non confrontation and dispassionate discourse seemed unable to accommodate the degrees of commitment and differences of opinion in the group. Yet the teachers were able to arrive at a mutually agreed upon solution.

This study of this incident was to a large degree retrospective; I was not always a first-hand observer, but gathered reports after the fact. Where there were original records it was possible to see that people’s memory is not perfect. I did conclude that the teachers at New Initiatives do not dwell on past problems and conflicts. I saw no signs of
resentment or anger over past decisions and processes. If there were such feelings, people kept them to themselves or had left the school. Because of my close relationship with the staff, and their openness about many sensitive issues, I think it unlikely they were hiding anything. They work through issues and move on. Readiness to go forward may account for vague memories of the conflicts of the past transitions. It is also possible that there were lingering grievances but that those who felt them had left the school.

The Consultant and a Clash of Norms

This next example centers on the conflicts generated by the hiring of a curriculum coach and consultant whose norms differed from those of New Initiatives. In this history we see how the staff reacted when there were difficulties with the staff developer’s style of delivery. About midyear the issue came to a crisis and the staff came together to look for a solution. The final outcome was based in part on the relationship of trust between the principal and the staff.

Grace has been viewed as an excellent principal by almost everyone at New Initiatives, but she does admit a weakness—curriculum and pedagogy. “Grace has admitted that curriculum development is not her strength” (Judith, interview, 3/18/04). Grace does not consider herself an expert on actual elementary teaching practice. She sees the larger vision, leads the school, manages the bureaucracy, and deals with outside forces. Thus throughout the history of the school Grace has delegated curriculum leadership to others. For many years, Connie, the literacy specialist, had that responsibility. She researched new language arts curriculum and assessment practices. She led the literacy professional development meetings during the midday-block, and she worked as a reading resource teacher. While Connie is well liked and respected for her knowledge of curriculum, many felt she was not equally good at helping the staff implement those ideas.

In 2002, following poor standardized test scores recorded the year before, Grace hired Debbie. She had been a principal and staff developer in an east coast inner city district known for its strong professional development. Debbie was familiar with the type of literacy programs New Initiatives was interested in. She was also experienced in staff
development. At New Initiatives she led twice weekly professional development sessions during the midday-block, and she also coached some of the teachers directly, mostly new teachers. The staff admired her professional expertise.

[We were] doing a lot of different things for the first five years and then last year we did get an outside consultant who actually was a former principal within the district who had a really, really strong literacy background in [her former district]. She came in last year and kind of helped us put a focus on things and brought in some ideas that she had which followed along real closely with the philosophy of the school. (Susan, interview, 1/26/04)

I told Debbie, I thanked her because I learned so much in the few months that she was training us. I learned so much more than all the whole four years together in a traditional school [where I worked before]. (Jacqueline, interview, 3/15/04)

She received praise even from one of those who complained most about her effect on the school. “Debbie is a very good resource for our school… She is very knowledgeable.” (Judith, interview, 3/18/04). Everyone seemed to agree that she brought focus to the school program, helping raise the test scores that were considered vital for the survival of the school.

We really went up on our scores last year… I think for a new teacher coming in … it’s a lot more focused now. It’s not like here is your classroom, figure out what you’re going to do. That’s kind of how I felt the first few years. (Sarah, interview, 12/12/03)

One of the things that I think has really changed the school over the last couple of years is sort of the guidance that we’ve gotten from Debbie. I feel like she’s making me and us better teachers… I think at New Initiatives everybody has sort of big ideas and we’re sort of always trying to find the new way or the creative way—but she has this way of kind of taking that and structuring it a little bit more and focusing it. I feel that we’ve become a better school or better teachers for it. Again I feel like to be able to admit and look at your own weaknesses and then work on them is not something you see in every school. (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03)

Silvia not only credits Debbie with helping the staff, but credits the school and staff as a whole for being open to guidance and change. Connie, whose role as professional developer was in some ways supplanted by Debbie, also praised her. “Debbie is really clear in [knowing] good curriculum” (interview, 10/13/03). Many felt that Debbie shared
the philosophical direction of Connie and the school, but was better at making ideas practical and accessible to teachers.

However, Debbie had a style that some staff members found difficult. For one thing, she mandated the literacy curriculum and the pacing of the lessons. “Debbie gives us certain programs to do. Those things that we have to do, we don’t really have a choice on that” (Sarah, interview, 12/12/03). “Debbie will decide if there are choices or not… Right now everybody in third through sixth is doing the same unit and they should be on the same page at the same time” (Connie, interview, 10/13/03). “We had kind of lost our democratic flair… It wasn’t so much deciding ‘I really see this need in my classroom…’—we just showed up, listened, and did what we were told. That definitely caused tension” (Judith, interview, 3/18/04).

For many, probably most, teachers, Debbie’s style was a break from the norm of the school. In the past, teachers individually or in a grade level team made their own curriculum and pacing decisions. Connie or a consultant might recommend a certain strategy, but not as a mandate. At times, Connie, who was previously in charge of literacy development, tried to get the staff to agree that they would all follow a certain practice, but she did not feel in a position to hold them accountable for those agreements. At times she may even have felt frustration at the lack of follow through.

Debbie’s leadership was less flexible. One complaint voiced in several of the grade level planning meetings was that the pace of lessons was too fast. Lucia mentioned, “We always seem to be off. Are we actually going to be able to make it to lesson 37 by the end of January?” When asked by another teacher why not bring it up to Debbie, she responds. “I’m tired of sticking my head out and I get chewed out. And then I get blown off and then ignored (Grade level collaboration transcript, 1/7/04). One teacher said, “We’re feeling overwhelmed and saying we feel overwhelmed. We just get [from Debbie], ‘Well teaching is hard’” (Lisa, interview, 11/6/03).

Another complaint was that when a person did raise issues or questions, it seemed that Debbie dismissed the complaint or belittled the questioner.

It wasn’t a safe place for people to really share any kinds of concerns. When some of us did say, “We’re moving real too fast, I don’t think the kids are really getting it. We need to spend maybe two days on this rather than just
one.” And it was shot down in a kind of flippant [manner]. (Susan, interview, 1/26/04)

Susan is herself a very outspoken and opinionated person, one of the older and more experienced teachers, even among the veteran staff, and not easily intimidated. However, not everyone felt that way.

We were told, this is what you are going to cover, plan it out and… You know I worked with my team. We planned it out. Executed the lessons. And we tried our best with the time that we had and with the materials that needed to get covered. But personally I don’t remember raising an issue with her… and feeling that she hadn’t heard me. That’s me personally. (Carolyn interview, 3/10/04)

While Carolyn agreed Debbie’s curriculum plan was fast-paced, she did not see it as a real problem. She viewed it rather as something to work on implementing with her team.

One teacher described how the atmosphere during sessions dramatized the problem. “Just the look on our faces told enough. Just the really defensive arms crossed or hands, heads in their hands or their posture showed how much they didn’t like Debbie” (Judith, interview, 3/18/04). Judith was particularly unhappy with Debbie’s style, and it is possible she was projecting her own attitude onto others. A majority of teachers said that they appreciated what Debbie was teaching them. I did not see any dislike during the sessions I attended, though I did notice a lack of interaction from the staff when Debbie was presenting.

Probably the sharpest complaints were about the way Debbie filled the role of coach for the new teachers. This was the problem that brought things to the surface and made the situation a schoolwide issue. Teachers complained that when Debbie was coaching she was more of a critic than a coach.

She was not a coach, she was a critic. She was not a mentor. And so the five of us that were observed last year… we had a huge problem with Debbie and collectively got together to talk about it and what can we do about and talked about coping strategies. “Well, just ask her for one thing to work on. Remind her that she shouldn’t criticize you in front of your students. She’s welcome to talk to you after class.” Just trying to empower each other, like, you need to speak up for yourself. I didn’t have too negative of an experience with her but my coworkers did. Two of them were very glad to leave the school because they did not want to work with her again the next year. (Judith, interview, 3/18/04).
Ann has an even keel, and it wasn’t like her. She was really upset once when Debbie made a few comments. She treated you like a little kid and we didn’t like being told what you have to do. We tried making comments, but it didn’t make a difference. This seemed to be in conflict with the norms of the school. (Jacqueline, interview, 3/15/04)

I was told that Debbie sometimes criticized teachers in front of students. According to one person, she would tell teacher what they were doing wrong, but was not helpful about how to get better. Again, this behavior and discourse was outside the norms and past practice of the school. Criticisms, if mentioned at all, were brought diplomatically, typically posed as a question or communal problem. Teachers did not directly criticize each other’s teaching.

Despite the rising tension with Debbie quite a few teachers were unaware that there was a problem. “Some of the teachers... really hadn’t a clue to anything” (Susan interview, 1/26/04). Many expressed that they themselves had no problems, but had heard about them from others. Veteran teachers told me informally that teachers who did not work with Debbie as their coach were less aware of the problem. One veteran teacher said in an interview after the incident was resolved, “I didn’t know how much people had been hurt and affected by the way she [Debbie] treated them. I really didn’t know! I felt, oh gosh, I didn’t know, I couldn’t be there for my colleagues” (Carolyn, interview, 3/10/04). Grace also seemed unaware of the problem until it was brought directly to her attention. This is surprising, given that in general she is thought to be very close to the pulse of the school. When I asked her if she had any idea of the level of discontent, she told me: “[It caught me] almost completely by surprise. I said the year before, I don’t have the skills to get us out of the test score hole. I had in mind Debbie, I told them she was strong but they would have a hard time with her style. They agreed … they could handle it, if she brought instructional power, they wanted it” (Grace, interview, 2/10/05).

When the level of dissatisfaction reached a certain point, some teachers decided something had to be done. On Friday January 16th, I was on campus observing the kindergarten grade level collaborations. I had lunch with teachers in the staff lounge, and as the midday-block time approached, one of the teachers asked me to absent myself from the meeting, because they would be discussing a sensitive topic. One of the teachers
described the meeting for me, and several other teachers have since corroborated that account. It is as follows:

JUDITH: [T]here was such a rumbling in the school, such tension. But I knew that either it would burst in a staff meeting one day or we as the staff would have to confront it when Debbie wasn’t there. The rumblings reached Lisa and Susan, who were very good organizers, and they got together and talked and decided we needed time for a staff meeting. It was decided that we could be more frank when neither Grace or Debbie were there and really discuss what we felt, because as much as we trust Grace, she’s still our boss, I guess. We wanted to be able to maybe, not make it a bitch session to Grace, but also present it as this is a problem and we came up with these solutions… So we held a staff meeting and the question was brought up: We don’t talk that much anymore. We’re all so busy, we’re all so stressed, drowning under all this curriculum that we’re implementing. One of our norms for the new teachers that weren’t here was Yakety-yak DO talk back. We wanted to check in with everybody and see how you are doing because we haven’t had a staff meeting where we asked each other how we are doing in so long because we had so much curriculum to develop. So—

MEIER: So then it was presented—just to be clear on this—it was not presented as “let’s talk about Debbie”? JUDITH: No… It was underlying. Everybody knew it would come up… It wasn’t advertised like that. It was like, “We haven’t had a staff meeting where we all get to hang out. We have some stuff to talk about. Everybody is stressed. Let’s talk about why” … It was presented as a problem solving meeting. It was never—Debbie’s name never came up [prior to the meeting itself]… there was one comment before we started talking about Debbie. The first teacher’s comment was about how stressed we are, and how there’s so much to do and so many deadlines, and how it’s a lot to absorb. That was the first comment. Mine happened to be the second comment, which was Debbie [laughs]. So, I brought it up, because I felt like we had been walking around this elephant for a long time, for two years, and it really frustrated me and I had talked to veteran and new teachers and my whole team and I’ve got five new teachers getting my advice because I used to be a new teacher and crying, sobbing, thinking, you know, this just isn’t right, we need to talk about this. So I actually said, “I feel the climate and culture of our school has dramatically changed since we hired Debbie.” That’s all I said. Just that it’s changed, and the floodgate opened. That was it. That was how the discussion went and then after that it was decided that four veteran teachers would go approach Grace because she trusts them and respects them and has a deeper relationship. And they went and brought our concerns and also some of our solutions. (Judith, interview, 3/18/04)

Susan, one of those veteran teachers, explains what some of those solutions were:
We wanted to really have a positive approach to fix it and help improve things knowing that Debbie was an invaluable resource for us and had really helped us focus quite a bit. And every single person recognized the fact that she brought a very needed focus to the staff and really appreciated those positive qualities and her knowledge. So then after that our next steps we thought we should go to the principal and say “This is what’s happening and this is what people are thinking and these are the positive steps we’d like to move forward with,” which were, maybe slowing down a little bit more, maybe more of a positive support for new teachers because the approach that was being given was not a real nurturing kind of support for new teachers. And then maybe some kind of support with the dual immersion with the bilingual support help. But that was not a major thing. It was mainly, let’s slow it down and leave some room for discussion as to how things are going—not these exact deadlines that we are being forced to complete. So we went to the principal with that. (interview, 1/26/04).

Grace then met with Debbie that weekend, with the result that Debbie decided she could no longer work directly with the staff. I had a brief informal conversation with Grace shortly afterwards, and she said that Debbie felt betrayed by the staff. According to her, Debbie felt they should have talked to her directly and not gone “behind her back” to the principal. It was clear that Grace also saw it as a conflict in the culture of discourse. She wondered whether it had something to do with Debbie being from the east coast, and therefore having a more confrontational style.

Although it may not have worked out as some had hoped, the incident demonstrates that the staff believed in their ability to work together to find a solution to communal problems, and if necessary, to make a problem communal. Susan gives her interpretation of the conflict:

We saw a problem that we wanted to fix and met without our principal because we wanted an honest input from new teachers who would feel uncomfortable giving their real honest—and we wanted to know if it was really what was going on or whether it was just you know, a few people that had an ax to grind… Grace’s philosophy is leadership is she gets out of the way and lets leaders emerge. And obviously the other person’s approach of leadership was—you control them. And that is just such a difference in what it is here. And the fact that we had that built in and then, I guess what it appeared to be happening, that was being taken away from us with the kinds of training we were having this year. And yet she did raise those damn test scores [laughs]. [But] a lot of us really felt that she was ruining our school. Ruining that culture
of collaboration, of the way we do things and replacing it with something... just didn’t feel like the school we had put together and created. And so we wanted to come get a pulse and see if that is what other people were also feeling. It wasn’t to get rid of her though. It was certainly to see how we can teach her our culture [laughs]. I guess she sort of saw it as we should change to hers. After all she did raise those test scores! (interview, 1/26/04)

In the following comment, Susan sums up to a degree how the staff viewed the outcome in light of the culture of the school.

[Grace] listened to us, and heard what we were saying and then reacted on it right away. She said “This is my staff,” and she listened to four people who had been around since the very beginning…. We went to her house and sat. And we just talked about everything openly and honestly. And then Grace wasn’t afraid to go and talk to the person immediately. We talked to her Saturday, she was talking to Debbie on Sunday night… Grace supported us, she listened to what we had to say, she validated it. (interview, 1/26/04)

The outcome was that Debbie would not work with the staff any more. The staff all say that this was not the outcome they wished, that they just wanted her to change her mode of interaction. On the other hand, many expressed a sigh of relief, and felt that the mood and climate of the school improved greatly after she left. However, they also expressed concern about keeping the focus that the staff developer had begun.

This event may symbolize the power the staff feels to come together and find a collective solution to their problems. A new person was brought in to meet a need seen by the school as a whole. Unfortunately, from the beginning some staff had difficulty with her style, but most appreciated her expertise and valued the focus she brought to the school. Over time the cultural conflict between her style and the staff became too great, and at that point the staff asserted their leadership. The teachers called the meeting. They report that they used a problem solving approach, following the school norm of focusing on solutions rather than just complaining or getting confrontational.

The event also shows the mutual respect of Grace and the staff. The staff believed that Grace would listen to their concerns, and in turn Grace took what they said seriously. It seems that part of the discussion between Grace and Debbie was that Debbie saw the principal as backing down in front of her staff, while the staff saw their action as working collaboratively. Again, there seems to be a cultural difference between Debbie
and New Initiatives. Debbie leaned to a hierarchical model of school governance and professional development against the collaboration and consensus model preferred at New Initiatives.

A question that this research is unable to answer is, is there a trade-off? In other words, is the needed focus and increased effectiveness brought by Debbie traded for the emotional harmony that characterizes the New Initiatives way? It is almost a staff joke that New Initiatives is constantly changing curriculum and methods. Debbie gave them a focus they felt they were lacking, and possibly a level of mutual accountability as well. The question that remains is, could Debbie have achieved what she did in a way that respected the norms of the school?

The story is illustrative in several ways. It demonstrates what happened when the staff had a clash of cultural norms with a member who had power in the school. There was little difference in values or vision. There was not a strong component of personal dislike; many of the staff considered Debbie a personal friend with who they socialized during non school hours. It is interesting that before the meeting in which teachers voiced their complaints, most of the comments I heard about Debbie were positive, whereas after the meeting, the majority was negative. Several explanations are possible. One is that I did not interview first year teachers, and these were the teachers who had the most problems. It may also be that before the meeting many teachers did not see the problem or its severity. Also, the theory of cognitive dissonance may apply here. While Debbie was present, and people had initially positive feelings about her, a person would be inclined to distrust a negative feeling. If negative feelings were expressed, there would be pressure to act on them. But once Debbie had left, those who felt responsible for her departure would prefer to believe that they had done the right thing, and that Debbie’s presence had always been a negative one.

External Threat: Testing Goals and the Charter

The previous conflicts both arose from internal issues. This example is how the school reacted to the external pressures of state standardized tests. The most influential of these was the effects of the state API (Academic Performance Index) requirements and
the federal NCLB (No Child Left Behind) act. Both of these legislations include sanctions for schools not meeting certain results on the State standardized tests. The history of New Initiatives was that they paid scant attention to statewide standardized tests. For several years a majority of the parents had refused to have their children take the tests, a refusal supported by the principal and staff. “New Initiatives has taken a very public position that we do not value this test as an indicator of student or school achievement… Last year 70% of our families opted out of the test” (school newsletter, 4/4/02). When both State and Federal governments threatened to impose sanctions for not taking these tests, New Initiatives concluded that they needed to convince parents to permit their children to take the tests, even if they did not consider them valid measurements. At first, the main point was that not having an API (Annual Performance Index) at all would incur “financial penalties that could devastate our programs” (school newsletter, 4/4/02). During the year covered by this study the stakes went even higher. Renewing the school charter, which would soon be necessary, might depend on having improved standardized test scores. One criterion for renewing a charter in California is reaching the fourth decile ranking on the state standardized test. Meeting this criterion was by no means guaranteed for New Initiatives, given their student population. For these reasons establishing acceptable test scores became an urgent priority.

MEIER: What is one issue you are working on at whole school level?
SARAH: Trying to gear our kids up for testing.
MEIER: How do you identify this as an issue to work on?
SARAH: Well when we had scored really low on our test, I think like two years ago, and we were scared of getting our charter getting taken away. Grace wanted us to see what we could do to improve our scores so at least we’ll get the state off our back…
MEIER: Was there any feeling that this was a change in the direction of the school or contradicting what the beliefs that you had been—telling the parents not to take the test before and now—
SARAH: It was kind of strange at first, but then we realized this is reality and we don’t want to get our charter taken away, we don’t want to get closed down. We still want to be here for our kids in the neighborhood. This is something that we have to face. We’re trying to do it in a way where we’re not taking away all the other things that we like, like hands on learning and things like that. We’re trying to balance it so we can do both. (Sarah, interview, 12/3/03)

9 The API includes a decile ranking among all the schools in California based on these test scores.
A super threat to the charter really that if test scores didn’t come up that we might actually lose the charter... And so we all felt a real need, a real push and kind of bit the bullet and really did a lot of test prep, which we hadn’t really done before and philosophically are pretty much against it even. But yet faced with losing a school or doing it, we decided that we’d buckle under and do what was necessary to keep our school. (Susan, interview, 1/26/04).

How was the decision to give the scores priority made? What process was followed to form a strategy for reacting to the threat?

When the issue was raised, the principal presented the situation to the staff. At the same time, she did not mandate a solution. Her strategy was in some ways like Paola Freire’s problem posing method. Once the principal had outlined the situation, it was up to the teachers to decide how to react. The preceding quotations, which are typical of what I heard, are immediately revealing on one point. Their use of the pronoun “we” shows that they felt they were empowered to decide. Outside forces obviously imposed enormous constraints and limitations on action, yet the school staff still felt it was their choice. As they said, “faced with losing a school or doing it, we decided that we’d buckle under and do what was necessary to keep our school.” Their language implies that they could have decided otherwise.

What they decided to do took three directions. One was to start spending time on explicit test preparation. The second direction was to be more deliberate about teaching the skills that would be on the test. The third, the one they hoped to make central, was to improve their instruction. To that end they decided to hire consultants. They followed the school norms, with the staff deciding the areas of focus, and the principal actually hiring the consultants.

I was not present at the meetings where these issues were discussed. In interviews, no one I spoke to disagreed with the decisions made. At the same time, for some the decisions were not easy.

Some people felt really pressured. I felt pressure too. But I know it’s just something we have to do... it’s kind of like you know you’re doing the wrongish thing. But we have to do it to survive ... I went through mixed feelings with it. But it’s just something you have to do. (Sarah, interview, 12/3/03).
In another interview I tried to push the teacher to uncover any disagreement.

**MEIER:** Was that a contentious decision? Did some people feel like, you know, we can’t...we’re giving up our...we’re compromising our vision to do that? Or was that...or was pretty much everybody was like, no, this is what we’re going to do?

**CONNIE:** Oh, I mean, it’s pragmatic. You can have a vision. If you don’t have a school, what good is it?

**MEIER:** Okay.

**CONNIE:** I mean, we would lose the school.

**MEIER:** But it doesn’t mean some people wouldn’t still feel—

**CONNIE:** Right. No.

**MEIER:** Like you were giving up—

**CONNIE:** No, nobody was that committed to losing the—nobody was willing to lose the school.

**MEIER:** Mm hmm. Nobody felt like that was too big of a compromise?

**CONNIE:** Yeah, right. (Connie, interview, 10/13/03)

While the decision to do what was necessary to raise test scores was not controversial, there were conflicts over how much and in what ways their teaching should change. The need to raise state scores was a shared goal, over against the teachers’ desire to maintain as much as possible their commitment to a constructivist philosophy. The two purposes were not easy to reconcile.

I think it varies from individual to individual. I think our vision is that we are a constructivist school. We’re not teaching very constructivist in a lot of subjects right now because of testing and preparation for that. We’re using test ready booklets and a lot of drill and kill. I think that clashes... All I know that in my first year I did a lot more project-based learning than I am this year... we do test ready, math equations, algorithms, fill in the correct answer.... We are following the trend of California education and leaning away from that to survive.... I guess we’re having a hard time balancing that, figuring out how can we teach in a constructivist way without compromising our test scores. I don’t know if we found that balance yet. (Judith, interview, 3/18/04)

**MEIER:** How do you feel it has impacted the decisions that are made—the staff?

**CAROLYN:** …the API and all of that … we certainly take into consideration how a decision might effect... test taking and things like that. Sort of keeping it on the front burners instead of the back burners. And maybe our planning and curriculum... So we’ve taking those things into consideration when we were teaching and when we were planning what we were going to teach in first grade. But they are not driving our instruction. We just—we are [more] aware of them now than before. (interview, 3/20/04)
Carolyn admitted that as a first grade teacher who did not have to administer the tests\(^{10}\), her perspective would be different. At the third grade level the tension was more pronounced. One of the teachers was in favor of staying with a more conceptually based math curriculum, called the Investigations curriculum. Others felt that it was poor preparation for the tests, and should yield to a more skills based approach. I asked one of the teachers about the disagreement I was hearing in their meeting.

We want what is best for the kids. It’s not because... different teaching philosophy or whatever — no, not even that. We were clear that it’s not like we don’t agree with you Ann. I think Ann really wants us to teach Investigations and just work on the concepts. We do. We all agree with [the math coach], we really want the kids to understand. That’s not happening on the test, it’s not showing on the test. So I think we compromised and decided to do it the traditional way because we did it last year and they did well on the test—doesn’t mean that they know math—but they did well on the test. (Jacqueline, interview, 3/15/04).

On balance the procedures and culture of decision making held up in many ways to the pressure of testing. The staff accepted ownership of the problem and generated possibilities and solutions as a group. They used their collaborative time to address the problem. Sometimes in fact it seemed that the testing problem would monopolize their discussion time.

This last aspect however, is also part of how the testing requirements changed what otherwise might have gone on. A significant amount of classroom time was spent on getting students ready for these tests. As was reflected in the above quote, many teachers did not feel that all of the changes in teaching were good for the long term academic and intellectual needs of the students. The same could be said for professional development and collaboration time. In many ways the need to raise test scores dominated much of the agenda of collaboration time. At first there were meetings just to strategize how to meet this threat. Next, while they felt mostly satisfied that the professional development was not just for getting up test scores, but also good instruction, there was some tension around that. In the area of math there was explicit tension around whether the professional development would actually support higher test

\(^{10}\) State standardized testing is mandated in second grade and up.
scores, and therefore whether to even follow in that course, a tension that was never completely resolved to my knowledge. A portion of grade level collaboration was spent discussing test taking strategies and aligning the curriculum to what was most likely to be emphasized on the test. This meant that decisions made outside of the school about what curriculum was important and ways of measuring that, was taken out of the hands of the professional staff. Their collaboration, therefore was limited in scope. Bigger educational questions of curriculum and goals were to some extent seen as outside the purview of the school professional staff.

New Initiatives Analysis

New Initiatives has structured more time for collaboration and meeting than virtually any other public school. This time factor works in their favor in several ways. One is the obviousness that the more time you have the more you can get done. The dailiness of meeting time also means that discussions or work started in one meeting does not have to wait for a week or more to be followed up on. This constant meeting time also means that a sense of community can be built in a shorter amount of time. In traditional schools, outside of staff meetings and occasional professional development days, there is very little time to meet as a group. Even many traditional staff meetings are not times when you get to speak with your peers as it is often mostly a time to be talked at by the principal where one is informed of policy and school events. It is lunch periods where teachers often get to know each other in traditional schools, and even there it is often only a portion of the staff, as many schools have staggered lunch periods. At New Initiatives the midday-block is rarely used for purely informational purposes. Email is generally used for that when possible. The staff development activities often are interactive. This again provides time for the staff to build that sense of community. The grade level teams have further time, with their regular shared prep times. In the two-way immersion program this relationship is even greater. The teachers who share students will attest it to almost being like a marriage.

What did not go on during any collaboration time, either during the professional development meetings or the grade level release day collaborations was any formal
lesson study. There was no explicit agenda to learn from each other’s teaching. Professional development meetings would be focused on learning new techniques, and discussion how to implement these techniques. At times teachers might examine student work together. However the agenda and purpose of those opportunities was to score the work. Again there was no explicit use of the examination to discuss teaching, though it might turn into a discussion of how a particular student was progressing and how to help that individual student. Discussion of practice during grade level release days did take place, but it was not an agenda item. It would come up in the context of teachers asking advice from each other when they were having a difficulty. These kinds of informal help would also take place during lunch periods and after school. Teachers did report finding this kind of help and support very useful. They believed that this support and team planning improved the quality of instruction.

There was also no formal peer observations or peer coaching. Due to the nature of the classrooms and architecture, teachers had informal opportunities to see each other teach, these were generally brief and not used explicitly to learn from each other. A comment from one interview was: “Teachers aren’t held accountable for their teaching… I can’t change other teachers. Only change myself and improve” (Lucia, interview, 2/7/02). I am not sure whether others hold this sentiment. It also must be put in the context. This was in reaction to a particularly difficult teacher (who was not renewed for the following year). Whether or not this was a general sentiment, I saw no evidence of where they took direct responsibility for the quality of another’s teaching, or of any mechanism to do so.

They had broken the norm of private and autonomous practice on certain levels. Their rooms were open, and they were not threatened by being observed by others. They planned curriculum jointly. The dual immersion program created a interdependence among the teachers, at least at the K through 3 level. Even where they did not formally share students there was a culture of “our students” and communal responsibility. The teachers took communal responsibility for improving teaching through professional development where there was a schoolwide need seen. When individuals needed help they felt they could get help from their peers. Teachers were even proactive, especially
with new teachers, with offering support. However, it was seen as the principal’s role to evaluate teachers and to intervene if there was a problem.

**Discourse**

The teachers whom I interviewed truly seemed to believe that they could express themselves freely, while acknowledging that how those viewpoints are expressed is important. “I think we’re already really ready to listen when we hear things like that because there are issues that need to be spoken about” (Monica, interview, 10/16/03). “I think you just always have to remember everybody else’s feelings and if you do it tactfully you’re not going to have a problem” (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03).

However, can one express oneself dispassionately if one believes passionately, or if one believes passionately that the “wrong” decision is being made? For instance if someone had a strong conviction different from what was decided when they were deciding on the one or two teacher model to use for fourth grade, would the tone of the discussion have been different? It may be that these teachers have learned to do so. In one grade level meeting, one of the teachers had expressed a strong opinion against the one teacher model. “Don’t say it too loud because Grace is looking at doing self-contained [for the upper grade]… and the problem is [the fifty-fifty split of language use] doesn’t happen…. It’s really easy to slip” (Lucia, third grade collaboration transcript, 1/14/04). Unluckily for this research question, she was out during the staff meeting where this topic was discussed. There is also some evidence that during the discussion to change the bilingual model to a full two-way program there was more emotional and strongly worded exchanges. While those exchanges were seen as outside of the discourse norms, and some members were uncomfortable with these exchanges, there was no sense that this harmed the decision making process or that those individuals were sanctioned for doing so.

It is also possible that attrition and hiring practices have had a role in this. The hiring process screens for people who share to some extent the school’s vision and beliefs about practice. This supports the notion that conflict is more positively handled where there is a common goal and shared vision. It added a level of trust to discussions that they
were working toward the same ends. It also meant that new teachers entering may do some self-censoring, in that they understand that there are certain practices and goals that are probably not up for discussion—that in signing on to be part of the New Initiative team, they have agreed to these beliefs or practices (for instance, the goal of bilingualism and biliteracy).

New Initiatives has mostly hired young teachers without much previous experience. Grace once said to me that she preferred such teachers as it was easier to mold them to the “New Initiatives way.” They would not have already established habits and ways of teaching to unlearn. This makes it less likely that they will have strong views about a particular teaching method or approach. Furthermore, the interview method purposely attempts to weed out those who have a confrontational style of discourse. There is the danger that this may screen out people who stand up for strongly held beliefs. While this was done with the purpose of finding people who knew how to work collaboratively, it also could also weed out those who have certain types of leadership.

Attrition is also likely to have played a role. While those who have stayed are comfortable with the fact that those who were considered not to be a good fit were either counseled to leave or left of their own accord—some of those teachers may have felt that they were pushed out for having differing opinions, as alluded to in Lisa’s quote. “We had a few teachers a few years back tell me ‘Don’t come on too strong,’ and they ended up leaving, and they put it on that. But I think it was other reasons” (interview, 11/15/01).

Avoided Issues

I have discussed up to this point the issues that New Initiatives has tackled and confronted. I also asked teachers what issues they thought should be, but hadn’t been addressed. Besides asking them, I used my own knowledge of the school to try to ascertain if I was aware of issues that the school appeared to be either unaware of or avoiding. First I will address those that teachers themselves mentioned. Next I will look at what issues I see as being salient, yet not addressed.

Many teachers claimed that they could not think of any issue that should be brought up that wasn’t.
MEIER: Do you think there are any topics or issues—practices, beliefs that are taboo that don’t get brought up?
SILVIA: I’ve never had a problem. I can’t think of anything. Again, I keep going back, it’s all into how you approach things. If you’re going to be a bulldozer, you’ll probably have a problem (interview, 10/10/03).

They did feel that some issues had not been resolved and needed more work. However, others did express their pet peeves.

One issue that many did mention, not surprisingly, given the difficulty of talking about it in this culture, is the issue of race and other issues of diversity.

The White kids get left out. In trying to be so politically correct, you overlook American culture. I feel sometimes that is touchy. Learning the pledges, to do it or not… Still very much of the opinion that a certain amount of American culture is not explicit. Our history, learning, not neglect theirs but not ours either. To never let anyone to feel ashamed. I don’t think we’ve ever in discussed it. In smaller groups yes, but not in bigger groups. I know I’ve been in discussions but never school-wide. I’m a chicken. I’ve never really—. I can’t think of examples where I’ve had opportunities to really, in like a big whole group. (Elizabeth, interview, 12/9/03)

I suppose I’ve had a few run-ins with a teacher about culturally we cannot raise one group up at the expense of another. If anything, we need to raise all—put all cultures up. I’ve seen it happen at the school where a girl actually said “I’m so ashamed of being White,” which I think is a horrible thing to do any child. It’s just not good teaching practices I don’t think. Not something we’ve discussed. I’ve never brought it up really as a staff but I have talked to that teacher about it (Lisa, interview, 11/6/03)

I suppose the whole—yeah, I suppose the whole cultural thing. Like, I thought in my head a few times, but I hadn’t brought it up like—okay our kids leave here in sixth grade knowing seven different Cinco de Mayo dances, but do they know anything about our kids from Sierra Leone? Do they know what Tet is? I can’t even pronounce it. Tet is. But I know if I bring that up people will be like, “Do something about it!” Or people get a little bit on edge, that cultural thing… What else. The whole gay issue, too. Grace brought in a videotape that we all watched [It’s Elementary] … So Grace is very excited and enthusiastic about it and everyone kind of like, “Uh-huh-uh-huh” and then, boom, nothing was done. (Lisa, interview, 11/6/03)

Issues relating to differences, race, ethnicity and class are not ignored. As is mentioned in the quotes, teachers sometimes raise it individually. Once or twice a year there has been a meeting to discuss one or more of these issues. For instance in the 2001–02 school year
Grace gave all the teachers an article on levels of multiculturalism in schools, and used it as a springboard for the teachers to discuss New Initiatives' level of multiculturalism. That same year, they had a consultant come and talk to them about that same issue. The staff agreed that it was an issue they wanted to continue to work on. Grace even attempted to hire that consultant to work with the school on a regular basis. He was not available, however. Grace has also occasionally used videos to start discussions on such topics. However, these instances have been sporadic rather than ongoing, which has limited the depth that those discussion have reached.

Another time during the 2001–02 school year, I observed the upper grade teachers discussing getting the students ready for the exhibitions. During the discussion some teachers made some remarks that stereotyped students based on income and ethnicity. Other teachers took issue with those statements (interestingly, sides on the disagreement did not break down based on ethnicity).

NANCY: If they can somehow [inaudible]. They cannot speak to me the same way they speak to their friends on the playground. They don’t understand the social correctness…
RITA: [I tell them] Patrick…. you can’t talk to me in the same tone as to your friends watching the Simpsons.
SUSAN: Their parents don’t teach them.
NANCY: They’re not going to get it at home.

…
SUSAN: They don’t have much space of their own.
CONNIE: It’s different at home. Everybody’s things are everybody’s.
LUCIA: Isn’t it the same at home. This is mine that is yours…
CONNIE: Not in my home. Maybe with clothes…
SUSAN: They live in small apartments, one bedroom. They all share a room…
TRICIA: Could be family first, out of priority, they do what they have to do to survive…
NANCY: It’s up to us to teach them the correct values—
SEVERAL: —The correct or societies…!
SEVERAL: Our way…
NANCY: The educated way.
SUSAN: I would disagree…
[more discussion of what to call this]
CONNIE: We’ll call them school skills. Project is a good time to teach these.
(midday-block meeting notes, 2/7/02)
Some stereotyped views of students, as well as the typical tendency of teachers to blame parents, are expressed in this exchange. However, these statements did not go wholly unchallenged. We see Connie, who was facilitating the meeting, bringing the discussion back to how they could use the project curriculum to teach the skills and behaviors that the teachers felt were lacking. She was encouraging them to take ownership of the problem, and use their beliefs about curriculum and instruction to solve the problem. While some beliefs about students, based on social background, began to be uncovered and discussed here, this topic was not followed up upon in subsequent meetings.

On the whole, race and cultural diversity are issues that New Initiatives has not completely avoided, but neither has it ever made such issues a priority in ongoing discussions or professional development. Given the highly emotional charge that such issues have it would be interesting to see how an attempt to follow through with such a topic in some depth would fare given the norms of non-confrontational discourse. It could be hypothesized that the highly charged nature of such a topic is one reason it has not been taken further. Another, just as likely (though not mutually exclusive) reason, is that issues that are not clearly directly related to the here and now of improving instruction do not get to the top of the priority list for discussion and professional development time.

A topic that was not explicitly addressed that I view as important for a school that sees itself as having an innovative vision of teaching and learning, is discussion of the underlying pedagogy and beliefs about how children learn and form the basis of their choices of curriculum and instruction. While there was a lot of lip service to the fact that they believed in a constructivist and project based curriculum, these terms were taken for granted. There was an assumption that everyone knew what these terms meant, and why they should use them. While some of the professional development sessions probably included some discussion of such topics, I never saw this issue directly addressed. This may be particularly problematic in a school with such a high turnover and with a relatively young staff. Given that a quarter of the teaching staff is new each year, even if the original staff had a deep understanding of these ideas (which is not clear), there was no systematic way of making sure new staff would gain such an understanding. While to some extent they tried to use their interview process to find teachers who shared their
pedagogical beliefs, that by itself is a limited. As in the issue of race and culture, it is possible that such discussions would be more likely to raise controversy, as people might have to confront differences in more deeply held beliefs about human nature and learning.

In general I find that while New Initiatives is very proactive, thorough and systematic when making practical decisions about curriculum and school programs, they have not shown that same follow through and depth with some philosophical and cultural topics—issues where the question is not solvable, where a particular decision or action is not involved. While it is not uncommon for teachers to raise the need for these types of discussions, New Initiatives has not as of this writing seriously tackled these issues in a sustained fashion.

Summary

It was clear from my research that New Initiatives had put in place the basic structures to form a strong schoolwide professional community. They had provided time for teachers to meet and discuss issues. They enacted this particularly through the daily professional development block, as well as the grade level team release time. Teachers had the physical proximity that fosters knowing each other well. The dual immersion program had institutionalized an interdependence that was already part of the culture of the students belonging to everybody, and not just the particular classroom teacher. The email system was used to further communication beyond that offered by the regular meeting times, and the informal conversation that took place in person.

The teachers had a fair degree of autonomy, both at the school and grade level, to make important decisions about the direction of the school, school programs the curriculum and pedagogy. It was clear that there was a shared vision and mission in the school among the staff.

They were clearly open to learning and change. This was evidenced by their actions in changing curriculum and programs when students did not meet desired goals, as well at ongoing professional development in those areas. There was a high degree of trust among the teachers, and between the principal and the teachers. Socialization to
build this trust was taken seriously and not for granted, as evidenced by the regular opportunities for teachers to meet socially both in and out of school.

They used an innovative hiring process to help maintain their vision and mission by bringing on board those they believed would best fit the school culture and mission. Attrition also played a role in weeding out those that did not fit.

In each of the examples of contestation we saw how the school used these features and their cultural norms to handle those situations. The teachers attempted always to handle each situation as a practical problem to be solved by the professional community. On the bilingual program issue, they investigated options and discussed which option would best fit their situation. On the testing issue, they made the compromises they believed were necessary to survive the external policy environment, without anyone expressing a sense of betrayal by the administration or other teachers in the school to having given in to such forces. When the staff felt their culture was being threatened by the professional development coach, they used their structures and relationships to look for a solution.

We saw the school use a fairly informal decision make approach to solve their problems. It was based on coming to a sense of consensus, but without a formal process. This informality was to some degree a conscious choice, from a belief that it allowed for an ease of discussion and ability to change quickly. It is a system based on trust. Left open was the question of what cost there might be to such informality. Are some voices less likely to be heard without a structure to assure their ideas expressed? What is the mechanism to assure that a variety of ideas and possibilities are explored and not overlooked when consensus appears to come easily? Further, can such a system outlast the current principal who has gained the complete trust of her staff that she will read and interpreted the consensus of the staff correctly?

The culture of the school supported expressing one’s ideas openly—*Yakety yak DO talk back*. There was clearly a willingness to look at weaknesses and an openness to change in order to improve. At the same time this took place in a culture that was fairly intolerant of confrontational speech. Several people mentioned it was such speech that got people in trouble or led to people leaving (but supposedly not the content of said
speech). One person mentioned that she personally had been poorly received for stating a criticism in such a way, yet in the end her idea was taken seriously. The conflict with the staff developer was largely over her confrontational style. The hiring process itself was used to screen out those whose discourse style did not match the culture of New Initiatives. We are left here with the question of is there a cost to this non-confrontational culture. Do some issues not come to the table for fear of confrontation? The story of the bilingual change provides some evidence that they can withstand some emotional and confrontational dialogue when an issue gets hot without lasting repercussions. It is also clear that they saw such outbursts as aberrations. Is the loss of certain staff members, either those who left, or those who may have been screened out, something that the school should be concerned about? What might they be losing out on in terms of diversity of ideas or teaching that might improve rather than detract from their mission?

Lastly I examined the possibility that certain issues were avoided, particularly the issue of race and culture, as well as other larger pedagogical questions. There is some possibility that these issues are avoided due to their potentially controversial nature. However, as these are issues that are rarely addressed in any school, the lack of immediateness to them is as likely an explanation. The understandable tendency to address that which is most practical and urgent may be as likely an explanation, given that time is always at a premium, even given New Initiatives’ schedule.

Having said all that, it appears that New Initiatives has created a strong collaborative culture that can withstand questioning its practices and continuously working to improve itself.
CHAPTER FIVE: CAESAR CHAVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Caesar Chavez provides another example of a school that has created a culture around schoolwide professional community, and that has created structures to support that culture. The particulars of that culture and the structures that support it vary from New Initiatives. Caesar Chavez is a larger school. Therefore some of the attributes vary due to size. Others vary due to the particular decisions made by the participants along the way. Like New Initiatives, Caesar Chavez has also had to deal with various difficult issues. Two of the issues that will be examined in more detail in this chapter have correlates to the issues examined in the chapter on New Initiatives. One concerns the bilingual program, in particular, the question of accountability to following the guidelines of the program. The other has to do with the effects of testing pressures and threat of sanctions based on those tests.

A third issue that will be examined regards a grant application. The school had to decide whether to apply for a grant that would impact their reading program. They were given a very short time frame in which to make the decision and somewhat inadequate information with which to base it on. How that decision was reached is also illustrative of how the school came together to make such a decision and how shared goals made it easier to have the discussion.

First I will describe the school itself, and the various structures it has created to support the collaborative and professional development model envisioned by the leaders of the school. Then I will describe the three examples over which there has been contestation or conflict—adherence to and articulation of the bilingual model, and reaction to the threats of sanctions under NCLB and the decision in regards to the grant. Finally I will summarize what we can learn from the culture of this school about managing contestation in the context of collaborative decision making.

The School

Caesar Chavez is set in a pleasant looking low-income residential neighborhood of an “agricultural” city in the California Central Coast region. The housing right around
the campus is mostly mid- to low-income single family and condo style homes, although there are also low rent apartments nearby. The architecture of the school is a Spanish style stucco with red tile roofs. As the school was built only 15 years ago, it still retains a fresh look. It has a pleasant and inviting feel when one approaches. One enters the campus through a gated archway. Once inside the main campus, there are several wings surrounding an “L” shaped grassy courtyard. This is kept green and well manicured. The classroom doors open directly onto this courtyard. However there are also about a dozen portables added to the campus to house additional classrooms, which are behind, and to the side of, the main campus (see Appendix D for a school map).

Caesar Chavez opened in the 1989 school year in portables divided between two other elementary schools. In the fall of 1990 the new campus opened and the teachers and students moved to the new site. In the beginning it was to be a magnet school with emphasis on its bilingual program and technology. These programs were meant to attract middle class White children to integrate the school which is located in a predominantly low income Latino neighborhood. This was part of the district’s voluntary desegregation plan. The attempt was only nominally successful, and fairly soon ceased to be the focus of the school.

Demographics

Caesar Chavez is a school of approximately 670 students, grades kindergarten through five. While in the early years there was a somewhat larger percentage of middle-class White children due to the school’s magnet school status, it currently serves a population that is about 90 percent Latino. Two-thirds of the students are second language learners. Three quarters come from low-income families. Of the 39 teachers on staff during the 200–2004 school year, 15 (38%) were Hispanic. This compares to a statewide average of 14% Hispanic teachers (DataQuest Website 11-24-04).

History

Within a few years of its founding, Caesar Chavez became a professional development school, with a connection to the local state university. In fact, the full name
of the school is the Caesar Chavez Elementary Professional Development School, and this full title appears on many school documents, a constant reminder that professional development is central to the school’s identity. Along with being a professional development school came support personnel, including direct support for new teachers. As part of a new teacher support project, Caesar Chavez had a full-time new teacher support position from about 1996 until the grant ended in about 2002.

From its inception, Caesar Chavez attracted teachers who were interested in working in a collaborative environment, one that took ongoing learning and professional development of the teachers seriously. This was in part a self-selection process, since the school’s reputation influenced who applied. It was also the result of the school having site-based control over hiring. The self-selection process may have also worked in terms of who decided to leave.

Caesar Chavez is a very difficult school to stay at…. You have to put in a lot of hours. And if you are not willing to do that, people don’t stay, you leave…. If a person wanted to close the door and be by themselves they couldn’t. They would probably leave, wouldn’t stay here. Because we wouldn’t let them. We’d knock on their door and say “Hey, you need to be part of this team!”…or who feel that maybe their education philosophy doesn’t match with the education philosophy of most people of the staff, they leave. (Veronica, interview, 3/25/04)

Teachers reported that they were attracted to a place that took professional development seriously and that took their voice in that process seriously. “It already had a reputation of being a… professional development school. I thought it’d be an interesting place to work” (Nicole, interview, 10/28/03). “Actually it was because of collaboration that I came to Caesar Chavez” (Veronica, interview, 3/25/04). The teachers themselves are directly involved in deciding what that professional development looks like.

Caesar Chavez has had four different principals in its fifteen years. Each principal brought a slightly different focus and agenda to the school. However, while their foci differed, their general vision for the school did not. All four principals maintained the vision of a collaborative culture, ongoing professional development, and the vision of Caesar Chavez as a school dedicated to equity and social justice.
Guiding Principles

The school mission at Caesar Chavez can probably be summed up best with the words: equity, social justice, biliteracy, and collaboration. Of the eleven teachers interviewed, when asked about the school vision and mission, seven mentioned equity, four mentioned social justice, four mentioned biliteracy and five mentioned collaboration (most teachers mentioned more than one). One teacher expressed it this way:

The shared vision here is around biliteracy… but it is also around social justice, it’s around equity, it’s around trying to even the playing field for everybody, for all groups in society… It’s part of our mission here. (Martin, interview, 2/27/04)

To insure that all teachers know what the mission is,

Every new teacher that comes here is given a copy of the REID\textsuperscript{11} principles and the Caesar Chavez guide as to what we stand for and who we are and so everybody knows that that’s what this school is about (Martin, interview, 2/27/04)

The school has a poster on the office wall outlining the school mission entitled \textit{Guiding Principles to Ensure Equity and Student Achievement}. The graphic divides this mission into four interlocking puzzle pieces labeled respectively: Empowering School Culture; Integration of Multicultural Anti-bias Perspectives and Content; Equity Pedagogy: Standards Linked to Effective Practices; and Curriculum and Assessment Design (see Appendix G).

In interviews, teachers also often referred to the RIED standards. RIED is a university-based research organization concerned with issues of educational equity and second language learners. RIED partnered with Caesar Chavez as a study site and in return offer consulting. The RIED standards are: Teachers and Students Working Together; Developing Language and Literacy Skills across all Curriculum; Connecting Lessons to Students’ Lives; Engaging Students with Challenging Lessons; and Emphasizing Dialogue over Lectures.

RIED contributed to the development of the professional community in a variety

\textsuperscript{11} REID is a pseudonym for the University based research group that worked with the school, offering consulting in exchange for using the school as a research site on issues of equity in education.
of ways. A RIED staff member led voluntary study groups and facilitated the primary grade-level meetings. REID also provided the framework for much of the focus on issues of equity and social justice. It has been through Caesar Chavez’s partnership with RIED that many decisions over how to use professional development time and resources have been decided.

A history of a commitment to ongoing onsite professional development and collaboration is clear. It is also clear the staff shares a basic vision of equity and social justice as well as support for bilingualism and biculturalism. Now we come to how Caesar Chavez carried out that commitment to collaboration in practice.

Structures of Collaboration

Caesar Chavez defines itself as a professional development school. The staff sees ongoing collaboration and shared leadership as part of what it means to be a professional development school (see Appendix G).

Caesar Chavez has developed a variety of structures to support their desired culture of teacher collaboration and shared decision making. To support teacher collaboration the school has provided the time for grade level teams to meet and work together. For whole school work, they use professional development days, some restructured Tuesday meetings, and staff meetings. For purposes of schoolwide decision making they use a leadership team structure. In this section I will review the various ways in which each of the structures for collaboration has been used to support the desired culture.

Grade level collaboration at Caesar Chavez

The focus of the collaboration at Caesar Chavez takes place in the grade level teams. The grade level is seen as the natural unit in which teachers should do the bulk of the curricular collaborative work. They have the common curriculum to plan and enact which creates a natural shared topic, and on a practical level it is this shared planning that teachers find most useful. The grade level meeting structure is not a particularly new idea or change from common practice. A large number of schools hold regularly scheduled
grade level meetings in which teachers are meant to discuss and plan curriculum. It is both the quantity of such planning time and the content and culture of how that time is used that sets Caesar Chavez apart from the large majority of public elementary schools. It is in this context that Caesar Chavez has created an innovative structure—this being monthly release days for grades to meet and collaborate and engage in shared professional development, in addition to weekly time allotted for grade level planning and collaboration.

Weekly grade level meetings

The grade level collaboration has gone through various changes over time. From the beginning of the school’s history, teachers engaged in regular grade level collaborations. A couple of veteran teachers expressed that the collaborative culture was put in place from the opening of the school. However, given that these meeting had to take place at the end of the long day of teaching, they were harder to sustain.

It’s varied over the period of ten years. Initially, because we didn’t have a lot to work with as far as the institutions like collaboration that we have now. I don’t even think we had any restructured days\(^\text{12}\) at that point. We met together but it was difficult. Then as the model itself and funding began to take flight and we got some other things in there to be able to allow us to meet in a way that wasn’t totally exhausting, it started to work a lot better. The point at which we started being released for collaboration, once we got restructured days, that helped. That time factor when your not totally exhausted is a huge piece of it. (Ursula, interview, 4/1/04)

Like grade level meetings, this restructured day idea is not particularly innovative. Many districts and schools use such schedules to facilitate professional development and planning. In fact, this restructured day is district wide in this district. At Caesar Chavez it has been part of the structure that has facilitated the culture of collaboration. Here the teachers use this time to meet and plan as grade levels. When this practice was first instituted, teachers had to turn in agendas and demonstrate how they were using the time. “With our first principal, we were required, when we had grade level planning meetings

\(^{12}\) Restructured days are days in which the students leave school early allowing teachers a more extended time to meet and plan after school. This instructional time lost on that day is made up by adding those minutes to the other four days.
and we had to turn in our grade level planning sheets, our curriculum, for each unit or each month that we had—or each week” (Veronica, interview, 3/25/04). Currently teachers are trusted that they are using the time effectively without an external accountability system. While generally they use the time to work in teams, sometimes they will use it for individual planning. “We meet when we need to meet, but we get the job done… as needs basis” (Second grade teacher, interview, 2/27/04). “We have grade level meetings… I’d say less than once a month. So usually it’s with one or two other people, maybe three, on something. But then we try to share that out [in the grade level collaborations]” (Fourth/Fifth grade teacher, interview, 5/25/04). “On our Tuesdays… we’ll meet for like an hour or so” (First grade teacher, interview, 10/28/03). Currently each grade level team decides for themselves how to use their time and how often to meet as a whole team.

Monthly release days

More innovative has been the grade level release days. During most years, these meetings have taken place twice monthly with each grade level getting half a day. However due to budget cuts, they reduced them to one half-day per month. Super-substr 13 are hired to cover the classrooms on these days.

The release days for grade level collaboration were begun early in the schools history. Originally student teachers were used to cover the classrooms, as they had student teachers in almost every class in the early years as part of being a professional development school with the university teacher education program. Then they got a grant to cover the cost of hiring substitutes.

When PDS [Professional Development School status] started we had student teachers in every classroom. The way we designed [the grade level release meetings] was on a limited basis, so they would release for only small periods, 2 hours….. We did that for a year, and then we got the CTEI grant. That’s when we began the super sub—might have been 1997. (Donna, interview, 6/21/05)

---

13 Super-sub refers to substitute teachers who bring in their own plans. This functions as enrichment for the students, but as importantly it means that the teachers do not need to develop plans for the substitute teacher (which would reduce the effective time they actually gain).
Donna was also an instructional leader and she saw the good work that was going on in professional development and she really made a call for: let’s put our resource into the teacher time. That was when we were able to launch this piece of structured, facilitated, teacher time within the school day to focus on articulated goals for professional development and student achievement. Which was a radical departure from thinking that it was going to happen always outside of the school day. (Kathy, interview, 6/2/04)

Caesar Chavez also received coaching from one of REID’s members, Patricia. Patricia led interest groups as well as facilitating some of the grade level meetings.

Out-of-classroom teachers facilitated all these meetings. Each of these facilitators was experienced in coaching and professional development as well as having classroom experience. The year I was there, the kindergarten through second grade team meetings were facilitated by Patricia, a staff member of RIED. She describes how she came to work at Caesar Chavez.

[The head of RIED] contacted me and said, “Go out there and Donna will kind of show you what to do and who to work with.” So it was a voluntary program. And I worked with about 5 or 6 teachers that first year and what I did is observation and coaching in their classrooms using the RIED 5 standards to kind of look at the classroom, look at the teaching and learning that was happening… And so it was kind of a deal of like: if you let us do research here we’ll give you Patricia and she can do RIED stuff plus help what’s good for the school kind of thing. So that’s how that relationship got established and why I’m here. (Patricia, interview, 3/9/04)

“Patricia … has been an exceptional facilitator for that process in the two and a half years I’ve been here” (Martin, interview, 2/27/04).

The third grade team was facilitated by Alice, a reading specialist and teacher coach:

I was working with the New Teacher Project14 …and after 4 years I really wanted to work with kids again. … I had done a lot of work with Kathy…and I think it was some kind of conversation that … there was [a] reading intervention [position] available and there was also a coaching position available. Kathy really—she brought me into the 3rd grade team and had me do some presenting about intervention issues. And that kind of laid the ground work of the relationship with the 3rd grade team, (Alice, interview, 6/1/04)

---

14 The New Teacher Project is a new teacher support program that takes experienced teachers out of the classroom to work as coaches for new teachers.
Kathy facilitated the four/five\textsuperscript{15} team. Kathy worked half-time as a professional development coordinator and half-time as classroom 4/5 teacher. Kathy had been at the school virtually from the beginning, generally working as a staff developer.

I came as a new teacher project advisor. And at that time we were starting as a new school and there were 14 new teachers. I worked full time coaching new teachers. That professional partnership…was funded then by the state under a grant called CTEI, Comprehensive Teacher Education Institute. I supervised student teachers, and I worked through collaboration with classroom teachers. So it was kind of a partnership at these different institutions…. Currently I plan and facilitate the 4\textsuperscript{th}–5\textsuperscript{th} grade collaboration and I’m also the literacy coach for 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} grade. My responsibilities also include coordinating professional development for this school (Kathy, interview, 6/2/04)

Another teacher describes Kathy’s influence on the culture of the 4/5 grade level team.

Through [Kathy’s] guidance, the program really developed with her as a hub. We’d each have different strands that she would develop with us. So we’d kind of co-construct things, but kind of starting from resources or ideas she had. But she’s also very good at using your ideas so you feel like a co-participant. And your ideas are woven in to what already exists. She did that with teachers before me and after me. It helped us create a culture at our grade level of collaboration. (Idalia, interview, 5/24/05)

The facilitators decide on the agenda of the meetings, act as meeting chair, and also, to some degree, as professional developers, contributing their expertise.

Patricia [sets the agenda]. But we have input. In other words, she asks us what should we do at the next meeting, at the end of every meeting. But she also has some top-down stuff too, that comes from the district or from site administration as to what we need to deal with (Martin interview 2/27/04).

While the restructured day grade level meetings are focused more on concrete planning, the monthly facilitated grade level collaborations are concerned primarily with professional development. The agenda in Appendix H illustrates a typical agenda. In this agenda one can see the focus on the development of classroom practice and on test preparation techniques.

The agenda will typically include discussion of methods in literacy or math. There will generally be a sharing by individual teachers of their successes and difficulties in this particular area.

\textsuperscript{15} All the fourth and fifth grades are combination classes by design.
It is the release time collaboration meeting that the teachers cite as the most valuable — what they most refer to as evidence that the school values collaboration. Part of that is that this is time that they normally would not have. All the other time is time they would not be teaching anyway, so actually reduces the time they have for other planning and work. They also see this release time as evidence of the school’s commitment to collaboration, as resources allocated is always a sign of what a place values.

The other thing I can say that’s probably pretty obvious is that, like with all of the budget cuts, we spent hours and hours and hours trying to renegotiate positions and things. It never even came up once to cut collaboration. It wasn’t even on the block—or to cut the coaches. (Alice, interview, 6/1/04)

As an educator in my 23rd year, the fact that we are relieved from our teaching without having to do sub plans… it’s pretty amazing. I’ve never seen it at any other school. (Martin, interview, 2/27/04)

The decision making at these levels is obviously over issues pertaining to the particular grade level. Teachers at this level have jointly developed curriculum and assessment tools. For instance the kindergarten team spent one year developing literacy rubrics. In the spring of my observations they were working on developing an outline of what math skills should be taught at what point, and what resources were most appropriate to meet those goals. A tension that they did not really resolve was over how specific to get. On the one hand was the desire to not make it too proscriptive, as teachers want the freedom to teach in their own particular way and be flexible to the needs of a particular group. Yet they did not want to leave it so broad that it would not give any direction and lose its usefulness.

Whole school collaboration

While it was the grade level collaborations that teachers referred to most readily and with the most passion, whole school collaboration and professional development went on as well. This whole school collaboration took several forms. About once a month the restructured Tuesdays were used for whole school professional development. The
school also had three full-day professional development days. Finally the biweekly staff meetings were occasionally used for professional development as well.

Restructured Days

Besides being used for grade level meetings, the restructured days were also used about once a month for whole school professional development. Those professional development sessions centered on looking at student test data and then talking in grade levels or across grade levels about how to raise the test scores in areas in which they appeared low.

We talked about our midyear assessments. We put them all on the district computer. And we typed out all the students’ names and whether they were English language learners or they were a migrant student or male or female. We color coded everything. We wrote down their test scores in math. And we put them on a chart regarding students who are all ‘at grade level’, ‘approaching grade level’ or ‘below grade level’. As a grade level, we charted that out and we were able to see, “Okay well, this looks like we have more English only students scoring higher in these test scores, most of these students are all ‘at or above,’ why is that? What do we need to address here as far as our ‘approaching grade level’?“ (Eleanor, interview, 3/14/04)

Across grade articulation also occurred at some of these whole school meetings. While these meeting were focused on looking at standardized test score results, at several meetings teachers were grouped heterogeneously across grade levels. The idea was that by talking across grades they could work to align what each grade level did so that it matched the expectations of the grades before and after. Teachers for the most part found the opportunity to meet across grades to be very valuable.

“We have grade level articulation. We find out what the grade before expects them to do, and what the grade after wants them to come in with” (Regina, interview, 5/11/04). “So we did articulation at one SBC\textsuperscript{16} day and two restructured Tuesdays… and people really, really, really like it” (Alice, interview, 6/1/04). “One of the things I think that’s powerful about collaboration here is that it’s articulated across the grade levels” (Kathy, interview, 6/2/04).

\textsuperscript{16} SBC days are professional development days authorized by the state to schools serving low income students.
I asked one teacher about whether there was tension or disagreements across grade levels during this process:

**MEIER:** Was there any issues… of teachers feeling like, well you want that, but that’s not realistic?

**ELEANOR:** In my group, I felt like everybody was receptive and said, okay we can focus on that. It seemed approachable. (Eleanor, interview, 3/16/04)

The above quotation reflects my observations of the conversations—serious yet amiable. The lack of real disagreement is worth noting. Several hypothesis for why this might be present themselves. It could be that, as Kathy suggests from the previous quotation, a firm groundwork has already been laid in terms of schoolwide expectations, with the result that significant differences have already been worked out. It could be that given the need to adhere to externally imposed state and district standards, there is little room for individual opinion on expectations for students at each grade level. Or it could be that because of a lack of deep relationships and limited time, teachers stayed with safe assumptions and were reluctant to challenge one another. One teacher credits the facilitation of the process.

This takes facilitation. If not done in such a way that leads to success, the grade level before might feel silenced if the other grade does not think that what they saw as important is important; or play the blame game, blaming them for what the kids can’t or won’t do. So there is facilitations across grade levels. (Regina, interview, 5/11/04)

It is likely to be a combination of all of the above. However I do not have evidence that supports one of these particularly over the others.

Another issue is that to do this work with a staff of this size, several separate vertical teams are created to make groups that are manageable for collaborative work. This then requires a process to synthesize the findings and decisions of the separate groups into one. The approach taken was to report the findings of each group at the end of the session. If there was time, the larger group was asked for their agreement with what the other groups found. To some extent the purpose was to inform each other across grade levels rather than come to hard and fast agreements. The assumption was that the teachers in their grade levels would then make the appropriate adjustments in their
curriculum and teaching to accommodate these requests. Whether such changes will actually take place was beyond the scope of my research.

While teachers I talked with found these sessions valuable, many expressed that they wished there were more such opportunities to work across grades levels. “You have to look at the vertical slice… through the grade levels… But since the state cutbacks… it’s pretty minimal. So there could be more” (Martin, interview, 2/27/04).

“The piece that I think that has been missing is that we talk among the first grade, but haven’t really talked to second grade. And so we need that” (Selena, interview, 3/24/04).

“There is through some of the professional development days some cross grade level of sharing. It’s superficial. I’ve been less satisfied with that part… I think that’s definitely something we could do better at” (Idalia, interview, 5/24/04).

As in many issues, a main obstacle is time. Given the limited opportunities to meet, where would the time for this collaboration come from? Would teachers be willing to extend their work time and meet more often? Would or could they exchange other meetings for this purpose? As most staff meetings were taken up with mandated agenda items, not much time was available there. With scarce resources and state regulations about student hours, providing time off for staff to engage in this work seems unlikely.

Key planners

Caesar Chavez uses a representative structure for making many schoolwide decisions. They call this team the Key Planners. This team is made up of the site administrators, a member of the non-classroom professional staff and a representative from each grade level. “Key Planners [is] the vehicle for the whole staff. [When] I was principal and needed to make a decision, I brought it to the key planners who brought it to the teachers and brought it back” (Donna, interview, 6/21/05).

The leadership of the school definitely sees this as an important and effective body. Third grade facilitator Alice described it thus: “The key planners forum of the school seems very strong to me. Each grade level has a key planner.... It’s a major decision making body of the school. Everything goes to key planners before it’s decided” (interview, 6/1/04).
Patricia, the primary facilitator, described teacher input into decisions in this way:

What I’ve seen actually emerge, especially this year is, I’ve seen it gradually develop since [former principal] Donna was here. To me it seems from the outside it keeps getting stronger as far as involving teachers’ input more and more into the decision making processes that happen here. (interview, 3/9/04)

I feel, there is so many things you talk about in key planners that affect first grade, that affect the school… It’s really complex, but yet it works. I feel that it works. [However] I feel like a lot of... issues that have come up have been filtered through key planners, and the key planners have been asked to make decisions for — they’ve informed us and kind of kept it... low-keyed it for the teachers… I don’t think that’s good, because everybody wants to participate in it. (Selena, interview, 3/24/04)

Here this teacher gets at one of the key dilemmas of the representative system. On the one hand she feels she does a good job of bringing the information from the key planners back to her team. She also feels it is an effective way of getting the important issues discussed. On the other hand, she also sees that not everything that is discussed by key planners is, or can be, discussed by the full staff. This may mean that while everyone was represented in the decision, they may not have had any meaningful input.

I think that people should be able to say what they have in mind. Whether it agrees or disagrees, with what has been decided. People should be given that opportunity. And I know that we are always short on time in staff meetings and things. But there’s always issues that people want to talk about and sometimes it’s kind of like “We can’t talk about it right now and we’ll talk about it at key planners.” And if they brought it up it’s because they want to talk about not because they want [it] to be talked about in key planners. Because then it gets broken down. Then you didn’t get your say in it. (Selena, interview, 3/24/04)

My observations of staff and grade level meeting corroborated this. The grade level collaboration agendas left little time for such discussions. Occasionally members would mention an item having been raised or discussed at the key planner meeting, or they might offer to bring an item from the group to the key planners. I also noticed, as Selena mentions, that if controversial issues were raised at staff meetings, the principal sidetracked them. I had the sense that this was as much out of feeling the need to move the meeting on as anything else. It is possible that grade levels found time to have
substantive discussions about issues raised in the key planner meetings during their restructured Tuesday meetings. However, no one reported having used that time to do so.

Part of the issue is that many teachers do not want to put their energy and time into the work of decision-making at the whole school level. They are focused on the concrete work of their classroom and grade level.

**Meier:** Does the process [of the key planner representative reporting to the grade levels] work?

**Nicole:** I thought it worked fine. I just think that there was not very much interest in it… unless it’s a burning hot item, it doesn’t really get brought up.

(interview, 10/29/03)

In this sense key planners works to both democratize schoolwide decisions while not bogging down the entire staff in details that are not their priority and are not worth spending everyone’s time on. For most teachers, most of the time it served that function well. Yet there was some lingering sense in some teachers’ minds that maybe they had been left out of, or not informed about some decisions.

**Leadership team**

The leadership team is not an official decision making body as far as I could discern. This is the principal’s support group, and was used in part to develop the agenda for the other schoolwide meetings. They meet almost every week. I gathered that this is a new body, and I am not sure how aware the teaching staff is of its existence. The only people who mentioned this group to me were those who were on it. “I’m on this leadership team with Fran [the principal] and we’ll do all this work deciding things, and then it’s always taken to key planners for approval” (Alice, interview, 6/4/04). Alice also mentioned this group in a discussion in the spring with the third grade team. She was explaining how the decision around the SBC [professional development] days were made. “There’s a leadership team this year. I don’t know how much people know about how leadership decisions [are made]. The leadership team consists of [the principal, vice principal, grade level facilitators, the math coach and the bilingual resource teacher].” As the person responsible for developing the agenda for schoolwide meetings, this gave the principal Fran an opportunity to do so in a more inclusive manner. As a relatively new
principal she may have seen an extra need for such support. It is fairly common for principals to rely on other administrators and support personnel in running the school.

Staff meetings

Caesar Chavez had whole school staff meetings every other week. However, these meetings were not generally used to work on issues directly related to teaching and learning, at least during this year of study. Often they were used for *administrivia*, bureaucratic issues that were required as part of running a school. I was able to observe eleven staff meeting. Of those eleven meetings, four were focused on discussions of the impact of NCLB and the district visitation on the school, and how to prepare for those visitations. Three were focused on district or state mandated in-services on such topics as harassment policies, a *use of computers* survey and Student Study Team policies. One meeting was focused on student placement for the following year. Only one meeting that I attended was focused directly on instructional practice, though probably at least one or two others that I missed were as well.

Two of the meetings I attended were devoted to revising the school plan. While this sounds like a substantive issue, in reality its purpose is largely bureaucratic. The plan is the document that the school must use to justify spending. While it is possible that in writing the original document the school was involved in substantive debate over the direction and goals of the school, here this was not the case. The teachers were divided into groups of five or six teachers to discuss and suggest changes to an assigned section. Most of the discussions were around minor changes. As they understood that the purpose was to justify spending, they tended to suggest changes to support a particular program or expenditure. There was no discussion about the larger vision or mission of the school, or major changes in programs or curriculum. Another limitation is that each group only worked on only one section. There was little to no opportunity for teachers to give input on the section that they did not personally work on.

It also may be that in the past the school engaged in more whole school decision making with the full staff. “If it was an important decision, no way just with the key planners. I would bring it to the school staff” (Donna, interview, 6/15/05). This change
may have been due in part due to changes at the district level with a more top-down
approach, changes in the school leadership, as well as the mandates from being labeled a
Year 3 school under NCLB.

Caesar Chavez has put in place a variety of mechanisms to allow teachers to work
together and develop professionally. Grade level teams have an opportunity to plan
together weekly on their own, they have a monthly opportunity to engage in professional
development and long term planning under the leadership of a trained coach and
facilitator. Whole school professional development opportunities are provided by a few
staff development days, as well as monthly early release days. What teachers seem to
miss is more opportunity to work across grade levels. While there is generally not much
opportunity, when possible staff meeting are used to focus the whole school on common
professional development issues.

All of these provided structures in which different levels of decision could be
made. Grade level meetings were where the bulk of focus on developing curriculum and
refining practice. The key planner group was used as the whole school committee to work
out the details of how school wide decisions would be implemented, and also often where
ideas would first come to be discussed before bringing them to the whole staff. While I
did not see substantive discussion over decisions at the staff meetings it was at whole
staff meeting that the staff was asked to agree to decisions that came from the key
planners.

Effect of Hiring Practices on Maintenance of Collaborative Culture

One factor that may be important in the creation of a collaborative culture is who
is hired and how they are hired. This is an issue in many reforms. Reforms are more
likely to be successful when the staff has ownership of the reforms. If the teachers come
into the school already believing in and agreeing with the vision and mission of the
school, or the reform being enacted, then the leadership does not need to convert teachers
who may be resistant or have other beliefs or priorities. It also means that when decisions
have to be made it is more likely that one can assume there is a common goal, and that
any disagreements are over how to best get there — one of the conditions that is considered to be more likely to lead to positive outcomes in times of conflict.

Caesar Chavez had the advantage in that the leadership at the school’s inception had a vision of the school mission. That leadership was then able to both select for, and attract, teachers who were like-minded. The leadership also had the advantage that the culture was being started from scratch. There was no existing culture with its own momentum (or inertia) that needed to be changed. Caesar Chavez has had four different principals in its twelve years. Often this change in leadership will mean that a school is not able to develop a strong vision or mission, as each principal will come with their own agenda, undoing the efforts of the previous leadership. It may also engender cynicism in the staff, who may feel that any new agenda the principal has is not worth investing in, as the agenda will change when that person leaves. While each principal at Caesar Chavez did have a slightly different emphasis, and of course style, certain key values stayed consistent. Those values included a belief in a collaborative culture, ongoing in-house professional development, a belief in teaching for social justice and equity, as well as a strong bilingual program.

I asked each interviewee how they came to work at Caesar Chavez. They all mentioned coming to work at Caesar Chavez because of its reputation. They were attracted to what they knew about its culture or mission and to its reputation as a school that respected teachers as professionals.

In particular, it was the professional development and collaborative culture that attracted the majority of the interviewees. Seven of the interviewees explicitly referred to this aspect. As Nicole put it “It already had this reputation of being… a professional development school” (interview, 10/28/03). Ursula explained it this way: “[As a] professional development model school… I knew people involved and it sounded like an interesting approach and well tied in with what I had done before… just that kind of collaborative atmosphere” (interview, 4/1/04).

Two others mentioned the biliteracy program. Martin was not happy with the bilingual program at his previous school in the district. “I felt that Caesar Chavez would be more in accord with what I believe as a biliteracy instructor” (interview, 2/27/04). And
Selena, also moving within district, remarked, “I decided on this one because this one had the dual immersion program” (interview, 3/24/04).

It is clear that a high percentage came to work at the site because they were attracted to certain core values. This attraction indicates they have an investment in maintaining those values and practices in the school culture.

It is notable that a large percentage of the staff came as experienced teachers from within the district.

The people who have come in as new teachers to our school are experienced teachers… I think that makes a difference in terms of the mentoring and what-not that can happen, and the idealism, perhaps. So we got more experienced teachers, which is actually great for our students (Idalia, interview, 5/24/04).

I screened… for years of experience (Donna, interview, 6/21/05).

They were attracted (or recruited) based on Caesar Chavez’s reputation as a professional development and collaborative school, and as a school committed to bilingualism. Seven of the teachers interviewed transferred from other schools in the district. The three new teachers had done their student teaching in the district and requested (or were recruited by) Caesar Chavez.

All but one mentioned some personal contact they had with people who worked in the school before being hired. Nicole stated, “They knew my master teacher” (interview, 10/28/03). Ursula remarked that “A number of the people I knew who were coming here were people that I liked and respected” (interview, 4/1/04). Alice noted, “They put together a package for me. It was word-of-mouth” (interview, 6/1/04).

This use of an informal network to hire and attract teacher also meant that new hires would likely be aligned with the beliefs of the school. These teachers were known entities, so there was less risk of a poor fit than if they had been hired based solely on resumes and interviews.

The fact that the local university has a teacher education program whose mission is similar to Caesar Chavez’s may be a factor in increasing the pool of teachers in the district who are likely to share Caesar Chavez’s vision. Many of the university’s student teachers, and a majority of their bilingual candidates, do their student teaching in the district. “If I did get beginners… I looked at their pre-service experience, where they
were from. I respected [both local universities]. I wouldn’t put them on my list unless 
they… received some sort of culturally relevant training” (Donna, interview, 6/21/05).

For most of Caesar Chavez’s history the school did its own interviewing and 
selecting of teachers.

From 1993 to 2002, hiring was site-based, collaborative (site administrators 
and staff reps) and focused on the Caesar Chavez principles and a commitment 
to teacher collaboration for the benefit of our community and student 
population. Last year the district took over hiring teachers at the district level 
from a common pool with administrators present. (Kathy, personal email, 
12/23/04)

This system gave the committee the ability to choose candidates based on fit to 
the culture and vision of the school. They could make clear the expectations of working 
in collaboration. “When we were hired we were told that we need to, as a grade level, 
plan” (Veronica, interview, 3/25/04). “We had our questions. And we knew what kind of 
teachers we were looking for… experience with communities of color or some 
experience working with poor kids, poor white or linguistically diverse students. Activist 
teachers” (Donna, interview, 6/15/05).

Recently the hiring has been moving to a more centralized structure where 
interviews are done at the district level by principals who have openings. This may limit 
the school’s ability to recruit and select teachers based on their particular vision. 
However, the ability to screen has always been limited by the fact that there is often a 
shortage of qualified candidates, especially among bilingual teachers. Furthermore, some 
teachers, due to seniority rules in the district, could opt on their own to transfer to Caesar 
Chavez. In at least one case, the district has enacted an involuntary transfer to put a 
teacher at the site to meet district needs.

Unlike New Initiatives Caesar Chavez does not appear to have had as much an 
issue with attrition, despite being in a lower paying district with almost as high housing 
and living costs.

Previous principal Donna has this explanation,

I had almost no openings for years, very few positions. If I lost somebody it 
was because they were moving to Oregon or Washington because they couldn’t 
afford a house here. I think it was the support we gave them. They told me if 
they came to Caesar Chavez they were going to be supported with resources as
well as other ways. My job as principal was to make as optimal as situation as I could, I wanted them to be the best teachers they could be. I was going to bring in as much professional development as I could. And as much support as I could. (interview, 6/21/05)

This can only be a partial explanation however, as new Initiative teachers would probably attest to being similarly supported. Age could be a partial explanation—with older teachers being more likely to be settled as to where they live.

While some people mentioned that it was a hard place to work, or those not interested in collaboration or not committed to the values of the school would leave, no one mentioned attrition as an issue.

Despite the above-mentioned constraints, the combination of self-selection of applicants and the school’s ability to recruit and screen for candidates who share the school’s core values and beliefs has helped Caesar Chavez to maintain those values and beliefs over time.

Issues of Contestation

Collaboration is easy when everyone agrees. The test of the collaborative culture comes when difficulties arise. In order to examine how the culture of collaboration stood up to various difficulties, and how they used their structures to mange such situations, three particular examples will be examined. The first example looks at how the staff reacted to the threat imposed on the school from being labeled a Year Three school under the No Child Left Behind Act. This example will illustrate how they handled an external threat to the school. The second example concerns the implementation of the bilingual program. This example illustrates the tensions over teacher autonomy versus schoolwide implementation, as well as issues of accountability. A limitation of these two examples is that neither of these is strictly a case of the school working together to make a specific or clear decision or choose a particular program. Both examples are cases of underlying and ongoing tensions that influence practice at a schoolwide level.

The third example pertains to the school having to decide quickly whether to apply for a grant that could have implications for their reading program and their assessment system. In this example I examine how the principal brought the staff together
to make a joint decision. This last example demonstrates how the teachers kept the focus on the instructional program, as they discussed the pros and cons of this is grant.

“Falling Off the Edge of the Earth”—The NCLB Year Three Threat

Like virtually all public schools, Caesar Chavez has had to deal with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Like other schools with large numbers of low-income and language-minority students, the test score targets are particularly difficult to meet. In the year of this study, NCLB created a strong backdrop for virtually everything that happened at Caesar Chavez. How the faculty at Caesar Chavez handled the pressures brought on by the need to raise test scores can shed light on the collaborative culture at the school. It will also highlight how the school uses the collaborative and decision making structures to manage such situations.

Pressures to raise test scores and follow a more test preparation type curriculum had already had an influence on the school. The advent of the state API (Annual Performance Index) rankings several years prior and the rewards and sanctions that go with those rankings had already forced the school to take seriously the need to prepare students for standardized tests. However at the beginning of the school year, Caesar Chavez was labeled a Year Three school under the NCLB Act, meaning the school had not met the NCLB goals for two years. This Year Three status meant that if Caesar Chavez did not meet test score targets this year it would be subject to much more serious sanctions.

At an early staff meeting in September, the superintendent spoke to the staff. She notified them of the NCLB Year Three status and discussed what this would mean for the school. One of the first things she told them was that the school was in danger of “falling off the edge of the earth.” This was a phrase she would reiterate several more times during her talk. When asked by the staff about the possible sanctions, she listed the possibilities permitted under the law. Possibilities she said she was not considering were takeover by private charter organizations and removal of the site administration. She also said she was not considering the option of transferring the administration, which received some applause. She talked about how she wanted to be their partner. However, later in
her talk, she stated, “I don’t want students not to have you next year,” implying that if the goals were not met teachers might be transferred (observation notes, 9/17/03).

The superintendent also explained that the district would be doing monthly site walkthroughs. The walkthroughs would consist of district representatives walking through each classroom for a couple of minutes per classroom. They would be looking for evidence of specific practices and then score each classroom on a three point scale. The superintendent stated that these walkthroughs were not evaluative but meant “to generate the conversations” (observation notes, 9/17/03). The staff, however, interpreted it as an evaluative procedure since the district (1) determined the practices, (2) defined what constituted evidence of such practices, and (3) gave each classroom a score. It is not hard to imagine what this did to the morale of the staff. They felt upset, demeaned and demoralized. “So there has been a lot of, for me, frustration in talking and venting of feelings and anger, emotions” (Veronica, interview, 3/25/04).

It is difficult to say exactly how this affected the decision making process in subsequent school meetings. However, it clearly affected what decisions were made and the content of many, if not most, staff meetings, key planner meetings, staff development sessions, and grade level collaboration sessions.

For the first half of the year, a majority of key planner meeting time was spent planning for the district visitations. I observed a majority of those meetings in the fall, as well as a large percentage of them throughout the school year. A major topic of discussion at all of these meetings was how to prepare for the district visitations.

While I did not have first hand access to the grade level release day meetings for that first half of the year, I was told that this was true of those meetings as well. I was also told that it not only dominated the agenda of those meetings, but that it also affected their tone and mood. This is how the facilitator of the primary grades described those meetings:

With the district mandates and the whole Year Three status, the first like three collaborations we were hard hit. And mostly people needed a place to come and talk. So it was like trying to incorporate the emotional reaction to it... It’s just in a crisis mentality and crisis survival crisis mentality. So I think it’s made collaboration — the first half of the year... we’d come to collaboration and I’d have this whole sweet agenda planned out — and they’d be like, “We don’t
Many teachers used those meetings as a place to vent their frustration and anger at what they felt was an attack on them and their teaching.

In my observations of the grade level collaborations in the second half of the year, I did not hear complaints about the testing situation or negative feelings expressed when testing or test preparation was the topic (though I had no comparison to meetings in past years). I did, however, notice that at the grades where the students are subject to the standardized tests (2nd through 5th), a significant portion of the agenda was devoted to test taking issues. I observed three meetings at each of these grade levels during that spring. Of the three hours provided, during the February meeting, approximately 1 hour for second grade, 1 1/2 hours for third grade and 2 hours for the four/five team was spent directly on discussing test preparation topics. For the March meeting, it went down to 1/2, 1 and 1 1/2 hours respectively. In the last meetings I observed, which were after testing, little or no time was spent on testing themes.

Second grade teacher Ursula made this comment in our interview: “We used to really set our agenda based on what we saw as our needs… for our own professional growth…. Now I’d say [we have] about a 50% — optimistically a 50% influence on our agendas because the test scores take up the other fifty percent” (interview 4/1/04). Third grade collaboration facilitator and reading specialist Alice summed it up this way:

The whole district visitation thing… dominated [the agenda] for six out of eight collaborations. The other thing that drove it was testing because the biggest mandate was ‘get your test scores up.’ I would say a good 75% of [collaboration sessions] was about the district mandates. (interview. 6/1/04)

From the interviews, a decidedly negative attitude was expressed in relation to the tests and their high-stakes implications. Many felt that the tests got in the way of their engaging in more powerful and effective curriculum and had a negative impact on student learning.

Alice stated: “I would say that No Child Left Behind dominated our year and I wouldn’t say that it led to any improvement in instructional practice…. Ridiculous waste of time” (interview, 6/1/04). Kathy, one of the most respected teachers at Caesar Chavez,
a long-time teacher mentor, and a fourth/fifth grade level facilitator said, “There’s no question that our ability to actually focus on our teaching practice and effective strategies to advance achievement has been — we haven’t been able to focus the time on it. Much of our time has been... work on testing” (interview, 6/2/04).

In terms of collaboration this situation meant that the definition of collaboration as co-creation was particularly limited. It meant that the staff, to a large degree, was collaborating not to meet their own agenda, but cooperating to meet an externally imposed agenda.

In terms of shared decision making it had other, similar implications. First, it took the most important decisions out of the hands of the teachers, though how they worked within these constraints can be instructive. In the beginning of the year the district set what practices the staff would have to demonstrate for the walk-throughs. The academic goals, which previously had included issues of equity, multiculturalism, and the use of thematic instruction had been narrowed to a large degree to raising test scores. This is not to say that this is all teachers did in their teaching. The teachers continued to try to keep these other goals in mind. Nevertheless, the goals that were discussed in collaborations and schoolwide professional development sessions were focused on testing goals. Further, these were not goals that the staff had decided on based on discussion and group consensus, but were imposed from the outside. At New Initiatives the principal had posed the situation as a question to the staff. While it is likely that the Caesar Chavez staff would have decided on more or less the same course if they had been asked rather than told, it might have changed the morale or attitude in the beginning of the year if they had been asked.

By the second half of the year, I did see a change in how the staff reacted to the threat. About midway through the year the key planners decided to take the initiative in deciding what the district visitation team would look for in their walk-throughs.

That was another taking back [by the district] saying “we’re going to do this and this to you.” And then finally us going wait, “So this is what you’re going to look for, this is where your going to find it. This is what it’s going to look like.” Still spending way too much time on that. But at least... it fit with what we were doing much better... at least we were able to soften the impact of that whole stupid process. (Idalia, interview, 5/24/04)
So, while the walk-throughs were still evaluated by the district team, the Caesar Chavez staff was able to assume some control over setting the agenda concerning what practices should be evaluated. The district’s positive reaction to this change further helped to improve morale and reestablish a sense of empowerment.

This was a very different [district] visitation. It really felt like we had taken the visitation back in terms of serving the needs of students, of teachers. The morning meeting with the district was so impressive... It felt like we had our “eyes on the prize” in terms of our vision at the school again. I feel a different feeling in the school. (Kathy, Key Planner meeting transcription, 12/10/03)

While they were not able to change the threat itself, they did use their collaboration time to work out how to deal with the threat. Initially, time was spent processing emotions and planning how to meet the requirements set by the district. They then were able to somewhat reorient their perspective and see themselves as more proactive rather than purely reactive in regards to the threat. This was illustrated in the move by the key planners to take control of the agenda of the district visits and by the grade level groups’ attempts to adapt their teaching in a way that could both help the students succeed on the tests without undermining what they believed was good practice.

The conflict in this case was not generally internal. The anger was generally expressed outward, toward the federal government for the imposition of NCLB and toward the district for not being outspoken against it. At first it was a feeling of impotence, frustration and sense of having their hard work not being appreciated. Over time, they worked to transform this into the practical work of trying to do what was best for the students given the situation.

Here, while no concrete single decision was at stake, there was conflict between what they believed was good instruction and what they felt they were being forced to do by outside entities—the federal government and the district. They did not turn this into an internal fight. The culture was strong enough, so that even if it was demoralizing, pretty much everyone was willing to accept that in the short term it was a reality they had to live with, and that it was best to consider how to work within it to do the best for the students.

What might have been lost by their course of action was that there was little to no whole school discussion about how best to make that happen. To some extent decisions
on this were made at the administrative level, and to some extent grade level groups did the work in their groups. While this was more efficient time wise, there may have been a loss in terms both of how empowered the teachers felt and in terms of whether there were other routes that were not considered.

The Bilingual Model

In the following section I describe the issues that arose around the articulation of the bilingual program at Caesar Chavez. The main concern here was whether there was consistency in following the language model outlined by the school plan. It appears that this had been an ongoing issue for several years. Neither was it resolved during the school year under study. This example illustrates two issues of shared-practice accountability. These issues are summed up by the questions: who are the teachers accountable to, and who makes the decisions regarding what they are accountable for? It also illustrates some of the difficulties in creating full schoolwide collaboration in a school this size.

Caesar Chavez has been dedicated to having a strong bilingual program since its inception. The commitment to a strong bilingual program was clear from many of the interviews as well as from the school mission. Many of the teachers had come to work at Caesar Chavez in part because of its strong bilingual program. Seven of the eleven teachers interviewed specifically mentioned the bilingual program as one of the reasons they came to work at Caesar Chavez or as an important part of the school’s mission.

In accordance with the “teacher autonomy” culture of schooling, there is often a gap between what a school may claim on paper is its model of bilingual education and what actually goes on in the classroom. Weick (1976) referred to this phenomenon as “loose-coupling,” the fact that to a large degree teachers can ignore or circumvent top-down mandates. To some degree the standardization and high stakes testing movements are an attempt to tighten that loose-coupling. They are seen as ways to hold teachers accountable. In the case of those types of measures, the accountability is to external mandates through external rewards and punishments. Schoolwide professionals community can be seen as another way to “tighten” loose-coupling, only here, the ideal is
that the teachers hold one another accountable to agreements they have made collaboratively.

At Caesar Chavez, in the spirit of having a highly professional and dedicated staff, the principals have trusted them to make good decisions about teaching. It was precisely this professional atmosphere that attracted many of the staff to work there. However, this professional autonomy can be in conflict with the idea of being a collaborative community. In a collaborative community teachers decide as a team rather than as individuals. Tension between teacher autonomy versus a mandated way of implementing the bilingual program is another theme presented by this example.

Caesar Chavez has several language strands, or programs. The majority of students at the school are second language learners, most of whom are in bilingual classes. There are two types of bilingual programs at the school. One program is based on the maintenance model. The model they use calls for fifty percent instruction daily in each language from kindergarten through fifth grade (the last grade of the school). The students in these classrooms are all native Spanish speakers. The other bilingual program is the two-way program. In this program some of the students are Spanish dominant and some are English dominant. Like the other bilingual program, instruction is to be fifty percent in each language. The difference is that in this model, English dominant students are learning Spanish alongside Spanish speakers learning English. These students can act as language models for each other. The goal of this program is that by the end of the program, when the students reach the upper grades, both groups of students will be bilingual and biliterate. In some of the classes following this model, the students switch teachers midday — in one classroom they receive instruction in English and in the other they are taught in Spanish. There is also an English-only strand. These are the SDAIE (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) classes. In these classes, English is the only language of instruction. Most of the students in these classes are English dominant. Others are second language learners whose parents prefer English-only instruction. The teachers are expected to use methods that are consistent with good practice for the teaching of second language learners.

17 Maintenance model programs attempt to maintain and develop the primary language even after fluency has been attained in the second language. Biliteracy as well and bilingualism is the goal in these types of programs.
The school has been trying to refine the articulation of the bilingual program across grades and classes for many years. According to one veteran teacher, “The biliteracy program… was in disarray… five years ago versus now… So the biliteracy focus group …we rewrote the school plan, we guided the school in terms of developing the biliteracy program” (Idalia, interview, 5/25/04).

At that point the school went through a process similar to what New Initiatives did when changing their bilingual program.

What happened is we really began to define the program…. It took them a year to research it. They formed a committee — they worked for a year visiting other programs, reporting back to staff, and at end of year proposed to staff as a strand. They spent a year of planning. It was well thought out. They presented their findings regularly to staff. It was interesting, I knew the research. I knew the two-way to be the best model. I had talked to others about what is best, but I know I couldn’t impose it, so I said look at these models. I knew they would come to same conclusion, but I could not impose it…. And maybe they wouldn’t decide on this program. [We made the decision] through the whole staff, through Staff meetings, retreats, discussing what is bilingual education, what is ELD [English language Development]. (Donna, interview, 6/21/05)

Officially, instruction in the bilingual and dual immersion program is fifty percent in each language. In this model the teachers are to use a language separation method (i.e. they are not supposed to switch back and forth between languages in one lesson or class period) and have a coherent rationale for how, when, and why each language is used. It has been left up to individual teachers (or pairs of teachers in the two-teacher model) to work out what this looks like in practice. The problem is that it is not clear if all the teachers are aware of the guidelines, and less clear to what extent they are followed. In both cases there has been no system to know if the teachers are following these guidelines. “But we’re trying to say from the start, language allocation has to be a school-wide focus next year. I think it’s a huge issue… language allocation” (Alice, interview, 6/1/04).

A concern regarding this lack of consistency across classrooms and across the school has arisen at various times in recent years. During this study the issue of consistency across classrooms and adherence to common practices was raised a number times in more than just the context of language use. It had come up in relation to practices
of reading instruction and time spent in each curricular area. This was seen as a matter of equity — all students should receive at least the same exposure and time on each curricular area, even if teachers used different methods and content to do so was a belief expressed by several teachers in leadership positions. The same concern is played out in terms of language allocation. When asked about areas that needed addressing, Alice responded,

I think that whole thing about language allocation is one that they should address… I think the school could move to having more consistency between programs in different classes — just making sure that the program you are getting in one class and the program you’re getting in another class is — not identical — but is equitable. I don’t know that it’s that people aren’t willing to do that as much — there is a little bit of resistance about — sometimes people say like, “Oh, we’re just trying to take away teachers freedom by….” There’s some initial reaction when we talk about that stuff of like, “You mean you’re making us all do the same thing?” [The bilingual Resource teacher] has been great at saying “Well, we all need to teach division, we all need to teach multiplication. So yeah, we all need to teach 50/50 [English/Spanish].”

(interview, 6/1/04)

In fact the issue of whether teachers were following the bilingual program model came up at one of the first Key Planner meetings of the year. In that meeting, the assistant principal raised the issue of whether the model was being followed consistently. She raised questions of whether the 4/5 team was using a different model than the rest of the school. And she raised questions about adherence to the model, asking, “If on English day would it all be English?” and whether they were using each language in a manner consistent with the model (observation notes, 9/10/03). While these questions were raised in this meeting, there was no follow-up discussion by the key planners until the very end of the year.

The issue was also raised by one of the grade level teams. The third grade team facilitator put the issue of the bilingual model on the agenda for one of collaboration meetings in the spring. The issue had been raised somewhat spontaneously at a previous meeting. Alice describes what she heard:

So we were talking about math and a couple of teachers are saying, “Oh, I do one lesson in Spanish and then the next day a lesson in English,” basically sounding alternate day… it [brought] up this issue of what is our model and who is following it? One of the other teachers at the grade level for some
reason, who is not a bilingual teacher, hadn’t realized that the 50/50 model really meant half day. She was like, “Oh my god, you mean they’re supposed to be doing half day?” So she came back after lunch and she was really pointedly asking them, “How do you do it, if you do Spanish/English, then do you teach math in the morning one day and the—” like she was really on it and it was cool because she was holding them accountable for the program. (Alice, interview, 6/4/04)

Alice then brought in the bilingual coordinator to address the issue and outline the program guidelines for these teachers. During that meeting the conflict of teacher autonomy versus mandated programs was overtly raised by one of the teachers. The following exchange between one of the teachers and the facilitator and then the bilingual resource teacher illustrates this conflict between teacher autonomy and program coordination. A question also raised here, though not addressed explicitly, is who decides on the model.

ALICE: [We are] looking at our [bilingual] program agreements, and when in the program do we teach language skills.

... 

SARA: I have a question. Is there an agenda that the bilingual to be mirroring each other, and is there a driven agenda that needs to be done? And if so, if it could just be said out loud, it would really clear the air up.

ALICE: I don’t have that sense. I do have the sense that every teacher is supposed to have a schedule, a program, and it’s either AM Spanish, or PM Spanish. And that there’s an articulated [plan]…. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that you and Isabel will both be teaching math at the same hour on the same page on the same day. But that you and Isabel will both have a half day model, where you’re doing half your instruction in Spanish and half in English… It doesn’t mean that you’re teaching the same lesson the same day at the same hour. Because that would be very scripted.

...

REGINA: The district is now saying all biliteracy programs have to be 50/50…. I would prefer to not use the word agenda, because agenda sounds like somebody has a side push for this or that. But if you look at it as a systematic well-designed program, and the research shows that if the program is not well-defined and systematic, it’s not [going to work well]…. The grades have given input as to how the program is being implemented. And I updated this. This is still being worked on. I need to ask questions of the different grades and get the input. And yours is in there…. When people talk about language allocation, number three was an agreement that language allocation [follow] a split day model for first to fifth grade. So that’s what needs to be in place. And is it an agenda? No. Is it a systematically well-designed program. Yes…. And here, at
Caesar Chavez, we’re doing the split day, AM/PM. (third grade collaboration, transcript, 4/22/04)

The exchange and tension around this issue continued into their next collaboration meeting. The facilitator wanted to continue to work on this issue by having the teachers start to discuss their language allocation, to have them work together to articulate how they would meet the program outlines. While they did some of this, the tension around teacher autonomy was raised again by that same teacher.

ALICE: Biliteracy teachers are starting to talk about what are you doing in Spanish and what are you doing in English. … At the same time I want to remind us again about the biliteracy agreements that we talked about last time. I brought them again. But we really want to be thinking about the program as a 50/50 program and it’s a half-day program. … And the biliteracy teachers can use this time to check in on what you’re doing in Spanish and what you’re doing in English.

…

SARA: … it would be to our advantage to our students if we just like say “It’s a done deal, and it’s just a matter of—,” It would seem like it would progress us much more quickly than dialoguing as if there were truly a choice about the time factor.

ALICE: Well, there is truly a choice about the time factor. There is not a choice about it being 50/50 half-day. And I would not get in to say, “You have to teach your morning message from 9:00 to 9:30.” If you and [the other 3 bilingual teachers] want to come together and make a schedule, I don’t think that’s going to come from [the principal] or [the Bilingual Resource Teacher]. I think it’s a grade level choice.

SARA: So there actually does exist a grade level choice?

ALICE: Definitely.

SARA: Okay. Because sometimes within missions there can appear, but perhaps that’s not it.

ALICE: There is an assumption that the 50/50 classes will be doing half-day instruction, half-day English, half-day Spanish. And that that’s consistent. And that there’s things you’re teaching in English and things you’re teaching in Spanish. And that’s what I was hoping to do with this, that we say, “Which of these are you doing in English, and which of these are you doing in Spanish?”

Isabel: In another school… (third grade collaboration, transcript, 5/6/04).

They did move on to have some of the discussion of how they were using language in the classrooms, though the conversations were fairly limited by time constraints. This was a beginning to what would need to be an in depth discussion.
The only grade level collaborative team that discussed this issue, at least as far as I was able to ascertain, was this third grade team. I do not know if that is because it was less of a concern at the other grades, or simply because it was higher on the priority list for this facilitator. The Key Planners team discussed it further, however. In a May meeting of the Key Planners the major agenda item was the bilingual program. In particular they discussed how students would be assigned to the different programs to assure an equitable distribution of students while also making sure students were in the appropriate programs based on their needs or desires. However the team also discussed the issue of adherence to the bilingual model, and what should be done to ensure that the model is practiced as agreed.

KATHY: I guess we should just say right from the start, it has to be made clear and held accountable that our school program is a 50/50 program…
ARACELI: We keep saying that, but then every discussion we have at grade levels, no one can put into minutes and time and language what they do in English and what they do in Spanish to say this is 50/50—

Principal: There will be an accountability that [the assistant principal] and I will be observing classrooms every month, and we’re going to have schedules from everybody, 50/50 and then we’re going to go into classrooms and make sure, observe—maybe one month we’ll do their English, next month their Spanish. And we’ll take turns going upper and lower grades so that we can make sure that everyone is doing the 50/50 model. And if they need help then that’s where we’ll say to the bilingual resource teacher, “So-and-so’s asking for support,” or “How do you exactly work this?” So that is definitely the goal.
(Key Planner meeting, transcript, 5/19/04)

The implication here is that the administration does see this as a problem and as a priority in terms of the principal’s time — for next year, anyway. It also implies that the principal sees it as the administration’s responsibility to hold the teachers accountable for adherence to the model. The form of that accountability appears to be, first, checking to see if it is or is not happening, and then offering support if it is not. Throughout all of the discussions, it has also been made clear that the model itself is not up for discussion. That is a given. Teachers can, at this point, decide how to implement it, but not whether this is the model they want to use.

To some extent, though, teachers chose the model. As was discussed earlier, a bilingual focus team had been assigned the job of developing the model, and the staff as a
whole had decided on it. The plan was not the result of a top-down mandate, but something that the staff actively agreed to do as part of a process in the original designing of the program. On the other hand, the district has put fairly strict limits on what type of bilingual programs are allowed. In fact, the previous year the superintendent had attempted to put in place a regulation that all bilingual instruction end by fourth grade. It was in large part the effort of many of the teachers at Caesar Chavez that got that decision reversed and allowed their bilingual program to continue through all the grades.

Obviously, from the contestation in the third grade collaborations, at least one teacher does not feel she was part of the decision on what the program should look like. Nevertheless, the site administration at least feels that (1) the decision has been made and that discussion is over, and (2) given district mandates, if they are going to have a bilingual program (which is not questioned), this is the only option they really have.

Alice, who consistently raised this issue in discussions I had with her, had this to say about why it had not been dealt with up until now (Alice was not a participant in the key planner meetings):

I don’t feel like there is a lot of unwillingness necessarily to look at issues. I think that there is overwhelm… and there has been so much focus this year on responding to all the other external pressures… they just have to have the time to be doing walk-throughs consistently. (interview, 6/1/04)

While they have created a culture that values collaboration and has provided time for teachers to meet and talk, there is still a great deal of behind-closed-doors teaching. Except for kindergarten, where teaming is built into the job, teachers have little opportunity to be in each other’s rooms. While they are open to beginning such work, there is still obvious discomfiture when they do so. Alice definitely sees that as a limitation to the work.

What I know from [my new teacher support training] and from my experience here is that you can do workshops and collaborations until the cows come home, and unless you back it up with [classroom] observations and reflections on the observations, there is no guarantee that anything is changing. That coaching is what makes things change. So we had collaboration but we didn’t really have coaching. I think that’s a key. We didn’t have a whole lot of accountability… So I think the whole point of that is until we go into the classes and say, “This is our model, now we need to come see it,” we’re going to talk about it in collaboration, talk about strategies and then we’re gong to go
see it. That needs to be happening. There is no necessary implication that collaboration [without observations and coaching] is going to change practice. (interview, 6/1/04)

What can we learn from this example? On one level we see here that certain staff members and the administration have a concern that the bilingual program agreed upon is not being faithfully enacted. This can be viewed in part as a question of accountability. In the case of the resource teacher who facilitates the third grade meeting, she decided to use the collaboration structure to encourage teachers to hold themselves accountable for living up to this plan for the bilingual program. As she saw it, the bilingual model was an agreement among the staff. The plan only goes as far as specifying the amount of time spent using each language for instruction. She saw the next goal as one of articulating how that time would be divided up. She saw the collaborations as the natural place for teachers to work together to develop those details. It was this step that she began that spring. Her next step would be observing the classrooms to see if the agreements were being carried out. While she was not specific as to what was to be done if teachers were not adhering to the program, she implies that it would lead to reflecting on practice and coaching, again using the grade level collaboration structure. There does exist some resentment about the district’s role in creating certain restrictions and limits of the program. In fact, the staff of the school had been involved in at least one district level fight when the district tried to scale back the program to an early exit bilingual program, a model highly disliked by the staff. It is also not clear how much ownership the current staff feels about the model. This may be due to two possible factors. Many staff may have come on board after the model was adopted, and therefore not have had a part in its creation. Second, the model was developed in large part by a committee. In larger schools it is often seen as necessary to work on such issues through committees, as it is unwieldy to try and do that kind of work with a staff of forty. It would also be hard to get an entire staff to come to the extra meetings required to do the work. Therefore, those who were not on the committee would not have the same level of ownership, even if they were involved in accepting the recommendations of that committee.

The other is the issue of accountability. Whose responsibility is it to insure that the model is being followed, and how can accountability be insured? In the key planner
meeting, the principal appeared to see it as her responsibility, an assumption that went unchallenged. Alice, while not countering that, also seemed to see it as at least in part her responsibility as grade level facilitator, and her job to help the teachers hold each other accountable through observation and discussion. While she believed that peer accountability is where she wanted to go, she felt it would take time to get the teachers to that level of peer accountability, and require more of her time to be able to observe their teaching, time she did not feel she had had during this year. She believed that the following year would allow her time to do so.

Finally, the issue of time comes up once again. As the third grade the meetings were a month apart, and by the end of the second meeting, they had just begun to discuss how they were implementing the program. While many of the key support staff and administrators agreed it was a major issue, they never found the time to bring it up to the whole staff.

*Reading First Grant*

While the other two issues discussed were ongoing issues that neither had resolution nor even really involved making a decision, this is a case where not only did a decision need to be made, but it needed to be made rather quickly. My data for this issue comes directly from observations of the two meeting where it was discussed. It was not raised in any of the interviews (mostly because it happened after the majority of the interviews took place).

The issue was that the principle was informed that the school was eligible to apply for a *Reading First* grant that would affect the kindergarten through third grade reading program. This grant comes from the NCLB Act. However they had only about a week to discuss it before a decision had to be made. Given the tight budget situation, any grant was tempting. On the other hand, the purpose of the grant was to fund the use of, and training for, a particular reading series. The major question was whether taking the grant would force them to use the reading series in a way that went against what they thought was good instruction, and further, would it require them to give even more assessments when they already felt overburdened by the number of assessments they had to give.
The meetings took place on a Tuesday and a Wednesday. The first meeting was with the primary grade staff that was available over lunch — those that would be directly affected by the grant. The Wednesday meeting was the following day as part of the regular every other week staff meeting. We will see in this episode how the principal does her best to include the full staff in the decision and uses a democratic process. It was made especially difficult as they were not sure they were making the decision with all the necessary information available.

Below are edited excerpts from the two meetings. The first is from notes, as I was not able to audio-tape that meeting. The second is from the audio-taped transcription. At the lunch time meeting were about a dozen of the primary teachers. They had been given some preliminary information a few days before. Before the discussion quoted below there was a district representative attempting to answer their questions. After the question and answer period that person left, and the principal, Fran, led a discussion with the teachers. The two main concerns that arose were in regards to how closely they would have to follow the text book, and what the assessments would be. They were especially concerned in regards the text book being appropriate for second language learners.

**ARACELI**: We’ll have a fifteen minute check in. Let’s go in circle.
**RAFAEL**: My concern, is that no one ever brought in the accountability factor. Nowhere does it say what is the accountability factor.
**X**: Spend the money right.
**X**: It would be hard for me to accept. I don’t like NCLB, I want to get away from this doing it just for the money. It goes against my beliefs. It’s nice to have money for training. But.
**X**: I’m apprehensive. I don’t follow the program now as it is. I integrate it into my themes. But this would force me to do it day one to end of year. That we can’t deviate, that concerns me. As a bilingual teacher, my students can’t read those books, which leads to more frustration for students. I’m having a hard time envisioning how it would work in third grade.
**FRAN**: We will talk, I think the incoming students will be excellent.
**NICOLE**: I’ve been using and adapting, I have less reservations. Same for a lot of us in the second grade group. It’s not perfect, but it supports the standards… We’ve adapted several readers, not do them the same as presented. We supplement and work around it… There might be ways we can work into it. It’s not easy but we can do it. I represent my grade, if it’s available in both languages.

---

18 I was unable to identify the speaker in these cases.
RAFAEL: The bilingual teachers are more concerned. We are asked to do English and Spanish. It will take up all our time.
FRAN: I’m not concerned how much time.
PILAR: I’ve done it. It’s time consuming. For me it would be great to have in both languages. The problem I see, if I try to use it in English they are not there. I would use it midyear. Plus assessments. The time, if fully implemented is a problem.
X: This is like the state standard test, I use the morning message and the big book, this assessment is not good.
ELEANOR: I want to use guided reading separate for some kids, not have to follow the whole thing. The workbooks are horrible. To give more fill-in-the-bubble means nothing to me. Instead of following the textbook theme I want to do more authentic stuff.
FRAN: Question. Time is up. Do we want to take a vote? Hand raise?
X: Can we say we will do, and take the money. In other words, could we take the money and not do it?
FRAN: My number one concern is the assessment.
FRAN: Who wants to do it full force? [no one]
FRAN: Who is for signing as an option: [7 vote in favor].
(Staff meeting notes, 4/20/04)

What I gathered they had voted for was that by saying yes, it would leave the option open for the school that would be opening in the fall to take it from them. As that school didn’t exist yet, it couldn’t apply for it, but as a new school, it may want the extra support of the grant and be willing to go along with the strings attached. The assumption was that they would be able to turn it down if it turned out the other school didn’t want it. Given the rushed nature, many seemed unsure as to exactly what they were saying yes to, but were willing to do so on the faith that they could get out of it, and not wanting to prematurely say no. It did appear that the principal did listen to the various concerns and attempt to get whatever information she could. As far as I could discern she was being open and transparent with the staff. While it appeared that she was in favor of voting yes in order to keep the option open for the other school, I did not sense any coercion on her part.

The next day she reported to the whole faculty on the issue during the regular staff meeting.
FRAN: I want to start out by thanking all the kinder, first, second and third grade teachers for their continued openness to this process. You had a four day week to make a decision about a large… Basically [we] got this possibility of being in a grant and all this money and [it seemed like] let’s go for it. … I have to say everyone asked very, very good questions time and time again. And the process was me calling [the district representative] and asking him, and he’d give me the answers and I’d go back to the staff. As of yesterday [we] still weren’t sure, because we’re leery about the accountability and the assessments, changing all the assessments. So we wanted to let the full staff know that the decision to participate in this three year grant, which is linked to the No Child Left Behind is that we decided to sign up as a participating in order to allow one of the new schools to participate. They couldn’t sign up as a school since they’re not a school yet. But we are not intending to participate in the Reading First grant because we saw the assessment binders. It precludes what we already do with students. It would mean that the data base that we already have created after one full year would be scrapped and a new data base and new assessments and an additional chapter test—

PILAR: I thought we agreed that we would participate depending on the… assessments are going to have with students If we opted out then that would allow another school to do that, right?

FRAN: Yeah. We are agreeing that we sign… We’re very, very leery about the assessments… The ratio already is, as you all know, as teaching to assessments, is kind of lopsided shall I say. And we do not want— the K-3 teachers do not want to be doing even more. And particularly the biliteracy teachers who are doing it in Spanish and English.

URSULA: I would also like to thank you because I went to the union meeting on Monday and I asked about Reading First and what’s the process and other building reps were there. And one of the building reps from [another] school said… it was imposed on their school with no teacher input at all. So I would really like to acknowledge the fact that we [got to decide]

[applause]

FRAN: But it really felt important to get everyone’s input… So because of the time line, it made the decision making process very awkward for all of us… I can’t remember who said it, but it’s like this (was it you, Pilar?) carrot dangling in front of us—money, money!—at a time where we really do need the money. But do we compromise our teaching in order to get the money?… So we’re still at an open place depending on the assessments.

(staff meeting, transcription, 4/21/04)

This was an instance where the staff was able to come together quickly and discuss an issue that could have a major affect on the teaching at the school and come to a common agreement. Where regular meeting time was not scheduled they were willing to give up their lunch time to meet. One thing that appeared to help was the common values about instruction. This meant that the disagreements were not about what they thought of
the program itself. There were a variety of opinions in regard to taking the grant. One teacher, claiming she represented her grade, felt they could adapt it to meet their needs. However, even there, she may not have been willing to if they were not allowed to adapt it, if they had to follow the textbooks page by page, and use all the assessments. The concerns appeared to revolve around that. The bilingual primary teachers were particularly concerned that it might force them to use grade level materials in English with second language learners who were still not ready to read in English at grade level. All the objections that were raised related directly to whether teachers felt it would interfere with good instruction. While some spoke more than others, and some had a harder time being heard as they were not as forceful at jumping in to the conversation (the going around in a circle did not last the full circle) people listened respectfully and never were any personal attacks made, nor did anyone appear to get defensive. As is evident from their statements, they appeared to be outspoken about their concerns and opinions.

The process used was majority vote, as far as I could tell. The principal did not attempt to come to a full consensus. Nor did it appear that she got one. At the full staff meeting she did not ask for another vote, but rather informed the staff regarding the decision. However, neither did anyone raise an objection. From what some staff members had related in interviews, this may have been a change from past years. No one raised the issue of the process used.19

Conclusions

Caesar Chavez has created a variety of forums for teachers to collaborate professionally and take leadership over professional development issues. While the founders envisioned being a professional development school from the start, and valued a collaborative culture, it took the school many years to create the structures to support that

19 The following year, as their test scores did not meet the NCLB targets, the district mandated that they take the grant, and use the text books verbatim and give all the assessment. It was a mandate that further demoralized many of the teachers as they saw it undoing the powerful curriculum they had been developing over many years. One wonders what this does to their willingness to put in the extra time and effort to collaborate on curriculum development under such circumstances.
culture. One of the first structures put in place was the restructured days to give the teachers a consolidated block of time to work together. This was also a fairly common move among schools in California in that period. Common or not, teachers did mention that they felt it was an important step that allowed them to use their time more effectively. They also saw it as sending a message that this work was valued.

The grade level collaboration days, in which teachers were freed from instructional duties, was even more significant. This allowed the teachers to engage in sustained collaborative work without adding to their workload. Again it sent a strong message that the school would put its resources into the areas that it claimed were important — collaborative professional development.

Caesar Chavez faced a major difficulty as standardized test scores and the threat of sanctions placed limits on its ability to be flexible and autonomous when making certain important decisions. For many years teachers felt the freedom to develop curriculum within a fairly broad outline of state standards. The pedagogy, strategies, and focus of the curriculum came out the collaborative work. For years they had also worked on using a thematic approach that took seriously the idea of a multicultural, anti-racist curriculum. While the extent of its full implementation in the classrooms was varied, and probably still in the beginning stages in many, if not most, classrooms, it was generally accepted as a shared goal.

That focus has been largely lost, especially this year. Teachers feel they must direct their instruction more narrowly to teaching the specific skills that will be on the district and state standardized tests. Certainly the discussions in collaboration meetings reflected this focus. Virtually no time was directed to multicultural, anti-racist or thematic instruction — areas that in past had been central to the collaborative work. The focus on instructional practice during the collaborations I observed was predominantly on strategies to enhance specific literacy and mathematical skills, and as well as English as a second language in order to enhance assessment scores. While the collaboration continued (although reduced due to budget cuts) the agenda of that collaboration had been to a large degree co-opted by decisions made outside of the school, at the state or district level.
A further limitation was that of time. Several of the issues discussed here were left unresolved, only treated superficially, or never made it to the whole school arena. Lack of cross-grade articulation was raised as something many teachers wanted more of, but had no time for. The size of the school is related to these, as more cross-grade and whole school can be combined in a smaller school. Also the additional need for a key planner structure, with those additional meetings can be eliminated in a small school.

Teachers have also been included in the school governance. Several years ago I was told that the staff had received training in consensus decision making and that this model had been used for making staff wide decisions. Either due to a change in administration, the pressures of testing, or both, such procedures were not in evidence during my year of observation. Again, as the autonomy over many curricular decision became circumscribed, there are less places that the school can be involved in making the important decisions. I did see aspects of the consensus model in the use of the fist-of-five\(^{20}\) during key planner meetings, and a spirit of including the staff in decisions when possible during staff meetings.

All of these various structures have been used to support the culture of collaboration that the founders of the school sought to build. None of these alone would be enough. Each one fulfilled a particular aspect of the school culture. Given the limitations imposed on Caesar Chavez because of its large size, and pressures of standardized testing, Caesar Chavez continued to work to create a culture where collaboration and shared decision-making was taken seriously.

\(^{20}\) Fist-of-Five is a technique for a quick check on the level of consensus. How many fingers one puts up shows the degree of agreement with the decision under consideration. It is like a show-of-hands, but with gradations of agreement.
CHAPTER SIX: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

Introduction

Many educational researchers and school reform advocates have come to the conclusion that schoolwide professional communities are essential for successful, effective schooling (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann & Associates, 1996). Despite the research supporting this conclusion, and the number of schools that claim to aspire to such goals, schools with established, well functioning schoolwide professional communities are rare. One pitfall that schools encounter in their attempt to develop such communities is the difficulty in effectively working through the conflicts and differences to make decisions collectively (Achinstein, 2002; Letgers, 1999; Lonnquist & King, 1993). This chapter develops a cross case analysis of the similarities and differences of how two schools managed some important decisions and issues that arose during the time of the study. In particular this chapter examines how the structures and cultures of these schools interacted to effect the decision making process.

In this chapter, I compare the cases of New Initiatives Charter School and Caesar Chavez Elementary School in order to answer my research questions. I look at how each school is structured to allow teachers to work together and make decisions together, the culture that was created around how dissent and differences of ideas are handled, and how each school managed several instances of conflict or decision making that arose. It will be important to remember as I go through the various factors that, while I refer to them separately, they are all interrelated and in some ways interdependent.

The findings discussed in this chapter include:

- **The school culture** influences the way dissent and conflict is managed. Schools have norms of acceptable forms of expressing differences, as well as levels of acceptance on expression of differences, especially regarding shared values. Where expressions of dissent can be heard it appears that better decision can be achieved.

- **Structures and procedures**: Delineated structures for raising and discussing issues enhance the ability of the community to work through issues effectively.
as they arise. Clear procedures for discussing these issues and procedures for coming to a decision that encourage all voices to be heard make it more likely that decisions will be made based on the best information and be accepted by the community. The kinds of structures will depend on other factors in the school, such as size of faculty and time available to meet.

- The level of **trust** influences the ability of the community to effectively manage differences of opinion. Building trust takes time with respect to both the history of the community and frequency of interaction. Trust is earned in the context of doing the important work. The structures of the school can limit or enhance opportunities to build that trust.

- It appears to be easier to make effective decisions in **smaller schools**. Getting to know and trust all members can be easier in a smaller community. All members are likely to have a more direct role in decision making in a smaller school, and therefore a greater sense of ownership of those decisions.

- Making effective decisions takes **time**. First it takes time to build trust. Then, without sufficient time, issues cannot be discussed in depth and alternatives cannot be explored fully. Without time, it is difficult to even get some issues on the table. And if meetings occur too infrequently, progress made at one meeting may get lost before the issue can be raised again.

- Effective collaboration suggests a need for a **balance** between a group of people who share values and get along together well enough to move issues forward, and a diverse enough group that there will be a variety of viewpoints and perspectives.

- All of the above variables are **interrelated and interdependent**. Each factor influences and is likely to be influenced by the others, and therefore the variables that affect the decision making process should be considered as a whole, and not in isolation.

- The **policy environment** influences the ability of schools to make effective decisions. This is particularly true in terms of the autonomy the school has to make the important decisions, such as over who to hire, what curriculum to use, and how students and teachers are to be held accountable.

Decision making effectiveness is correlated to an inherent dialectic of the decision making process. The two poles of this dialectic are somewhat idealized in Achinstein’s (2002) framework of conflict avoidant and conflict embracing communities. Too much conflict can destroy a community, yet too little probably means dissent is being stifled, or the community is not open to change. Too much diversity, especially in terms of
educational beliefs, means the schools cannot move forward collectively. Too little diversity, and important assumptions may never get questioned. How each school negotiates this tension is explored below.

Both New Initiatives and Caesar Chavez had excellent reputations among local school reform advocates. The stated missions of both schools were similar. Both mission statements expressed a commitment to professional collaboration, ongoing professional development built on in-house leadership, shared decision making, equity and excellence in working with a traditionally low-performing student population, and a belief in the positive attributes of bilingualism and multiculturalism.

The two schools had established structures to facilitate ongoing teacher collaboration as well as ongoing professional development. Both schools consciously fostered a culture of collaboration. Both schools established procedures for making decisions in a democratic fashion. However, each school differed in the way they enacted these structures and acted on these beliefs.

Both schools confronted some similar issues. They were confronting possible sanctions based on low scores on state standardized tests. The two schools also had questions about how best to structure their bilingual programs.

In this chapter I compare the ways the two schools were organized to foster collaboration in relation to the factors elaborated above. I also compare how each school reacted to similar situations. Then I examine the effectiveness of the key decision outlined in the case studies in light of these factors and what is known about effective decisions making. Finally, I look at what these differences can tell us about successfully handling issues in which there is likely to be contestation.

Culture

Shared Values

As has been highlighted in much of the literature on school reform, a strong sense of shared values and shared mission among school staff is important when it came to
discussion on important issues and coming to decisions on those issues. Both schools in this study demonstrated this strong sense of shared values and mission.

The fact that these schools were fairly new, both having a substantial number of original staff, helped them maintain the strength of their original visions. More important, both schools were founded with a vision in mind. The average public school does not open with a strong stated vision or mission, beyond truisms such as “all children can learn.” Both of these schools were founded with the mission of collaboration and ongoing professional development as a goal from the start. As schools serving predominantly low-income Latino students, they also both believed that they must make issues of educational equity, social justice, bilingualism, and biculturalism priorities. Each school defined its identity differently depending on how it prioritized those values.

The idea that teaching is a collaborative effort was one of the central tenets of New Initiatives. Teachers who left the school because of differences over beliefs often left because their own teaching style or philosophy was in conflict with this emphasis on collaboration — and the time and effort such collaboration takes! The school was fairly tolerant of a wide variety of pedagogical ideas in practice. As Daniel remarked, “We have the freedom to try out new things based on having valid reasons” (Daniel interview 5/14/03). However, if one did not want to plan together with one’s grade level, that raised tensions. “Those teachers left over time. They wanted to do their own thing. ‘Own thing’ doesn’t really fly around here” (Connie, interview, 10/16/03).

The dual immersion program intensified this, with the sharing of students. At New Initiatives the teachers felt that this makes virtually daily communication necessary, as well as a very tight coordination of curriculum. It was this tight planning that was the main focus of most of the grade level release days at New Initiatives. All the teachers at a grade level, at least within the grades that were full two-way immersion, had the same basic daily schedule and attempted to cover close to the same curriculum, although they varied somewhat in how they carried it out, and certainly had their own style.

At Caesar Chavez, while teachers worked together by grade level, the coordination of scheduling and curriculum was much more informal. As one Caesar Chavez teacher remarked, “We have grade level meetings… I’d say less than once a
month. So usually it’s with one or two other people, maybe three, or something” (fourth/fifth grade teacher, interview, 5/25/04). According to Alice, this “doesn’t mean the you and [the other teacher] will both be teaching math at the same hour…” (Alice, third grade collaboration meeting, 4/22/04). Even in those cases where teachers shared students in the two-way immersion strand, teachers at Caesar Chavez did not feel as intense a need for constant collaboration as at New Initiatives. When asked about planning with the teacher she shared students with, one teacher explained it this way: “It took a lot of setup time initially… We meet periodically, just to kind of stay on track… But we don’t seem to have to meet very much…. like maybe a half an hour once a week” (Ursula, interview, 4/1/04).

These different emphases were reflected in the varying amount of time each school dedicated to structured collaboration. As the founding members saw collaboration as a central feature of the new school, they designed the schedule to help create that culture. New Initiatives had substantially more time that teachers were required to work together, both as grade level teams and as a whole school. In the hiring process they actually developed a simulated task in which candidates had to demonstrate their ability to work together collaboratively.

While both schools had a strong collaborative culture, interdependency was much stronger at New Initiatives. This was especially made true by the dual immersion program where teachers actually shared students. Interdependency refers to the idea that teachers do not view students as belonging to individual teachers, but to the community as a whole. Therefore what happens in any one classroom is everyone’s business.

New Initiatives’ other main shared vision was around pedagogy. They had a stated belief in constructivist or project-based curriculum. “Philosophically it sounded like it was going to be child centered, with more integrated curriculum” (Connie, interview, 10/30/01). This was actualized through New Initiatives’ prioritizing of professional development. Grace, New Initiatives’ principal, made training in project-based curriculum a priority. A major criterion in deciding on learning strategies and curriculum was that it fit within this philosophy, such as the decision to use and provide weekly professional development in Understanding by Design.
Caesar Chavez focused much more on issues of equity, social justice and multiculturalism in defining their shared values. There was evidence of this in how they used their professional development resources. For many years they had ongoing professional development specifically focused on multiculturalism and developing multicultural curriculum. “[Our consultant] helped us move [forward] in questioning the superficiality of equity and promote the value of multicultural” (Regina, interview, 5/11/04).

Having these shared values made it easier to move forward effectively. As illustrated in the case studies, discussions were over means rather than desired end. At New Initiatives when they felt the bilingual program was not working, the question was not should we have such a program, but what the ideal program should look like. The shared value in bilingualism and biculturalism meant that they were working toward a common goal and the discussion was about the best road to get there. “We felt strongly that we wanted to continue a dual immersion program… The alternative was a traditional bilingual program… but no one seriously wanted to do that” (Susan, interview, 11/27/01).

The conflict with the consultant at New Initiatives was similarly situated. The staff saw her style as conflicting with the shared norms of the school. Again, the conversation became what changes the consultant could make in order to sustain shared norms of discourse. The discussion was not over whether they agreed on the norm, or whether they valued her expertise; it was centered on how they could gain from her expertise without sacrificing their norms.

We wanted to really have a positive approach to fix it and help improve things knowing that Debbie was an invaluable resource for us and had really helped us focus quite a bit. And every single person recognized the fact that she brought a very needed focus to the staff and really appreciated those positive qualities and her knowledge. So then after that our next steps we thought we should go to the principal and say, “This is what’s happening and this is what people are thinking and these are the positive steps we’d like to move forward with.” (Susan, interview, 1/26/04)
In the issue of what to do about the threats posed by their low test scores, there was agreement on their beliefs about teaching, yet also a belief that they needed to make some compromises to their ideals to address the reality of the threat.

We don’t want to get our charter taken away, we don’t want to get closed down. We still want to be here for our kids in the neighborhood. This is something that we have to face. We’re trying to do it in a way where we’re not taking away all the other things that we like, like hands on learning and things like that. We’re trying to balance it so we can do both. (Sarah, interview, 12/3/03)

In all three examples, the teachers identified a threat to the school. They came to common agreement about the threat. The question then became how to manage the threat. In all three they were able to reach consensus about next steps to work with the issue.

The values at Caesar Chavez also influenced how each of the examples of conflict was managed. This was clearest in the decision over the Reading First grant. The conversation was very much centered on whether the grant would force them to compromise their teaching practices. Since they had shared beliefs about what constituted good practice, this meant they were unlikely to disagree over whether certain aspects of the program would be good or not. Instead, differences were over to what degree the program would require them to compromise their practice, and the value of what was gained versus what was lost. In the case of the NCLB threat of sanctions, there was not so much a decision to make as much as a means toward how to best meet these demands. The shared belief that the emphasis on test scores is counterproductive again meant that staff disagreement was not about whether the changes in curricular focus were a good idea or not (there was agreement that the emphasis on tests were not good for student learning) but rather on how far to compromise in order to meet the requirements.

Similarly, the conflict around implementing the bilingual program was not in regards to whether the bilingual model was a good model, but rather over how to hold teachers accountable for upholding the model in practice.

In both schools conflicts centered not on disagreement over ends, but on means to those ends. This made finding a solution all could agree on more likely and, in general, increased the likelihood that the discussions would be productive (Cosier & Rose, 1977; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Jehn et al., 1997; van de Vliert & de Dreu, 1994). Since the ends
were agreed upon, it was a matter of finding the best means. That they could do so was in large part due to the fact that the schools had developed a strong sense of their vision and mission. They were able to select and attract teachers based on those beliefs, and they created a culture in which those who felt they did not conform to the vision of the school tended to leave over time.

Conflict Stance

A central dichotomy of Achinstein’s (2002) framework for analyzing dissent in professional communities is between conflict avoidance and conflict embracing. Achinstein posits that the embracing stance is more likely to lead to positive changes for teaching and learning, although it may be at the cost of a more stressful work environment. While it seems obvious that embracing problems rather than avoiding them is more likely to lead to positive solutions, it was not clear from my cases that confronting problems caused additional stress, at least for those who stayed. There did seem to be evidence of indirect stress caused by the extra time commitment required for collaborative decision making. I did not find any evidence however, that the decision making process itself was stressful. However, it is still useful to look at the ways each community took ownership of the issues presented in the case studies since ownership may affect the decision making process.

One variable that distinguishes conflict avoiding from conflict embracing communities is conflict ownership. At New Initiatives, in each of the three examples explored in this study, staff took ownership of the problem. Even in the case of the threat posed by standardized test scores, where the threat originated from outside the school, the staff saw the problem as their responsibility. First it was posed as a dilemma by the principal. She left the choice as to how to respond as a collective decision. During my visits I did not hear teachers complaining about the imposition of the tests. While they at times expressed that they did not like the tests or think they were good for teaching, they did not use this as an excuse to not prepare the students to do well on them.

In the case of the bilingual program, again there was no sense of blaming an outside force for the problem. There was some blame that it might have worked better if
certain teachers had upheld the program standards, but overall it was accepted that the problem lay in the model, and it was up to them to adopt or devise a better model.

In the third case of the problem with the staff developer, the staff came together to discuss the problem and offer solutions. While the solution turned out to be that the person left, the staff claims that this was not their aim. Their goal was to have the person work within the norms of the school.

This is not to say there was no evidence of any attempts to avoid taking ownership. There was an instance from a meeting to discuss how best to implement project-based curriculum in which some teachers began to complain about certain student behaviors and blame the home culture or families. However, even in this case, such blaming did not go unchallenged. In particular, the facilitator of the meeting brought the focus back to the teachers’ role in changing such behaviors. The teacher leading the professional development on *Understanding by Design* indicated a second example with the following remark. She mentioned that at times teachers would cite lack of resources as an excuse for not being able to implement the ideas presented:

> But then when it comes to planning the units and planning curriculum, a lot of times there are excuses, “Well we can’t do that because we don’t have the resources,” or “There’s not any books in Spanish so we can’t do that.” So I brought that up. That [it] is like an excuse to me because if you are saying they deserve it, they deserve it no matter what. (Monica, interview, 10/16/03).

Here again, she would challenge these teachers to move beyond these limitations. While occasional attempts to avoid ownership of problems were exhibited by individuals, the overall stance of the community was to take ownership of problems.

I also saw little evidence of conflict avoidance in an overt sense at Caesar Chavez. In two of the examples of issues at Caesar Chavez some of the conflict did originate from outside the school. As in the case of New Initiatives, the threat from NCLB did not originate from within the school. While there the staff did complain about the mandates, and also about the district’s role in enforcing those mandates, they did not use that to absolve themselves from doing what they could to meet the demands. When the district insisted that they show evidence of particular practices, the teachers used their collaborative time to work together to find the best way of displaying those practices.
Some staff meeting times were used to work together on sharing these common practices. Grade level release days focused particularly on this. This was an agenda item at virtually every key planner meeting. The focus in the grade level meetings I observed was on how to improve instruction.

These stances of ownership meant that in each case movement was being made toward positive engagement of the issues.

**Discourse**

The norms of discourse at New Initiatives were much more explicit than at Caesar Chavez. The New Initiatives norms of discourse almost appeared to be contradictory, but it was this tension that the staff felt led to healthy discussion. On the one hand was the explicit norm, written on their cards, of *Yakety yak, DO talk back*. On the other hand, there was a clearly expressed norm of non-confrontational discourse. This was part of what they attempted to screen for in the hiring process, and what they would attempt to enforce socially. Interviewees told of people leaving the school who were in conflict with the latter norm. “Sometimes it doesn’t work. The first two years were a real shake out of staff. Some came embracing the values theoretically, but practically speaking it didn’t fit their… style of communication” (Grace, interview, 2/28/02). Other staff who did stay mentioned being called on it themselves. “I was told rather strongly that that wasn’t okay [that I said] ‘sometimes people do things the wrong way,’ and the word wrong was wrong” (Silvia, interview, 11/10/03).

For the staff that stays at New Initiatives this approach appears to work. None of the staff I interviewed felt that there were issues that they could not raise. They did not always feel their issues got addressed the way they wished they would, but none said that there were issues they were not raising due to how they would be received. Neither did anyone say that they suffered any negative consequences for raising issues. If they paid a consequence, it was for how they raised the issue — confrontational or accusatory language was likely to provoke a negative reaction from other teachers. In the decisions I was able to observe and from the reports I received, it did not appear that this style got in the way of frank discussion or of exploring possible alternatives. On the other hand, the
contributions of those with a more confrontational style may have been suppressed. It is also possible that the norm of tight collaboration and non-confrontational style was connected to their difficulty attracting many experienced teachers. This lack of experience may have meant a loss of the knowledge that comes with that experience. However, those who have stayed do not express any sense of loss. This may be because they notice improved social relations without considering the possibility of lost viewpoints.

At Caesar Chavez there was not such a strictly held norm of discourse. One of the facilitators describes an interaction that she thought was out of hand, yet the teachers were able to work it out.

Then there was the attack — it was intense. And I was like, “Ohhh shit,” because it felt like one teacher who kind of heads the whole project got attacked…. Then I checked in with her at break and she was like, “No, it’s just who he is, I know who he is, it doesn’t affect me anymore.” … They were able to come back and finally say, “Okay, here is what we do.” (Patricia, interview, 3/9/04)

This does not mean that they were not aware of the need to consider how their ideas were expressed.

Only thing is some people are more vocal than others. Some people aren’t comfortable with political confrontation. So if there is a lot of vociferous discussion regarding an issue, some people can become uncomfortable even here… I think we try to address issues and that’s going to create disagreements by definition, because not everybody sees everything in the same way or has the same slant. When we reach the point where the dialectic has become dysfunctional, which on occasion it has, we usually get a directive from our administrator saying hey, we’re having a problem here, let’s be sensitive to other people and basically, in a nice way, back off. So that usually cools people out enough. Seems to work. Because they’re the ones that monitor. They’re the ones who create the dialectic and monitor it. It’s a healthy process here, thank god. I haven’t seen a lot of animosity between teachers over differing opinions about issues. But I think it’s really helpful that we were kind of hand picked for sharing the same social political vision more or less. (Martin, interview, 2/24/04)

I did observe instances where the principal expressed concern about the tone of discourse. Due to the morale issues surrounding the NCLB year three threats, the principal, Fran, was sensitive to the need for a positive attitude. To help create a more
positive attitude, she instituted a practice of starting meetings with people sharing successes or positive things that were happening in their classrooms (or respective jobs). At times, she went further with advice to generally use a positive tone.

Because of this negative piece [of being a school facing sanctions], we need to turn it around, and I need to turn my language around. And when people say, “How are you doing?” I need to say, “Great.” I need to say, “We are advancing our practice,” Like you were saying Lucia, “We are moving our students forward. We are working as a team. (Fran, Key Planner meeting, 11/3/03)

More to the point of decision making, I was told that when Donna was principal and they instituted consensus based decision making, the staff received training in consensus building. “We had to learn it, it was a whole process… It was a training” (Betty, interview, 4/5/04). Others mentioned that the facilitators were helpful when issues got tense between people. “It was pretty emotional. So it was nice to have like a facilitator” (Nicole, interview, 10/28/03).

Along these same lines, Martin emphasized how important it was to “talk to each other, keep the dialogue open. So I think that’s particularly valuable. Particularly with Patricia, who I think has been an exceptional facilitator for that process in the 2 1/2 years I’ve been here” (Martin, interview, 2/24/04). Alice explained that “There is an awareness that some grade levels would have a hard time going in any one direction without a facilitator” (Alice, interview, 6/1/04).

There are grade level collaborations. Those are well planned and prepped by a facilitator. That is the number one thing that has made collaboration successful. Teachers are not taught to collaborate in teacher preparation classes… By having facilitators, it helps in the activities that are planned…. Then we have cross grade level articulation. We find out what the grade before expects them to do, what the grade after wants them to come in with. This takes facilitation. If not done in such a way that leads to success, the grade level before might feel silenced if the other grade does not think that what they saw as important is important or play the blame game, blaming them for what the kids can’t or won’t do. So there is facilitation across grade levels. This also has to be facilitated. (Regina, interview, 5/11/04)

MEIER: So it’s the facilitation you think?
SELENA: I think so…. There is some points that we get stuck on…. If somebody else says it then we are able to hear it and you go, “Oh okay, that’s what you are saying.” [By] just having that one person that is just kind of bouncing off ideas, is really good. (interview, 3/24/04).
Caesar Chavez’s staff was, on average older and more experienced. It is possible that this also made them more likely to hold strong opinions about teaching, as well as more comfortable when strong opinions were voiced. While the hiring procedures at Caesar Chavez also screened for collaboration, as important or more important in attracting candidates to the school was their political stances on teaching—equity, and the socio-multicultural perspective. This more political stance may have also meant they were more comfortable with confrontational discourse.

In comparing New Initiatives and Caesar Chavez, not only were norms of discourse different, but also concerns around discourse. At New Initiatives the concern was how discourse style affected the ability of the staff to work together effectively to make decisions. At New Initiatives it was felt that confrontational discourse would interfere with others feeling comfortable expressing themselves and would lead to negative conflict. Therefore they attempted to hire people who would fit this style of discourse. Further, they were careful to monitor themselves and each other to hold to these norms.

At Caesar Chavez it was also understood that how people expressed themselves could lead to negative conflict. However they handled the issue differently. Years earlier one principal addressed it by having training in consensus decision making. Several teachers expressed that while at times others got emotional, they were able to not let it bother them, based on having built a relationship with the other. The major tool, however, that was mentioned as being effective for this purpose was the facilitators. No one mentioned any difficulty in expressing themselves or feeling upset by the way others expressed themselves. It appears that the facilitators served both to keep the conversations on track and to mediate conflict when it arose, allowing people to hear each other.

Hiring

The hiring process was very different at each school. New Initiatives used an innovative approach to hiring, focused on identifying candidates who would be team
players. They made an attempt to judge this in a somewhat authentic manner with the interviewees being set to work together on a group task. The entire staff was always invited to take part in the process, and the large majority always did so. This process made the whole staff feel that they were part of bringing the new staff members into the community. It gave them some sense and knowledge of who the new staff members would be before the new school year.

Caesar Chavez used a more traditional hiring procedure. There was a formal interview with a representative panel. However, like New Initiatives, until recently they were able to do site-based interviewing and selection of candidates. This allowed them to screen for applicants who shared their goals and values. Unlike New Initiatives, however, not all teachers were directly involved in the process or in selecting the candidates. They would have teacher representatives on the interview and selection committee. In their case, while being similar in terms of looking for people interested in collaboration and ongoing professional development, they placed more explicit emphasis on equity, social justice, and multiculturalism. “I wouldn’t even put them on my list [of people to interview] unless they could tell me that they received some sort of culturally relevant training… Activist teachers.” (Donna, interview, 6/21/05). It was also true of Caesar Chavez that many of their teachers came from within the district. Unlike New Initiatives this was not true just in their opening year (actually in the very beginning they had a large number of beginner, non-credentialed teachers); they continued to attract some of the strongest teachers over the years, and specifically some of the more activist teachers, due to their explicit emphasis on social justice and equity. While they had a seemingly less rigorous interview process — they did not have the multiple interviews nor the group process component that New Initiatives used — the interview committee was more likely to have other information on the interviewees, or know the candidates beforehand. It also meant that the staff at Caesar Chavez tended to be older and more experienced. “I tried not to hire too many beginners. This had [positive] consequences for academic achievement” (Donna interview 6/21/05). Because they were older and more experienced, with more politically explicit values, these teachers were likely to have stronger opinions about their teaching and politics, especially as they related to education.
This difference in age, experience, activist stance, and hiring procedure may have influenced the manner of discourse at the two schools. The explicit and implicit non-confrontational style at New Initiatives may have been easier to maintain due to these factors. Older, more experienced staff are more likely to have strongly held views about what is good teaching practice based on that experience. Because of their stronger views, they may be more likely to react strongly if their views are challenged. They may also be less willing to change their practice, more defensive if asked to change their practice, and more jealous of their autonomy. Thirdly, the team project process used at New Initiatives may eliminate candidates with strongly held opinions, as they may come off as not being good team players.

Structures and Processes

While it is important that the culture of the school supports effective decision making and dialogue, there need to be structures and processes in place to support this culture. Both schools created a variety of structures to foster a culture of collaboration. The schools were dedicated to site based management, and created structures for schoolwide decision making to take place. While they both created this time, they did so in different ways.

New Initiatives went further in how much time was designated for whole school collaboration and professional development. Caesar Chavez did not structure any time for teachers to meet outside of staff meetings and state-provided professional development days in their first years. It was only after a few years of the school’s existence that the restructured days came into being, providing a longer block of time once a week for teachers to meet in grade level groups. (It must be remembered that this time was not additional time, but a reorganization of time.) By lengthening the school day slightly on four days, they let the students out early on one day, allowing for a longer block of time on that day to meet collaboratively.

At New Initiatives, in an average month, there is the daily midday-block, for about 22 hours, plus the approximately five hours for the grade level planning days, for a total of 27 hours minimum of time that is organized for collaborative work of some sort.
or another for all staff. (The midday-block at New Initiatives was also not time away from teaching—it in effect lengthened the school day.) New Initiatives was also able to organize the schedule so that all teachers shared a common lunch period, further creating opportunities for teachers to socialize beyond their grade level, or beyond the primary/upper grade split that is common in many schools. Given their larger size and the need for students to have different eating times, this was not considered an option at Caesar Chavez.

At Caesar Chavez, every other week there were whole staff meetings for an hour and a half, and monthly grade level planning, plus the weekly restructured days, which allowed about two hours of collaborative time per week. This equals about 17 hours of total structured collaboration time per month. The key planners meetings involved about another four hours of meeting time per month. While in past years there were two half-days a month of grade level release time, the year of this study it had been cut back to one half day a month. In grade level group time, the two schools were fairly similar in the amount of designated meeting time. New Initiatives generally used one midday-block a week for grade level collaboration, equivalent to the weekly restructured days at Caesar Chavez. Where we see a qualitative difference is in whole school collaboration. Where Caesar Chavez met as an entire staff only every other week, and the intervening week was for key-planner meetings on whole school issues, New Initiatives could meet daily, and did meet at least three times a week, for whole school professional development, collaboration, and decision making. This difference could account for a stronger sense of ownership over decisions, and an easier ability to create a whole school culture of collaboration. It also meant that there was a stronger sense of community and collegiality among the staff as a whole, not just at grade levels.

While some structures are different, the two schools used the structures to accomplish many of the same things. And while some structures look similar, they may be used for different purposes. An example is the release time for grade level collaboration. Both schools designated about a day a month for grade levels to meet and collaborate during school hours through the use of substitute teachers (although at Caesar Chavez it had been reduced to one half-day during the year of this study). However the
way that time was used was different. At Caesar Chavez these grade level collaborations were facilitated by a non-classroom leader, and were focused on professional development, and to some extent long-term planning. As described above, the Caesar Chavez staff felt this facilitation was crucial. At New Initiatives, on the other hand, these collaboration days were focused on curriculum and lesson planning—often the day-to-day, or week-to-week work of staying aligned, deciding what to teach, and getting the materials ready. It was not that Caesar Chavez did not do any of this in grade level collaborations. Rather, this type of planning by grade levels was done during the weekly meetings on restructured days. It is also true that the culture of New Initiatives was one that encouraged following common curriculum much more than at Caesar Chavez. Teachers that wanted to “do their own thing” were encouraged to leave and teach elsewhere, which many did. This meant that at New Initiatives teachers found it necessary to spend more time planning as a team. While Caesar Chavez used the grade level release day for professional development, at New Initiatives this work was done during the midday-block. New Initiatives therefore had significantly more ongoing professional development—generally three days a week as opposed to the about twice a month at Caesar Chavez. New Initiatives also had more grade level planning time, as usually one of the midday-block periods a week was used for grade level meetings. Like the release days, these meetings were generally focused on planning.

Teachers at both these school believed that this time working together and engaging in common professional development enabled them improve their teaching. Teachers at both schools mentioned that by working together they used each other’s expertise to shorten the time it might take them to learn more effective ways to teach on their own. As this structured time working together was how and when the schools were able to create their sense of identity and build their common knowledge and vision.

At both schools, when grade level teams meet on their own, the focus is on the practical aspects of planning. In addition, professional development requires the leadership of someone outside of the grade level team itself whose job is specifically to lead such professional development.
It was the use of these structures that allowed each school the time and space to have the conversations and make the decisions on the important issues that confronted each community.

**Decision Making Structures**

The structures for decision making were very different at the two schools. Both schools believe in a democratic consensus model. However, at Caesar Chavez, I saw almost no major issues decided by the staff as a whole. In part that was due to the circumstances of the particular year I was there. However, for schoolwide issues, the main structure at Caesar Chavez was the key planners. This was a representative body consisting of a member from each grade level, a support staff person, and the administrators. Given the size of the staff, it is understandable that they would use such a representative system. A staff of 40 cannot easily have a single conversation, so this representative body allows for deeper conversation and discussion than would be possible by the staff as a whole. Besides this official body, the principal also regularly met with an unofficial leadership team made up of administrative and support personnel. It appears that this body, while not making final decisions, helped set the agenda for Key Planner and staff meetings.

New Initiatives, on the other hand, had no representative bodies. It also had fewer non-classroom teachers, a group that often acts as quasi-administrators. At New Initiatives, issues that pertained to the whole school were brought to the whole staff. For some issues, this was done through email. However, for most issues pertaining to curriculum or school programs, the discussions took place during the midday-block meeting time. This forum was used for all three issues addressed by the case study. When New Initiatives had to decide how to react to the threat posed by their low standardized test scores, they met as a staff during a midday-block meeting. They then used the midday-block time to engage in the professional development training to advance the plan they set. When teachers at New Initiatives were dissatisfied with the results of their bilingual program, the issue was raised at a midday-block meeting. In subsequent meetings a new plan was discussed and finally settled upon. When the teachers were
dissatisfied with the way some of them were treated by the professional development coach/consultant, they met during a midday-block meeting to discuss the issue. They spent two more meetings in follow-up. With the midday-block structure, all of this was able to happen in a week’s time.

While the issue of testing was addressed at staff meetings at Caesar Chavez, it was not to decide what to do, but to explain to the staff what they would have to do. The bilingual model was investigated and proposed by a committee, although the decision to implement was done through a whole school consensus process under the previous principal, Donna. When the issue arose during the year of this study, it was never raised at a whole school forum. It was only raised at one grade level during two consecutive collaboration days (a month apart) and at Key Planner meetings, once in the fall and once in the spring. At these meetings, again, the purpose was not so much to decide what to do, but to explain the parameters of the model and how to ensure that it was being faithfully followed. There is some evidence that in the past, under Donna’s leadership, there was more whole school decision making.

Consensus was a really good unifying approach that we had for several years there where we made decisions based on consensus, as a whole staff. And it really empowered teachers. I saw it empowering teachers…. I see what’s happened as we get away from that now. (Betty, interview, 4/5/04)

However, others expressed that the level of shared decision making was still growing.

I’ve seen [shared decision making] actually emerge, especially this year, I’ve seen it gradually develop since Donna was here… it keeps getting stronger as far as involving teachers’ input more and more into the decision making processes that happen here. (Patricia, interview, 3/9/04)

It appears that at New Initiatives teachers felt much more empowered to be part of setting whole school agenda items, and felt that issues they raised were likely to be acted upon. While there were issues that individual teachers felt were not being properly addressed, the issues described here were raised by teachers and were acted upon by the school. The Spanish language classes and the clash with the consultant were two such cases. At Caesar Chavez, on the other hand, there was no issue that was brought from the teachers themselves that I saw followed through on the whole school level. While as
grade level teams, the teachers felt empowered to influence the agenda and create and organize curriculum and instruction, classroom teachers not on the key planner team had less sense of whole school influence. The new, less experienced leadership at the school, as well as a more top-down management style coming from the new district leadership, combined with the state of emergency tone created by the possible sanctions around test scores, may have all been responsible for undermining the sense of empowerment among Caesar Chavez’s teachers.

The structures at New Initiatives were more likely to directly involve all teachers in schoolwide decisions, as well as grade level decisions. The structures at Caesar Chavez, while allowing input from all teachers, meant that direct input on many decisions was left to representatives. This meant that New Initiative teachers felt more ownership of school decisions.

**Decision Making Procedures**

Much of the literature on conflict management and decision making emphasizes the importance of the process that is used (A. C. Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). This literature speaks of the need to ensure that a variety of viewpoints are heard and that all voices are heard from (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Janis, 1982; Nemeth, 1986). There are also references to the advantages of consensus based decision making over majority rule (A. C. Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). Teachers at New Initiatives stated that they used and believed in a consensus model for decision making.

We’ve made decisions from the beginning of New Initiatives. We used to meet once a week before the school even opened and make decisions [by consensus]. It isn’t exactly the same as we do it now, but still pretty much the same where the whole staff we talk about it and have a meeting about it and we make a decision. (Saul, interview, 11/29/01)

On the other hand, this consensus model was an informal process. This informal aspect was part of the culture of the school. In other words, it was not informal because they had not gotten around to working out the details, but rather out of a belief that it worked better that way. In the passage below, Grace, the principal, indicates the incompatibility of New Initiative’s culture and formal decision making structures.
The decision making process becomes a system that’s around shared values. … How to get the formal structure and juxtaposition it to this organic synthesis of values that we have grown? I’m not saying it’s not possible. I just don’t know how. It’s hard. (Grace, interview, 2/28/02)

Their informal process was based on a trust that it would best allow for members to speak openly and easily. To them it meant the discussion was like a group of colleagues having a conversation.

There is no formal structure, like meeting called to order, keeping… taking votes or this is what we need to talk about and we’re going to take a vote, what we’re going to decide on after that. It’s usually talked about and then a conclusion is made or a decision is made after the talk. Sort of a discussion is summed up into what the main point was and that’s what we go with. (Daniel, interview, 5/14/03)

What I saw in action was that after such a discussion, Grace, the principal, would sum up what she saw as the consensus and what the next steps would be. I never heard anyone complain that she had misinterpreted or misused this power.

In many ways, while the teachers believed that the process was democratic and consensus based, they also saw Grace as being the ultimate authority and the boss—a position they did not resent.

The culture of Caesar Chavez also included a belief in site-based decision making based on a consensus model. The previous principal, Donna, worked on developing the consensus model. At that time the staff went through training in consensus building. This principal was seen as being a particularly visionary leader. She involved the staff in larger questions about the vision and mission of the school.

During my study of the school the exact process was less clear. When asked about the process, most teachers referred to the structure of the key planner group, and how decisions were made through that group. When the principal wanted to be sure she had a clear consensus of the key planner group, she would ask for the fist-of-five, a technique for seeing where each member stood. During the decision regarding the Reading First grant she used a majority vote. In general what I witnessed during Key Planner meetings was similar in practice to the informal conversation that I saw at New Initiatives, except
here it was with a smaller representative body. In both cases, at the end of a meeting they would have an understanding that they had come to an agreement.

Most researchers recommend having a well-structured and well-defined process (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Schweiger et al., 1989). However, there is good evidence that systems that these two schools used worked to a large degree for their respective communities, despite a lack of being well-defined. As has been discussed, it appears that both communities were able to come to effective decisions given their particular constraints, and that they did so in a way that allowed for a variety of ideas and dissenting opinions. The process at New Initiatives relies to a large extent on the high degree of trust in the principal and that people will speak up on their own. At Caesar Chavez there was a clearly expressed feeling of loss because of the sense that all teachers’ voices were not being heard in the representative model. The NCLB threat, new leadership at the district level, and a new principal combined to create a bigger problem: a progressively shrinking range of issues that teachers at the school were allowed to make decisions about.

To sum up, New Initiatives believed in an informal process for making decisions. This was a part of their culture of getting along, a sort of family-like sense of community. The size of the school made this stance possible to put it in action. Caesar Chavez had somewhat more formal structures, in part due to their size. In practice, the decision making process was often similar in terms of having discussions leading to an informal sense of consensus, even if less likely to be used in a whole staff setting. While those directly involved in the decision making process at each site seemed equally satisfied with this process and the decisions made, at Caesar Chavez, those not directly involved in the decision making process (due to its representative nature) sometimes felt less ownership decisions, or even a wariness about whether they were being fully informed about decisions.

Trust and Opportunities to Interact

I believe you need to first of all have trust that the other person… is going to do their absolute best that she can do to get those kids to where they need to be. That she is going to do her part in that. So first and foremost I think there has to be trust. (Elizabeth, New Initiatives, interview, 12/9/03).
Trust is seen as essential for a school to work together effectively by many school reformers (Bryk et al., 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman et al., 2000; Meier, 2002). As Bryk notes, “Social trust is … [a] key facilitating factor for professional community” (1999, p.757). This is especially true when dialogue concerns controversial issues. “Trust builds and participants feel comfortable raising sensitive issues and risking self-revelation” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). We have to trust that the other will not attempt to harm us. If we do not have trust we may not voice our opinion for fear that what we say will be used against us. Therefore communities that believe in shared decision making need to concern themselves with building trust among the members. In this section I will address how each of these communities created opportunities and structures for members to get to know each other in order to build that trust. I will conclude with a short discussion of how trust is connected to a sense of empowerment.

**Trust and Process**

In the previous section I discussed how New Initiatives used an informal process of decision making. What allowed this informal process to work? There are various factors. One important factor is trust. The school staff at New Initiatives was able to build a strong bond of trust among themselves, as well as having complete trust in the principal. Size again helped here. It is much easier to get to know each other well and build trust when there are less than 25 members of the professional community, as opposed to 40 or more. In addition, opportunities were provided for the staff to get to know each other to build trust. There were the monthly outings to get to know each other. The three-day beginning of the year retreat allowed the staff to bond both in the context of doing the work of planning for the school year, as well as having fun together. Furthermore, this retreat was an opportunity to restore and build on the common vision and mission of the school (and acculturate the new staff). The monthly outings allowed the staff to build the personal relationships in informal, fun settings. The common lunch time and several per week professional development meetings meant they also continued to meet as a whole staff to do professional work together on a regular ongoing basis.
Their mutual trust meant that they trusted that they all had the best interest of the students in mind, and that they shared similar values. It meant that even if they disagreed, their disagreement concerned how to reach a goal, not the nature of the goal itself. Staff trust in the principal meant that despite a lack of a formal process of coming to a vote, or lack of meeting notes, the staff trusted that Grace was able to sum up the consensus at the end of the discussion and that she would act in accordance with the wishes of the staff.

Caesar Chavez did not share those same advantages. The school was much larger. It was difficult to carry on a sustained conversation with the whole staff. Where such attempts were made, it was likely only a few people would get to speak. In whole staff meetings where the occasional issue was raised, it tended to be the same few teachers whose voices were heard. However, few attempts were made to have such conversations when it came to making school decisions during the year of my study. Because of the constraints of size and time, they used the representative system of the Key Planners. There were also fewer opportunities for the whole staff to work as a whole. The year I was there, there were about two full-staff meetings a month. However, often there was little interaction at these meetings, as they were focused on having information presented to the staff. “The Tuesday meetings were largely informational” (Alice, interview, 6/1/04). When there was active participation, the teachers were often divided into grade level groups, the level where they already knew each other best. The whole staff only worked together about once a month during extended professional development times on the restructured Tuesdays. Even here, however, they often worked in grade level teams, though a few times they did have an opportunity to work across grade levels, an opportunity many very much appreciated due to its rarity. Teachers often expressed the trust they had for their grade level team. They did not explicitly speak of trust on the schoolwide level. What they expressed is that they believed that those who stayed shared the school’s vision and mission — they believed, trusted, that the staff of the school were working toward the same goal. However, teachers tended to know each other best at grade level. Compared to New Initiatives, there were far fewer opportunities to build relationships outside one’s grade level. Therefore, the sense of trust was probably not as strong or pervasive at Caesar Chavez. The trust in the principal was certainly not as high
and unquestioned at Caesar Chavez compared to New Initiatives. This was due to a large degree to it being only her second year, and because she was following in the footsteps of a highly regarded predecessor. This was exacerbated by the fact that the school was under severe pressures from the district and had lost some of its decision making autonomy, due to the threat of sanctions as well as new district leadership. The coincidence of the new principal’s leadership with the sense among the teachers that they were having to compromise their vision meant that it was hard to see her as being the visionary leader they felt the previous principal had been. In grade levels, where teachers had worked together over a period of time, especially for more than a year, there was a high level of trust. It was evident that those grade levels where the team had been together longer were able to have more in-depth conversations, and take some of the work to a further level of development.

The lack of full trust in the leadership at Caesar Chavez was apparent in some issues that arose. While it was only one teacher, a lack of trust was evident when that teacher questioned whether there was a hidden agenda in regards to the bilingual program. This lack of trust meant that the grade level team could not move forward without spending substantial time attempting to reassure this teacher that there was no hidden agenda. While for the most part the teachers were satisfied with the process of decision making, and felt the school had a system of shared decision making, there was some hesitation or doubts about its transparency or inclusion. Several teachers mentioned a lack of trust that they were being fully informed about what was going on in Key Planner meetings. Another teacher expressed that the use of some of the restructured days for whole school trainings was an expression of a lack of trust by the district that the teachers would use this time wisely.

I think there has been a lack of trust about how we are going to use our restructured days… Now eating into our prep time and kind of regimenting us into the cafeteria to sit and listen to somebody for two hours instead of actually meeting with your colleagues. (Ursula, interview, 4/1/04)

At New Initiatives the high degree of trust in their principal, who they saw as having the official power in the school, meant that that the staff felt empowered. They trusted that they could speak freely of their concerns to her, and that she would take those
concerns seriously. This did not mean they believed they would always get their way, or she would always act in the way they wished, but that she would listen. A clear instance of this was when the staff went to Grace regarding the problem they were having with the staff developer. They trusted that she would take their concerns seriously and act on them. They found that she earned that trust. Mostly they trusted that she was always acting in the best interests of the school.

In large part, the size of New Initiatives and the fact that there was no need for representative meetings added to the higher level of trust at New Initiatives. The high degree of trust that the principal had earned over many years added to that. This strong trust in the principal and in each other made decision making smoother. Where there is a higher degree of trust teachers feel less concerned about the process and are more likely to be satisfied with informal arrangements. When that trust starts to break down, one hears more concerns about the process, as was expressed in Caesar Chavez. The trust level appeared to be high enough in both places that everyone claimed they felt safe to speak honestly.

Time

When teachers speak of the difficulty of teaching in general, and complain specifically about the extra work required in schools attempting to enact shared decision making and collaborative practices, lack of enough time is often a key issue. Research indicates that a new or restructuring school needs three to five years to mature and for the reforms to take hold (Grossman et al., 2000; Stokes, 2001). This was one reason I picked the schools I did. Both had been developing their character as schoolwide professional communities for many years. Like any good school they were always making changes. However they had been developing their cultures long enough to feel that the culture of collaboration and shared decision making had taken firm root.

The time factor can be divided into two aspects for the purposes of this analysis. One is that it takes time to get to know one another and build the trust necessary to do the hard work together. The second is that to make good decisions takes time. Without enough time discussions get cut short, and not everyone gets heard. Issues are dealt with
only superficially or do not get fully investigated. Linda Darling Hammond (1997) in her book *The Right to Learn* recommends 10 hours a week of collaborative time.

Time can also be looked at in terms of overall length (i.e. number of years people have known each other and worked together) as well as a fixed quantity within the work week (as in how many hours per week are allotted for group collaboration and decision making). Both of these have been found by researchers to be important for building strong communities and for making good decisions. I will now examine how time was a factor in these two schools.

**Time to Build Trust**

In interviews with teachers at both schools they often referred to the time it took for their grade level teams to build the relationships, levels of trust and knowledge of each other’s quirks and habits to work together effectively.

The following passages from interviews with Caesar Chavez teachers highlight this point:

I think [the relationships] had to be cultivated. You have to get to know your colleagues before you’re going to [open up]. I think one of the keys is that the group of people that you work with, there is some stability in that group over a period of a few years. The first year that I moved from third grade to second grade, and I really didn’t know the second grade teachers at all, was hard.

(Ursula, interview, 4/1/04)

One thing about collaborating is that every time you have a new team, I’ve noticed it takes us at least a year to work smoothly together. And then always -- our first year our planning sessions are long, we do a lot of discussion, we sort of iron out everyone’s individual styles. And then our second year goes much smoother. Then by our third year if we’re on the same team it’s very easy, we know each other’s thoughts… I think it’s the trust. The trust and the friendship and just working with someone for so many years that you know that you can work it out. It’s not going to be something that — it’s not going to be resentment held against you. And then the other team members where there and trying to cool down the situation. “Well, you know, I think we’re all under a little too much stress here” (Veronica, interview, 3/25/04)

The New Initiatives teachers made similar remarks:
The first couple of weeks we got together, we couldn’t even decide what color
to make flyers that we were giving out…. We were like, wow, this is going to
be a long road. I remember it getting to the point where we were finishing each
other’s sentences as far as just a group that had worked together for nearly the
last 2-1/2 years…. It was such an amazing process to come to that point.
(Elizabeth, interview, 12/9/03)

I think [camaraderie] kind of builds…. Your friendships are built on more
things than just work. You start having memories together; you start having
some inside jokes. [It] just builds a friendship, a family, a team. It just takes a
while to do that. (Daniel, interview, 5/14/03)

This process cannot be accelerated. Many policy makers often want to see results
after one or two years (or sooner!). As was detailed in the above section on trust, trust
cannot be declared, it needs to be earned over time.

To create this then takes two factors. One is stability. Though it is unclear what
price they paid for their lack of a stable staff, this was definitely a factor at New
Initiatives, although turnover is an issue at many, if not most, urban schools. New
Initiatives had a substantial stable faculty from the original founding group. This group
was very close, had those shared memories, and had built that strong bond of trust.
However, another half of the staff was fairly new, and had to become part of that group.
Although the school went out of their way to provide opportunities to help make this
happen, such as the monthly outings, as well as the substantial time they worked together,
it was not always easy.

Here when I first came, I felt like an outsider. You feel left out… even though I
tried to go to events, I felt like a stranger in an already formed family. I was a
guest. As they got to know me I felt better. As someone new would feel like I
didn’t belong and might look for a new job…. It is somewhat of a closed
community…. It was hard (Jacqueline, interview, 3/15/04)

Although it didn’t seem to be as serious an issue at Caesar Chavez, one teacher,
specifically in the context of the time it took to do the collaboration, raised the issue of
turnover.

That might be why we have high turnover, we do get a bit burnt out. We are
feeling the pressure of it and the pressure keeps increasing. So it does take
time. We feel the payback pretty high. But, it’s also hard. It’s a lot of our own
time (Idalia, interview, 5/24/04)
This turnover, as well as teachers moving between grade levels, is going to have an effect on the time it takes to develop as a grade level team as new teachers become part of the mix. Caesar Chavez also provided time for teachers to build relationships, although the majority of this was in grade level teams. They did have the normal time in staff meetings, professional development days, and the occasional social gatherings that most schools have. It was in grade level teams that significantly more time was provided—through the weekly restructured days and the monthly release days.

[In the beginning] we met together, but it was difficult. Then as the model itself and funding began to take flight and we got some other things in there to be able to allow us to meet in a way that wasn’t totally exhausting, it started to work a lot better. (Ursula, interview, 4/1/04)

This sense of being a collaborative team also increased the time they spent working together informally.

I find that we collaborate during lunch, for anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes here and there. We collaborate after school from anywhere from a half an hour to an hour. (Eleanor, interview, 3/16/04)

These schools were able to provide time for their teachers to meet together in order to establish the relationships necessary to do the collaborative work. While at Caesar Chavez this was much stronger at the grade level, New Initiatives had been able to create the time at the whole school level as well. As has been discussed throughout, this facilitated the making of decisions as a full faculty.

*Decision Making and Time*

In general it is simpler for one person to make a unilateral decision. However, group decision making is more likely to make a better decision as more ideas and possibilities can be presented (the old, “two heads are better than one”). An equally important factor for schools is the theory that those involved in the making of a decision are more likely to faithfully carry out the decision. However, collaborative decision making is considerably more time-consuming. The question becomes, where do we find the time to do this effectively in the already busy lives of teachers? As one teacher at
Caesar Chavez put it, “A part of it is time. How do you structure that kind of time?” (Idalia, interview, 5/24/04). A New Initiatives teacher asked, “How do you struggle with these issues when you are teaching kids everyday?… That’s the crux of the problem” (Nancy, interview, 1/31/02).

Each school created its own ways to handle the issue of time and decision making. As is alluded to in some of the previous quotes, the time required to do this took its toll on teachers. While the time was structured into the work schedule, in reality most of this was done by adding on to the length of the workday.

New Initiatives created the midday-block. This block of time meant that everyday there was structured time to meet. That time could be, and was, used for grade level planning, for professional development, for some of the required administrative bureaucratic announcements, as well as doing the work of making collaborative decisions. (However, this time added an hour on the teachers’ workday.) This extensive time meant that when they had to solve an issue they could do so in an intensive and timely fashion. This was illustrated in all three of the examples from the case studies. When they finally decided to confront the problem they were having with the consultant, they were able to call a meeting within the week. The two follow-up meetings happened the following week, all without having to create extra meeting time. This was true of the bilingual issue as well. When it was clear that it needed to be discussed it could be quickly made the agenda of a meeting. When staff members were ready to report on their findings from readings or visiting other schools, they could use any of the midday-block times for that week. This meant that important issues could be resolved in a more timely fashion without having to either create extra meetings, or wait weeks to follow up. It also created more flexibility, because since the time was not as limited, if something suddenly came up, it could be fit in without feeling like some scheduled item would be lost.

Even with this time, one teacher felt that more long-term, philosophical issues were not addressed.

Now we have a certain amount of time. But it’s never enough to come to those kinds of revolutionary things where everybody’s ideas are honored and truly a reflection of the kids and the teachers. [For that] you have to spend a lot of time sitting on couches, drinking wine and talking. You have to brainstorm… You
have to throw incredible ideas all over the place, and that takes time and there’s never enough time. (Nancy, interview, 1/31/02)

Caesar Chavez has structured its time for making whole school decisions differently. There is some evidence that during the tenure of Donna as principal, the school engaged in more whole staff collaboration around issues of developing their values, mission and programs, using staff meetings to do so. During the year of this study, whole staff meeting time was used for informational purposes, some professional development, and only to a small degree, making schoolwide decisions.

The time we have for staff development outside of those staff development Tuesdays once a month and then our weekly staff meetings, it’s pretty minimal. So there could be more. There could be a lot more collaboration to articulate a school vision, to deal with school wide issues. That would be great. (Martin, interview, 2/24/04)

Given the size of the staff, and the limited time to meet, Caesar Chavez went to a representative system. This group met generally every other week, though if there was a pressing matter, they would schedule extra meeting time.

It was in these Key Planner meetings that there was depth to the discussions regarding whole school issues. During the year of this study, those were to a large degree around how to best respond to the district visits and to the threat of sanctions. This conversation was ongoing and, as we saw, resulted in some degree of taking the initiative in terms of those district visitations. However, it meant other issues were given less priority. For instance, the bilingual issue, while raised in the fall, was not raised again until the spring. To handle the issue of the Reading First grant, a special lunchtime meeting had to be called. This was due to the extremely short time line the school was given to make a decision, and to the fact that within that time frame there was no regularly scheduled meeting time that could accommodate the necessary discussion of the issue.

Because of the time line, it made the decision making process very awkward for all of us. And so I wanted all of you to know that I think we did a really good job of listening to everything and staff asked excellent questions. (Fran, staff meeting, 4/21/04)
Because of the school’s culture, teachers expected to be heard, and this meant that most teachers that would be affected by the grant did attend this meeting.

Time is crucial in order to make good decisions. Without adequate time, people may get left out of the decision, decisions may be made without a full discussion of the possibilities and gathering all the data, or the decision making process may drag on without coming to a resolution and decision.

Size Matters

Size has been referred to multiple times in all of the above sections. Size is a factor that research indicates plays a central role in the success or failure of schoolwide professional communities (Bryk et al., 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann & Associates, 1996). While Caesar Chavez was able to sustain most of the attributes of an effective schoolwide professional community the evidence demonstrates that its size has made this task more difficult.

Staff size impacted the type of decision making structures that were created at each school. At New Initiatives all schoolwide decisions were made with the full faculty present. Caesar Chavez has about fifty percent more students and classrooms, and seventy percent more teachers. At Caesar Chavez most decisions were delegated to a representative body.

The organization in turn affected the culture of the school in terms of teachers’ sense of connection to the decision making process. That Caesar Chavez used a representative body meant that there was less of a sense of ownership of schoolwide decisions. Those on the committees or key planners felt very much an ownership of those decisions. Classrooms teachers not serving on the key planners had less of a direct stake in those decisions.

One of the key planners discussed the dilemma this way:

If I wasn’t a key planner I probably wouldn’t find out about half of the things that I do. I feel like that is information that I need to know. I’m not always going to be in key planners…. I’m going to miss out on a lot of stuff that is important. (Selena, interview, 3/24/04)

And a teacher not on key planners had this to say,
I’m sure there are things that [as] teachers we’re not involved enough in. But I feel like we’re involved enough. I’m not like that kind of teacher. Like I just kind of stay low. Below the radar. But I feel like, hey, if I wanted to get into it, have my voice heard, I’d take care of it. (Nicole, interview, 10/28/05)

Nicole’s remark indicates an ambivalence between feeling that she may be being left out of important decisions, yet not really wanting to put in the extra time and energy such involvement would take. She also trusts that if she did want to have a say, the process is open for her to do so. However, there is a cost to that. By not participating, this person may not feel the same commitment to the decisions that are made.

The larger size also meant that Caesar Chavez teachers did not build the same level of relationships outside of their grade level, and therefore the same level of trust among all the members of the larger community. New Initiatives’ size and the supporting structures meant that it was not hard for all the staff to build some level of personal relationships.

New Initiatives made schoolwide decisions with all staff members participating. In all three examples elaborated in the New Initiatives case study, the whole staff was part of the process. This even included hiring new staff members. Most professional development was whole school as well, making it more likely that their was cross grade articulation of the curriculum. Lunchtime was shared across all grades. A level of bonding and group cohesion is developed in the very work of making these decisions together. At Caesar Chavez, while the whole staff was informed about what was happening with the NCLB threat of sanctions, decisions on how the school would respond were mostly left up to the key planner group. Grade level teams then decided how they would adjust their teaching and curriculum to meet these demands. The bilingual issue was brought up at key planners and at one of the grade level teams, but never at a whole school forum.

Most importantly the smaller size and therefore whole school inclusion in decision making meant that all staff felt a higher level of ownership and inclusion in decisions that were made.
Architecture

While both schools were founded on the idea of collaboration, at New Initiatives this included the architectural design, something the Caesar Chavez staff was not able to influence. At New Initiatives, the architectural design meant that classrooms were visible to each other. It also meant that there was a common space where teachers were likely to run into each other. That their desks were next to each other also encouraged teachers to communicate, even if informally, with each other. At the end of the day, or on a break, all they had to do was turn around, or look across the great room to communicate with each other. The architectural design itself meant that New Initiative teachers had more contact with each other, and could even observe each other in practice, as a natural, and almost unavoidable, part of the day. All of this contributed to greatly decreasing the sense of isolation from other adults that teachers often feel. Since they have more natural contact, they get to know each other better. This ability to know each other well increases the sense of trust, crucial for working through difficult issues. At Caesar Chavez teachers are unlikely to run into each other outside of organized meeting times or common breaks. Some teachers made a point of working with other teachers on an individual basis after school. While the collaborative culture supported this, it was not built into the architecture of the school. It also meant that this collaboration was likely to be built on a self-selection process (generally within grade levels), meaning teachers were likely to work with those they already felt comfortable with.

Dialectic of shared values vs. diversity

One of the central issues for effective collaborative decision making is the tension between needing a diversity of ideas, and yet having a shared vision and values so that there is a sense of moving toward a common goal. This tension was evident at both schools, though each handled it in different ways.

New Initiatives put a high priority on hiring for their shared culture of collaborative work and norms of collaborative discourse. Those uncomfortable with these norms either left the school over time or were not hired in the first place. They also
tended to hire younger teachers whose teaching styles and beliefs were more malleable, and who came out of universities that reinforced the beliefs about learning held by New Initiatives’ staff. They often hired outside consultants for training to make up for any lack of internal expertise. In the school they also stressed the norm of *Yakety yak, DO talk back*. In deciding on curriculum and school programs they relied on their ability to investigate and discuss openly their options to come to a decision.

Caesar Chavez also hired for teachers willing to collaborate. However, in making hiring decisions they put as much emphasis (if not more) on social justice and equity as on the collaborative aspect. Caesar Chavez also hired more experienced teachers, valuing their teaching expertise as an asset to the school. As there was less whole school decision making and less interdependent teaching, differences were in some ways less likely to be put to the test. While more confrontational assertion of viewpoints was less likely to be censured at Caesar Chavez, they used facilitators in many forums to help the process of working out differences effectively.

**Interdependence of Factors**

I hope it has become clear that all of these factors are interdependent. While I have separated them for the sake of analysis, these divisions are somewhat arbitrary. Trust is in part a factor of time. Trust is part of making good decisions. Good decisions require time. Shared values help establish trust, and trust helps establish shared values. The structures help create and support the cultural values of the school, at the same time that the structures are in part a byproduct of that culture.

**Autonomy and the Policy Context**

One of the attributes considered crucial to being a schoolwide professional community is a degree of autonomy to make certain decisions. The Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools\(^{21}\) identifies control of curriculum, assessment, budget and hiring as areas in which schools should have direct control. If schools have little or no autonomy to

---

make the important decisions in the school, how they make decisions becomes relatively unimportant. They may enjoy being able to meet together or find the extra work a nuisance. In either case, their work is somewhat irrelevant if the knowledge produced or decisions made cannot be put into action.

What autonomy did the schools have, and how has the current policy context influenced the limits of that autonomy? New Initiatives became a charter school in its fourth year, which allowed it certain freedoms that Caesar Chavez did not have. This difference played a role in various issues that arose.

Both schools have had a large degree of freedom to hire their own teachers. This was identified as crucial by both staffs in their ability to create and sustain common values and a common vision. With new district leadership at Caesar Chavez, they are seeing that autonomy being eroded. While they will continue to have some say in who works at the site, the hiring is now being done centrally and schools will select from that central pool.22

As a charter school, New Initiatives had substantial freedom over its budget. Although the principal made the actual budget decisions herself, she prioritized budget items based on feedback from the staff. Caesar Chavez also had some budget freedom. Several members mentioned the Key Planner’s involvement in making the budget priorities the previous year as evidence of the teachers’ involvement in making important schoolwide decisions. Both schools used this freedom to pay for release time for teachers to meet during the school day. New Initiatives used this freedom to create the midday-block. Both were able to express their priorities as a staff by hiring consultants and staff to support professional development. However, given the extremely low budgets of California public schools, once the basics are taken care of, there is very little left over with which to make choices.

While both schools worked collaboratively to define their bilingual model, Caesar Chavez did so within strict limits set by district policy. Even there, they had had to resist a directive from the superintendent that would have further limited their program. New Initiatives as a charter school was not constrained in the same way.

22 As a follow-up, I was just told that a new assistant principal has been assigned to the school for the fall of 2005 without teacher input.
The threats of sanctions from the federal NCLB legislation and the State API goals that were based solely on the state standardized test scores did limit choices over assessment. While they were free to choose other assessments as well, only the standardized test scores would be used to decide if these schools would be sanctioned. This in turn very much affected the freedom the schools had over their curriculum, as the curriculum had to be geared toward preparing the students to score well on these tests — tests that are very limited in scope. This was a challenge for both schools as the type of knowledge emphasized by these tests was in conflict with the values of what constituted good teaching and learning by the schools. New Initiatives had somewhat more freedom to decide how to react to that conflict, although in both schools the grade level teams struggled with that dilemma. This also created some conflict with both schools’ beliefs about bilingual education. Both schools believed in a maintenance approach to bilingual education, which emphasizes strengthening the first language while slowly building the second language. The tests that are used for assessment of the school by NCLB and the API are only in English. This meant that both schools emphasized English to a greater extent and at an earlier age than they might have otherwise.

The policy context of both schools (at Caesar Chavez more than at New Initiatives) put limits on the autonomy that many researchers think is crucial for professional communities to play a significant role in furthering school reform.

The Decisions

In the case study chapters I explained in some detail the process by which each school made certain decisions. In the previous sections I discussed the decision making processes of both schools in relation to certain factors highlighted by the case studies and supported by the literature. In those sections I examined the effectiveness of the decisions in terms of the school culture, processes, and structures. What I will now examine is whether the decisions should be considered effective and positive in terms of their outcomes. Outcome here will be evaluated in a restricted fashion. Given the limitations of this study, I cannot determine whether they led to improved student outcomes. Instead I will evaluate the effectiveness of the decisions based on what is known about effective
teaching practice, whether the decision was in fact implemented, to what extent the teachers felt satisfied by the decisions, and the decisions’ effect upon the culture of the schoolwide professional community.

First I will look at decisions involving the bilingual programs at both schools. New Initiatives probably demonstrated its most effective use of its structure and culture for making important school wide decision in this example. The way that Caesar Chavez addressed the bilingual issue through its decision making processes demonstrates some strong points as well, but also exposes some weaknesses. Next I will look at how both schools reacted to the threat posed by the state mandated tests. In both schools this required compromising their beliefs about best practice in order to survive. This example will particularly illustrate the importance of school autonomy. Then I will examine New Initiative’s problem with their staff developer, which raises more nuanced issues. It both shows the power of the staff to protect what they saw as crucial to the school culture, as well as some possible unintended consequences to how it was handled. And finally I will look at the decision at Caesar Chavez in regards to the Reading First program. There were both positive aspects to the process, as well as problems presented by the time line imposed and process to make the decision.

The Bilingual Program

New Initiative’s decision to adopt its bilingual program came the closest to meeting the ideal conditions for making an effective decisions of any of the examples studied here. Throughout the decision making process they followed the sound principles of making an effective decision. They started with the identification of the problem. In other words, they took ownership of the problem. They saw that the current program was creating unhealthy divisions in the school, and that the students were not making adequate progress in their second language. There was a culture in the school that supported looking at student data, and bringing that to the table for discussion. There was a culture that expected people to confront problems by suggesting solutions. They were able to make effective use of the extensive meeting time available. They were able to have meetings to discuss the issue as the issue arose. When the staff was investigating
their options, they were able to bring that information back to the staff in a timely manner. I was told that although there were strong opinions voiced, in the end there was a clear consensus on deciding to implement the two-way immersion program. As the program has matured and moved up the grades, each year the program is revisited in the spring and at the fall retreats to discuss how the program will look for the coming year. When the program was to move up to fourth grade, the full staff discussed how that might change the model of the program as class sizes went from 20 to 30. After discussing the options, they assigned the fourth grade teachers the job of further investigation and to report back to the staff. The shared values mean that they were not discussing whether they believed in bilingual education, but rather what the best bilingual program would like.

When they first decided they needed to alter the program, they were able to start a discussion in the late winter and implement a fairly radical new program that fall when initially switching to the full two-way immersion program. As an expert in bilingual education myself, I can attest to the fact that they looked at the major theories and options available, weighed the evidence, and made a decision based on evidence, logic, and their own particular circumstances. The two-way immersion model has some of the strongest support in the literature (Krashen, 2004; Lessow-Hurley, 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Once the program was implemented, teachers reported positive outcomes in terms of the goals of second language acquisition and healing the divisions created by having multiple programs.

The school had to make a decision that would have a major impact on the school and would in many ways change teachers’ roles. They were able to make this decision without creating a rift in the school, or even creating animosity among individuals within the staff. In fact the school culture appears to have come out the stronger for it. The process was based on looking at what they believed would be best for student achievement, and continuing to monitor the program, adjusting it as they see it needs it to continue to meet the needs of the students. Each year since the initial implementation they have reviewed and refined the model. Based on the criteria listed above, this would
have to be considered an effective decision both in terms of process and outcome for both students and the adult community.

In many ways Caesar Chavez used the same process to refine their original bilingual program and to initiate the two-way strand. According to the previous principal, Donna, while the school had started with some strong bilingual teachers, it was not a well-defined program in the first few years.

In the beginning it did not have a well-defined program. I know some of the bilingual teachers were great. What happened is we really began to define the program. (Donna, interview, 6/21/05)

Like New Initiatives, some teachers investigated the alternatives. Donna, who was well versed in bilingual educational theory and practice, suggested they look at the two-way model. As they researched, they would present their findings to the whole staff. In the end they did decide to implement the two-way model as a strand. Again, similar to New Initiatives, teachers were able to make a change at the school through the combined support of their decision making processes and structures and a culture where teachers felt empowered to make programmatic decisions. Similarly, they looked at the options, and decided on the one that appeared to be strongest from a practical and theoretical perspective. Was this a successful decision? I have no prior student data to compare, but the school does have a strong reputation for its bilingual program now. It was this very reputation that brought many of the teachers to work at the school from other schools in the district. Unlike New Initiatives, Caesar Chavez’s was not involved in the kind of ongoing refinement of the program, nor was their an assessment of how teachers were implementing the model, at least during the year I was at the school. At New Initiatives it was not uncommon for teachers to discuss how the model was working. This discussion addressed both drawbacks and advantages and occurred both informally during grade level collaborations, as well as when it was a formal agenda item at whole school gatherings. At Caesar Chavez the only discussion I heard or was informed about was in regards to whether the model was being followed, and even there, they were not able to resolve or follow-through with action during that year. I would attribute this to two factors. One was time. As New Initiatives had lots of structured time for teachers to meet, when it did come up, there was time to follow through. At New Initiatives raising this
issue was not likely to mean other issues did not get raised, or other professional
development activities would be dropped or lost. Given the limited time at Caesar
Chavez, prioritizing issues was much more of a concern. Time spent on one item was
likely to mean something else important was dropped.

The second factor, which is not unconnected to the issue of time, is the centrality
of the program to the school identity. As New Initiatives was a full two-way immersion
school, this identity was very much at the heart of how the teachers defined the school.
The two-way immersion structure also created a change in their role as teachers, since
this program meant they shared students. This centrality meant it was more likely that
issues pertaining to the bilingual program would take precedence.

While it is possible that in the past the issue of the bilingual program took higher
precedence at Caesar Chavez, the year I was in the school, the issue of district visits and
the NCLB threat were top priority. This meant that other issues had to fight for the much
more limited time on the agenda, at whole school, key planner, or grade level meetings.
Whole school professional development was devoted entirely to issues relating to the
raising of test scores, a priority that was at least in part mandated by the district. This
meant that an issue — the bilingual program — that many at the school and most of the
leadership thought was important was not being adequately addressed.

To review this decision, then, the original decision was based on solid research of
effective practice. The plan was implemented. There was concern over how well it was
being implemented, though this concern was not acted upon in a very effective manner
during this particular year. While teachers were satisfied with the model, some were not
satisfied with the level of implementation. The improvement of the original decision, and
the collaborative form in which it was made, had a positive influence both on the sense of
empowerment of teachers and the reputation of the school. The issue over
implementation raised tensions around teacher autonomy and accountability that
remained unresolved.
At New Initiatives the threat posed by the mandated state standardized tests manifested itself first in terms of loss of certain funds due to not having an API score. Given the low funding of California schools, this was seen by the principal as a major threat that would endanger some of their programs. The stakes soon got higher—if they did not raise their scores there was the possibility of losing their charter status. The staff considered that the equivalent of losing the school, as they could not imagine maintaining the programs or culture of the school if they returned to being a regular district school. The manner in which they responded reflected their culture of teacher empowerment. Like the previous example, this was presented to them as a problem to be solved. They used their midday meetings to make a plan — do more direct test preparation, look more closely at aligning the curriculum with what would be tested, and most central, hiring a consultant to help refine their literacy instruction.

In the case study chapters I explained in some detail the process by which they made this decision. In the previous sections I outlined the various ways in which they used practices that are supported by the literature on good decision making practices. I will now examine whether their decision should be considered an effective and positive one, one that would be likely to lead to positive outcomes for the students. In the sense that it improved instruction, I would have to say no, as the teachers themselves would mostly agree. They were of the opinion that the kind of teaching that was focused on teaching to the test was not going to be good for the long term learning of the students. However, as they saw it, their program, even compromised, was better than no program at all. This compromise would allow them to continue to exist as a school, and continue to work toward offering a more authentic and rich curriculum to students who often do not receive such instruction. It allowed them to continue to be a school that both parents and the local community see as an asset. Even in terms of instruction they used the situation in some positive ways. They looked at what were weak areas in their instruction and focused their professional development in those areas. In particular, they saw their writing program as weak. They hired someone who they had good reason to believe

---

23 Annual Performance Index—a state ranking system based on the standardized test scores.
could wed their philosophy of good writing instruction with helping prepare students for the tests. They were happy with the focus and expertise she brought to the school. The teachers felt that she was helping to improve their instruction, and bring clarity and articulation across the school to their literacy program. “Debbie was an invaluable resource for us and had really helped us focus” (Susan, interview, 1/26/04). The previous spring, after she had been there for a few months, they saw significant gains in their test scores. Therefore there is some indication that even in terms of instruction this could be seen in a positive light. In terms of implementation, it was clear that they had implemented the decision. In my observations of grade level meetings, I heard constant reference to the state standards, as well as analysis of what particular skills were more heavily emphasized on the tests in choosing curriculum. They generally had three days a week of professional development focused on improving the rigor of their instruction. The teachers were satisfied with the decision they made on how to proceed within the constraints that were beyond the school’s control. I can not speak to an obvious effect on the culture. The need to compromise did raise some tensions around the best type of instruction. This was most apparent in the third grade team around the issue of math instruction. There was also a concern that the staff developer they hired created a tension and negative influence on the culture of the school. I will discuss this issue in the last part of this section. Overall, the process, implementation and effect of the decision can be seen as generally positive for students and the larger community.

Caesar Chavez was confronted with a similar problem. They were identified a Year 3 school under the NCLB guidelines. This meant that if the test scores did not meet the required criteria under NCLB the following spring the school would be sanctioned. Unlike New Initiatives, where the staff decided how to react, here it was the district that mostly set the agenda for what they would be required to do. In the beginning it was the district that mandated that certain practices be implemented, and monitored the school for evidence that such practices were in fact implemented (although specific curriculum was not mandated). The district mandated that their professional development days be focused on raising the test scores. The school was allowed to decide who to use for the professional development, and how to implement the changes.
Should the practices and changes implemented be considered effective practice? From what I was able to gather about changes in classroom practice, I would say that they were similar to New Initiatives. The staff at Caesar Chavez worked hard at maintaining authentic pedagogy and thematic instruction, however, the focus on both was definitely lost. In looking for a silver lining, some teachers did feel that the pressure increased the across grade level articulation. They looked more closely at the alignment of their curriculum, which they felt was a good thing.

So we really had to sit down and talk about them and talk about which were the essential ones. Which ones were good to know, because you just couldn’t do it all. It was just too overwhelming. So we just really sat down and we decided, which were the important ones. And also just learned what they were too as a result. So I thought that that was very helpful. (Nicole, interview, 10/28/03).

In the fall, however, according to reports from the grade level collaborations and in my observations of the key planners, I noticed that a lot of time was spent on how to look good for the district visitations. Here it appeared that the discussion was not about whether taking these actions would actually help students learn, or even whether it would help them do better on the tests. Rather, their concern seemed to be scoring better on the rubric the observers would be using. In winter and by the spring, that shifted. The school began to set the agenda on what the district should look for, which aligned it more with what teachers were doing and thought of as good practice. Preparing for the visitations then became somewhat more authentic. Also the grade level collaborations that I observed in the second half of the year, while they were focused on instruction to raise test scores, were not focused on preparing for the visitations.

It was clear teachers were not satisfied with this focus on preparing for district visitations and on the emphasis of the professional development being on test preparation. A further problem of some teachers was that some of the professional development was run by people outside of the school, who really did not have an understanding of the needs of the teachers. Several interviewees spoke to the issue of morale, and morale was something the principal raised more than once. Teachers complained about how their ability to teach the way they believed best had been compromised. There was also a strong sense of loss of autonomy and loss of the
visionary focus of the school. In this sense this was a real blow to the culture of teacher empowerment. The teachers felt very little sense of empowerment over this issue, and there was a sense that teachers were less trusted and less involved with schoolwide decision making.

The consultant

New Initiatives hired an outside staff developer, Debbie, to help them with their literacy instruction. In part this was motivated by a need to raise test scores, and also partially out of a shared concern with the general quality of instruction in this area. However, over time many teachers were concerned about the way they were treated by her, both in her coaching role, as well as her generally more confrontational style. Many also felt the professional development had become less interactive and more prescriptive. As was detailed in the case study, the teachers met without the principal, Grace, or Debbie present. The feeling was that the newer teachers especially would feel inhibited speaking of their concerns in front of Debbie and Grace, since they were the ones Debbie directly coached and who had most of the problems with Debbie. The purpose was to hear each other, and then to come up with suggestions for change. According to those I spoke to who were at the meeting, the group decided to speak with the principal about their concerns. The hope was that Debbie could alter her style to be less confrontational and more collaborative. Some veteran staff met with Grace who then met with Debbie. The result was that Debbie felt betrayed by the staff; she thought they should have talked to her directly. There is some evidence that Debbie may have felt Grace was giving in to her staff. In any case, Debbie decided she could no longer work with the staff.

Was this a good decision with positive outcomes? In one sense the staff did follow its norms. They saw a problem and discussed it in terms of looking for solutions. They brought the problem to the principal with their suggestions, and trusted that the principal would act accordingly. In another way it went against the norms. They did not raise the issue completely openly, as they waited for a time they could meet without the administration present. Some teachers told me they had brought the issue to the principal several months earlier, though Grace did not recollect that when interviewed later. Others
mentioned trying to raise questions with Debbie, but that they were “shot down” by her. In this sense there was a quandary. Since the problem was a breakdown in the norms of discourse and trust with this consultant, who was seen as an authority figure, they felt they could not completely use the usual form of open, direct communication to solve the problem in this instance.

Was this good practice based on what we know about decision making? This is difficult to determine. They felt they had tried confronting her directly, and raising it individually with the principal, and both approaches had not worked. They felt they needed to take collective action, but circumstances created a “we” vs. “they” division in the group, “they” being Debbie. In some instances there may be no way to avoid such a division. The staff claims they did not want the staff developer to leave. Was there a way to get her to hear their concerns without this outcome? That is unclear. While the staff did implement their solution, the outcome was only partially successful.

As mentioned above, it was successful in that afterwards there was a general sense that the school was again a more pleasant place to work in. One teacher who was leaving at the end of the year said that when Debbie was there, she was looking forward to leaving, but once Debbie was gone, she felt sad to be leaving. Teachers had mixed feelings. They were relieved that the norms, culture, and more pleasant working atmosphere had been restored. However, there was a concern that without Debbie they would lose some of the focus and push that maybe they needed.

This may not have been bad decision making, however, but an inevitable result of a staff developer who did not work out. Grace continued to look for other ways and other people to substitute for that loss.

Reading First Grant

The Reading First grant opportunity at Caesar Chavez also posed some dilemmas. The first problem was the particularly short time line they were given in which to make a decision—about a week. The second problem was that they were doing so with inadequate information. It was not clear what the full implications of saying yes would be. The dilemma for them was one of money versus curricular freedom. For many years
they had been building what they saw as a strong literacy program. The teachers also believed that they needed flexibility in the pacing and content of their instruction based on individual student needs. This program might not allow adequate flexibility, and would require additional assessments when they were already spending what they saw as too much time on assessment. On the other hand, it would offer some money, materials and training. The process, as detailed in the case study, was for the principal to call together the teachers who would be involved for a lunch meeting to present them with the information, have a discussion, and then vote on how to proceed. Most of the teachers did not want to do it, as they believed that the negatives in terms of curricular choices and assessments outweighed the positives. Nevertheless, they voted to say yes, which would allow another school to take it, and allow them time to get more information. That vote was not unanimous however — a minority was not ready to say yes at all.

Was this a case of effective decision making? The evidence suggests both positive and negative aspects to the way it was made. The most problematic aspect of the manner in which this decision was carried out was the time line, and insufficient information. While no decision is made with all information available, information regarding their central concerns was not completely clear. Second was time. They had to make a decision without time to reflect on it, have a lengthy discussion, or gather further information. For a decision that might affect the reading program for years, this was not a strong way to make it. Also, some affected teachers may not have been able to be at the meeting due to its timing (called at lunch without substantial advanced notice). A third problematic feature was that it appeared to be a majority vote that was used. For such an important decision, in a school that traditionally had used consensus, vote by majority could lead to future problems if the minority felt that this curriculum had been imposed upon them. Because of when this decision was made — near the end of the school year — I did not have an opportunity to get much of a sense of how teachers felt about the decision, nor was I able to judge the effects on the culture of the school. It appeared that most were satisfied, since it appeared that they would not actually be doing it, as most of those that had voted yes had done so to allow the other school to have the opportunity to get the grant money. Given the time frame, which was externally imposed, this may have been
the best they could do. Coming to a consensus decision would likely have taken more time than was available. However, another option would be for the leadership to have said that without a consensus they could not proceed on such an important matter, even if it might mean giving up an opportunity. In terms of effects on students, they appeared to have made their decision based on what would be good instruction for the students according to learning theory research.24

Conclusions

In this chapter I have discussed how various factors at each school influenced its ability to make effective collaborative decisions. I looked at the schools’ cultural stance toward conflict and how these interacted with each school’s shared values. New Initiatives’ culture placed greater emphasis on cooperation and non-confrontational dialogue. I examined the structures they built to support decision making, describing how New Initiatives used more whole school structures while Caesar Chavez used more representative structures and facilitation to manage conflict. I discussed the relevance of trust to decision making effectiveness, in particular, how each school used their time and structure to build strong bonds of trust. I noted, however, that those bonds were easier to build at New Initiatives due to its size and greater time for interaction. I discussed how New Initiatives’ smaller size made all of the other factors easier to implement. As described above, time has significant effects on the decision making process, both longitudinally to develop the factors listed above and build trust, as well as weekly quantity to be able bring depth to the discussion. With respect to this factor, New Initiatives was able to structure more time into their schedule. Another variable concerns the tension between shared values and diversity. Here, New Initiatives used their hiring and shared discourse norms as their main tool, while Caesar Chavez relied heavily on shared values and the use of facilitators and process. I noted that all of these factors are interconnected and, to some extent, interdependent, and that the level of autonomy

24 In some informal conversations the following year, I learned that due to not meeting test score criteria and going to Year Four status, they were required to accept the grant. This did appear to have a detrimental effect on morale, if not the culture as well. It was not made clear whether it would have been imposed even if they had voted no.
matters. New Initiatives’ charter school status enabled it to have power over making certain decisions where Caesar Chavez could not due to district mandates.

I also reviewed the decisions outlined in the case studies in terms of their effectiveness. In general, New Initiatives, due to its smaller size, more time to meet, and greater autonomy, was able to make more effective decisions.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

My study set out to examine how two schools known for their schoolwide professional communities managed contestation and conflict in the context of collaborative decision making. How did the structures and cultures of the schools interact to support (or not support) effective decision making? In order to examine this question I interviewed the teachers and observed many of the meetings at these two schools. In particular, I examined decision making processes at each school as they negotiated three separate issues. I had intimate previous knowledge of one of the schools, New Initiatives, which gave me further access and insight into its culture. This final chapter presents some of the conclusions that can be drawn from this data. It discusses some of the implications for others who are building schoolwide professional communities as well as for policy makers who wish to support this form of school improvement. I will also discuss some questions this research leaves unanswered but that are important to consider, possibly for further research.

This research addresses a complex issue: identifying the variables and factors that contribute to effective decision making in schoolwide professional communities. Since complex questions tend to have complex answers, this dissertation offers no simple conclusions. What I hope I have demonstrated is how the various factors identified have made the process of decision making more effective or less effective in these communities, and how these factors have influenced one another. For the most part, the case studies supported the conceptual framework laid out in the beginning of this dissertation. While my research focuses on just two schools, these case examples serve as strong examples of what is possible, as well as good illustrations of what are common dilemmas in schools confronting similar constraints. Another issue this dissertation raises—and that remains problematic—is the tension between a desire that members of a community conform to a shared vision and viewpoint, with the need for a variety of perspectives, viewpoints, and dissenting opinions. Connected to this issue is the tension between autonomy and collaboration. As professionals, teachers expect autonomy to
decide what is best for their particular students given what they know. On the other hand, a shared model of how things are done strengthens a school. A third issue raised by my research (that I had not planned on explicitly addressing when I began this study), is the impact of the larger policy context. The assumptions driving the current top-down policy environment that is pushing standardization on public schools is in direct conflict with the assumptions on which schoolwide professional communities are based. This context placed a large shadow over the stories both these schools had to tell us, and has limited these schools’ ability to live up to their ideals.

What was Learned: My Conceptual Framework Revisited

This research is concerned with issues surrounding effective decision making in schoolwide professional communities. In particular, how did the structures and cultures of these two schools known for their professional learning communities help them (or hinder them) in making effective decisions as a community? In this section I will review my major findings. As I do so, I will revisit my initial framework, and explain where I believe it needs changing or amending.

Each community is comprised of a set of unique individuals in a particular socio-political, historical context. Each of these factors makes the schools I studied unique and idiosyncratic to some extent. Despite those limitations, these case studies suggest some important general findings on decision making in schoolwide professional communities for others interested in such reforms.

My initial literature review focused mainly on four sets of literature. One set highlighted advantages of and attributes of schoolwide professional communities. For defining school wide professional community, I relied heavily on the outline and framework created by Kruse et al. (1995) (Appendix B). The second set of literature looked at the issue of shared decision making in schools from a quantitative perspective. This literature, while tentative in its findings, found generally positive results for shared governance that included teachers in decisions over teaching and curriculum (Brown & Cooper, 2000; Ramey & Dornseif, 1994; Smylie et al., 1996). A third set examined the social psychology and organizational literature on group conflict negotiation. This
literature suggested certain factors that make it more likely that groups will make decisions effectively. These included the importance of building trusting relationships (Eisenhardt et al., 1997), working toward a common goal (Jehn et al., 1997), taking ownership of the problem (Janis, 1982), having processes to assure dissenting voices and ideas are heard (Nemeth, 1986), and using a consensus model of decision making (Thompson et al., 1988). The fourth set of literature looked at qualitative literature on decision making and conflict in school communities. This literature supported many of the same conclusions regarding decision making. Decisions are more likely to be effective in conjunction with the following factors: getting to know each other well and building trust (Meier, 2002), having ways to assure dissent is heard (Stokes, 2001), having a shared goal, mission or vision (Kruse et al., 1995), taking ownership of problems (Achinstein, 2002), and providing forums and time for teachers to meet (Stokes, 2001).

Other researchers have compared professional communities and looked at issues of how those communities confronted conflict. Three works in particular address themes quite similar to those discussed in this study. However, in each case, there are also significant differences between my research and these other works with respect to approach and/or focus of investigation. In her book *Community, Diversity, and Conflict among Schoolteachers*, Betty Achinstein (2002) addressed the same general issue as this dissertation—how teachers manage conflict. Achinstein focused almost exclusively on what she termed *Conflict Stance*. *Conflict Stance* is the cultural stance a school takes toward conflict. How does the school (that is the professional members of the school community) react to conflict when it arises? The framework she created is useful for analyzing schools along this dimension, looking at whether schools embrace or avoid conflict, and assessing the ways in which they do so.

This dissertation examines the question of conflict in a much different way. While Achinstein described some aspects of school structures and culture, her focus was almost exclusively on what I would describe as a cultural feature of school discourse. In addition, this work only partially supported her findings. Both of the schools in this study would fall toward the conflict embracing end of the spectrum, especially on the criteria of
conflict ownership. On the other hand, owning the conflicts did not appear to be a major stress factor leading to turn-over for either school. While New Initiatives had high-turnover — something Achinstein found to be a possible side effect of embracing conflict — I found no evidence that this conflict embracing stance was a factor in that turnover.

In this dissertation I look more broadly at various aspects of the school culture as well as structural features to help understand what supports effective conflict management, whereas Achinstein focused more narrowly and in depth on the single issue of Conflict Stance.

Like Achinstein’s study and my own, Joel Westheimer’s work (1998; 1999) also compared two schoolwide professional communities. While his study did address the issue of dissent and conflict, it was not focused on that topic. Westheimer was more interested in how the values of the school made it a more or less effective professional community. He started with the assumption that “Whereas many reformers have called for stronger school-based teacher communities, their efforts have often been driven by a variety of underconceptualized visions of professional community” (Westheimer, 1999, p.72). His effort was aimed to a large degree in further developing what it means to be a professional community. The value he was most interested in was the issue of communitarian versus liberal community. He saw the question of taking collective responsibility to be of central importance. While our works did not contradict each other, they asked different questions. Like Achinstein and myself, he found it important for the staffs to confront and express differences openly and found that it was important for there to be forums to do so. However, Westheimer’s primary concern was not on the issue of dissent per se.

Carol Reed (2000), in Teaching with Power, also studied schools attempting to work toward more inclusive forms of decision making. Her study informed my work in several ways. Her work looked particularly at the power dynamics within schools. While her work examined some areas that I also addressed—e.g., how schools made decisions—she was less concerned with school structures and procedures and more concerned with how teachers felt about their role in the decision making process, and how effective the schools were at being inclusive and open in their decision making.
processes. To some extent, like this study, her study examined the culture of the school around decision making. Like myself she recommended that teachers need training in conflict management and consensus decision making. However, there were also major differences in her work and my own. Her work focused on schools that were much less developed along the spectrum of shared decision making. More importantly, the purpose of her work was to develop a framework of power dynamics oriented around the idea of sharing power with, rather than the more traditional definition of power as power over others. She was also not looking at the overall structure and culture of the school, but was more narrowly focused on how the schools were structured for shared decision-making.

Each of these three works, while overlapping in many ways with the study I have done here, has a slightly different focus and theme than this work.

My original framework, developed from previous research on schoolwide professional communities and shared decision making as referenced above, proposed certain aspects of the school culture and structure that would be important factors in creating a climate for effective decision making. Under “school culture and norms” I listed: interdependency, diversity, conflict ownership, trust, deprivatized practice, and shared mission and values. I listed the following structures and procedures: decision making process, venues for discussion, protocols, agenda setting, leadership structure, time to meet, and places to collaborate.

The two case studies did not significantly alter either list of factors. However, they did highlight particular factors over others. Process appeared to be less significant than previous research led me to expect. It seemed trust and being able to express oneself were more important than any particular process. Size, although discussed in the literature, was not listed in my framework, yet played a critical role. New Initiatives, the school that met more comprehensively the definition of being a schoolwide professional community, was able to confront the issues more fully as a schoolwide community than Caesar Chavez, a school that had the disadvantages of larger size and more limited autonomy. The effects of hiring and attrition on the homogeneity or diversity of the professional community was a factor that I had not adequately recognized in my original
theoretical framework. Discourse style was not discussed in the research explored for this study. However, in both schools (New Initiative especially), norms and systems to manage discourse were considered necessary.

Structures and Procedures

Size

Several major factors were highlighted that distinguished each school’s ability to confront the issues. Size of the faculty influenced many of the other factors. School and faculty size was raised by a variety of researchers as important in creating and maintaining schoolwide professional community, with the evidence suggesting that such communities were unlikely to be found outside of small schools (Bryk et al., 1999; Kruse et al., 1995; Talbert, 1993). While having discussed size as an important factor in my original literature review, I did not include it in the conceptual framework itself.

I would now add size as a structural factor with a strong impact on decision making effectiveness. There is probably no aspect that was not influenced by size. The fewer people involved in the decision, the easier it generally will be to come to agreement. In communities with fewer members it is easier to make decisions as one group, rather than through representative bodies. It is also easier to get to know each other well and build the relationships that are so important for such communities to work effectively. That the group is small enough so that decisions can be made efficiently with all members directly involved is probably the most important aspect of size. In this way all members take ownership of the decisions that are made, and therefore have a greater stake in faithfully carrying them out. It was apparent from the case studies that New Initiatives teachers took greater ownership over decisions than teachers at Caesar Chavez, the larger of the two schools. New Initiatives’ smaller size made it possible to implement decisions more efficiently.
Time

Time to meet and discuss was also of central importance to each school’s ability to handle and work through issues. The issue of time in terms of longevity of the group was raised in my literature review. It was discussed in relation to effective site-based decision making, where it was found that effective site-based decision making was more likely to be found in schools that had been involved in tier reforms for a period of years (Brown & Cooper, 2000; Ramey & Dornseif, 1994; Smylie et al., 1996). Longevity was also found to have an influence on relationship building among group members (Grossman et al., 2000).

New Initiatives’ schedule allowed significantly more time to meet as a whole staff (they generally met three hours per week minimum, a three day retreat before school, a weekend retreat midyear and two or three professional development days). This made it possible to be more flexible in handling issues as they arose, and permitted the staff to deal with issues in a more timely manner with full unrushed discussions. Even with the time that it had, there were issues that New Initiatives did not address, perhaps because of a lack of time. Controversial issues such as racism, sexism, multiculturalism, as well as larger issues of teaching philosophy, were only superficially discussed, if discussed at all. Caesar Chavez’s every other week staff meeting, monthly professional development sessions on the restructured days, and three professional development days, added up to significantly less time and opportunity to discuss and settle issues with the full staff directly involved.

It was also clear that at both schools grade level teams needed time to coalesce as a team. Most felt that the second or even third year of working together made them significantly more productive. Each school took several years to establish their full identity. It was after several years that New Initiatives decided to become a full two-way immersion school. Caesar Chavez’s real commitment to socio-multicultural justice did not develop immediately. Each school had initial attrition of staff who did not fit the community, especially as these identities took hold. This research indicates that time (both as time to meet and as longevity) is an important influence on the effectiveness of school wide professional communities.
Hiring and Attrition

My conceptual framework chapter did not explicitly discuss the issue of who makes up the community and how that is decided. This issue was not completely ignored in the literature review. It fell under the category of school autonomy. Many researchers and school reform advocates highlight the importance of schools having certain autonomies, particularly autonomy over hiring their own teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Kruse et al., 1995; Meier, 2002). In deciding who to hire, and in making a school more or less comfortable for certain members, a school can influence levels of diversity and uniformity among community members.

Hiring and attrition appeared to play an important role in creating the community of each of the schools in these case studies. New Initiatives tended to hire younger less experienced teachers, and explicitly hired for a non-confrontational style. They put a premium on joint planning in their definition of a good member of the community. Those that did not fit the model of joint planning were either not hired in the first place or tended to leave. These factors may have made it easier to come to consensus, but possibly at a cost of expertise and diversity. Caesar Chavez put more of a premium on prior teaching experience — especially experience working with minority students — and on those who saw themselves as activists. This may have given Caesar Chavez some advantages in terms of the teaching expertise of their staff, and of having teachers who were comfortable with controversy. These advantages, however, may have been gained at the cost of having teachers who were somewhat less inclined to jointly plan and more jealous of being able to do things their own way in the classroom. In both cases it did appear clear that site-based hiring was crucial to maintaining each school’s shared vision. This in turn aided decision making, since groups that have a shared goal are more likely to make effective decisions. We saw the importance of these shared values for all of the issues illustrated in the case studies.

While attrition can have the effect of weeding out those who are a detriment to the school culture, attrition also has negative consequences. New Initiatives has had difficulty in keeping teachers hired after the original core group. About 25% of the teachers left each year, and about 50% of new teachers left after their first year. As the
original core group of teachers slowly shrinks, there are less teachers who can carry on and pass on the school culture. It also means that much of the enormous time, energy and expense spent on professional development is leaving the school each year. Further, new teachers are less likely to raise strong dissenting opinions; a large percentage of new teachers will tend to limit the number of voices in a discussion. New Initiatives has managed to have a fairly strong professional culture despite this turnover. However, as the membership of the core group shrinks, unless they begin to keep more of the new hires, this could become a major issue, especially if and when there is a turnover in leadership. The strong leadership and tenure of the current principal has gone a long way in overcoming the turn-over problem. However, once the current principal leaves and there is a new principal without that history, it is less clear if the school could maintain the culture and vision.

**Decision Making Process**

According to many researchers the process and procedures used to make decisions is an important factor in effective decision making. Problems with process were mentioned as making effective decision making difficult (C. H. Weiss et al., 1992), as my own prior experience in schools had also borne out. The organizational and social psychology literature also included process as a factor with significant effects on decision making (A. C. Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 1988). Both schools espoused a belief in consensus decision making. Some teachers at Caesar Chavez reported having received training in the process in past years. However, none of the teachers in the two schools studied here appeared particularly concerned with procedural issues. New Initiative teachers seemed almost proud of their informal method of reaching “consensus.” At Caesar Chavez most teachers mentioned their representative body (the Key Planners) when discussing whole school decisions. They expressed some concern with the representative structure itself, the pluses and minuses of being on this committee or not, and how well information was communicated between the teachers and the committee. Despite some complaints at Caesar Chavez, the overall feeling was one of satisfaction with the school’s decision making processes.
In practice, New Initiatives’ informal approach to consensus involved staff discussion of an issue until there was a “sense” that there was staff wide agreement. The principal would then sum up her understanding of that consensus. There were only two instances where I know a more formal approach was taken. One was in deciding on the two-way immersion program, where each teacher had to state their view, and on issues surrounding becoming a charter school, where formal votes were required by law. At Caesar Chavez, I saw a semblance of the consensus approach at Key Planner meetings. However, the decision on the reading program was made by majority vote — a contradiction that no one mentioned, and that I did not think to ask about at the time.

Both schools also held a belief that teachers should feel free and open to express their opinions. New Initiatives even had this as a written school norm of *Yakety yak, DO talk back*. Everyone I talked to expressed that they felt they could do so. At New Initiatives, as has been discussed, there was the stated norm that disagreements be expressed in a non-confrontational manner.

The data of this study is insufficient to make a strong argument about the advantages of a particular process. It appeared that decision making outcomes with respect to all three issues at New Initiatives were effective by the measures used in this study. This appeared to be in large part due to the inclusiveness of its decision making procedures and to spending the time to come to a consensus, even if it was done somewhat informally. At Caesar Chavez, the one teacher who raised questions about whether there was a hidden agenda in regards to articulating the bilingual program seemed to have some suspicion about whether the decision was inclusive. It was not clear if this was an idiosyncratic suspicion or whether it might have been more widespread. If it was more widespread, no one mentioned it to me. Overall, though, at Caesar Chavez, there was a general satisfaction with how decisions were made, although not the same level of ownership. The evidence of outcomes of such decisions was more mixed in the case of Caesar Chavez.

From my research I would conclude that the most important part of the process of decision making is that all members are directly involved in the decision. The data indicates that consensus is also important, though the evidence here was less strong.
The importance of trust was also highlighted in these case studies. Trust in turn was influenced by several factors such as school size (the smaller school having easier time building strong trust beyond grade level teams) and time and places to interact (New Initiatives having more time and places in which staff would interact, especially above and beyond grade level teams). There also appeared to be an interaction between trust and leadership, though that factor was not well explored in the study.

Trust can take many different forms and vary by degree. In the cases of these schools, the quality of trust that appeared to be important was that the members of the community trusted that the others had the best interests of the students in mind. This meant that they believed that their colleagues would make decisions based not on what would make their life easier, or to serve a personal agenda, but on what would be good for all the students of the school. This also meant they trusted that their fellow teachers were able and willing to look beyond their own classrooms and keep the shared goals of the whole school in mind. The trust meant that all believed that the other members of the community had the best interests of the school itself in mind. The evidence of the decisions made in the schools bore out this trust in large part. It was only in the case of Caesar Chavez in the example of the bilingual program where there was evidence of one teacher who did not trust the administration’s motives. It appeared that this trust in one another allowed the teachers to have open dialogue that led to productive discussions.

Prioritizing the needs of students raises a question: at what point might the best interests of the students conflict with other needs of the institution? As these schools find it more and more necessary to compromise their vision to meet the requirements of NCLB and the State’s standardized testing system, at what point might a teacher feel it necessary to put her beliefs about what is best for the children above the needs of the school as an institution? During this study all the teachers interviewed believed that at this point it was better for their school to survive, even if they had to compromise their
beliefs about good teaching, than to have the school suffer the consequences of State, Federal or District sanctions.

*Discourse Style*

Style of discourse was also explored in these case studies. Each school had a strategy to manage discourse in a way that would support effective decision making over controversial issues, and in both cases these strategies appeared to have some success. Each school’s strategies were different. New Initiatives enforced a non-confrontational discourse style while also encouraging teachers to speak out about concerns. Caesar Chavez chose at one time to have a training in consensus decision making, and as an ongoing strategy used facilitators to monitor discussions.

From both my interviews and my observations of meetings, it appeared that both these methods were effective at their respective schools. Teachers at both schools assured me that they believed they could honestly express their views and raise issues without fear of retribution or negative consequences. There were second hand reports that some of the teachers that had left New Initiatives believed otherwise. Those who stayed claimed that it was not the fact that these teachers dissented that led to their departures, but either their form of expressing their dissent or their lack of willingness to be team players that was the problem. I also saw evidence at Caesar Chavez of the principal trying to curtail controversial discussions during staff meetings. Here it did not appear that she was trying to stifle the content of the dissent, but rather that she was concerned about time, and in those instances wanted to have the issue raised in another forum. Time seemed to be the problematic factor for this principal, rather than a stance against dissent. Regardless of the principal’s intentions, it could still be argued that her concern with time stifled dissent. However, these instances appeared to me to be minor, and not indicative of the general culture of the school.

*Depth and nature of the discourse*

As has been illustrated by the case studies, and discussed in the analysis chapter, at both schools certain issues and topics were addressed as a whole staff with a good deal
of depth, and others topics were treated only superficially, sporadically, or not at all. When it came to direct planning, both schools showed a high degree of sustained deep collaborative planning. At Caesar Chavez we saw how teams met regularly to plan, and often developed curriculum together. This type of planning was the focus of New Initiatives’ grade level release days. Both schools also engaged in focused, sustained professional development around curriculum. At Caesar Chavez this mostly took place in grade level teams during the release days. New Initiatives used the midday block to achieve this purpose.

At New Initiatives it was clear that when particular school issues arose, or major changes were needed, they were willing to spend the time to fully discuss these issues. This willingness was reflected in decisions regarding the change to dual immersion, hiring, the direction of professional development, and curriculum changes. There was some evidence for this at Caesar Chavez as well, but the few times it did arise, finding the time to do so was more difficult, and it was mentioned more in terms of issues from past years.

Discussions about larger philosophical issues seemed more superficial. While both schools professed a belief in justice and multiculturalism, during the year of the study neither school addressed the issue in a planned, sustained way. If it came up at all, it was almost an aside. There is evidence that such discussion were a major part of the professional development at Caesar Chavez in past years, however with the focus on raising test scores, such issues did not make it onto the agenda during the year of this study. New Initiatives had also made some sporadic attempts at discussing issues of multiculturalism, racism, and issues of sexual orientation in past years. However, even then they were not sustained. While it is possible that in the early years there was sustained or in depth conversations about teaching philosophy, such conversations were not in evidence during my study.

A third area where there was little depth of discussion was group reflection on their own practice. While they discussed practice for planning purposes and to learn new methods and techniques, they did little sustained critique and examination of their actual teaching. One grade level had started to do so at Caesar Chavez, and others said they
were planning on doing so. The principal at New Initiatives also claimed that she wanted to move in that direction.

The lack of discussion in these areas may limit the ability of these schools and schools like them to live up to their potential and their vision. For instance, while New Initiatives espoused a constructivist philosophy, it was unclear how much of an understanding the staff had of what that meant in practice, and of how much agreement they had about the implications of that belief. This was especially true given the high turnover. Without a discussion of these issues, it is unlikely they lived up to implications of the label. The same is true of the other issues. Most research on professional development agrees that the impact professional development will be limited without a coaching component where teachers get direct feedback on the implementation.

For these reasons I would recommend that schools build into their professional development adequate time to expressly address the larger issues and engage in classroom observations and coaching.

*Values*

As several researchers highlight, a school’s values may influence its decision making processes (Achinstein, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Westheimer, 1998). My research appears to support this finding. It was fairly clear that the stated values of Caesar Chavez were on the innovation side of the spectrum, as seen by its emphasis on collective curriculum building, on-going professional development, and changing the status quo. Their stance was also characterized by a belief in being change agents, rather than just preparing students to succeed in the system as it is. This was clear from their explicit multicultural and anti-bias perspective and professional development, as well as their preference to hire activists.

New Initiatives’ commitment to innovation was explicit. It was almost a mantra there. They were constantly attempting to improve the curriculum wherever they believed it was not meeting the needs of the students. They also had a multi-cultural perspective, as evidenced most strongly by the two-way immersion program. However, their stance toward working to alter the status quo was not as strongly emphasized in the curriculum
or professional development as it was at Caesar Chavez. It was more evident in the work they did trying to help empower the parents, most of whom came from typically poor and disenfranchised groups. In terms of student goals, New Initiatives’ teachers were more likely to speak of leveling the playing field and giving their students the same opportunities more privileged students regularly received.

In general, the values of both schools met the criteria for being likely to lead to decisions that will have a positive impact for students. As I reviewed in the cross case analysis, I would concur that, in fact, the decisions made were in the service of improving student learning. Since in both staffs there was fairly strong agreement about these values, these common assumptions meant that they were less likely to encounter disagreement and discord. This made it easier to assume that they held a shared goal for decisions and action.

As in other areas, the advantages of group homogeneity may have been gained at a certain cost; homogeneous values may reduce disagreement among group members, but this also means that decisions might be made without adequate consideration of diverse or opposing views.

**Leadership Style**

While this research did not focus on leadership per se, an adequate analysis of decision making processes cannot avoid looking at the role of leadership completely. Leadership obviously played an important role in both schools. The structures and cultures of the schools were in large part the creation of their respective leaders, particularly the principals. Grace at New Initiatives defined the school’s vision during its foundation and development, and was the carrier of that vision. The structure of the midday block was her idea. The purposeful work on getting to know one another and the structures to make it happen came from her initiative. If one were looking at the issue of leadership, one could probably gather substantial evidence of the importance of strong leadership in creating the collaborative professional community that exists at New Initiatives.
At Caesar Chavez, each of the various principals had exercised her own distinctive influence on the school. One teacher referred to this influence with the following quote, “I used to jokingly refer to this school … as like inside Donna’s brain, because that’s kind of what the school was a reflection of” (Martin interview 2/24/04). Like New Initiatives, from a leadership lens, one could probably make a strong argument that the strength (and weakness) of its professional community was in large part due to the role of both the principals as formal leaders, as well as other staff members who were instrumental in developing and maintaining the school vision. The focus of professional development generally came from the principal. In addition, the structures for teacher collaboration were developed by the leadership of the school.

_Interrelationship of Factors_

One of the important findings of this study is the importance of the interactions among the various structural and cultural features. These factors had previously been identified by various researchers as being important in building collaborative communities and/or for effective decision making. But in many cases, these factors were treated in isolation. One contribution this dissertation makes is to illustrate how they work together. To outline all the possible combinations of all of the factors would be impossible. However, I will touch on a few that are particularly salient.

School size was obviously central. The comparison of the two sites illustrated this in various ways. The smaller size at New Initiatives made it easier to build a culture where everyone knew each other well, as there were less people to get to know, which in turn helped build trust. The size made it possible to meet as one group for school-wide decision making, rather than using a representational structure. Meeting in this way helped the staff get to know each other better. This in turn built trust, as it increased face-to-face interaction time, in particular on the issues of the actual work of the school.

One could also look at the different factors through the lens of trust. Having shared vision and mission is likely to increase trust. We trust that other staff members want what we want. However, trust also makes expressing diverse opinions easier. If we trust someone, we are less afraid of what they will think or do if we express a differing
opinion. We are less likely to dismiss offhand the opinions of those we trust, even if those ideas contradict our own. It appeared clear from my research that one of the main factors affecting the decision making process was the level of trust among those involved in the process. This trust seemed just as important as the structures and procedures of the decision making process itself. However, transparent processes are more likely to lead to trust. At New Initiatives, everyone was involved in the decisions. Therefore no one expressed feeling that decisions had been made behind their back or without their input. At Caesar Chavez, where some decisions were made by committee, there were suspicions or complaints of not being told or informed about decisions being made. The hierarchical nature reduced the level of trust (which in turn was created in part by the larger size of the staff). The level of trust was a major factor in the ability of New Initiatives to use an informal style of discussion and consensus decision-making.

These are just a few examples of the interrelatedness of the various factors. It is my hope that the interrelatedness and complexity of these factors was made apparent and illustrated in the case studies themselves.
Figure 4: Revised Framework of Decision Making in Schoolwide Professional Community

SchoolWide Professional Community
- Shared values
- Collective ownership
- Ongoing Professional Development
- Collaborative practice

Leads to

Contestation over Decisions

Is mediated by

School Culture & Norms
- Shared Mission and Values
- Diversity vs. Unity
- Conflict ownership
- Trust
- Discourse style
- Leadership style

Structures & Procedures
- Decision making process
- Venues
- Leadership structure
- Time to meet
- Size
- Hiring and attrition

Leads to outcomes in which:
- important issues are addressed
- issues are fully examined
- (viewpoints/evidence)
- there is satisfaction with decisions
- there is time and place to express dissatisfaction
- stated vision and values are honored
- changes in practice are likely to improve educational experience of students
- there is follow-up to examine effectiveness
Overall, my framework stayed fairly stable with respect to its major components. As outlined above, however, these case studies suggest that some factors are more important than others, in terms of their effects on decision making effectiveness. On the “Culture and Norm” side, shared mission and values, issues of diversity, size, trust, and discourse style stood out as important factors from the research on these schools. In terms of “Structures & Procedures” having time and places to meet, size, and autonomy to make important decisions (including hiring decisions) stood out as important factors in these schools.

The figure above is a revision of the earlier framework, illustrating the factors that support effective decision making based on the evidence of these two case studies.

Implications for Practice

How can school practitioners use the findings of this research? Here I am speaking to those who are attempting to build such communities in their schools, or to those wanting to start schools with strong professional collaborative communities. I will not address how to build such communities per se here. For that there are many excellent resources (See for example Darling-Hammond, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lieberman, 1995; Meier, 1995). I will outline features of the school culture and structure that appeared to be most crucial in helping to manage effective decision making.

Discourse Skills

The guiding principle of this work is that the issue of conflict negotiation—how to handle contested decision making — should be consciously considered. As Reed (2000) points out in Teaching with Power, teachers need “the skills to deal with the inevitable conflicts caused by trading individual authority for the collective capacity of the democratic process” (p.160). Each of these schools handled conflict negotiation slightly differently. Caesar Chavez did do some explicit training, though it appeared to be a one-time exercise. They also used facilitation by trained coaches in many of their
meetings. New Initiatives hired people they thought already had a style of discourse that would make collaboration easier and enforced a non-confrontational style.

My reading of the research and my observations of these schools both suggest that training helps groups effectively negotiate conflict. By insisting candidates need to come in already having those skills, the school may lose candidates who provide other strengths, yet lack that particular skill. Some turnover of staff is inevitable and such skills are probably not easy habits to remember, especially under the stress of conflict. Therefore, I would recommend regular repetition of such training. The use of facilitation I believe is warranted at least in situations where the topic is particularly controversial. New Initiatives did not feel a need for facilitation, while Caesar Chavez found it useful. Deborah Meier (1995) discusses how bringing in facilitators to begin and shape discussion around race and culture were particularly useful in her schools.

Time to Meet

Another major implication of this research concerns time. Effective decisions require plenty of time for teachers to meet. These case studies illustrated how difficult it was for Caesar Chavez to come to well thought out, inclusive decisions given their limited time to meet. At New Initiatives on the other hand, where there was ample meeting time, teachers were able to handle each decision in a more timely and thorough manner without significantly sacrificing other agenda items. The struggle here is how to do so without overburdening teachers. New Initiatives found most of the time by scheduling daily midday meetings, which in effect lengthened the teacher workday. This is a sacrifice not all teachers are willing to make. Both schools found funds to release teachers monthly from classroom duties to meet with their grade level teams. I do not believe that it is possible for a school to be an authentic schoolwide professional community without substantial face-to-face time every week.

Getting To Know Each Other

It also appeared important that teachers have the time and space to get to know one another. At both schools teachers spoke to how it took time for their grade level
teams to know each other well, to build the trust and personal relations to work smoothly. At New Initiatives the principal consciously worked at doing this at a whole school level. Their daily meetings made for frequent formal contact, and the open architecture and shared lunch period made for frequent informal contact. Caesar Chavez had a more difficult time building this whole school level of getting to know one another, with much less frequent whole school gatherings, a differentiated lunch period, and a more traditional architecture.

My observations seemed to confirm what the researchers claimed: it is easier to work through issues when everyone knows and trusts each other. Schools therefore would be well-advised to structure times for teachers to get to know each other socially, as well as opportunities to work together on actual school building tasks. In addition, the physical environment should be structured in such a way that teachers will have ample opportunities to informally interact with each other in the normal course of the work day. While not highlighted in this study, it is often the informal one-on-one conversations that teachers feel are the most useful for their individual growth as practitioners. This was corroborated by many teachers in these schools, informal conversations with teachers elsewhere, and my own experience. The architecture of New Initiatives was an excellent example of how this can be planned into the construction of a school. While most schools do not have that luxury, other ways can be found to facilitate this through common work spaces and clustering classrooms.

Shared Goals, Vision, and Mission

The importance of shared goals, mission, and values was reaffirmed by this research. It was apparent that in all the issues that arose, coming to decisions was facilitated by the fact that the staff trusted that they all had the same basic goals for the students and the school. While one can hire to some degree for those who share one’s basic goals, the details of what these shared goals and values mean in practice need to be constantly discussed and worked out. However, when the faculty share the same general vision they are more likely to have a productive conversation about the best way to reach their goals, even if there is substantial disagreement over how this may best be achieved.
I believe that mutual trust among the staff — each member of the group could trust that her colleagues shared the same basic goals for the students as herself — was one of the biggest factors in keeping the discussion productive at both schools.

*Encouraging Diversity*

Research indicates that diversity enhances the effectiveness of decision making processes. According to Nemeth (Nemeth, 1986), diverse views help assure that all reasonable alternatives are explored. Research also indicates the importance of the community having shared vision and goals. On the face of it, these two values seem to be in conflict. An emphasis on conformity to a shared vision and proceeding from consensus rather than majority rule seems irreconcilable with believing that having people from diverse backgrounds expressing a diversity of perspectives, and encouraging members of the community to express and defend alternative views and ideas, is the best approach to decision making.

Most researchers on school reform argue that school success depends on a school having a shared vision and mission (Louis et al., 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Westheimer, 1999). If staff don’t agree on where they are going, it is harder to get there! The data from these two schools reinforced that finding. The decisions made at each school were facilitated by the fact that there was a shared belief among the staff regarding where they wanted the school to go, and about certain core pedagogical beliefs. On the other hand, researchers such as Irving Janis (1982) have warned against the possible dangers of a group that thinks too much alike. In coming to too quick a consensus, a group may overlook other possibilities, or even inhibit those who may harbor doubts from expressing their views. Other researchers have pointed out the advantage of multiple viewpoints in coming to the best solution (Nemeth, 1986). And some researchers have cited the advantages of diversity among the members of the work community (Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled et al., 1999). How do we reconcile these seemingly opposing research findings? A simple answer might be the compromise solution — there needs to be some diversity, but not too much. While there may be some merit to that response, I think this issue requires a more nuanced analysis. It is necessary to take into consideration the type
of diversity one wants. I would argue that on core values and goals of the school, diversity is not helpful. As the literature points out, and as this research supported, controversy over where to go is usually not productive. For instance, I have worked in many schools where some teachers are for supporting bilingualism, and some not. Discussions over these issues at those schools only further entrenched the disputants in their camp. In the two schools under study, however, the discussions over bilingual education were about how to best implement it, and therefore were productive in finding solutions.

On the other hand, in a country that is made up of people of a variety of ethnicities and cultures, having ethnic and cultural variety in the professional staff provides a model for students. Staff diversity demonstrates that people of a variety of backgrounds can be teachers. They also provide a model for how people of different backgrounds can work together and work through differences. While there is research evidence that such diversity can make decision making more difficult (Pelled et al., 1999), the disadvantages of such difficulties are outweighed, in my opinion, by the social good achieved through diversity.

When there is general agreement about values, diversity of viewpoints can be advantageous in exploring alternatives to problems (Nemeth, 1986; Schweiger et al., 1989). For instance, at New Initiatives, while the staff agreed on the 50-50 two-way bilingual model, they disagreed as to the merits and disadvantages of using a two-teacher versus one-teacher model. This diversity of opinion forced the staff to carefully examine the alternatives.

Did these schools find a good balance between diversity and conformity? Was it the “right” kind of each? That is a harder question to answer. As I have expressed in my explanations of the major decisions portrayed in this study, it would be difficult to argue that a lack of diversity of ideas led to poor decision making.

At New Initiatives I felt there may have been some cost associated with their tendency to hire younger, less experienced teachers. Such teachers may be less likely to express opinions forcefully. It is possible that hiring younger, less experienced teachers may have indirectly suppressed the expression of diverse views, which in turn may have
made decision making less effective at New Initiatives. Is there any evidence that hiring practices did suppress the expression of diverse views? And is there any evidence that decision making was adversely affected as a consequence? New Initiatives’ staff had a tendency to quickly abandon curriculum when they were not getting the results they wanted. A common refrain I heard was that even the veterans often felt like new teachers since almost every year they were trying new curriculum. When a curriculum is not working, there are two obvious reasons why this might be the case. One is that the curriculum is inappropriate. The other is that the implementation of the program is lacking. If there are few people on the staff with strong opinions about curricular matters, or without sufficient experience, they may be more likely to abandon one curriculum for another. This must be advanced as a tentative idea, since New Initiatives’ frequent curriculum changes may also have been due to the natural tendency to divert blame away from oneself by blaming something else—in this case, the curriculum—or based on a correct assessment that they had not yet found the appropriate curriculum.

New Initiatives tried to encourage teachers to speak up if they had concerns. They constantly examined student data to look for where they needed to improve. They did outside research when they wanted new ideas. In the initial decision to go to a full two-way program, all teachers were required to speak and to give their explicit consensus. This demonstrates an awareness of the need to hear all voices when making a decision regarding something central to the school’s identity. I felt neither school went as far as they could have to ensure that diverse viewpoints and all alternatives were explored. I did hear examples of New Initiatives teachers purposefully playing the devil’s advocate role in my observations. At least on any major issue, I would suggest implementing some sort of procedure to ensure that all voices are heard, that as many alternatives as possible are presented, and finally, when making the final decision, that all members actively assert their consent or disagreement.

My conclusions about the tensions between conformity to a shared vision and the advantages of a diverse staff and diversity of ideas must been seen as tentative. However, my research does suggest that this tension has significant effects on the decision making process. The significance of these effects makes this an area worthy of future research.
Size

The advantages of keeping the school smaller have been a theme running through almost every other factor. Whatever one can do to keep the school smaller is well advised. It is the size of the faculty that may be more crucial than the size of the student body. This is certainly true for the issue of this study. The bigger the group, the harder it is to carry on one conversation, and the more likely a school will feel the need to use representational structures. Every additional person adds geometrically to the complexity of relationships. As Deborah Meier (1995) says, the group should be small enough so they can sit around a table and all talk face-to-face. She puts this figure at about 20. New Initiatives was just slightly larger than this number, and I would concur that they were at about the limit of making this possible.

Final Thoughts on Practice

All of the above mentioned factors are interdependent. They should not be considered in isolation but in connection to one another, and their power is synergistic. I believe that a difficulty some reformers run into is that they implement certain features without the others. In some cases, such features cannot be sustained because they lack the support of the others. In fact, some characteristics of the school that are left in place may actually work against the implementation and effectiveness of partial reforms. It can be like trying to work under two different paradigms simultaneously. Based on the evidence of this research, the recommendations listed above must be implemented in conjunction with each other for them to positively affect decision making outcomes.

Implications for Policy

Administrators sometimes ask how the district or other policy levels can support the work of schools attempting to achieve schoolwide professional communities. When I interviewed several school reformers involved in creating small schools for a previous paper, they told me what they wanted most was for the district office to leave them alone (Kahng, Meier, & Um, 2001). This answer reflects their belief that schools attempting to change the status quo need to have the autonomy to make changes and implement
important practices, as well as their cynicism regarding the ability of district or state institutions to be a positive force in school change.

The central issue here is that giving teachers the opportunity to meet and work together is meaningless if they cannot make the important professional decisions. If decision about curriculum, assessment, budget priorities, programs, hiring, and evaluation are all outside of their purview, then there is little to be gained from having teachers spend time working together.

This research shows how important it is that schools be able to select the staff that comprise their community. In both schools, the ability to set some budget priorities was also crucial. It took money to pay for release time for teachers and for professional development support personnel, for instance. If a school picks a curricular focus, they need to be able to purchase the materials to make that decision a reality. Yet each of these schools made slightly different decision on how to carry that out, depending on their particular needs and preferences. The fact that the teachers in each of these schools could develop and choose their curriculum and assessment tools was part of what attracted them to these schools. This is what they spent much of the collaborative time actually doing. While my evidence is anecdotal, many experienced, successful teachers are leaving the profession as decisions over how and what to teach are being made further from the classroom and they find themselves not being allowed to exercise their professional judgment.

At both schools, and especially at Caesar Chavez, some of that autonomy was being lost, and the negative impact on teacher morale was obvious. It may be hard to convince teachers to put in the time to collaboratively plan if they see that what they come up with or decide is overridden by the district or state, as happened at Caesar Chavez to projects some teachers had worked years developing. Given the regulations of NCLB and the California’s standardized testing and ranking system, districts are also highly constrained. New Initiatives has demonstrated one way a school that is left to itself can make the best of the situation. The question asked at Caesar Chavez was: why don’t we hear the district’s voice in opposition to some of these regulations, even if they need
Questions Raised by this Study and Implications for Further Research

While this and other studies have explored questions about the role of conflict and contestation in schoolwide professional communities, research on this issue remains at an exploratory stage. Achinstein’s (2002) research posed the framework of conflict stances. Reed (2002) looked at power relationships in schools, creating models for such relationships. My research here has looked at how the influences of the culture and structure of a school intertwine to make negotiating such conflict more or less effective. However, all of these studies have been mostly qualitative in nature and based on a small number of case studies. To further the research in this area, studies including larger samples are needed. There may be ways of usefully quantifying some of these factors for further analysis as well.

My research indicates that an adequate understanding of the conditions of effective decision making must include some consideration of the tension between diversity and the need for a shared vision. While I touched on that topic, it would be useful to explore this more fully. While I discussed to some degree diversity as defined by experience, age and discourse style, I did not explore the issue in terms of race, culture, or ethnicity. At least one researcher on organizational conflict (Pelled et al., 1999) found that ethnic diversity was detrimental to effective decision making. However, given the importance of such diversity for other reasons in schools, this is worth exploring in more depth. What types of perspectives are gained by such diversity, and how do they actually benefit the community? This is especially important in education where students come from a variety of backgrounds and should be educated to be ready to live and work in a community made up of people from a variety of backgrounds. If the community of teachers is not diverse, what sort of example does that set for the students? For these and other reasons, it is important for groups made up of people of diverse racial

25 In the district’s favor is the fact that they have just signed on to a lawsuit asking the state to accept primary language testing for second language students.
and cultural backgrounds to be able to work together effectively, irrespective of what the research says about the difficulty of doing so. I would recommend further study on how to make the most effective use of diversity, and how decision making effectiveness varies in relation to different types of diversity.

Also worth exploring further is the issue of processes. Neither school adhered closely to particular procedures or guidelines for decision making during my observations (e.g. Robert’s Rules of Order, or a formal consensus model). The process at New Initiatives relied to a large extent on the high degree of trust in the principal and on the willingness of teachers to speak up on their own. Can this system work under a new leadership that does not have the same level of trust? Do new teachers feel safe enough to express dissenting opinions? With a change of leadership, will they need to create a more explicit system? Or can they, by the force of their culture, hold a new person to their high standards? Can they insist through their informal system that this person follow through with their decisions, and confront the person if they believe this new leader misinterprets their decisions? My observations raise all these questions as promising avenues for future research.

This study did not examine the actual effect on classroom practice that resulted from the decisions made. Yet this may be the most important issue of all. Looking directly at such effects was beyond the scope of this work. Furthermore, I did not have the opportunity to observe classroom practice at one of the schools — Caesar Chavez — and at the other, I did so only informally in order to put their conversations into a fuller context. Future work in this area that makes a more direct connection between classroom practice, student learning, and teacher collaboration is recommended.

A key link from decision making to classroom practice may be when teachers discuss and critique their own practice based on mutual observation. As one of the facilitators at Caesar Chavez said:

What I know from the New Teacher Project and from my experience here is that you can do workshops and collaborations until the cows come home, and unless you back it up with observations and reflections on the observations, there is no guarantee that anything is changing. That coaching is what makes things change and so we had collaboration but we didn’t really have coaching. I think that’s a key (interview 6/1/04).
Neither of these schools was doing much in the way of either expert or peer coaching; neither involved teachers in observing and critiquing their own practice. Caesar Chavez had begun peer coaching at one grade level, and New Initiatives had at times used expert coaching for some teachers, such as new teachers, or for the first team that started the two-way immersion program. Neither school, however, had institutionalized such practices, even though evidence suggests that without them actual change in teaching practice — where it counts — may be minimal.

A question that is connected to this, that is also part of shared governance, is peer evaluation. While teachers were involved in selecting their peers, at neither school were they involved in the decision to retain (or dismiss) their peers. It appears logical that if teachers are to share responsibility for the success of the school, they should also be responsible for holding their peers accountable. Yet, could this interfere with levels of trust: If my peers can fire me, can I risk an unpopular opinion? This is another area worthy of further research.

Final Thoughts

Schoolwide professional communities offer an opportunity to raise schools to new standards for both teachers and students. Such communities can be places that bring new vitality and energy to the profession. These are communities in which adults interact purposefully and jointly, rather than a group of adults who just happen to work in the same building. Contestation and conflict may be challenging, and on the surface do not make the running of a school smoother. However, contestation and conflict negotiated through the structural and cultural factors described above — trust, time to meet, smaller school size, etc. — enhance the likelihood that better decisions get made. It also appears to be the case that qualified professionals prefer working under such conditions. If the adults in the community where children spend a large part of their waking life, and almost all of their public life, cannot manage conflict, contestation, and dissent effectively, where will these children learn to do so? Successfully building such communities will not be easy, especially in today’s climate of top-down mandates and
standardized curriculum. I hope that the stories and examples of these two schools shed light on how this can be done more effectively.
Appendix A: Interview Protocol (Open ended)

1. Introduction
   a. Introduce myself, and describe the purpose of the study. [I am investigating how
teachers collaborate and make decisions in a school where teachers have a shared
vision and where there is an explicit mission to work together.] Explain how the
work will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used.
   b. Ask if they have any questions about what I am doing.
   c. If consent form has not already been signed, present it now.
   d. Ask if they mind if I turn on the tape recorder, and let them know that it can be
   turned off at any time they like.
2. Relationship to the school
   a. Tell me how you came to work at [name of school]?
   b. What do you find to be special about [name of school]?
   c. Is there a shared mission or vision at the school? Can you describe it?
3. Collaboration and decision making?
   a. What are some ways that you collaborate with your colleagues?
   b. Can you tell me about a time recently when you collaborated with your
   colleagues? [what did you discuss? Were any decisions made?]
   c. Describe how you work together [who set the agenda, did someone chair or lead
   the group, did everyone participate in the discussion, did certain people
dominate…?]
   d. How did you feel about the way you worked together? Was the meeting
   productive? Were you/others satisfied with the outcome?
   e. How are decisions made about programs and curriculum? [ 
   f. Can you tell me about a time when the staff made a joint decision about a school
   program or curriculum? [prompt for the particulars about why this issue came up,
   if alternatives were explored, what data they used to make their decision, how
   differing viewpoints were considered, and the process by which a decision was
   finally made]
   g. How did you feel about the way the staff worked together? Was the meeting
   productive? Were you/others satisfied with the outcome?
4. What is your position in the school? [grade level, program…].
Appendix B: An emerging framework for analyzing school-based professional community

Potential Benefits of School-Based Professional Community
- Empowerment
- Personal Dignity
- Collective Responsibility for Student Learning

Characteristic of School-Based Professional Community
- Shared values
- Reflective dialogue
- De-privatization of practice
- Focus on Student learning
- Collaboration

Structural Conditions that Support School-Based Professional Community
- Time to Meet and Talk
- Physical Proximity
- Interdependent Teaching Roles
- Communication Structures
- Teacher Empowerment and School Autonomy

School and Human resources that Support School-Based Professional Development
- Openness to Improvement
- Trust and Respect
- Access to Expertise
- Support and Leadership
- Socialization

Appendix C: New Initiatives School Layout
Appendix D: Caesar Chavez School Layout
Appendix E: New Initiatives Norms Card

NORMS

- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- Results matter.
- Think like a kid.
- Yakety-yak, DO talk back!
- Be the hundredth monkey-always remember the power of one.
- Think and act beyond boundaries. Ask "why not?"

Core Values

Knowledge    Teamwork

Achievement  Fun

Creativity    Integrity
Appendix F: New Initiatives Interview Protocol documents

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICANTS

1. Teaching at New Initiatives represents a professional commitment to work at a research and development campus where risk-taking and change is the norm. We are trying to reconcile project-based learning, student exhibitions, balanced literacy, conceptual math, bilingual education, and character development while dealing with the increasing state and federal emphasis on standards-based curriculum as measured by a high-stakes, norm-referenced, English-only accountability system. What resources and expertise do you bring to help us with this daunting challenge?

2. At New Initiatives you must be a team player who enjoys sharing new ideas, swapping materials, and interacting professionally with the rest of the staff. Think about a significant experience (positive and negative) working within a group to accomplish a goal. What was your contribution to moving the group towards the goal? Describe your typical style of participation in a group.

3. Grade level specialists don't exist at New Initiatives. It is important that you be willing to teach where the need exists. Teachers often take their classes for two years and “loop” (K-1, 2-3, 4-5). Describe your experience and interest in primary grades (K-2) and/or intermediate grades (3-6).

4. Influencing students to love and value learning includes reading and writing with your students and sharing your personal work and insights—in essence serving as their role model for "life-long learning." What reading materials are stacked up next to your easy chair at home? Describe an original piece of writing you would be excited to share with your students and colleagues. How do you convey your enthusiasm for learning to your students?

5. (Ask/respond in Spanish for BCLAD-Spanish candidates): Describe your approach to literacy instruction. What training have you received? How comfortable are you using early literacy techniques: guided reading, interactive writing? What reading assessment tools do you use: running records, observation survey, etc.?

Describe tu método para dar instrucciones en literatura. ¿Qué entrenamiento haz recibido al respecto? ¿Qué tan capaz te sientes en usar técnicas primarias de literatura por ejemplo, lectura guiada y escritura ineractiva? ¿Qué usas para evaluar a los estudiantes, por ejemplo, “running records”, cuestionarios de observaciones, etc.?

6. (Ask/respond in Spanish for BCLAD-Spanish candidates): New Initiatives is committed to being the hub of the community. Our parent population are equal shares of wonderful and difficult; supportive and frustrating; compassionate and hostile. Yet, we need them in partnership with us. How do you interact with parents? Are you willing to go the extra mile to insure student success by building relationships with parents that may include conducting home visits with your families?

New Initiatives se dedica a ser un centro comunitario. Nuestra población de padres está compuesta de padres maravillosos y de padres difícil. Nos apoyan mucho y hay otros que nos frustran demasiado. Y a la vez necesitamos de su compañía. ¿Cómo interactuas con los padres? ¿Estas dispuesto a ir más allá para lograr el éxito de los estudiantes que probablemente incluya visitas a los hogares?
INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATION

You have 30 minutes to enjoy a collegial conversation with the recruit in regards to their philosophy and practice of teaching.

Here are some possible conversation-starters to ask the candidate:

Discuss any key authors, practitioners, books you’ve read or studied that shape your belief system around instruction.

What kind of literacy practices do you disagree with? Are there any approaches you would never do?

How do you know a child is reading a book that is on that child’s instructional level?

If a child can decode but not comprehend, what do you do next for that child?

Discuss your approach to teaching spelling? Grammar?

Explain how you connect reading to writing.

How do you see special education or other support personnel (counseling, mentoring, tutoring) supporting your classroom instruction?

If you know within five minutes that your lesson plan is a flop, what do you do at the sixth minute and beyond?

---------------------------------

Interview: Writing Prompts

Technology is a key element of our instructional practices. Students are learning at early ages to access the age of information via the Internet. Our students turn to word-processing before picking up a pencil. Multimedia presentations are common by third grade.

1. Describe your expertise with technology and include specific examples of how you do use or would use technology in your teaching. (Please respond in Spanish if you are applying for a bilingual position).

2. Discuss one unit you might develop using the internet as a resource. Cite at least one web reference to support your unit (feel free to conduct an internet search during this writing session).
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING SIMULATION

The project approach to learning is a key interest at New Initiatives. We continue to work towards a deeper understanding of how to implement project-based learning within our curriculum and instruction. Many of the staff participated in a three-day workshop in January hosted by the Museum. We worked in small teams over the three-day period selecting, researching and presenting a project of our own interest as adult learners. Topics included coffee, pencils, tattoos, beads, and community. Over the next one hour, your task is to go through a highly condensed version of that project approach workshop. Keep in mind that the process of how you interact within a group is far more important than the project outcome.

Step 1: As a group, decide on a project topic.
Criteria for a lively project:
♦ Rich enough to explore over an extended period of time
♦ Is part of your everyday life
♦ Helps you understand more deeply what you already know
♦ Includes observation and interview in the “real world”
♦ Develops research & investigation skills
♦ Has component of working independently within the team
♦ Potential for performance activities: music, drama, dance, poetry

Step 2: Develop a graphic organizer (web, diagram, chart) that illustrates the potential depth and breadth of this topic (subtopics).
Step 3: Identify one project subtopic that each group member would research in more detail.
Step 4: Articulate one question or hypothesis you want to explore/answer per subtopic.
Step 5: Brainstorm together research ideas for each of these subtopic:
♦ Where would the group member go for more information?
♦ Where would this subtopic take you for observation in the real world?

Step 6: Develop one set of interview questions (keep it short!) and use a staff member in the audience as your interviewee.
Step 7: Create a presentation that includes:
♦ Project title
♦ Names of group members
♦ List of subtopics and research questions/hypotheses
♦ Interview questions and responses
♦ Real world observation ideas
♦ Performance material (songs, dances, music, role play, poetry, artistic representations)

For your presentation, remember documentation of process is more important than the product so include all:
♦ Charts, graphs, graphic organizers
♦ Sketches, scribbles, doodles
♦ Ideas, topics, lines of research that you abandoned
♦ Successes, mistakes & failures

Phases of presentation
♦ Organize your materials in a visual manner so an audience could easily view them and reflect upon your work
♦ Present any performance material
♦ Reflect upon the project simulation as a group—how did you feel going through this fishbowl process?
  How did you feel as a group contributor? Was it more fun than stressful or vice versa?
♦ Receive feedback from audience

You have one hour TOTAL to carry out this simulation – from planning to presentation
2002 CANDIDATE RATING INSTRUMENT

CANDIDATE____________________________________

PANEL MEMBER________________________________

Interview Questions #1 through #6

Score candidate on a range from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

Question 1:
______Candidate is familiar with current political climate relative to classroom/school applications and appears informed, willing, and able to contribute to our vision. This candidate will bring vital personal and professional resources to strengthen our educational efforts.

Question 2:
______Candidate demonstrates meaningful consideration for all parties: students, parents, and colleagues. Can provide concrete examples of working harmoniously and productively within a group to accomplish a goal; expresses willingness to learn, share ideas, reach out and look for opportunities to be part of a team.

Question 3:
______Candidate demonstrates flexibility towards teaching and learning and appears to understand that teaching children is valued over covering content. Is willing to teach at any grade level although may espouse a preference for primary or intermediate level students.

Question 4:
______Candidate provides examples that demonstrate true enthusiasm and love of learning; presents himself/herself as intelligent, articulate, and reflective about the power of being a personal role model to children.

Question 5:
______Candidate demonstrates a clear sense of educational focus, purpose, and philosophy. Knows why he/she wants to teach and how to get the job done. If no classroom-based experience, candidate has sufficient life/educational experiences to find success in the classroom. Presents enough specific, credible ideas and strategies to convince you he/she is ready to teach.

Question 6:
______Candidate understands that teaching is greatly enhanced by parental partnerships and is willing to go the extra mile to establish relationships with families.
SUMMARY EVALUATION (Everyone rates candidate on these characteristics)
Place “X” in column that is closest to your opinion

_____ analytical, intelligent or _____ limited reasoning capacity
_____ physically vigorous, passionate or _____ lethargic, listless, limited eye contact
_____ caring, compassionate or _____ cold, judgmental, narrow world vision
_____ excited, enthusiastic or _____ boring, monotonous
_____ thoughtful, reflective or _____ rapid answers, superficial processing

Ideas are presented in a purposeful, focused, confident manner that effectively communicates a clear plan of action and strong personal belief system. This candidate is someone you would like to see teaching next to you and/or is someone you would like to have your own child have as a teacher: _____Yes _____No

Spanish Fluency (rated by bilingual interview team members)

Check statement that matches candidate’s Spanish fluency

_____ Spanish fluency is native or near-native (if BCLAD candidate) level
_____ Spanish fluency is at a conversational level, but not academic quality
2002 CANDIDATE RATING INSTRUMENT

CANDIDATE__________________________________________

PANEL MEMBER______________________________________

Instructional Conversation

Score candidate on a range from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

_______ Candidate places emphasis on students and student learning and clearly and confidently assumes responsibility for that learning. Candidate understands that if a child in his/her classroom is not making academic progress, the appropriate action is to examine and adjust his/her teaching practices.

_______ Candidate does not attribute lack of progress to factors outside the classroom (home environment, parental support, student academic ability, language fluency, poverty implications, emotional or physical problems, etc.). Candidate approaches each child with a strength-based, rather than deficit-based theory of action.

_______ Candidate does not shift responsibility for student learning to resource teacher, mentor, psychologist, principal, tutor, etc. While seeing support providers as key resources, candidate first consults these support providers to get classroom-based instructional advice – not to have them pull-out and “fix” a student.

_______ This candidate is equipped intellectually, emotionally, and physically to teach ALL children and will never offer an excuse why the job can’t be done!

SUMMARY EVALUATION (Everyone rates candidate on these characteristics)
Place “X” in column that is closest to your opinion

_____ analytical, intelligent or _____ limited reasoning capacity

_____ physically vigorous, passionate or _____ lethargic, listless, limited eye contact

_____ caring, compassionate or _____ cold, judgmental, narrow world vision

_____ excited, enthusiastic or _____ boring, monotonous

_____ thoughtful, reflective or _____ rapid answers, superficial processing

Ideas are presented in a purposeful, focused, confident manner that effectively communicates a clear plan of action and strong personal belief system. This candidate is someone you would like to see teaching next to you and/or is someone you would like to have your own child have as a teacher.

_____ Yes _____ No
2002 CANDIDATE RATING INSTRUMENT

CANDIDATE______________________________

PANEL MEMBER__________________________

Simulation

Score candidate on a range from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

______ Participates actively without being overbearing.

______ Demonstrates a balance between leading and following.

______ Provides suggestions and input that moves the group forward.

______ Encourages others to get involved and gives positive feedback.

______ Is able to clearly and concisely explain personal ideas.

______ Shows evidence of creativity, enthusiasm, and humor.

______ Works hard but maintains a spirit of play.

______ Reframes group ideas in an imaginative manner that enhances both process and product.

COMMENTS:
Appendix G: Caesar Chavez: Guiding Principals

Guiding Principles to Ensure Equity and Student Achievement

- Empowering School Culture
- Integration of Multicultural Anti-bias Perspectives and Content
- Equity Pedagogy: Standards Linked to Effective Practices
- Curriculum and Assessment Design

Community of Leaders and Learners
- Students and their Families
- Administration and Staff
- Student Teachers
- Beginning Teachers (New Teacher Project)
- Paraprofessionals
- Veteran Teachers

Ongoing Professional Development and Reflective Practice
- On site advisor for pre-service and beginning teachers
- Professional Study and Guest Researchers
- Equity Consultants
- Partnerships, Peer Coaching & Informal Collaboration

Biliteracy Program
- Schoolwide Collaboration and Action Research
- REID Standards and Applications
- Curriculum Planning and Assessment Understanding by Design
Appendix H: Caesar Chavez 3rd Grade Collaboration Agenda

3/11/04

**Goals**

- To build upon last year’s work developing Standards-based Teacher Center lessons with accompanying Independent Work in Literacy
- To work together to prepare our students for success on the California Standards Test with a focus on Literacy and Mathematics
- To continue aligning our curriculum content with test content via targeting instruction on key standards

**Agenda**

- **Welcome, Agenda Review** (9:10-9:15)
- **Grounding:** Please share about a recent standards-based Teacher Center Lesson you taught along with standards-based Independent Work (9:15-9:35)
- **Literacy Centers:** The Relationship Between the Teacher Center and Independent Work
  - Affinity Diagram: Essential Components of Literacy Centers (10 min)
  - Sharing Our Practice (10 min)
  - Advancing Our Practice (10 min)
  - Next Steps (10 min)
- **Break** (10:20-10:35)
- **Affirmations!** (10:35-10:40)
- **Teaching Test Preparation Strategies: Perils, Pitfalls and Successes** (10:40-11:25)
  - Mini-Lessons on 7 Strategies from Calkins
  - Test Preparation Mini-Lessons in Math
  - Agreements and Next Steps for Test Preparation (10 min)
- **Reading Intervention Priorities at 3rd Grade** (11:25-11:40)
- **Looking Forward:** Highlight Upcoming Staff Professional Development and Grade Level Collaboration (11:40-11:45)
- **Closure:** (11:45-11:50)
  - What’s working/suggestions


