# Teachers’ Views of School-Based Professional Learning in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools

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Teachers’ Views of School-Based Professional Learning
in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools

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Susan Moore Johnson
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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

2015
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Rachel Lipton.

My younger sister, Rachel, headed into her first classroom as one of many promising young college graduates recruited to help turn around failing schools in New York City. She began glowing with optimism, fortified by her Princeton education but with just 2 weeks of summer teacher training. At the time, I was in my eighth year as an elementary school teacher. I was so proud that Rachel had chosen to teach and so sure that she had the skills and motivation to succeed. The glow of optimism quickly faded as she tried to find her way as a novice in a system that had no organized mechanisms to support teachers as learners. Rachel persevered and touched the lives of many lucky students. However, her challenges combined with my professional experiences, made me want to better understand how schools might foster learning for teachers and in turn, their students. Like all teachers, Rachel deserved to be nurtured as a learner and respected as a professional. The practices illustrated in this study, give me hope for the future of the teaching profession.
Acknowledgements

I could not have completed a project of this magnitude, earning my Doctorate in Education, without inspiration, support and contributions from many. Thank you to my students and teaching colleagues who inspired me to make education my career, which was not my original plan. My teaching experiences at Edison Middle School and Lyndon Pilot School (Boston, MA), Colegio Internacional de Carabobo (Valencia, Venezuela), Wampus School (Armonk, NY), and Greenwich Academy (Greenwich, CT) kept me grounded while visiting the ivory tower. A special thank you to Elliot Stern—my thought partner and role model—for gently pressing me to get done and back into schools.

I am grateful to the six schools that participated in this study and to the 142 administrators and teachers who provided honest accounts of their experiences. I also thank the Spencer Foundation for funding this project and Harvard Graduate School of Education for funding my graduate studies.

I am deeply indebted to my committee, Susan Moore Johnson, Andrés Alonso and David Cohen for their insightful feedback throughout the dissertation process. I appreciate the ways that you encouraged me to situate this study in the broader context of schooling in America and to take a stand about the implications of this work.

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In my personal life many people sustain me. The long-term friendships bolster me: Hillary, Lynn, Julie, Juan, Pete and Lina, Emily, Cassie, Jen, Sarah, Chris, Nicole, Leah, Neha, and “my moms group.”

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To Tova and Andrei Reinhorn, thank you for your genuine interest in my work. Your help with the kids during the drafting of this dissertation, including long, snowy, no-school days, was invaluable. Gadi and Barrett, I feel so fortunate to count you as family and especially to have you near by.

I am so grateful for my five siblings—Eric, Tobi, Scott, Matthew and Rachel. I appreciate your support from afar, but especially cherish when we are together. You bring a smile to my face and laughter to the room.

When I think about why I am an educator, my thoughts always return to my parents, Barbara and A.W. Karchmer, and their parents—Roselle and Louis Fine, Rena and Isadore Karchmer. You taught me to value education—to invest in it and believe in its potential. You modeled how to set the bar high, treat others with respect and help to make the world a better place than I found it.

Most importantly, this journey would not have been possible without my family. Noam, Tamar and Avi, thank you for being my cheering section and for having patience well beyond what was reasonable to request. The dissertation is done! Micki—Thank you for helping me finish another marathon. You pushed me forward when I needed encouragement, distracted me when I needed a break, and believed in me, always. Here’s to many more adventures together!
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Abstract

Policy makers, practitioners and scholars agree that teachers need sustained job-embedded professional learning experiences to help students meet the demands of new accountability systems, higher education, and the workforce (Smylie, Miretzky, & Konkol, 2004; Valli & Buese, 2007). Research shows that job-embedded learning for teachers can improve student performance (Parise, & Spillane, 2010). Although, researchers generally agree about the core features of effective professional development (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Desimone, 2011), their findings do not provide sufficient guidance to practitioners and policy makers in designing and implementing on-the-job learning opportunities (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013). This dissertation is a qualitative, comparative case study embedded in a larger study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. I analyzed collected documents and data from 142 semi-structured interviews of administrators and a diverse sample of teachers from six high-performing, high-poverty schools within one city. Three of the schools are state-authorized charter schools (one a restart of an underperforming school) and three are district schools (one traditional and two former turnaround). In this study, I explored how teachers experienced and assessed three practices intended to support improvements in teaching quality—teacher evaluation, collaborative data routines and peer observation. Teachers and administrators across the sample, described evaluation, first and foremost, as a robust, ongoing improvement process that incorporated frequent feedback to teachers, which they valued. It also played a role in holding teachers accountable for their work. All six schools had structured data routines that required teachers to collaboratively gather, analyze and respond to students’
learning data. Data practices contributed to high expectations for all students and teachers. Finally, the schools had a range of practices that allowed teachers to observe each other, be observed, and in some cases analyze the experience. Teachers’ responses, although generally very positive, differed across and within schools, depending on the school’s ability to address logistical and cultural barriers to peer observation. None of these practices were implemented as discrete, stand-alone initiatives. Instead, the professional learning opportunities at these schools were intensive experiences that teachers described as highly interconnected.
Introduction

In high-poverty, urban schools students often perform below grade-level, are disproportionately referred for special education and frequently lack English proficiency. These students tend to rely heavily on their teachers for academic success (Downey, Hippel, & Broh, 2004). This is problematic since low-income and minority students are more likely than their wealthier counterparts to be taught by the least experienced, least effective teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carroll, Reichardt, Guarino, & Mejia, 2000; Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2007; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Consequently, urban districts and schools are investing heavily in a wide variety of strategies to develop their current teachers (Chadwick & Kowal, 2011; Furgeson et al., 2012).

Policy makers, practitioners and scholars agree that teachers need sustained job-embedded professional learning experiences in order to help students meet the demands of new accountability systems, higher education, and the workforce (Smylie et al., 2004; Valli & Buese, 2007). Further, there is evidence that job-embedded learning can build on teachers’ pre-service preparation and improve student performance (Carpenter et al., 1989; Garet et al., 2001; Parise, & Spillane, 2010). In addition, researchers tend to agree about the core features of effective professional development; it is content focused, connected to other initiatives, employing active learning techniques, requiring collaborative participation, and sustained over time (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011; Penuel et al., 2007). Researchers have also
demonstrated that teachers want, but usually lack, learning experiences that have these characteristics (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

Yet, the many studies focused on teachers’ professional learning provide insufficient guidance for policy makers and practitioners as they design and implement on-the-job learning opportunities for teachers (Hill et al., 2013; Wayne et al., 2008). In addition, most research on this topic has focused on discrete elements of teacher development, despite scholars’ suggestions that practitioners should not implement professional development as isolated initiatives or events. In reality, teachers are often engaged in many formal and informal learning experiences over the course of a school year. These often go well beyond traditional professional development sessions to include opportunities for common planning time for instructional teams, instructional rounds, in-class coaching, and standards-based evaluation by administrators and peers. There has been scant examination of what schools are providing and how teachers experience the constellation of learning experiences in which they are engaged. Therefore, the extant literature has provided little guidance about how to integrate various professional learning efforts for teachers.

In this dissertation, I explore how teachers experience three practices—teacher evaluation, collaborative data routines, and peer observation—intended to support improvements in teaching quality in six high-poverty schools (three charter and three district). All six schools, located within one city in Massachusetts, were demonstrating success with student achievement according to state accountability measures. Although I anticipated that the schools would be using a range of professional activities to support teachers’ learning, I did not predict this particular combination of practices would emerge
as a prominent element of their strategy worth analyzing. Given the significant emphasis on teacher evaluation in policy, practice and research I had planned to analyze this process prior to data collection. The other two topics, data routines and peer observation, emerged from the data as approaches that were playing a substantial role in the schools’ efforts to support teachers’ learning.

None of these practices were implemented as discrete, stand-alone initiatives. Instead, the professional learning opportunities at these schools were intensive experiences that teachers described as highly interconnected. Nonetheless, I present these topics as three distinct qualitative, comparative case studies embedded in a larger study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. The larger study was conducted by Susan Moore Johnson, fellow doctoral student, Nicole Simon, and me. In what follows, I present a summary of each paper in this dissertation.

**Chapter One. Supporting Continuous Development for Teachers: Teacher Evaluation in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools**

The first paper explores teacher evaluation, one of the most high profile recent reform efforts aimed at improving teaching quality in schools nationwide. I found that teachers across the sample experienced evaluation as a robust, ongoing improvement process. The majority of teachers received frequent feedback on their practice based on classroom observations, lesson plans, and/or observation of other professional activities. Teachers and administrators in all schools also took the evaluation process seriously as a means of assessing teachers’ effectiveness and determining future employment. However, teachers’ sense of accountability seemed more driven by the day-to-day activities intended to support continuous improvement, such as frequent observational
feedback, than by the formal elements of the evaluation process including their rating on the rubric.

Two conditions enabled these schools, to varying degrees, to focus their evaluation efforts on developing all teachers rather than on dismissing some teachers. First, the schools in this sample had considerable staffing flexibility. Most had substantial autonomy in hiring teachers and some had the added assurance of being able to transfer or dismiss teacher who did not do well. Second, several of the schools had the ability to organize resources, including their administrative teams, so that evaluators could focus almost exclusively on instructional leadership and what they saw as the primary function of teacher evaluation—developing teachers.

In each of the schools, the evaluation process was embedded in an extensive set of professional learning practices and a culture that focused on supporting continuous improvement for teachers. By closely connecting supervision and evaluation to other professional learning, administrators not only increased the relevance of the feedback but also were able to provide substantial support to aid teachers in responding to suggestions made by supervisors. Notably, teachers with a range of experience from novices to veterans expressed interest in this process for supporting their growth. Many teachers spoke of specific ways that supervision and evaluation had contributed to improvements in their pedagogical practice.

There are lessons learned and questions that emerged based on implementation challenges across schools. In four out of six schools, teachers and administrators reported that the evaluators did not have sufficient time to keep up with the demands of the process to provide equally intensive supervisory support to all teachers. In addition,
Chapter Two. Using Data To Drive Instruction: Teachers’ Experiences of Data Routines in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools

In the second exploratory study, I examined teachers’ experiences of data use practices in their schools. The schools were places where teachers and administrators describe an acute sense of urgency about standardized test scores. Importantly, these are six high-poverty schools that are having success, according to state accountability ratings, which measure growth in standardized test scores and progress on closing proficiency gaps. Not surprisingly, there was a strong emphasis across all schools on carefully tracking every child’s academic progress, however, teachers’ and administrators’ efforts went well beyond a simple focus on raising test scores. The teachers described structures in their schools for regularly gathering, analyzing and responding to student data together with colleagues. Their data routines contributed to rigorous and collaborative professional learning cultures in which there was a sense of shared responsibility for student achievement. By way of their data routines, teachers were developing, revising and coming to agreements about what they wanted students to learn, how to assess their progress, and how to respond when students were struggling. Data use efforts in these schools contributed to high expectations for all students and teachers and an atmosphere in which teachers were accustomed to making their practice and their students’ learning public among their peers. Teachers were in many respects engaged in “joint work” (Little, 1990).

Chapter Three. Peer Observation: Supporting Professional Learning in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools
Although norms of privacy (Bird & Little, 1986; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975) among teachers in American schools often serve to discourage them from visiting colleagues’ classes, teachers in these schools sought opportunities to observe others’ at work. School leaders and teachers in this sample demonstrated a strong commitment to working collaboratively in order to address the pressing needs of their students. They hired teachers who were interested in working closely with colleagues and designed structures and systems that compelled teachers to rely on each other. They also created frequent opportunities for peers and administrators to analyze each other’s work. These schools were systematically challenging the conventional norms of privacy, autonomy and non-interference (Little, 1990).

In keeping with these efforts, all six schools provided a range of peer observation opportunities serving various purposes. Teachers’ responses, although generally very positive, differed across and within schools. At Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter, non-traditional school structures fostered an environment in which teachers expected their work to be visible to colleagues on a regular basis both incidentally and through structured peer observations. At Rodriquez Charter Middle, a more traditional school setting, the principal created systems for ongoing, collaboration, including peer observation. Teachers in these schools experienced peer observation processes, which included providing colleagues feedback on their instruction, as a productive and routine component of their professional learning.

At the other schools—Dickinson, Fitzgerald, Hurston K-8 and Rodriguez Charter Elementary School—peer observation was a short-term initiative that was not yet fully integrated into their professional learning repertoire. Many teachers appreciated the
opportunity to watch their peers in action, but administrators had difficulty sustaining the practice from one year to the next. In most cases, peer observation processes in these schools did not include providing feedback to teachers. It appears that in some of these schools, conventional norms of privacy and autonomy (Little, 1990) persisted, even in the presence of structures intended to promote collaboration. Ironically, in the schools where the practice was designed to be less threatening to observed teachers by not including feedback, the process was not consistently maintained. Notably, in these schools as compared to Naylor, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter Middle, teachers were provided less support to build their skills for observing and analyzing other teachers’ instructional practice and in most cases the processes were loosely defined, which may have created greater uncertainty for teachers. In addition, these schools struggled with the logistical challenges of implementing peer observations.
Chapter One

Supporting Continuous Development for Teachers:
Teacher Evaluation in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools

In recent years, the US federal government crafted several policies (Race to the Top, Teacher Incentive Fund Grants and No Child Left Behind waiver requirements) to motivate states, districts and schools to remake teacher evaluation processes. Most states responded to incentives and sanctions embedded in these policies with new legislation calling for massive changes in teacher evaluation systems (NCTQ, 2013). States, districts and schools are very early in the process of implementing these policies and many questions remain about their impact on teaching and teacher quality. More specifically, little is known about how teachers experience these reforms in their daily work.

In theory, teacher evaluation can improve teaching quality by two means: by identifying and dismissing underperforming teachers and by developing all teachers’ professional practice. On paper, new teacher evaluation policies appear to attend to both the accountability and developmental aims of the process. Recent quantitative studies support the potential payoff of investing in teachers’ learning over the course of the “career continuum” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). For example, researchers find that teachers continue to improve for at least ten years into their career, especially when their schools provide supportive work environments (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ladd, 2011). Currently, formal evaluation is one of the most widely adopted policies intended to improve teachers’ effectiveness. Yet, we know very little about how these policies are being implemented at a local level and researchers have only begun to understand how evaluation can contribute to teachers’ professional growth.
The goal of improving teaching quality is of paramount importance in urban schools, where low-income and minority students depend more on their teachers than their wealthier counterparts (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2013; Downey, Hippel, & Hughes, 2008), yet are more likely to be taught by the least experienced, least effective teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carroll et al., 2000; Clotfelter et al., 2007; Hanushek et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2004). Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain (2005) report that having a “high-quality” elementary school teacher “can substantially off-set disadvantages associated with low socio-economic background” (p. 419). Thus, students in high-poverty schools stand to gain if evaluation improves teaching quality.

In this analysis, I sought to understand how teacher evaluation worked in six high-poverty schools (three charter and three district) that were demonstrating success with student achievement according to state accountability measures. All six schools, located in one city in Massachusetts, were adhering to the state’s new teacher evaluation regulations, with most implementing its model evaluation system. Specifically, I examined how teachers and administrators described and assessed their experiences with teacher evaluation at their school.

In this sample, most school leaders had the authority to hire and dismiss or transfer teachers, and so could exercise considerable control over who was teaching in their schools. Therefore, they did not rely on the evaluation process as a tool to “de-select” (Hanushek, 2009) teachers as one might without flexibility in staffing policies. Instead, they were committed to using evaluation to develop their teachers, and they were able to organize their schools so that they could focus on instructional leadership. These conditions enabled evaluators to provide teachers with ongoing, comprehensive
supervision that, for the majority of teachers in the sample, went well beyond what was required by state and district policies. Teachers also described evaluation as contributing to a strong sense of responsibility for the quality of instructional practice and for their students’ learning. Teachers across schools valued the process and many spoke of specific ways that it had contributed to improvements in their pedagogical practice.

In what follows, I begin by situating this paper in the current body of literature on teacher evaluation. After presenting my research methodology, I present my findings, considering the particular histories and policy environments of the schools in the sample. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study on future research, policy and practice.

**Literature Review**

Until recently, teacher evaluation has had a disappointing track record. Several research papers, including the high-profile report, *The Widget Effect* of the New Teacher Project (Weisberg et al., 2009), document the failure of many US school districts to use evaluation to identify and respond to variations in teacher effectiveness (Donaldson, 2009; McLaughlin & Pfeifer, 1988; Toch & Rothman, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2007; Wise, Darling-Hammond, Tyson-Bernstein, & McLaughlin, 1984). Donaldson (2009) describes US school districts as suffering from the “the Lake Wobegon effect” because almost all teachers receive positive ratings, even though teachers within schools vary widely in their effectiveness (Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004). Researchers and practitioners generally agree with TNTP’s (2010) assertion that teacher evaluation in the United States has been largely a “perfunctory compliance exercise that rates all teachers good or great and yields little useful information” (p.1). Furthermore, school districts rarely use
evaluations to dismiss teachers or inform decisions about awarding tenure in charter or traditional schools (Donaldson, 2011; Tucker, 1997).

**New Evaluation Policies**

Nonetheless, policy makers have included teacher evaluation in wide-scale reform efforts aimed at improving teacher effectiveness nationwide. Legislators have made significant changes in teacher evaluation policies at the state level, and many policy analysts see promise in the new regulations (Doyle & Han, 2012; NCTQ, 2013). The number of states that differentiate teachers into multiple levels of effectiveness has gone from 17 in 2011 to 42 plus Washington DC in 2013 (NCTQ, 2013). In addition, almost every state requires classroom observations and almost half call for multiple observations yearly for new, and in some cases, all teachers. In 21 states, evaluators must provide feedback after observing a teacher. Data from 17 states and Washington DC, suggests that as a result of new regulations, school systems have made significant progress on differentiating between “poor, fair and great” teaching (Aldeman & Chuong, 2014). In addition, these schools are using higher-quality observation rubrics (Danielson, 2013) and providing teachers with more frequent and more detailed feedback on their practice. These studies suggest that shifts in evaluation policy could positively affect implementation of evaluation processes.

Ultimately, the success of policies depends on how they are implemented at the school level. Kimball and Milanowski (2009) studied implementation of a new standards-based evaluation system in one district and found that, despite a detailed rubric and district-level training of evaluators, there were idiosyncratic differences across schools. In our prior research analyzing teachers’ experiences with evaluation in six high-poverty
schools in one large, urban district, we found marked differences in implementation across schools (Reinhorn & Johnson, 2014). Although the district’s new policy was intended to help teachers improve and most teachers saw potential in the process, teachers in only one school said that this occurred. In four schools, principals and teachers described evaluation largely as a set of bureaucratic procedures, and in the sixth, teachers said it was primarily a means for dismissing incompetent teachers. This variation in implementation supports the need for more detailed analyses of teacher evaluation practices at the school level.

**Impact of Evaluation on Teaching Quality**

Very little research has focused on whether or not new teacher evaluation practices are supporting improvements in teaching quality. In a convincing study that links teacher evaluation and student assessments in Cincinnati, Taylor and Tyler (2012) found that, when experienced peer evaluators and administrators used “multiple, highly-structured classroom observations,” mid-career math teachers’ effectiveness, as measured by their students’ achievement, improved. Importantly, the gains persisted and were even stronger several years after the evaluation cycle occurred. The authors suggested that the evaluation process provided teachers with detailed feedback and the incentive to improve. While this research supports the potential of high quality evaluation processes, their study does not explain how evaluation yielded these results. In an effort to understand teachers’ views on the impact of evaluation practices, Donaldson (2012) interviewed 95 teachers in one mid-size urban district during their second year of implementing a new evaluation system. Evaluators assessed teachers based on students’ growth on academic performance measures and on observation-based data. The majority of teachers reported
that the new evaluation process focused their attention more directly on students’ test results, but did not lead them to make changes in their instructional practice. Teachers generally believed that evaluation reform was necessary and expressed positive views of the new evaluation system, although they provided mixed reports about the fairness and objectivity of the process. These contrasting findings raise significant questions about what teachers need from evaluation in order for it to help them improve their practice.

**The Role of the Evaluator**

In a study of 121 new teachers in Houston, O’Pry and Schumacher (2012) found that teachers’ perceptions were determined less by the evaluation tool itself than by how it was used. The authors surveyed teachers about their views of the district’s standards-based performance appraisal system, and then interviewed those whose views of evaluation were most positive or negative. The factor that most consistently influenced teachers’ perceptions of the process was the value that the teachers thought their principal placed on the process. Sartain and colleagues (2011) also concluded that the impact of an evaluation system depends greatly on the evaluators’ implementation of the process. These researchers studied a pilot group of principals who were trained to use the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching as an instrument for evaluating teachers and found that the ratings based on classroom observations were both valid and reliable. Also, students showed the greatest growth in classes where teachers consistently received the highest evaluation ratings, while students showed the least growth when their teachers received the lowest ratings. These researchers concluded that better evaluation tools could support school leaders in assessing teachers’ instructional practices and engaging them in reflective conversations that support improvement. However, this only occurred
when principals had strong knowledge of the instructional framework, well-developed skills for instructional coaching, and they were highly engaged in the process. These findings suggest that school systems need to go beyond current efforts to train principals to provide valid and reliable ratings of teaching. System leaders also need to support principals in developing strategies for using evaluation to improve teaching quality.

**Evaluation in Charter Schools**

Charter schools are often assumed to have different opportunities for using teacher evaluation as a tool for both accountability and growth. This assumption is primarily based on the fact that charter schools usually do not bargain collectively with teachers or have a teachers contract, thus giving their school leaders greater flexibility in how they conduct the evaluation process. However, there is little research about how evaluation is used in charter schools and the degree to which their context influences the process. Donaldson and Peske (2010) interviewed administrators and teachers in five charter schools from three different Charter Management Organizations [CMOs]. Teachers in these charter schools described the evaluation process as more robust than in their former schools and said that it grew out of weekly or biweekly observations and coaching sessions by their evaluator. They also described evaluation as being primarily a formative process used to support professional growth with less emphasis on the summative assessment, which often gets more attention in many new evaluation systems (Eg. Taylor, 2015).

Although they were not specifically studying evaluation, findings from Dobbie and Fryer’s (2011) recent study of 35 New York City charter schools provide greater insight regarding the use of frequent formative and summative feedback to teachers. They
found that five practices explained more than half of the variation in school effectiveness as measured by student test scores on state math and ELA assessments—frequent teacher feedback, data driven instruction, high-dosage tutoring, increased instructional time, and a relentless focus on academic achievement. In their analysis, they controlled for a wide range of educational strategies and philosophies and other explanatory variables.

“Schools that gave formal or informal feedback ten or more times per semester have annual math gains that are 0.075σ (0.021) higher and annual ELA gains that are 0.054σ (0.017) higher than other schools” (p.16). This raises many questions for future research regarding the frequency and type of feedback provided to teachers and the relationship between this feedback and the formal teacher evaluation process.

Donaldson (2013) extended this line of research attending to evaluation practices in charter schools, analyzing principals’ views of evaluation in 30 charter and conventional schools from two northeastern states. Hypothesizing that, in principals’ day-to-day experience they take a multi-faceted approach to the task of improving teaching quality, Donaldson sought to understand how they viewed teacher evaluation as one of several approaches to human capital development. Over two-thirds of the principals she studied reported that they did not achieve the dual goals of development and accountability. They cited time, inadequate observation tools, school culture and the formal nature of observations as limiting factors. Interestingly, in this study charter school principals cited time and culture as a barrier at roughly the same rates as their traditional school counterparts. It is also notable that charter and district principals in this sample were far less likely to cite teacher evaluation, as compared to hiring, as one of the most important ways they aimed to improve teacher effectiveness in their schools.
Questions remain about how school leaders integrate evaluation with other strategies for developing human capital in schools. How if at all does the policy context influence implementation of evaluation processes? Donaldson’s study also suggests that we have much to learn about how schools, charter or traditional, establish a culture that is conducive to productive evaluation practices. To what extent is a positive organizational culture a prerequisite and to what degree can robust evaluation processes contribute to shaping a culture in which teachers appreciate feedback as contributing to continuous improvement?

This research base clearly establishes that developing and implementing an effective standards-based evaluation policy is challenging but has the potential to support schools in developing human capital. Donaldson and Peske (2010) suggest that “policies that focus on assessing and improving teacher practice over time may, in the end, be stronger mechanisms to improve teacher quality than tinkering with summative evaluation” (p.39). Currently many states, districts and schools are in the midst of implementing new policies with little guidance from policymakers or researchers about how to achieve the dual goals of supporting improvements in teaching practice and holding teachers accountable for the quality of their instruction.

In this study, I seek to contribute to this line of research by closely examining the teacher evaluation practices at six urban schools, all of which serve students from low-income families and have been judged to be successful according to state accountability ratings. Here, I analyze how teachers and administrators experienced and assessed the evaluation processes at their schools.
Methods

This paper is based on a qualitative, comparative case study embedded in a larger study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. The larger study examines how six high-poverty, urban schools—all of which had received the state’s highest accountability rating—attract, develop, and retain teachers. It was conducted by Susan Moore Johnson, fellow doctoral student, Nicole Simon, and me. In this paper, I focus on findings regarding teachers’ and administrators’ experiences and assessments of evaluation in their schools.

Research Questions

1) How do administrators implement teacher evaluation processes in six schools serving high-poverty students and judged to be successful according to state accountability ratings?

2) How if at all, do the policies that regulate the school influence implementation of teacher evaluation?

3) How do teachers describe and assess their experiences with evaluation? How, if at all, do their assessments of the evaluation processes vary from school to school?

4) What challenges do teachers and administrators identify related to implementing evaluation policies?

Sample of Schools

Our sample selection was guided by four principles. First, we sought a sample that included charter and district schools located in one city in Massachusetts. Second, we looked for schools that served high-poverty populations (where 70% or more of students...
were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and also enrolled high proportions of students of color. Third, we sought schools that were considered high-performing, having achieved the highest rating in the state’s accountability system. Fourth, we sought schools that employed distinctive approaches to human capital development.

To attend to the first three principles, we examined publicly available demographic and student performance data. In seeking out schools that were having “success” with students from low-income families, we used the state’s accountability ratings as a proxy for students’ academic success. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MA DESE] ranks every school on a scale from one to five, with one denoting the highest performing schools. The formula calculating a school’s rating relies heavily on results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS], the state’s high stakes standardized test. The formula accounts for growth in student performance and the school’s success in narrowing proficiency gaps among subgroups of students, using a weighted average from the four most recent years of MCAS data. Although this definition of success is limited because it relies heavily on standardized test scores, which are a narrow and often problematic measure of achievement, it was the best proxy available for identifying schools that have a positive impact on students’ academic outcomes. In addition, these were the measure by which these schools were judged for awards and sanctions by the state and district, as well as by funders, school boards and the popular media.

To attend to the fourth principle, we consulted our professional networks and considered available information about the approaches to human capital development used by specific schools and, in some cases, charter networks. Based on our initial
inquiry, we drew up a sample of six schools—all geographically located within the boundaries of one large urban school district, Walker City School District [WCSD]. The sample included three district schools (one traditional and two former turnaround) and three charter schools authorized by the state (one restart of a chronically underperforming school). All schools were elementary and/or middle schools, which facilitates cross-site comparisons. To recruit schools, we contacted school officials explaining our study and requesting their participation. All six schools we approached agreed to participate in the study (For descriptive statistics for sample schools see Appendix A). The purposive nature of our sample has allowed us to conduct an in-depth, exploratory study of schools in a particular context. However, because the sample is small and deliberate, we cannot generalize our findings beyond our sample.

Data Collection

Interviews. Between March and June 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 142 teachers, administrators and other staff in the six schools. Administrator interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and teacher interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. At most schools, all members of the research team were present for interviews with the principal and CMO director. In addition all three researchers conducted interviews at each school. This facilitated cross-site comparisons, improved inter-rater reliability in coding data, and ensured that each research team member knew about each school’s structures and culture.

We also purposively constructed our interview sample. At each school, we first interviewed school administrators in order to understand both what processes they used to

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1 All names of schools, districts and individuals are pseudonyms.
select, develop, and retain teachers and why they used them. Then, at each school, we recruited a sample of teachers, varying in demographics, teaching experience, preparation, and teaching assignment. We solicited teachers’ participation in a variety of ways, including requests by email, flyers in teachers’ mailboxes, and principals’ recommendations. We also relied on recommendations from the teachers we interviewed about others in their school who might hold views different from their own. Teachers were promised confidentiality and anonymity as participants in the study. In addition, we interviewed other key staff members (e.g. curriculum coaches, program and family coordinators) when it became apparent that their work and views would inform our understanding of teachers’ experiences.

In each school, the number of teachers we interviewed varied depending on the school size, the complexity of the organization and the practices used. We interviewed between 33% and 56% of the teachers at each school. (For descriptive statistics about the interviewees, see Appendix B). We used semi-structured protocols (Appendix C) to guide our interviews and ensure that data would be comparable across sites and across interviewers (Maxwell, 1996). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocols included several questions that allowed interviewees to discuss systems and processes related to school-based professional learning, including teacher evaluation. Administrators were asked what supports their schools provided for new and experienced teachers, including supervision and evaluation, formal professional development [PD] and teacher collaboration. With administrators and teachers, we used follow-up questions to explore each of these and to identify other sources of support. In order to learn about how teachers assessed these experiences, we asked them to reflect on
which of the components of supervision and evaluation that they discussed worked well for them and which did not. By interviewing teachers and school leaders about a range of strategies to develop human capital in their schools, we sought to understand the connections among approaches within a school. Although this design, by definition, limits the depth of information we collected on any one topic, such as teacher evaluation, it situates that practice among other strategies for developing human capital, allowing me to consider relationships among them in my analysis.

**Document collection.** Although interviews were the main source of data for this study, we also gathered many documents that describe state, district and school policies and programs related to recruiting, developing and retaining teachers. The collected documents that informed analysis of interview data in this study included teacher evaluation rubrics, teacher handbooks, school policies, samples of feedback to teachers, and observation frameworks.

In our visits to the schools, we also observed day-to-day practices and sought evidence of the school’s organizational culture, which we recorded in our notes.

**Data Analysis**

After each interview we wrote detailed thematic summaries describing the participant and summarizing his or her views. First, we identified themes using *etic* codes drawn from the literature on the elements of developing human capital. Then, using the thematic summaries, we conducted a preliminary analysis of each site individually as well as cross-site comparisons, identifying common themes, similarities and differences. We used the preliminary analysis to supplement the *etic* codes with a list of *emic* codes that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, many interviewees
reported working long hours in order to participate in the job-embedded professional learning opportunities and to prepare for their daily teaching responsibilities. Although we had not identified such “demands” as a theme from our review of the literature, preliminary analysis led us to include this code so that we could systematically attend to this data in our analysis. We then used this preliminary list of codes to review a small sub-set of the transcripts, individually and together, in order to calibrate our understanding and use of the codes, as well as to refine the list and definitions. We repeated this process twice in order to finalize the list of codes and to improve inter-rater reliability. We then thematically coded each transcribed interview using the software, Dedoose (For a list of codes see Appendix D).

After coding all interviews, I engaged in an iterative analytic process, using data-analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to address my research questions about teacher evaluation. I relied on Dedoose’s function that allowed me to sort data by codes and by particular characteristics of interviewees to investigate my research questions. I analyzed the data for each school separately, completing a data analytic matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that showed the components of teacher evaluation at each school. I then reviewed school documents, such as teacher evaluation rubrics and school handbooks, to supplement this information. After establishing a clear understanding of the different elements of evaluation at each school, I created a cross-school matrix, to allow me to consider similarities and differences in teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives within and across schools. Finally, I wrote an analytic memo comparing teacher evaluation at the six schools in order to discern patterns about how teachers and administrators experienced and assessed these practices.
I used several strategies to address risks to validity. Throughout the process, I returned to the data to review our coding and check my emerging conclusions, seeking rival explanations or disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also shared analytic memos, outlines, and drafts with members of the research team, my dissertation committee, and colleagues familiar with this line of research but not involved in this research project so that they might offer alternative interpretations of the data.

**Findings**

In US schools today, evaluation is often viewed as a marginal activity, intended primarily for removing underperforming teachers (Thomas, Wingert, Conant, & Register, 2010). The school leaders in this sample had a more complex view of evaluation, seeing it as part of their approach to building human capital within their organizations. Teachers across the sample experienced evaluation as a robust, ongoing improvement process. Teachers and administrators in all schools also took the evaluation process seriously as a means of assessing teachers’ effectiveness and determining future employment. However, teachers’ sense of accountability seemed more driven by the day-to-day activities intended to support continuous improvement, such as frequent observational feedback, than by the formal elements of the evaluation process including their rating on the rubric.

**Contextual Factors Influenced Schools’ Approach to Evaluation**

Two conditions enabled these schools, to varying degrees, to focus their evaluation efforts on developing teachers rather than on dismissing them. First, the schools in this sample had considerable staffing flexibility. All had substantial autonomy in hiring teachers and some had the added assurance of being able to transfer or dismiss
teachers who did not do well. At the time of this study, none of the administrators in this sample would have described their school as having a significant proportion of underperforming teachers whom they were trying to “evaluate out.” Second, several of the schools had the ability to organize resources, including their administrative responsibilities, so that they could focus on what they saw as the primary function of evaluation—developing teachers.

Before examining the evaluation processes in these schools and the teachers’ perspectives, it is important to describe the range of schools in the sample and their particular histories and policy contexts, both of which influenced their approach to evaluation. Across the sample, school-based administrators who were responsible for supervising and evaluating teachers had different titles and roles, including principal, assistant principal, head of school, or dean of instruction, curriculum, or professional learning. For this paper, I refer to them all as supervisors or evaluators.

**The schools and their contexts.** *Naylor Charter School* and *Rodriquez Charter School* were well-established state-authorized charter schools that opened their doors ten and twenty years earlier, respectively, to serve elementary and middle school students from the area. Both were freestanding entities at their inception, although Naylor eventually became one of three schools in the Naylor Charter Network. Administrators at these schools had the authority to recruit, and hire teachers from the time their school opened.

*Kincaid Charter School* had been selected by the district and authorized by the state to “restart” a failing WCSD middle school in 2011, three years prior to this study. School officials promised, and Kincaid delivered, significant and rapid gains in student
test scores. They successfully recruited more than 80% of the students who had been enrolled by the traditional school before the restart, more students than typically returned to the school each year under the prior administration. In accordance with the requirements for restarting a school, Kincaid had invited current teachers from the school to apply for positions in the new charter school; however, very few applied and none of those who did were asked to return. When Kincaid opened, all teachers were new to the school.

*Dickinson Elementary School* was a century-old district school that served a largely immigrant population, most from the school’s surrounding community. In recent years, Dickinson had been recognized by the state and district for growth in students’ MCAS scores. In 2013-14, Dickinson began implementing WCSD’s new hiring system, which granted all district schools significant autonomy in selecting teachers from the district’s pool of candidates. Notably, Dickinson had a history and reputation of having very little teacher turnover and, therefore, experienced few opportunities to hire new teachers. In fact, when we conducted our study, over half of their teachers had worked at the school for more than twenty years. Many teachers in our sample talked about having waited years to apply for an opening at Dickinson before they received a job offer.

*Hurston K-8 School* and *Fitzgerald Elementary School*, also part of WCSD, had histories that differed substantially from Dickinson’s. The state had placed both in turnaround status as chronically underperforming schools four years prior to the study. At the beginning of the “turnaround” process, they were required by the state to replace at least 50% of the existing faculty and the principal, unless the principal had started at the school less than two years prior to turnaround designation—as was the case at Fitzgerald.
After a process of reviewing the performance of current teachers, Hurston’s new principal replaced about 80% of the school’s teachers and Fitzgerald’s principal replaced about 65%. In subsequent years, both schools demonstrated substantial growth on state standardized tests, allowing them to exit turnaround status, each in three years. Although school leaders and teachers at both schools were proud of this accomplishment, they were also forthcoming about the need for continuing to improve.

With support from their teachers, both Hurston and Fitzgerald had requested and received significant waivers from district policies in order to continue their reform efforts after exiting turnaround status. Both schools were granted autonomy in hiring along with flexibility in many other areas ranging from budget to curriculum. Although Fitzgerald and Hurston K-8 were part of WCSD, both continued to have significant school-based control of their organizations.

Selective hiring practices. The autonomies granted by state and local policies allowed these school leaders to be very selective in hiring teachers. Administrators across schools variously described the ideal candidates as those who were “…willing to constantly reassess, reinvent, and really be creative,” had the “will” to improve, and were ready to “take feedback and grow.” A network administrator at Naylor Charter explained, “If we’ve hired well, they are people who are constantly looking to improve. If they are looking to coast, then it was probably just our fault in hiring.” Four of the six schools, required applicants to teach a demonstration lesson and then debrief the lesson with an administrator or instructional coach, a process that helped the school identify teachers who were interested in improving and able to respond productively to critical feedback. Principal Forte at Fitzgerald explained,
What we really looked for was, how did they debrief with us? The reflection piece was the most important. I think it was more important even than the lesson. Were they able to say what went well or didn’t go well? Did they blame it on the kids? …If they can’t take any hard feedback, that’s not going to go so well.

All of the school leaders viewed hiring as the first step in a developmental trajectory of instructional improvement for educators joining their organization.

**Ability to dismiss or transfer teachers.** Although school leaders exercised significant control in selecting the teachers in their schools, not all hires worked out. In four of these schools, teachers in this sample were not guaranteed a position in their school beyond the current year. At Naylor Charter and Rodriguez Charter schools, teachers were hired as at-will employees who could be dismissed at any time. As an in-district charter, the WCSD teachers union represented Kincaid’s teachers. The school had been granted exceptions from the WCSD teachers contract, including the ability to release teachers from their faculty at will. If a teacher had achieved tenure after three years, but was then released into the district’s transfer pool by Kincaid Charter, that teacher would be guaranteed a job at another school in WCSD. Although Hurston K-8 was a WCSD school, it had a waiver from district policies allowing the principal to involuntarily transfer teachers out of his school, placing them back in the district pool to be reassigned to another WCSD school. In the other two schools, Fitzgerald and Dickinson, the principal could not transfer teachers at will. If these principals believed a teacher was not a good match for their school, they had no formal recourse except, where applicable, to use the WCSD evaluation process to officially dismiss a failing teacher. In summary, in four out of six schools, administrators could release or transfer teachers at will.
Although the relevant policies differed from school to school, all teachers across the sample seemed to believe that teachers who did not perform up to expectations would not remain at their school unless they improved. When a teacher was not a good match for the school or not able to meet its high expectations, they were counseled out or not offered a subsequent contract. However, these administrators understood the negative consequences of high teacher turnover, worried about the depth of their hiring pool, and therefore were cautious about using the authority they had under current policies to dismiss teachers. The administrators used the flexibility in staffing policies judiciously, and relied heavily on working with their current teachers to build instructional capacity in their school.

**Committed to developing teachers.** In all six schools, administrators saw the primary purpose of evaluation to be developing the teachers they had hired. A network administrator at Naylor Charter explained that this commitment to improvement called for observing teachers frequently:

> We do believe that our whole mission is to be a human capital organization. We are here to develop our kids. We are here to develop our teachers. We are here to develop our administrators. This is what we do and what we’re all about. … Therefore, we think that the most transformational thing is just being in people’s classrooms, talking with them afterwards.

Across schools, when we asked about teacher evaluation, administrators repeatedly responded by describing processes for ongoing supervision. Kincaid Charter’s Principal Kain explained, “We believe that teachers, or just people in general, grow with immediate feedback and real time instruction on how they are performing and giving them an opportunity to fix that in the moment.” He also reported that he expected some teachers would struggle more than others, and that those in the school were prepared to
support them. “If we have teachers who are struggling, it’s often times … rooted in a lack of skill. Our job as coaches is to help them with that.” Administrators in this sample provided long explanations of how, as one Fitzgerald evaluator said, they “coach [teachers] or find them the help they need.” The fact that the evaluators in many of these schools referred to themselves as “coaches” was indicative of their focus on supporting teachers’ growth.

Teachers across schools concurred with their administrators’ descriptions, saying that supervision and evaluation focused on promoting growth for all teachers. They reported that frequent feedback was the norm at their schools. A Naylor Charter teacher explained,

I think it’s just the overall culture of our school. I think that in order to be an employee here, regardless of if you’re an academic teacher, co-curricular teacher, even a staff member, you need to want feedback … and actually try and change it the next day to make it better. You have to have that open mentality that this is going to make me better and I want to get better… [to] help your kids.

In all schools, teachers explained that the process of supervision and evaluation was embedded in a professional culture that promoted continuous growth for teachers. Many described their schools much as this Rodriquez instructional coach did hers.

I think there is a culture here that is about continually getting better…that means that every teacher, whether they’re getting feedback from an administrator or not, is trying to get better in their own practice. There is no one who’s doing the same thing from year to year.

One teacher explained that she appreciated that the administrators at her schools were “continuing to develop [her] as a professional.” Another asserted that the processes for providing frequent and ongoing feedback contributed to an “extremely supportive environment.” She added that she wanted to stay at the school in large part because of
this emphasis. Teachers across the sample consistently expressed appreciation that their administrators focused on the developmental purpose of evaluation.

**Schools organized to prioritize instructional leadership.** Where possible, principals organized their leadership teams to allow key administrators to focus intensively on supervision and evaluation, while other administrators juggled many other responsibilities, such as discipline or building maintenance. Many public schools had recently suffered cutbacks in administration. However, Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Hurston K-8 had administrative positions designed to relieve those who supported and evaluated teachers of additional responsibilities. There were deans tasked with responding to student behavior challenges, directors of operations overseeing the logistical elements of running a school as well as administrators responsible for managing student data, recruiting teachers, and organizing PD. The Director of Operations at Hurston K-8 explained, “My role has been to block and tackle so that [the evaluators] can spend their time in the classroom coaching teachers and at [teacher] team meetings.”

Across these schools, we heard similar explanations. As a result, evaluators at these three schools reported that they spent most of their time on instructional leadership tasks that related directly to supervising teachers and interacting with teacher teams. Notably, however, Hurston’s administrative team included the same number of adults as Kincaid Charter’s, yet they had twice as many students and teachers. Therefore, unlike Kincaid and Naylor, Hurston K-8, did not have enough evaluators to provide the same intensive level of supervision for all teachers, even though they did their best to organize responsibilities to make that possible.
The three remaining schools—Fitzgerald, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter—had smaller, more traditional administrative teams, which made it impossible for evaluators to focus exclusively on instructional leadership. Having at most an assistant principal—and in the case of Dickinson having only a principal—they could not hand over their management responsibilities to others. Nonetheless, they made time to regularly observe teaching, review lesson plans, meet with teacher teams and provide teachers feedback on their work. In addition, school leaders at Fitzgerald and Rodriquez Charter allocated resources to hire full time instructional coaches to support teachers.

It is also notable that in this sample, all of the administrators who were responsible for supervising teachers had, themselves, been teachers, several with more than twenty years of teaching experience; six of fourteen had taught in the school they were now leading.

**Teacher Evaluation Policies**

All six schools were subject to the new Massachusetts teacher evaluation policies, which required districts and charter schools to either adopt or adapt the state’s new model evaluation system or revise their own system to meet regulations. WCSD (and therefore the three district schools in the sample) had adopted the state’s model system. One of the charters, Rodriguez, had also chosen to use that system. The other two charters, Kincaid and Naylor, chose to revise their existing evaluation frameworks to meet the state’s new regulations. In accordance with state regulations, all of the schools in the sample were using detailed, standards-based frameworks for observations and assessments. Five out of six of the schools were using rubrics with four rating levels for multiple elements under each standard of practice. The sixth school, Kincaid Charter, used an evaluation tool that
included multiple indicators for each category, but only had two rating levels—“present” or “not present.” According to state regulations, evaluators were required to observe each teacher one to four times per year, depending on the teachers’ improvement plan and ratings from prior years, where applicable. In all schools, teachers were active participants in the evaluation process, setting goals for student performance and professional practice.

At all six schools, evaluators were required to provide teachers with mid-year formative and end-of-year summative assessments, which consisted of ratings on the major standards as well as a summary overall rating. Five of the schools used student achievement data as a component of their rating system and assessed teachers’ progress in reaching specified targets for student outcomes. In all of the schools, teachers were asked to assess themselves using the evaluation rubric prior to their formal evaluation meetings. Teachers who consistently received low ratings were placed on more directed evaluation plans, which were intended to support improvement but also might lead to dismissal.

**Evaluation as a Continuous and Unusually Comprehensive Process**

Across schools, teachers described supervision and evaluation processes as continuous and unusually extensive. Evaluators had many ways to assess teachers’ work throughout their schools and to support teachers’ improvement. In the district schools, teachers were required to submit artifacts as evidence of their progress toward professional and student achievement goals. Artifacts could include samples of student work, lesson plans, copies of communication with parents, or photographs. One Dickinson teacher said that she was grateful to provide artifacts because her supervisor
became aware of aspects of her work that she “would probably never even know,” such as correspondence with parents. At Fitzgerald, the principal went beyond the district’s policy requirements and expected all teachers to submit lesson plans to their supervisor weekly. Each month, teachers submitted a packet including samples of student work and student assessment data. The principal and assistant principal regularly provided individualized, written feedback on these packets. At Naylor Charter, teachers were required to submit unit plans two weeks prior to using them so that their supervisor and a network administrator could provide feedback. Teachers and administrators also reported that their supervisors stayed informed about their professional practice by participating in team meetings, which focused on data analysis and curriculum planning. Interestingly, it was difficult to determine which practices were defined as part of the evaluation system and which were not, since teachers and administrators described them all as elements of an ongoing, integrated improvement process. Although teachers appreciated the varied ways that supervisors interacted with their daily work, most described classroom observations as the dominant and most valuable component of supervision and evaluation.

**Frequent observations and feedback.** Classroom observations played a central role in evaluation in all six schools. In district schools, evaluators were obligated to formally observe and provide feedback to each teacher throughout the year; the frequency of observations depended on that teacher’s rating on the summative evaluation in prior years. For example, a new teacher had be observed--once for an announced visit and four times for an unannounced visit—while a returning teacher with a history of proficient or exemplary summative ratings had to be observed once, unannounced. The district
encouraged evaluators to observe and provide feedback to teachers informally and frequently. In this sample, the three charter schools and one district school, Hurston K-8, expected their administrators to observe in classrooms more frequently than the state required.

Most teachers interviewed described an intense cycle of observations followed soon after by written or oral critique from their supervisor. In this sample, about 40% of the 100 classroom teachers we interviewed reported that they were observed and received feedback from their supervisor at least twice per month. Approximately 20% estimated that they were observed and given feedback between 5 and 10 times per year. The final 40% of teachers estimated that they had been observed 1 – 4 times per year as prescribed in the new state evaluation policy. Overall, therefore, these schools went well beyond the state requirements, although some teachers experienced that more than others.

Kincaid Charter and Naylor Charter expected that every teacher would be observed and provided face-to-face feedback at least twice per month. All teachers interviewed said that evaluators met these expectations and sometimes went beyond them. At Hurston K-8 and Rodriguez Charter, administrators aspired to observe every teacher and provide feedback at least once per month. They also routinely conducted “walk-throughs” for quick observations. Teachers’ accounts suggest that, although many teachers were observed frequently, these schools did not have the resources to maintain the intense supervision for all teachers. At Dickinson and Fitzgerald, teachers described their principals as spending a lot of time in classrooms throughout their school, but most talked about receiving formal feedback only a few times per year. These administrators did not have sufficient time for more frequent observations and focused more on
regularly reviewing lesson plans and student data and participating in team meetings. At these two schools, neither administrators nor teachers mentioned a target number of observations per year, but they reportedly met the district’s requirement to conduct between one and four unannounced visits per teacher per year.

**Teachers appreciated frequent observations.** Teachers valued frequent observations and detailed feedback, describing them with phrases like, “hugely helpful,” or by saying they made them feel “super supported.” One teacher, expressing a sentiment echoed by many others, explained that the reason she was so satisfied in her job was “…the constant feedback, and I constantly feel like I’m getting better.”

Those with all different levels of teaching experience provided a range of reasons in explaining why frequent observations were advantageous. Many teachers asserted that evaluators had greater credibility if they observed in classrooms regularly. A teacher with 11 years of experience at Dickinson reported that, “She [the principal] knows what we're doing. ...It's not like that old school where you never saw the principal. …I feel like she's always in our classes. The kids don't really even pay her any attention. …It's more natural, more organic.” A Hurston K-8 teacher with 10 years of experience compared the quality of observational feedback from two different evaluators in her school. “His feedback is a lot more valuable than hers, just because he is more consistently in there and I just feel like he gets more of the nuances because he must go to a million classrooms a day.” Teachers also reported that their evaluators had a better understanding of their professional experience and their particular struggles if they observed them teaching regularly. An experienced teacher at Rodriguez Charter explained, “He knows my flaws. He knows what I need to work on. He knows me better than I know myself as
For some teachers, administrators demonstrated their investment in developing teachers by observing frequently. A third year teacher at Rodriguez Charter explained, “Just the fact that my administrators are in my classroom on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, I think shows a lot. It means that they care, and they’re here to help us. … A lot of times we will get feedback that things need to change. The way it is delivered is almost always in a very positive way.” In all six schools most teachers appreciated that their supervisors spent a lot of time in classrooms, even if in some cases they did not provide feedback after every visit.

**Observations as a way to “get help.”** Given the regularity of the observation and feedback cycle and the cultural norms that encouraged continuous efforts to improve, many teachers viewed supervisory observations as an opportunity to get help in areas they found challenging. One teacher explained this by contrasting her current experience with that in her previous school:

> You’re so honest with everybody here, and nobody’s this expert of, “I can do everything perfectly.” It’s just calming…whereas in my old school …you’d find out they were coming in [to observe]. It was like you were ready for a performance. You had to do it perfectly and then they never came in again until three or four months later. [Here], they’re just always in and out of the room, so it’s nice. It’s a good way to just always keep getting better.

A colleague gave an almost identical report and added,

> When I know something isn’t going well, I will ask to be observed so that I can get help on that. That’s totally the mentality here. I don’t like someone seeing me doing something wrong or seeing something that’s failing, but I’d prefer that … [to] not getting any guidance on it.

Teachers also described times when they were praised for asking a supervisor for help, which reinforced the expectation that the focus of the supervisory practice was on improvement.
**Teachers appreciated detailed feedback.** Across schools, teachers valued high-quality feedback—detailed, relevant comments and suggestions that helped them to improve their instruction. Teachers appreciated receiving feedback about a range of topics including classroom management, general pedagogical strategies and what some called “content feedback.” Many teachers shared examples of supervisors’ suggestions that they found helpful. A teacher at Naylor Charter said that her supervisor had helped her improve the questions she asked during read-alouds so that she could encourage a variety of types of students’ thinking in response to text. A Kincaid Charter teacher discussed the helpful feedback she received about the ratio of teacher talk to student talk during her lesson. Hurston K-8 evaluators often emailed teachers with post-observation feedback, which teachers repeatedly described as specific and relevant. Samples provided by teachers included one case where Hurston’s Principal Hinds wrote about the pacing of a lesson and another where he noted that the discussion consisted largely of the teacher responding to every student’s contribution before the next student spoke. In both cases, the principal offered suggestions about how the teacher might adjust his or her practice.

Across schools, feedback went beyond support for classroom management. Although teachers frequently praised the feedback as detailed and insightful, many of the examples they shared with us focused on general pedagogical strategies applicable across content areas. It was unclear how often teachers received subject-specific pedagogical feedback, although several teachers said that they would like more.

**Day-to-day supervision contributed to teachers’ sense of accountability.** Teachers reported that the intense levels of day-to-day supervision contributed to a sense of high expectations and professional responsibility within the school that seemed to
matter more to them than the ratings they received in the formal evaluation process. Many teachers talked about feeling accountable for their work because they knew that their supervisor or a peer might be in to observe at any time. One teacher explained, “I can’t slack…knowing that [my supervisor is] in my class every two weeks. Knowing that other teachers are teaching my [lesson plans], there is no day that I can come in… not well-prepared…. I just can’t lower my bar.” Teachers at Fitzgerald also described feeling like they were held to high expectations for submitting and responding to feedback from their supervisor on weekly lesson plans and monthly data packets. One said, “I think it is where all schools should be, but it is demanding. I mean people are expected to turn in lesson plans, they’re expected to get feedback on it and implement the feedback in their classroom every week.”

*Formal evaluation matters, too.* The school leaders’ developmental goals for evaluation were not at odds with the formal aspects of the process, including mid- and end-of-year meetings to discuss ratings on the evaluation rubric. Teachers and administrators took these parts of the process seriously as supports for teachers’ development and as a means of assessing teachers’ effectiveness, which might inform future employment decisions.

Teachers generally viewed the formal evaluation process as providing an accurate assessment of their professional practice. A teacher at Rodriguez Charter described how his evaluator might compare the teacher’s self-assessments with his rating: “He'll say,… ‘I see you [put yourself] at a three; or you think you're at a two and a half, and I see you at a three. This is why. … I see you doing X, Y, Z.’” Some teachers respected the fact
that even the rating process emphasized the goal of helping teachers to improve. A Naylor teacher explained,

You’re graded in a number of categories in a rubric from 1 to 4, just like the students are. It’s like a standards-based employee evaluation. I got mostly like 1.5s and some 2s. I think I had one 3. … In another context, I would have felt like they were starting a paper trail to fire me. It was clear that actually that was right where they expected me to be. They expect their first-year, maybe even second-year teachers to be working hard, but not really mastering all the things they want you to master. It was a very positive conversation. I was offered a job the next year. At the same time, I felt like I had just walked into my teacher’s office and they had given me an F on the paper. It’s just a different scale. It’s like I went to school in Britain. I was not going to get a hundred percent on my essay anymore. They just don't do that.

As this and many other similar comments suggest, teachers trusted that the intent of the process was to support their growth and therefore they could appreciate tough assessments of their practice. They did not expect or want a “rubber stamp” process; nor did they think that falling short of the highest rating would be the first step out the door.

Nonetheless, across the sample, teachers and administrators recognized that evaluation could be used to hold teachers accountable for meeting professional expectations. Teachers believed that evaluators had given and would continue to give teachers low ratings on evaluation if justified and that those teachers could be dismissed. This contributed to a sense of accountability and made the evaluation process a serious one, but did not seem to generate fear or widespread anxiety among teachers. One administrator offered a perspective that distinguished between purposes of supervision and evaluation, which was consistent with her counterparts in other schools, “I think that supervision is the way to get change in teaching…evaluation is really important when somebody doesn’t change.” At several of the schools, teachers and administrators spoke of teachers who were on official improvement plans with goals that needed to be met in
order to keep their position. Administrators also told of teachers who were not offered a position the following year and in some cases were asked to leave mid-year.

“No surprises” formal evaluation processes. Many teachers in the sample described formal evaluation processes as an outgrowth of day-to-day supervisory practice. Teachers variously described the formal evaluation process as “just a tiny piece of what we already do on a daily basis,” or “connected to the informal.” One teacher expressed the sentiments of many in saying that the formal process “shouldn’t be a big deal. It really hasn’t [been].” Another clarified why that would be the case: “I know exactly what my goals are and what I’m doing, so it wasn’t surprising how she graded me. I graded myself really hard, but I knew what I was working on so it made sense to me.” The administrators’ intentions matched the teachers’ experiences as explained by Principal Hinds.

I think evaluation without ongoing supervision is meaningless. It becomes only the way that you terminate employment. And so my belief is that I and every member of my administrative team needs to be in classrooms all the time, giving feedback, asking questions, pushing people. And then all of that just gets rolled into an evaluation. No surprises.

Supervision and Evaluation Embedded in Professional Learning Structures

Ratings and feedback, which generally include a supervisor’s diagnosis and sometimes suggestions for improvement, do not necessarily lead to changes in practice. In a school system in its second year of implementing a new teacher evaluation system, Donaldson (2012) found that, although teachers had generally positive views of the process, they did not say that it had led to changes in their pedagogy. Teachers’ experiences in this sample stand in stark contrast to those findings.
Teachers believed their practice was improving. Strikingly, across schools teachers frequently reported that supervision and evaluation processes led to them to make changes in their pedagogical practice. A Kincaid Charter teacher with six years of teaching experience said,

I think I’ve become a drastically better teacher in the three years that I’ve worked here because it’s been this really close cycle of being observed and then feedback on what to work on and then observed again and then feedback again. … and also in … being more self-aware.

An early elementary teacher at Rodriguez Charter who had ten years of experience described in more specific terms how his principal provided him with observational feedback, over time, which supported him in dramatically shifting his approach to instruction.

She kind of said, “Why don’t you think about doing this, that and the other thing?” I said, “Okay” and that first two, three, four weeks of changing my entire teaching style was a disaster. …I started tweaking it and figuring it out and she would come in and observe and critique and give good positive comments and negative ones. …Looking back I can’t even imagine how much of a disservice I was doing to kids back then in the way that I was teaching.

Supervisors in these schools realized that their frequent feedback and suggestions for improvement were necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, for teachers to change their instructional practice. Therefore, they often connected the supervision and evaluation process to the school’s other learning opportunities so that teachers could have additional sources of ongoing support for improvement. When interviewees spoke about supervision and evaluation, their comments often led them to discuss other collaborative learning processes such as coaching, practices for reviewing data, lesson planning structures, whole school PD sessions, and peer observations.
Teachers’ goals created “alignment.” In all six schools, teachers were asked to set student performance goals and professional practice goals to guide their supervision and evaluation, and in several schools administrators and teachers explained how these goals were intentionally connected to school-wide and team goals. For example, at Hurston K-8, the teacher leaders for instructional teams set school-wide goals based on in-depth analysis of data. They then facilitated their content and grade level teams in setting goals to guide the collaborative work of their team. Team goals also could be adopted or adapted by individuals for their evaluation process. An administrator at Hurston K-8 discussed the advantages of explicitly connecting these processes. “So there’s… an alignment from the individual to the team to the school that makes sense to people, and it doesn’t feel like they’re pulling [evaluation] goals out of the hat.”

Teachers across schools appreciated the fact that connections among individual, team and organizational learning goals focused their efforts rather than fragmented them. Teachers in various schools described how this played out. One teacher told about how she and colleagues on her team were working “on open responses and the quality of our students’ writing in relation to what they read,” which had “driven a lot of the work [they] did as a team this year”; this was her personal evaluation goal as well. A fourth grade teacher explained how she and her colleagues had developed a goal related to “reflection for fourth grade students,” which elaborated on the school-wide PD focus on social-emotional learning. Notably, in all of the schools, teachers helped to define the connections among goals. None were mandated by administrators and most varied from one team to the next within a school.
**Supervision connected to one-on-one coaching.** Supervisors provided teachers with one-on-one coaching to help them understand and enact the suggestions provided in their supervisory feedback. Teachers praised instances when supervisors used observation debriefs to go beyond critique and help them implement suggestions. For example, a teacher with eight years of experience reflected on an observational debrief with his evaluator in which they planned questions that he might ask individual students during a subsequent lesson.

It was helpful to do because the meeting itself produced the question series. It’s good to have a product come out of those meetings, rather than just … “Here’s what I saw, fix it” type of things. Also because it was sort of teaching me how to do it myself. … I found myself doing it more and more … having that idea in mind.

Teachers also provided examples of their supervisors modeling instructional strategies with students in their classroom. In other situations, supervisors met with teachers to help plan lessons based on student data or feedback from an observation. A teacher described a series of one-on-one coaching sessions she had with her supervisor in conjunction with observational feedback.

Every Monday [she] and I meet after school and look up the lessons for the rest of the week… In that meeting for 20 minutes we debrief over very specific things that she knows I’m already working on—aligned exit tickets, and also what line of questioning is going to reach peak thinking the quickest. That’s very quick cogent points. She looks at [lesson plans] and gives me feedback. … I send her the new lesson plans that I’ve made, so she’s constantly hearing from me.

At Rodriguez Charter and Fitzgerald Elementary, where the faculty included instructional coaches, evaluators often directed the coaches’ work with individual teachers, based on information that they had gleaned from supervisory visits. A Fitzgerald coach explained,
Sometimes, [Principal Forte] is very directive with my time, like “I want you to spend three hours a week with [Teacher X] and help him write math lesson plans and go into his classroom to give him feedback on his teaching, specifically working on implementing lesson plans, because he writes great lesson plans, but then he doesn’t implement them.” And sometimes it is a lot more loose… she’ll vent to me about how a teacher is struggling and then say, “Could you work with them?” and then it’s up to me to kind of put together a plan.

Many teachers and the administrators at Rodriguez Charter valued the ways that more general pedagogical feedback from a supervisor was complemented by content-specific, curricular support from a coach in the form of lesson planning, data analysis and in-class modeling of practices. Supervisors across the sample strategically coordinated one-on-one coaching to complement supervisory feedback, making it more likely that teachers could implement suggestions.

**Supervision also connected to other collaborative professional learning.**

Evaluators also integrated topics from supervision into teacher team meetings and whole-school PD sessions to support teachers in their learning. Although the schools had varying amounts of team and whole-school learning time, administrators in all of the schools strategically planned how this time was used, creating coherent learning experiences for teachers. For example, at Kincaid Charter an evaluator explained that she used her classroom observations to identify “bigger-picture trends,” that is, needs that were apparent across the school, which might inform the topics for weekly whole school PD sessions. She further explained that in response to a “trend” in observations she might also guide a teacher leader to work with her team on that particular topic during their planning block. Teachers appreciated this multi-faceted approach to supporting improvement and many provided examples like this teacher’s: “Student discussion was an area of growth…they gave me some strategies [to use] in [feedback]. We’ve also had
PD around what teacher talk should sound like…how much time I‘m talking versus how much time they’r e thinking.”

At Fitzgerald, administrators also integrated professional learning opportunities, but rather than making PD responsive to supervision, they focused individual supervisory feedback on the established long-term PD topic—fostering higher order thinking among students. They created an observation feedback form that included twelve indicators from the teacher evaluation rubric that they believed relate to fostering higher order thinking. A Fitzgerald teacher with six years of experience appreciated the efforts to create connections among professional learning opportunities.

[I was] really impressed with the amount of consistency and thoroughness with which the whole topic of higher order thinking was integrated and just drove the instructional plan for the school. … Therefore, that was the theme that went all the way through a lot of our meetings; higher order of thinking in writing, higher order of thinking questions in math, …all the topics are related to that. That was a good cohesive theme.

**Supervision connected to targeted peer observations.** In some cases, teachers reported that their supervisor suggested and orchestrated an opportunity for them to observe a peer (inside or outside the school) as follow-up to feedback from a supervisory observation. A teacher at Fitzgerald recalled,

A couple of weeks ago…one of the teachers in the second grade was having a problem teaching… three digit addition with and without regrouping. The instructional coach … came in with her to observe the way that I did it. How did I execute my lesson? The vocabulary. What did I allow the kids to do? The turn and talk. The group work.

A Rodriguez teacher said that it “ helped a lot, just to see” a colleague teaching. Teachers and administrators in these schools explained that peer observations were used as a way to help teachers better understand a teaching approach or a particular aspect of instructional practice that they were trying to adopt or improve.
Across schools, administrators strategically coordinated the many professional learning activities in their school to optimize the possibility of improving teaching quality. Supervision and evaluation processes were intertwined with the work of instructional coaching, teacher teams, whole school PD, and peer observation.

**Limitations in Implementing Supervision and Evaluation Processes**

Despite the overwhelmingly positive views of supervision and evaluation, teachers and administrators experienced challenges as they implemented the process. Understanding these not only explains what more would be required to improve evaluation, but also suggests what it takes for any school to design and implement an evaluation process that teachers experience as supportive of their learning.

**Mismatches between evaluators and teachers.** Across schools, some teachers were disappointed with the type of feedback they received and often attributed the shortcomings to the fact that their supervisors did not have knowledge and experience that matched the content they taught. These teachers explained that their supervisors were able to provide feedback about classroom management and general pedagogy, but not content-specific pedagogy or curriculum. A music teacher in one school expressed the views of other teachers in similar situations:

> I think that, being in the arts, those supports over the past two years have developed me into being a person who has strong management. … I haven’t necessarily had that person really driving my curriculum. …I’ve had the autonomy to do what I want and figure it out. … I’ve been less developed in that regard, but as far as management goes, it’s very supportive.

An early-career science teacher at a charter school described the feedback she received from her supervisor, a former math teacher.

> My feedback has mostly only been on … talking less and having my kids talk more. Near the end of the school year I felt like she was just trying to find little
things that she could tell me to improve on. …I don’t know if she just didn’t
know what I needed improve on …I assume I have lots to improve on because
I’m definitely not perfect. …[S]he had no feedback for me on content.

A middle school math and science teacher at Naylor Charter described a similar
experience. “She often gives me good feedback more about management, but as far as
content, I don’t get much.” A history teacher who was supervised by a former English
teacher said that his feedback often focused on how to teach English skills in history
class, but neglected the “nitty gritty of history.” Teachers of students with special needs
expressed concern because their supervisors did not have experience or knowledge
specific to special education. “ I don’t feel that my [evaluator] can coach me in special
education.” Her colleague agreed and elaborated further, saying that he found the
feedback to be “very standard…cookie-cutter” not addressing the particular challenges he
faced due to his students’ learning disabilities. Notably, these teachers consistently
expressed a desire to improve. As one teacher explained, “I think there’s still huge
amounts of growth I could make, but it’s hard accessing that growth when the people up
ahead of you don’t know what you’re doing.” Across the sample, teachers who thought
that their supervisor lacked experience and knowledge specific to their teaching
assignment saw this as a significant limitation of the supervision and evaluation process.

Several administrators acknowledged the challenge of mismatched expertise, and
we saw evidence of the ways in which they were trying to address it. An administrator at
Kincaid Charter expressed her concerns about supervising teachers in a subject she had
never taught.

I think it’s really detrimental to the quality of instruction that students receive. …I
think I’m doing moderately well, but I don’t have a [subject] background and I’m
doing my darnedest to support my teachers. I would love more support in that
arena. …I think it’s actually really hard to find an expert in any area in our
organization. People who are moderately qualified are considered experts. I think that’s a concern.

At Fitzgerald Elementary and Rodriguez Charter, the administrators relied on instructional coaches to support teachers in curriculum planning and subject-specific pedagogical strategies. Teachers and administrators appreciated the intentional pairing of support that was possible when they had specialized coaches on the faculty. However, they only had coaches in mathematics and literacy, so this did not fully address the challenge, and some schools had no coaches at all.

Across schools, many administrators relied on teachers within their faculty as sources of content knowledge and subject specific-pedagogical feedback. At Dickinson Elementary, Principal Davila was the only administrator and therefore had to evaluate all teachers in her school. She explained, “I don’t have all the answers…I taught kindergarten for years. Fifth grade math? I do my observations…I say [to teachers] ‘Learn from one another.’” Davila and other school leaders created many opportunities for teachers to learn from each other through peer observation, collaborative data analysis and other team discussions. Principal North at Naylor Charter periodically invited teachers to observe colleagues together with her to provide content-specific feedback. She explained that she might ask a veteran math teacher to participate in a collaborative debrief, explaining to him, “Content-wise I think I know the feedback I need to give, but would love your support on it.” Other principals allocated time for veteran teachers to meet with colleagues who taught the same content but weren’t on the same teacher teams. Teachers valued these opportunities to work on curriculum and content-specific pedagogy. A middle school math teacher at Hurston K-8 described observations by administrators as “affirming,” but said she found observations by her colleague who also
taught math to be more helpful. “He just knows more about the content. He can tell if students are understanding or not a little bit more than they can because not everybody’s an expert in everything.” Although teachers proved valuable resources to each other, the veteran teachers who were relied upon to support others often spoke of wishing for feedback themselves.

Across schools, when a supervisor’s expertise did not match a teacher’s role, the administrator and teacher sought, although not always successfully, sources of expert advice to support the teacher’s ongoing development. When the feedback was not what teachers hoped for, they still endorsed the overall process of supervision and evaluation, but wished it could better meet their subject-specific teaching needs.

**Insufficient Time.** The second limitation identified by participants was evaluators having insufficient time to provide comprehensive supervision to all teachers. Although most teachers in the sample praised frequent observations and feedback from supervisors, some teachers—ranging from novices to veterans—at Rodriguez Charter, Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald and Dickinson, wished for more.

Administrators at these four schools spoke of the daunting amount of time and resources required to conduct frequent observations and feedback for all teachers. The majority of administrators in the sample had between 15 and 20 supervisees but some had more, with the highest number being 39 for one of the principals. The principal at Fitzgerald Elementary said, “We just can’t keep up. We’re lucky to have two of us.” One of the principals at Rodriguez Charter described a similar concern. “I have 20 people I evaluate and supervise, and it feels like too many to me. I’m always thinking, ‘Oh, I
haven’t been there for so long!’” Many of the school leaders bemoaned the sheer number of teachers that they were trying to support.

Teachers generally believed that administrators spent more time supervising new and struggling teachers than competent veteran teachers, who still might improve. Experienced teachers understood why novices’ learning needs were a higher priority. Nevertheless, they wished for more intensive support so that they might further develop their practice. For example, a Hurston teacher with ten years of experience said that her supervisor’s periodic observations were not enough: “I don’t want oversight but I would like more feedback—someone who knows my classroom, has seen Student A in October and now can tell me how Student A progressed in March.” A colleague with nine years of experience wished to be observed more frequently so that she could have in-depth discussions about her “delivery of instruction,” such as “Did it make sense to do that activity … in groups?” Although the Hurston evaluators were providing this level of feedback to other teachers in the school, they did not have sufficient time to invest similarly in teachers they deemed effective. At each of these four schools, a small number of teachers expressed interest in having more frequent observations and feedback from their evaluators.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Teachers in this sample of six high-performing, high-poverty schools appreciated receiving frequent feedback on their instructional practice and believed that supervision and evaluation were helping them to improve. Two factors enabled these school leaders to use evaluation principally as a process to support teachers’ professional growth. First, administrators in these schools had considerable flexibility in hiring, transferring and
dismissing teachers, so that they did not need to regularly rely on evaluation to dismiss underperforming teachers. Second, some of the school administrators had the resources and flexibility to organize their administrative team’s roles and responsibilities so that evaluators could spend their time almost exclusively on instructional leadership.

In all six schools, teachers and administrators consistently described the primary purpose of the process as supporting improvements in teaching quality although they reported that it also played a role in holding teachers accountable for their professional work. By closely connecting supervision and evaluation to other professional learning, administrators not only increased the relevance of the feedback but also were able to provide substantial support to aid teachers in responding to suggestions made by supervisors. Notably, teachers with a range of experience from novices to veterans expressed interest in this process for supporting their growth. There are lessons learned and questions that emerged from the similarities and differences across schools as well as the implementation challenges.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

In many ways, the policy environment in which these schools operated supported their approach to supervision and evaluation. The Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation and the state’s new regulations emphasized a cycle of continuous improvement. The evaluation policies allowed these schools to continue and build upon their existing focus on developing teachers. In addition, to support implementation of the policies, Massachusetts DESE and Walker City School District provided schools with detailed resources including models from practice. For example, they disseminated samples of how individual teachers might align their evaluation goals with improvement
goals for their teacher teams and their schools. The administrators and teachers in this study appreciated working under teacher evaluation policies that aligned with their approach to the process.

This study reinforces previous findings that doing supervision and evaluation well requires evaluators who possess content and pedagogical knowledge, coaching skills, and the orientation to attend to developmental as well as accountability goals (Kane & Cantrell, 2013; O’Pry & Schumacher, 2012; Sartain et al., 2011). This is a substantial challenge for most schools and school systems. All of the supervisors in this sample were inclined to attend to developmental goals of the process, which we found remarkable in contrast to our previous study where evaluators in only one of six schools had this orientation (Reinhorn & Johnson, 2014). However, by their own account, they struggled to find sufficient time to complete a high-level of supervision for all teachers. In this sample, even with a cohort of experienced former teachers as evaluators, the schools struggled to match evaluator expertise to the teachers’ assignments for all teachers, leaving some teachers wishing for more from the process.

**A time-intensive process.** Teachers in this sample appreciated high-frequency feedback and support when it was provided. However, the comprehensive process described in these schools is extremely time intensive and would require a school or school system to commit significant resources to support implementation. Schools and school systems and state departments of education must consider how much time they are willing to devote to developing their teaching force, particularly in high-needs schools; what role supervision and evaluation is going to play in that process; and then provide schools the flexibility, resources, and support to accommodate their efforts. At Naylor
Charter and Kincaid Charter, policy flexibility and sufficient resources allowed them to organize so that some administrators focused almost exclusively on instructional leadership. Hurston K-8 and Fitzgerald Elementary had the freedom to reorganize their administrative teams during the turnaround process and they both added positions, permitting the principals and other key administrators to devote more time to instructional leadership. But when Fitzgerald and Hurston exited turnaround status, reductions in their funding led them to decrease the size of their administrative teams making the reforms difficult to sustain. At the time of this study, Fitzgerald had returned to having a traditional elementary administrative team with a principal and assistant principal while Hurston, despite having non-traditional roles, was administratively under-staffed relative to their goals. Rodriquez Charter and Dickinson also would have benefitted from funding to increase the number of people on their leadership teams. These administrators would likely have welcomed support that allowed them to focus more exclusively on instructional improvement and/or additional colleagues with expertise to contribute to supervising teachers. Across schools, additional evaluators and additional administrators focusing on non-instructional management tasks would have created more opportunities for greater investment in the supervision process. Some of the schools in this sample, charter and district, were working hard to increase their resources through fundraising efforts and partnerships with organizations supporting their efforts. Nonetheless, they did not all have sufficient resources to sustain their efforts in consistently and rigorously supporting all teachers in their schools.

In order to effectively implement new teacher evaluation policies, schools serving high-poverty communities may, over time, need more financial support than others. As
was demonstrated in this sample, increased funding during turnaround efforts may allow schools to add administrators and coaches to their faculties, helping to solve the problems of time and content expertise, but when this funding is withdrawn after the turnaround process, the schools find that they must revert to traditional administrative teams that cannot sustain a robust supervision and evaluation process. State departments of education and school systems will need to determine what level of funding is required over time for schools to develop and maintain leadership teams that can effectively assess and support teachers through the supervision and evaluation process.

Matching content expertise for supervision and evaluation. In this study, where there was a good match between evaluator’s knowledge and teachers’ assignment, teachers benefitted. When the evaluator’s content knowledge did not match the teacher’s role, he or she tended to provide feedback on general pedagogy and classroom management. Although teachers and administrators believed that this feedback helped teachers to improve, they also acknowledged that it was not sufficient to support teachers’ growth in subject-specific dimensions of their instructional practice.

These schools went to great lengths to create productive matches and supplement those with support from coaches and peers where appropriate. And yet, this challenge persisted. Almost any school could benefit from identifying and relying on effective teachers in different content areas, whether as formal or informal coaches, as the schools in this sample did. However, this was a limited solution in that the person considered most knowledgeable in the building would be left seeking support as well. In addition, there were some content areas in which there were no peers in the school for subject-specific support. In order to fully address the issue of providing all teachers with
supervisors who have expertise and experience that can support their learning, the solutions are unlikely to exist completely within the confines of a single school. Schools (particularly small schools), CMOs and districts should consider how to work across schools to capitalize on expert knowledge in the field to better inform the supervision and evaluation process. As demonstrated in this sample, teachers are likely to be part of the solution.

**Integrating professional learning opportunities.** As schools and school systems seek to solve these challenges, it is important to recognize the power of integrated strategies for developing human capital in schools. The school leaders in the sample viewed supervision and evaluation as part of their broader strategy to develop their teachers. Teachers benefitted from the fact that their supervisors were able to connect one-on-one supervisory experiences with their professional learning in teacher teams and in whole school PD. If school systems, CMOs, and school leaders consider ways to work across schools in solving the problems of time and expertise described above, they would benefit from considering how to create systems in which supervision and evaluation is an integrated process, not an isolated activity. In addition, most of the schools in this sample had more time than is typical for collaborative professional learning, in some cases including weekly whole school PD or weekly double block team meetings. In addition to having the time to devote to teachers’ learning, these school leaders also had the flexibility to work with their teachers on developing the content of their professional learning time, allowing for topics that are responsive to teachers’ demonstrated learning needs and creating coherence across structures.
Preparing principals to lead school-based human capital development. New evaluation policies continue to demonstrate great promise as a way to support improvements in teaching quality for all teachers—not just underperforming teachers. This is of vital importance as schools and school systems venture into the uncharted territory of the Common Core State Standards. However, it is evident that we will only achieve this promise with significant investments in administrators who lead and implement the evaluation processes with a focus on learning and improvement.

Principals’ development programs in universities, school systems and independent organizations, can assist in these efforts by preparing school leaders who value and understand how to invest in developing teachers in their schools. Unless principals view this as a core function of their job, it will always be superseded by the managerial tasks that can easily dominate a school leader’s time. An orientation toward developing teachers is necessary but not sufficient for effective implementation of new evaluation policies. In these schools, when school leaders were able to organize so that they could focus on instructional leadership, teachers viewed it as a productive investment.

School systems will need to hire school leaders interested in continuous improvement and then immerse them in a culture that prioritizes growth for all its community members, including them. At Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter Schools, organizational structures allowed for the evaluators to be supervised and evaluated by CMO administrators regularly, much like what is happening with teachers in these schools. Toward this end, the school, school system, or CMO will need to invest in developing their evaluators after they are hired. They will need to go beyond calibrating
their use of evaluation tools for validity and reliability to helping evaluators develop strategies for understanding teachers’ daily work, supporting improvement and integrating this supervision with other professional learning throughout the school.

**Implications for Research**

The degree to which evaluation was integrated into other school improvement efforts was striking in this study. As researchers seek to understand whether and how teacher evaluation practices lead to improvements in teaching quality, they will likely need to broaden their focus and consider the array of practices that may be interacting with evaluation. Future research on evaluation could examine how effective evaluation practices interact with staffing policies and other professional learning opportunities to support development of teaching capacity within schools.

Given that the policy conditions played a significant role in how these schools were able to approach evaluation processes, further research is warranted. This sample was small and contained schools with particular histories and flexibilities in how they organized and operated their schools, which were afforded by different state and local policies. Many questions remain about how schools are enabled and constrained by the systems and the policy environments in which they operate. In particular, there is more to learn about the similarities and differences across charter schools, district schools, and within-district charter schools.

Many questions remain about how, if at all, teacher evaluation processes support improvements in teaching quality. In this study, teachers appreciated frequent, detailed feedback but in some cases wished for more content-specific critiques of their work. Teachers also reported on various types of supervision ranging from observational
feedback to commentary on lesson plans. Future research on teacher evaluation could investigate the different types of feedback. For example, what is the value of different types of feedback relative to the time investment required? Future research is also warranted about the frequency of observations and feedback to teachers. Is there an optimal frequency to support teachers’ growth and does it vary depending on the teachers’ experience? How, if at all, does an evaluation process change over time if a faculty is stable?

This study suggests that teacher evaluation can be used to support improvements in teaching quality in a variety of school contexts and that teachers appreciate when this occurs. There is also a small but growing body of evidence supporting the promise of integrating evaluation processes into a school’s larger program for instructional improvement. However, implementing evaluation processes in this way is a challenging undertaking that requires skillful school leaders, ample resources and policies that afford these leaders significant school-based control. Across the U.S., states and school systems have invested heavily in reforming their evaluation policies, but now they need to follow these efforts by investing in schools and supporting their leaders as they implement these policies.
Chapter Two

Using Data To Drive Instruction: Teachers’ Experiences of Data Routines in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools

The use of student data to improve schools has been a high priority among policy makers for well over a decade. The No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] of 2002 called for gathering, analyzing and using student achievement data to support school improvement in the hope that greater accountability would lead to higher expectations for all students, especially students of color and those from low-income families. This legislation was intended to promote better learning for all and to reduce racial and class-based achievement gaps (Diamond & Cooper, 2007). The significant policy emphasis on data has successfully raised awareness about student achievement (Jennings & Rentner, 2006) and created an unprecedented sense of urgency about students’ performance on high-stakes standardized tests (Rentner et al., 2006). In addition, there is ample evidence that states and local districts are using data to inform decisions about the status of schools and teachers. However, it is less clear how educators within schools are using data to inform decisions that are closely tied to everyday student learning.

Most districts nationwide still grapple with how to make relevant student learning data accessible to teachers in efficient and helpful formats (Means, Padilla, & Gallagher, 2010). Evidence suggests that at the school level student achievement data are most often used for school-wide improvement planning and less frequently to inform teachers’ work with students (Means et al., 2010). However, the pressure of rewards and sanctions built into federal, state and district accountability policies has encouraged schools to expand their use of data to improve student performance on tests. While some schools and
teachers have developed narrow strategies aimed specifically at improving outcomes on standardized test (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Cooper, 2007), others have developed a more comprehensive response, intended to improve learning—not simply test scores—for all students (Horn & Little, 2010; Little, Gearhart, & Curry, 2003; Wayman & Stringfield, 2006).

There are now scores of for-profit and non-profit organizations that partner with schools to support ongoing use of data. In addition, many schools have developed their own systems and structures to support data use in their organizations, often with support from their district or Charter Management Organization [CMO]. These practices, in an idealized form, often start with school wide analysis of summative data from state standardized tests to formulate school-wide goals, professional learning plans and initiatives to support students. Teachers could then engage in ongoing data inquiry cycles, with their grade level or content colleagues. They could meet regularly with peers to examine data, identify students’ learning struggles, craft ways of addressing them, implement them, and then return with data to reassess and repeat the cycle. The types of data used could be diverse with some being chosen by the district or CMO while others remain at the schools’ and even the teachers’ discretion. Little is known about how teachers experience these and other types of data routines in schools.

In this exploratory study, I examined how teachers experienced data use practices in six high-poverty schools, each of which had demonstrated success, based on state accountability ratings that measure growth in standardized test scores and progress on closing proficiency gaps. The schools included a mix of charter and district schools located in one Massachusetts city. At each school, teachers described structures in which
they regularly gathered and analyzed student data with their colleagues, in order to inform their instruction. Teachers and administrators described their schools as experiencing an acute sense of urgency about improving standardized test scores. Therefore, there was a strong emphasis across all schools on carefully tracking every child’s academic progress. However, teachers’ and administrators’ efforts went beyond a simple, singular focus on raising test scores. Data routines compelled teachers to develop, revise and come to agreements about what they wanted students to learn, how to assess their progress, and how to respond when students were struggling. Data use practices in these schools established high expectations for all students and teachers and contributed to an atmosphere in which teachers were accustomed to making their practice and their students’ learning public among their peers. Teachers were in many respects engaged in “joint work” (Little, 1990).

In what follows, I situate this study in the research literature about data use at the school level. After presenting my research methods, I describe the schools in the sample, providing relevant information about similarities and differences in their history and their policy contexts. Next, I present the findings followed by a discussion of implications for practice, policy and research.

**Literature Review**

Researchers have investigated data use by actors at multiple levels of the educational system, ranging from federal regulators to teacher teams within schools. At the federal and state levels it is clear that data plays a significant role in driving decisions and informing policy efforts. In the years following the passing of NCLB legislation, researchers found that students have been taking more tests than ever before (Jennings &
Rentner, 2006) but it is unclear how the data are actually used by teachers who are in direct contact with students.

**Across the US, How Are Data Being Used?**

In order to understand implementation of the NCLB Act, The Center on Education Policy administered questionnaires to a nationally representative sample of school districts, followed by case studies of individual districts and schools. One focus of their investigation was data use practices, a prominent feature of NCLB legislation. (For reports see *From the Capital to the Classroom* at [http://www.cep-dc.org/](http://www.cep-dc.org/)) They found that schools and school systems are paying much more attention to aligning curriculum and instruction with the standards that drive the assessments and they are examining student assessment data much more carefully than in the past (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). Seventy-one percent of the 229 districts surveyed across 50 states increased time spent on reading and math (both tested subjects) at the expense of other subjects. Students took more tests than ever, and schools were using the tests to identify achievement gaps among subgroups of students. However, it was unclear how this information was being used. Extant research suggests that that school systems are responding to the policy but little is known about how these responses influence learning and teaching in classrooms (Rentner et al., 2006).

In another national investigation, *The Study of Education Data Systems and Decision Making*, Means and colleagues (2010) examined data use in districts and schools using both national surveys and site visits to a purposive sample of 36 schools in 12 districts, selected for their active involvement in using data for instructional improvement. Although districts had made progress in developing or acquiring
appropriate technology to provide flexible and efficient access to a variety of data sources, they were not routinely supporting schools in using data to inform their daily work.

At the school level, Means and colleagues (2010) found that, more than any other activity, educators were using student data to develop annual school improvement plans. Teachers rarely reported using student data to reflect on and improve their pedagogical practice. Instead teachers reported using data analysis to plan curriculum, place students in particular classes, including specialized support situations, and to group students within a class for targeted interventions. The researchers concluded that several conditions encouraged data use in the schools: systems providing timely interim assessment data, teachers having common assessments to share and review, and leaders designing and implementing routines to support data use. However, the study suggested that such conditions were rarely present.

**How Do Schools Respond To The Pressures Of Accountability Policies?**

Not surprisingly, how teachers interact with data is influenced by the policy context in which they work. Several studies conducted in the years following the passing of NCLB suggest that the policy may have had unintended consequences for how teachers used the data to inform instruction. The hope had been that by creating high expectations for all students and providing districts, schools and teachers with detailed disaggregated data about how their students faired on high stakes tests, teachers could respond by improving curriculum and instruction in ways that would increase the learning for all students, especially chronically underperforming students.
However, researchers found that in the name of data-driven decision-making, many schools and teachers allocated resources and focused attention on some students rather than others in an effort to improve the school’s profile on state accountability reports. Diamond and Cooper (2007) explored this phenomenon using data from an in-depth longitudinal comparative case-study of school leadership in 13 elementary schools in Chicago Public Schools as part of The Distributed Leadership Project (Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003). Schools that were not on probation and had a history of higher scores relative to their counterparts used data for systematic school-wide instructional improvement. For example, teachers worked together to make charts of the skills they were intending to teach and then used data to track all students relative to the skills. In contrast, the schools that were on probation and had a history of lower test scores used the data to make decisions about how to get off of probation. For example, they determined which students were closest to reaching the benchmark scores and provided them with additional instructional support, at the expense of other students they deemed were unlikely to improve. These schools were responding in ways that might help them to avoid sanctions but were not fundamentally improving their instruction or student learning for all students and were categorically neglecting the most needy students. The authors also pointed out that in Chicago Public Schools black students and students from low-income families were disproportionately represented in the lowest performing schools. Therefore, they concluded that these types of responses to the pressure of NCLB policies could, in fact, increase race and class achievement gaps over time.
Booher-Jennings (2005) found similar responses to state testing requirements in an urban elementary school in Texas, based on interviews, observation and document analysis. The school and its teachers analyzed their data in order to identify students who were most likely to improve and surpass the benchmark score for proficiency, “bubble kids,” who were close to the cutoff. Then, in the name of “data-driven decision-making,” they increased instructional support to the “bubble kids” in part by withdrawing support from the lowest performing students who they deemed unlikely to make sufficient progress to achieve proficiency. Booher-Jennings concluded that educators in this school equated raising test scores with “good teaching” and data-driven decision-making, of any sort, with “effective school improvement.”

These studies raise valid concerns about the perverse incentives built into federal and state accountability policies, but provide little insight into how schools might effectively use data to improve learning and teaching, particularly for students in the lowest performing schools. Ingram, Louis and Schroeder (2004) sought to understand the effects of accountability policies in nine high schools recognized as leaders in implementing strategies for continuous improvement. Although these schools were not focused on “gaming” the tests, nor were they using student achievement data from standardized tests to inform their daily work. Based on a two-year study, Ingram and colleagues found that teachers were willing to use student achievement data for school wide decisions but were much more likely to rely on anecdotal information or their intuition when making decisions related to their classroom. Teachers did not trust the data from standardized external assessments and routinely dissociated their practice from it. Teachers reported having insufficient time to collect what they perceived to be more
relevant data. The researchers suggested that there was a lack of agreement among educators about which student outcomes they valued, how to measure student learning, and whether data should and could be used to improve instruction. Many questions remain about the effects of accountability policies on data use in schools.

**How Do Teachers Respond to Ongoing Data Routines?**

Other researchers have focused less on the accountability policies and more on understanding how teachers respond to data routines in schools. They conducted longitudinal, in-depth case studies of schools that were selected because they were engaging teachers in ongoing data routines—analyzing and responding to student data in ways intended to improve learning and teaching. These studies identified the possibilities of this work and the implementation challenges it presents.

Wayman and Stringfield (2006) studied three schools located in three different states using computer-based data systems from outside vendors. Teachers reported benefitting from training during professional development sessions on how to use the systems and time during weekly team meetings for collaborative data analysis. Teachers particularly valued their ability to use multiple sources of data to analyze student learning. For example, they might consider results on multiple assessments of literacy skills along with their professional judgment in order to determine next steps for student learning. As a result of their data new practices, teachers believed that they had a better understanding of students’ learning needs and a greater sense of collaboration and professionalism. They also believed that they improved teaching practice. However, interestingly, many of their examples were actually instances of teachers providing students with different groupings or more instruction rather than examples of changes in
pedagogy. Although these researchers did not distinguish these sorts of revisions to practice from changes in how teachers instruct, Means and colleagues (2010) did. This is a difficult but important distinction that is worthy of future examination.

Other studies found variability in implementation of data routines within schools, and highlighted factors that enabled productive use of data. In a two-year study of two teacher work groups in two urban high schools, Horn and Little(2010) analyzed teachers’ conversations rather than relying on teachers’ self-reports. They found that, despite having enthusiastic, skilled professionals on both teams, one team was far more likely than the other to productively discuss problems of practice presented by colleagues. This team, unlike their less productive counterpart, had shared terminology and concepts about learning and teaching, had a common curriculum, and were supported by a leader who participated in ways that periodically helped to focus the group and deepen the conversation.

In another study of teacher teams across four schools, Little, Gearhart, Curry and Kafka (2003) found that productivity of the work varied depending on the amount of guidance provided on what student work to select and how to present it. This case study focused on teams that were Looking at Student Work (LASW) as a data process – teachers regularly, presenting, analyzing and discussing samples of their students’ work to colleagues as a way to frequently explore formative data and theoretically adjust instructional practice accordingly. Across all of the schools, they found that teachers grappled with the discomfort of talking about their practice and often demonstrated defensiveness in the form of jokes. The researchers found that, in order for teachers to
realize the full potential of the process, they needed more time and more implementation support.

**How Might Data Use Affect Professional Culture In Schools?**

As demonstrated by Little and colleagues (2003), collaborative data routines challenge longstanding norms of privacy and autonomy in the teaching profession (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975) by compelling teachers to examine each other’s instructional practices. Is it a prerequisite that schools have a culture that supports collaboration and continuous improvement in order to productively engage with student data in ways that influence their daily work? Or, can the data routines, themselves, help to shift these professional norms? There is a large body of literature suggesting that collaborative cultures support school improvement, (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Little, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989) are valued by teachers, (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001; Little, 1982) and correlate with higher rates of teacher retention (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2011). It makes sense that we seek to understand how, and under what conditions, data routines facilitate close collaboration among teachers.

There is a small amount of evidence that data routines can contribute to building a culture of collaboration to support instructional improvement. Sherer and Spillane (2011) found that the school leaders in a K-8 school were able to use an ongoing data cycle to focus teachers’ attention on improving learning and teaching in more intensive ways than they previously had accomplished at that school. In this four-year longitudinal study, they also identified subsequent changes in instructional practice. Sherer and Spillane suggest
that the intentional design and enactment of organizational routines, such as this data practice, can help to build norms and culture in a school. Many questions remain about the structures, capacity, and other conditions necessary to support this type of work.

As is evident from this research, data use in schools is rarely integrated into teachers’ daily work and when it is, that occurs with varying degrees of success. The six high-poverty schools in this sample were implementing a wide range of school-level data routines as part of their daily work in the service of improvements in learning and teaching. I explore how teachers experienced and assessed these practices, with attention to their organizational and political contexts.

Methods

This paper is based on a qualitative, comparative case study embedded in a larger study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. The larger study examines how six high-poverty, urban schools—all of which have received the state’s highest accountability rating—attract, develop, and retain teachers. It was conducted by Susan Moore Johnson, fellow doctoral student, Nicole Simon, and me. In this paper, I focus on teachers’ and administrators’ experiences and assessments of data use in their schools.

Research Questions

1) How, if at all, do teachers and administrators use data to support improvement in six high poverty schools that are demonstrating success according to state accountability ratings?

2) How do teachers describe and assess their experiences with data use in their schools?
3) How, if at all, do teachers and administrators’ accounts vary across schools?

**Sample Of Schools**

Our sample selection was guided by four principles. First, we sought a sample that included charter and district schools located in one city in Massachusetts. Second, we looked for schools that served high-poverty populations (where 70% or more of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and also enrolled high proportions of students of color. Third, we sought schools that were considered high-performing, having achieved the highest rating in the state’s accountability system. Fourth, we sought schools that employed distinctive approaches to human capital development.

To attend to the first three principles, we examined publicly available demographic and student performance data. In seeking out schools that were having “success” with students with students from low-income families, we used the state’s accountability ratings as a proxy for students’ academic success. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MA DESE] ranks every school on a scale from one to five, with one denoting the highest performing schools. The formula calculating a school’s rating relies heavily on results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS], the state’s high stakes standardized test. The formula accounts for growth in student performance and the school’s success in narrowing proficiency gaps among subgroups of students, using a weighted average from the four most recent years worth of MCAS data. Although this definition of success is limited because it relies heavily on standardized test scores, which are a narrow and often problematic measure of achievement, it was the best proxy available for identifying schools that have a positive impact on students’ academic outcomes. In addition, these
were the measure by which these schools were judged for awards and sanctions by the state and district, as well as by funders, school boards and the popular media.

To attend to the fourth principle, we consulted our professional networks and considered available information about the approaches to human capital development used by specific schools and, in some cases, charter networks. Based on our initial inquiry, we drew up a sample of six schools—all geographically located within the boundaries of one large urban school district, Walker City School District [WCSD]. The sample included three district schools (one traditional and two former turnaround) and three charter schools authorized by the state (one restart of a chronically underperforming school). All schools were elementary and/or middle schools, which facilitates cross-site comparisons. To recruit schools, we contacted school officials explaining our study and requesting their participation. All six schools we approached agreed to participate in the study (For descriptive statistics for sample schools see Appendix A). The purposive nature of our sample has allowed us to conduct an in-depth, exploratory study of schools in a particular context. However, because the sample is small and deliberate, we cannot generalize our findings beyond our sample.

**Data Collection**

**Interviews.** Between March and June 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 142 teachers, administrators and other staff in the six schools. Administrator interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and teacher interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. At most schools, all members of the research team were present for interviews with the principal and CMO director. In addition, all three

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2 All names of schools, districts and individuals are pseudonyms.
researchers conducted interviews at each school. This facilitated cross-site comparisons, improved inter-rater reliability in coding data, and ensured that each research team member knew about each school’s structures and culture.

We also purposively constructed our interview sample. At each school, we first interviewed school administrators in order to understand both what processes they used to select, develop, and retain teachers and why they used them. Then, at each school, we recruited a sample of teachers, varying in demographics, teaching experience, preparation, and teaching assignment. We solicited teachers’ participation in a variety of ways, including requests by email, flyers in teachers’ mailboxes, and principals’ recommendations. We also relied on recommendations from the teachers we interviewed about others in their school who might hold views different from their own. Teachers were promised confidentiality and anonymity as participants in the study. In addition, we interviewed other key staff members (e.g. curriculum coaches, program and family coordinators) when it became apparent that their work and views would inform our understanding of teachers’ experiences.

In each school, the number of teachers we interviewed varied depending on the school size, the complexity of the organization and the practices used. We interviewed between 31% and 56% of the teachers at each school. (For descriptive statistics about the interviewees, see Appendix B). We used semi-structured protocols (Appendix C) to guide our interviews and ensure that data would be comparable across sites and across interviewers (Maxwell, 1996). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We did not anticipate prior to the study that data routines would be such a high priority strategy for improving teaching and learning at all of the schools, so we had not
included a direct question about data use in our protocol. However, several of the questions in the protocol led interviewees to discuss data routines and the professional culture that supported these practices. The interview protocols included questions that encouraged participants to discuss the school’s systems and processes related to teachers’ professional learning, including work with colleagues. Administrators were asked to explain how their teachers were organized into teams and what work they did together. In addition, questions about their overall view of the school and about hiring created opportunities for interviewees to discuss the professional culture of the school. With administrators and teachers, we used follow-up questions to explore their responses. In order to learn about how teachers assessed their experiences, we also asked them to reflect on which of the opportunities that they discussed worked well for them and which did not. By interviewing teachers and school leaders about a range of strategies to develop human capital in their schools, we sought to understand the connections among their approaches within a school. Although this design, by definition, limits the depth of information we collected on any one topic, such as data use, it situates that practice among other strategies for developing human capital, allowing me to consider connections among them in my analysis.

**Document collection.** Although interviews were the main source of data for this study, we also gathered many documents that describe school policies and programs related to recruiting, developing and retaining their teachers. The collected documents, which inform analysis of interview data in this study, included teacher handbooks, school policies, assessment calendars, data use protocols, and data analysis forms used by teachers.
In our visits to the schools, we also observed day-to-day practices and sought evidence of the school’s organizational culture, which we recorded in our notes.

**Data Analysis**

After each interview we wrote detailed thematic summaries describing the participant and summarizing his or her views. First, we identified themes using *etic* codes drawn from the literature on the elements of developing human capital. Then, using the thematic summaries, we conducted a preliminary analysis of each site individually as well as a cross-site comparisons, identifying common themes, similarities and differences. We used the preliminary analysis to supplement the *etic* codes with a list of *emic* codes that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, many interviewees reported on multiple strategies for using assessments to monitor student achievement and plan interventions. Although we had not identified “monitoring students” as a theme from our review of the literature, preliminary analysis led us to include this code so that we could systematically attend to this data in our analysis. We then used this preliminary list of codes to review a small sub-set of the transcripts, individually and together, in order to calibrate our understanding and use of the codes, as well as to refine the list and definitions. We repeated this process twice in order to finalize the list of codes and to improve inter-rater reliability. We then thematically coded each transcribed interview using the software, Dedoose (For a list of codes see Appendix D).

After coding all interviews, I engaged in an iterative analytic process, using data-analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to address my research questions about teacher evaluation. I relied on Dedoose’s function that allowed me to sort data by codes
and by particular characteristics of interviewees to investigate my research questions. I analyzed the data for each school separately completing a data analytic matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that showed the components of data use at each school, identifying who was participating in data routines, what data they had access to as well as how they responded to the data. I then reviewed school documents such as assessment calendars, data meeting protocols and data analysis forms to gain additional information about data use processes at each school. After establishing a clear understanding of the different elements of data processes at each school, I created a cross-school matrix, to allow me to consider similarities and differences in teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives within and across schools. Finally, I wrote an analytic memo comparing data use practices at the six schools in order to discern patterns in the data about how teachers and administrators experienced and assessed these practices.

I used several strategies to address risks to validity. Throughout the process, I returned to the data to review our coding and check my emerging conclusions, seeking rival explanations or disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also shared analytic memos, outlines, and drafts with members of the research team, my dissertation committee, and colleagues familiar with this line of research but not involved in this project so that they might offer alternative interpretations of the data.

**The Schools and Their Context**

The schools in this study are similar in several respects and quite different in others. A brief discussion of their histories and policy requirements provides contextual information that informs the subsequent analysis and discussion.
The Charter Schools

*Naylor Charter School* and *Rodriquez Charter School* were well-established state-authorized charter schools that opened their doors 10 and 20 years earlier, respectively, to serve elementary and middle school students from the area. Both were freestanding entities at their inception, although Naylor Charter eventually became one of three schools in the Naylor Charter Network. As charter schools, they were completely free of all local district policies and received public funding through the state, rather than the school district.

*Kincaid Charter School* had been selected by the district and authorized by the state to “restart” a failing WCSD middle school in 2011, three years prior to this study. They recruited more than 80% of the students who had been enrolled by the traditional school before the restart, more students than typically returned to the school each year under the prior administration. School officials promised, and Kincaid delivered, significant and rapid gains in student test scores. In accordance with the requirements for restarting a school, Kincaid had invited current teachers from the school to apply for positions in the new charter school; however, very few applied and none of those who did were asked to return. When Kincaid opened, all teachers and staff were new to the school. As an in-district charter, the WCSD teachers union represented Kincaid’s teachers. The school had been granted exceptions from the WCSD teachers contract, giving them extensive autonomy to define teachers’ working conditions. In addition, Kincaid Network and school leaders had autonomy over their budget, curriculum and assessment, as defined in their charter with the state.
The District Schools

Dickinson Elementary School was a century-old district school that served a largely immigrant population, most from the school’s surrounding community. In recent years, the district and the state recognized Dickinson for growth in students’ scores on the state standardized test. The school had a history of having very little teacher turnover and many teachers we interviewed there talked about having waited for years to apply for an opening at Dickinson. In fact, when we conducted our study, over half of their teachers had worked at the school for more than 20 years. The WCSD teachers union represented Dickinson’s teachers, and the school was bound by the WCSD collective bargaining agreement, as well as other state and district policies. Dickinson could be characterized as a traditional district school, implementing district policies as directed and taking advantage of district resources such as data coaches, district-designed interim assessments, and curricular materials.

Hurston K-8 School and Fitzgerald Elementary School, also part of WCSD, had histories that differed substantially from Dickinson’s. The state had placed both in turnaround status as chronically underperforming schools four years prior to the study. At the beginning of the “turnaround” process, they were required by the state to replace at least 50% of the existing faculty and the principal, unless the principal had started at the school less than two years prior to turnaround designation—as was the case at Fitzgerald. After a process of reviewing the performance of current teachers, Hurston’s new principal replaced about 80% of the school’s teachers and Fitzgerald’s principal replaced about 65%. In subsequent years, both schools demonstrated substantial growth on state standardized tests, allowing them to exit turnaround status, each in three years. Although
school leaders and teachers at both schools were proud of this accomplishment, they were also forthcoming about the need for continuing improvement.

With support from their teachers, both Hurston and Fitzgerald had requested and received significant exceptions to district policies in order to continue their reform efforts after exiting turnaround status. For example, both schools were granted autonomy in hiring and budget, as well as flexibility in scheduling teachers’ time, additional PD hours, extended learning time for students and decision rights regarding curriculum and assessments. Although both schools were part of WCSD, they continued to have significant school-based control of their organizations.

**Rigorous High Stakes Standardized Tests**

All six schools, as public entities, were required to administer the state’s standardized test, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS] each spring to their students. It was aligned to the Common Core State Standards [CCSS], which were adopted by Massachusetts in 2010 with some additions unique to the state. MCAS included multiple choice, short answer and open response questions and, in certain grades, a written composition. Researchers who compared standards for proficiency on state tests to standards for proficiency on National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] found wide variation across states, with Massachusetts ranking highest in 4th grade reading and math as well as in 8th grade math. In 8th grade reading, Massachusetts standards for proficiency were in the top twenty states (Bandeira de Mello, 2011). In general, the MCAS was regarded as a more challenging assessment

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3 Although some districts and schools in MA were piloting Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC] as a summative test, all of the schools in this sample were preparing to take MCAS in the year of data collection.
than most state tests nationwide. In addition, Massachusetts’ students did well in
collection to other countries in international assessment results (National Center for
Education Statistics (ED), 2012; OECD, 2011).

**Findings**

In all six schools, teachers and administrators placed a high priority on supporting
students’ academic performance, but for most, their sense of professional obligation and
their hopes for their students extended well beyond raising test scores. Nonetheless,
teachers felt significant pressure to ensure their students scored well on state tests.

Across the sample, teachers were expected to carefully monitor and support every
student’s achievement and improvement. Toward this end, they participated in ongoing,
in-depth routines for gathering, analyzing and responding to student learning data.
Through these data practices and other professional activities, teachers and administrators
in these schools were coming to agreements (and grappling with disagreements) about
what they wanted students to learn, how they intended to measure that learning and how
to respond in the face of learning struggles. Almost all teachers interviewed, endorsed
data use in their schools as an effective practice that supported them and their students in
improving.

**State Test Results Play a Prominent Role**

In these six schools, teachers and administrators were acutely aware of and driven
by their students’ performance on MCAS. The Massachusetts DESE, their district or
network, their community, their funders and the media routinely judged these schools
based on their test scores. In some cases, the schools had been closed or could risk being
closed if their results did not measure up to expectations. For some, funding depended on
maintaining and improving upon their prior success on these measures. As previously noted, all six schools were ranked at level one in their accountability ratings, which reflects a notable degree of success in terms of growth and closing proficiency gaps among subgroups in students’ scores on MCAS. In addition, five had received commendations from the state department of education in recent years for high achievement or for significant growth on student test scores. Two schools had been finalists in competitions in which non-profit organizations recognized schools that improved significantly. A sense of urgency regarding students’ MCAS results permeated the cultures and practices in these schools.

**Teachers felt significant pressure regarding high-stakes tests.** Across the sample, teachers and administrators repeatedly talked about the responsibility they felt to help students score well on the MCAS. A Kincaid Charter teacher explained,

> The stakes are very high in terms of us producing test scores that show growth. At the end of the day [our school] was founded on the premise that we would improve test scores that were being generated previously, …which objectively, theoretically, [is] something I believe in, but in practice has become extremely stress-producing and anxiety-producing.

Across schools, teachers offered different explanations but remarkably similar descriptions of the pressure they felt. A Rodriguez teacher reported,

> Our board of directors wants to see that our MCAS results are good. That…trickles down to the teachers that there’s an expectation that the scores are going to be in a certain place. Because of that there is a lot of pressure to make sure the test scores are where they should be.

Some teachers agreed with the views of one who explained that the pressure increased as she approached “test season,” when there was “a really, really high degree of oversight …It just feels like a really high-pressure situation.” In several schools, administrators spent additional time working with teachers or teacher teams whose students’ test results
were considered to be below expectations. Notably, although administrators did not use value-added measures in the teacher evaluation processes, teachers were required to demonstrate progress on student learning goals measured with scores on MCAS or interim exams. Teachers’ success in achieving these goals influenced their evaluation. In two of the schools, students’ test scores also influenced teachers’ bonus pay. Across the sample, many teachers described significant urgency about students’ results on standardized tests.

**Schools Relied on Data In Their Daily Work**

Although the annual state standardized test results figured prominently in the ethos of these schools, their data routines went well beyond strategies to raise test scores. We never directly asked interviewees about data routines, yet, time and again, teachers and administrators spoke of the substantial role that data played in their daily work.

Teachers across the sample appreciated regular use of data in their schools and saw it as one of their organizational strengths. A Kincaid Charter teacher who had been teaching for ten years at different schools praised the fact that they were, “incredibly, incredibly focused on data here, incredibly.” A teacher at Dickinson with eleven years of experience had a similarly emphatic report about the role of data at her school. “Data, data, data!” she exclaimed and then went on to explain that she believed that the increased focus on analyzing student data had “made a huge difference” and contributed to a “rigorous environment.” A Hurston K-8 teacher with eight years of experience contrasted his school’s regular use of student data with that of his previous school.

The way in which we have systemized using data to drive instruction here just was never a conversation at [my old school]…The meetings that we have are really driven by looking at student work. …The fact that the time itself is even carved out and that there is an expectation [is different than my old school].
He characterized the organized use of data as “high-level work.” Across schools, teachers were surprisingly consistent in saying that school-wide and instructional decisions should be informed by objective information about student learning, not just teachers’ impressions of teaching. Teachers provided abundant examples of formal and informal data use weaving through professional dialogue and activities in all six schools.

**Hiring for teachers who believe in data-driven instruction.** School leaders in this sample realized that not all teachers would want to work in an environment with high levels of pressure related to student achievement and a relentless focus on student data. A Hurston K-8 admin explained,

> There is a lot of data pressure in terms of looking at student growth. Not just MCAS but in all sorts of progress monitoring that we do. Some people honestly just don’t want that. ... [Y]ou can go to many schools and not have that kind of intensity.

For this reason, when administrators and teachers in several of the schools screened applicants for teaching positions, they attended closely to the candidates’ interest and skills in using data to inform their instruction. In describing what he looks for in prospective teachers the principal at Hurston K-8 said, “I wanted people who are comfortable with data...I ask [candidates] to bring data and [explain] how they use it to plan.” The principal at the Fitzgerald explained that they often arranged for prospective teachers to interact with current teachers as they analyzed student work and planned lessons in order to see how the candidates responded to student data. A teacher at Naylor Charter explained the role of data use in the school’s hiring process.

> We just believe in data. ...We use it a lot to assess where kids are weak and where they need to improve more. It just informs our teaching. ... It informs how we plan curriculum. It informs everything. If we are interviewing people who are not experienced at using data or maybe even have some opinions against it—they don’t really like the idea of it. That might be a problem.
This approach to hiring underscores the prominent role data routines played in these schools.

**School Wide Structures to Promote Data Use**

A closer look at the formal structures for data routines in these schools reveals various ways in which they were designed to help teachers collaboratively examine what they taught, how they measured student learning, and how they responded when students had not mastered material or standards.

**Periodic, common assessments to monitor student progress.** All schools required teachers to administer interim assessments in academic subjects approximately every quarter. These interim assessments were central to the teachers’ data routines. At Dickinson and Fitzgerald, teachers used the school district’s interim assessments for the core academic subjects. At Hurston K-8, Rodriguez Charter and Kincaid Charter Schools, administrators instead purchased quarterly assessments in English Language Arts [ELA] and Math from a nonprofit organization. Teachers of other subjects, such as science and social studies and in some schools co-curricular arts classes, developed or adopted common assessments with their teams. Naylor Charter’s CMO leaders had developed their own assessments for core academic subjects at each grade. The interim assessments developed by the district, the non-profit company and Naylor Charter Network, were aligned with both the CCSS and the school’s curricular scope and sequence so that teachers could assess students’ learning of the content that had been taught most recently. They were formatted to resemble MCAS and both teachers and administrators said they

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4 Schools had different names for these assessments but for the sake of clarity I will refer to them all as interim assessments. For the purposes of this paper, interim assessments were required, common assessments that were aligned with the state standards and the curriculum that the teachers were using in the classroom.
used the results to predict how well students would perform on the annual high-stakes state standardized tests.

Soon after administering the interim assessments, teachers received (often within a day) detailed data reports about the performance of each child and each class on each problem, including correlations between the items and particular standards. Teachers and administrators then met to analyze the results and develop action plans. This data routine occurred during the weekly team meeting among grade-level or content area teachers or during professional development sessions devoted to this process.

Teachers explained that, as they interpreted and responded to the results of interim assessments, they could count on guidance from trained teacher leaders, school and network administrators, instructional coaches and data coaches from the district or non-profit company. In some schools, administrators facilitated data meetings, while in others they participated along with the teachers. In addition, teachers used structured protocols and/or forms provided by their administrators or the non-profit company to guide their work. A teacher in her second year at Rodriguez explained the basics of the framework that guided her work with interim assessment data.

[We] go through the data, and I have an action sheet that I need to fill out, which are my first response to looking at the standards we either did well or poorly on, as well as looking at individual children, as well as setting up my own action plan.

Although the approaches and protocols varied, from school to school, they always began with teachers analyzing the data in order to identify misconceptions or gaps in students’ understanding relative to the learning standards. One teacher said they aimed to understand “what students know and don’t know” while another said that she wanted to
understand where students’ “strengths and struggles are within the curriculum” as the first step in any discussion of data.

*Teaching to the test or using the test to support teaching?* Despite having generally positive views about the interim assessments, many teachers also acknowledged a tension between “teaching to the test” and using the tests as a tool to support their teaching. Teachers associated this particular data routine most closely with the pressure to continuously improve the schools’ test results.

*Administrators acknowledged the testing “trap.”* Most teachers believed that their school leaders wanted the schools to be about more than just producing desirable test scores and several shared specific examples of why. An experienced teacher at Naylor Charter commented, “I think that [the network director] honestly believes that…’No, we don’t want you to feel like the MCAS is the end-all be-all.’” However, she observed that “most of the teachers . . . especially the younger teachers [have that feeling]. They get really scared about their MCAS scores.”

An administrator at Hurston K-8 explained the tension in ways that echoed the opinions of many of her counterparts in other schools. “You can go very wrong with testing. All you do could be testing and test prep.” She spoke of one teacher team that discussed this “trap” regularly. “They really want to ensure that that’s not something that happens here, which I really respect and is really important to this school.” She explained that, as a school, they were not prepared to ignore the tests either. “Then how do you also ensure that there is the accountability piece? That we are measuring and responding to data about what our kids are able to do in that moment?” According to various accounts about this same team, the administrators and teacher leaders tried to capitalize on this
disagreement in order to promote discussion of the standards and increase accountability for teaching them, rather than allowing the disagreement to derail their collaborative work. An experienced teacher from Rodriguez Charter recalled the principal’s response when some teachers expressed concern about items on an interim test.

“Well, don’t just teach something because you think you have to teach it because of [interim test.] If that’s the case, then we need to decide: Do we just not do [an interim test] in second grade? Do … we cut out those questions? …Don’t ever just do something.” She wasn’t saying it in a confrontational way, just…”If you don’t think it’s the best way to do it…then let’s figure it out.”

Despite administrators’ efforts to convince teachers that their work was not just about raising test scores, this tension could not be easily dismissed.

*Most, but not all, teachers accepted the focus on test data.* Most of the teachers willingly accepted the substantial role that test results played in their schools, believing that the focus on students learning the standards served them well. A fifth grade teacher reflected on the role that testing played: “Do I teach to the test? I would say, ‘No, I don’t.’ I use the information that I get from [interim tests] and their MCAS scores and I’m going to say, ‘Okay, what’s happening with what kids?’ … I think yes, I do teach some specific things that I know are going be on the test.” Another teacher explained,

I’m going to work hard to get these kids to be successful and they might not get the scores and I’m okay with that. But I’m also not going to say, ‘We don’t care about the test because that’s not the school’s mission.’ So I think it’s a balance. You know …there’s no perfect school.

A middle school teacher explained why it was problematic for teachers to ignore the test.

Regardless of what your philosophical disposition is, there’s a test and [the kids] are judged based on that test. Given that they’re kids who are from poor neighborhoods and brown, your philosophical disposition is actually hurting them. You are not giving them access to power, which is being able to do well on a test, to open doors for you.
Many teachers spoke in ways that suggested they had come to accept the focus on test results as part of the context in which they worked and that the benefits to students outweighed their concerns.

However, a small number of teachers worried that their school’s focus on test results had a negative influence on decisions about what and how to teach. Several from various schools expressed concerns that in preparing students for the interim assessments they narrowed the curriculum in ways that were detrimental to student learning. A second grade teacher at Rodriguez Charter said,

> It doesn’t leave much room for creativity in the classroom. Even at seven and eight years old, our curriculum is now geared towards our quarterly [interim] tests that we’re taking. … Essentially we are teaching to a test. …I find that frustrating but I don’t think I would find it any different elsewhere.

A Hurston K-8 teacher with ten years of experience said that interim assessments “should be used as a dipstick; instead they are used as a compass.” Another teacher reported that the emphasis on testing made her feel that the work in the school ultimately focused on “how do you compare?” and created competition among teachers about student test scores. A teacher at Naylor Charter worried that both teachers and the school lose sight of the “whole child.” Notably, only a few teachers across the sample expressed these concerns and sometimes noted that they were outliers among their peers. Interestingly, most of these teachers attributed this problem to the substantial power of the accountability systems dictated by federal and state policies.

Teachers’ accounts revealed that many were grappling with perceived pressure and concerns about the prominence of high stakes testing in their schools, but they did not believe their experience would be different at another school. In general, most
teachers suggested that their schools’ organizations were striking a balance between being driven by the tests and using the assessments as a tool to support student learning.

**Other types of data complement the interim tests.** Teachers may have accepted the intense focus on interim assessments closely associated with MCAS because there were other ways to monitor student learning. Each school also gathered other types of data that they examined with peers and administrators during weekly team meetings or whole-school PD sessions to assess and support student learning. Other forms of data included samples of student work, teacher-administered reading assessments, responses to questions on exit slips, homemade quizzes, unit tests, performance assessments, homework completion records and disciplinary records such as demerits and detentions. At Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Hurston K-8 teacher teams incorporated data analysis into the ongoing curriculum work of their content and/or grade level teams.

There were several additional data processes in these schools.

**Progress monitoring.** At Dickinson and Fitzgerald, one grade-level team meeting per week was devoted to student “progress monitoring.” At Fitzgerald, teachers took turns presenting formative data about one or more students who were struggling, while at Dickinson, teacher teams used formative data to identify a learning need for their whole class. Teachers then helped each other plan academic interventions. Finally, teachers reported back to their team in six to eight weeks with updated student data. Teachers at both schools valued the opportunity to consult with colleagues about how to respond to students’ learning needs. A Dickinson teacher described how progress monitoring helped her plan and provide students with focused, small-group instruction on phoneme segmentation. She enthusiastically reported that the data, which she gathered during one-
on-one assessments with students, showed that students had grown significantly in that area, beyond her expectations. Fitzgerald’s principal recalled teachers’ responses when she surveyed them about which structures they found most helpful in supporting their success as a turnaround school. “One of them was progress monitoring. That was the number one strategy that teachers felt contributed to our students’ success. They wanted that to continue.” Many teachers appreciated have the regular, structured opportunity to monitor student progress and seek advice from peers.

**Monthly data packets.** At Fitzgerald, teachers were also required to submit a monthly set of student learning data to their supervisor, who then provided individualized feedback. This set of data included math assessment scores, reading scores, writing scores, writing samples, homework logs and reading logs. Although a few teachers said they found it hard to meet the demands of administering the assessments and gathering data every month, others added that the process and the feedback they received were helpful. A kindergarten teacher recalled a specific, valuable suggestion that her principal made in response to a student’s writing sample. In her data packet, the teacher had indicated that she was working with a student on using the full width of the paper when writing. The principal responded that another teacher had assisted one of her students with a similar challenge by highlighting the margin in bright yellow.

5 The math scores were based on the most recent unit assessment. The writing scores were a class set based on using a rubric to score a monthly written response to a prompt. The writing samples were from three students selected to represent the range of low, middle and high-level writers. Writing for the same three students was submitted each month all year. The homework and reading logs were records of the students’ homework and independent reading. The contents of the data packet varied across grade levels but were specifically prescribed in the school handbook.
Teachers recognized that the potential of this process was not only in the feedback they might receive from their supervisor, but more importantly in the ways that the process kept them attending closely to their students’ academic progress. The instructional coach at Fitzgerald explained,

Because we carefully monitor all of our kids’ progress, for our teachers it’s really amazing when they think “wow, this kid…moved from an AA to a G [reading level] in first grade”…and the first grade teacher knows it’s because of the hard work she is doing…. I think it’s very rewarding, but it’s challenging too.

She believed that their ongoing attention to data helped teachers to recognize student growth and feel efficacious in their work.

**Variation in data used across schools reflected differences in educational philosophies.** It is notable that in some cases the data that was available to teachers and the data that they most frequently discussed in our interviews reflected the school’s educational approach. For example, at Rodriguez Charter many educators told us about their philosophy, which one administrator summarized as an approach to students characterized by the phrase, “We love you and we have the highest expectations for you.”

In keeping with this approach, Rodriguez Charter teachers had access to data about students’ social-emotional well-being because of a school-wide professional development focus on social emotional learning that called for administering a student survey to all students. Teachers were expected to use this data in addition to academic data in student learning goals for the teacher evaluation process and to assess students’ needs for intervention groups; while one student might be getting extra help with mathematics another might be in a small group working on issues related to bullying.

In contrast, at Kincaid Charter, where administrators and teachers spoke at great length about their strict behavioral expectations and disciplinary system, educators made
frequent references to using data regarding behavioral infractions, homework completion, tardiness and attendance in addition to academic data. Their data leader had developed a customized data “dashboard” that provided teachers easy access to students’ academic and disciplinary records. Teachers and administrators talked about using team meetings and professional development time to identify patterns and exceptions in the behavioral data. For example, one teacher talked about identifying students who were repeatedly attending “homework club” which was a consequence for having incomplete or unsatisfactory homework. The amount of attention to behavioral data was consistent with the way the school was organized and descriptions of their regimented approach to schooling.

At Hurston K-8, the types of data used by teachers were different still. Although data routines were pervasive, as at the other schools, there was more variability within the school than at others in terms of the types of data used beyond the prescribed interim assessments for ELA and Math. Hurston teachers often spoke of the considerable amount of professional autonomy their administrators afforded them, but also acknowledged that there was an intense focus on coordination within teams and high expectations regarding student achievement. Therefore, teams of teachers decided what assessments to adopt, adapt or develop to guide their work. While some teams focused heavily on samples of student work, others relied on benchmarking tools from published reading materials and others depended on homemade assessments. Teachers deeply appreciated the professional autonomy that their teams had on defining their data practice.
Comprehensive Responses to Data

Given the many types of data and multiple routines in use at each school, it was not surprising to hear teachers say things such as, “We are very aware of where [students] are at. We use data really well.” But the work did not stop there. Across schools, teachers then focused immediately on planning next steps to address students’ learning needs. Teachers responded to the student data in three ways. In some cases, they planned opportunities for additional, targeted instruction. In other cases, they revised their lesson and unit plans for upcoming classes or for the following year. Finally, many teachers across all six schools reported that data routines helped them reflect on and improve their teaching practice. These responses to data were not mutually exclusive; in fact most teachers described multi-faceted responses to collaborative data analysis. These processes also compelled teachers to discuss their understanding of and agreements about what they teach and how they teach.

Providing additional targeted instructional supports. At all six schools, teachers and administrators described times when they responded to data analysis by planning additional, targeted instruction for which they had a large repertoire of options, which they could expand as needed. Some of the additional instruction was offered outside of traditional class time during designated tutoring sessions, intervention groups or extended-day opportunities. For example, a Hurston K-8 administrator recalled a time when a middle school math team identified gaps in students’ procedural knowledge. They designed, proposed, and then offered small group instruction for a specific group of students in lieu of their usual extended day activities. An early elementary teacher described how data analysis might lead to a student’s getting “pull-out,” small-group
reading support from a reading interventionist during the school day. At Rodriguez Charter and Kincaid Charter, there was a designated time during the school day when all students were intentionally grouped for additional, targeted instruction based on frequent analysis of student data. At both schools, as one teacher explained, “data analysis … drives the intervention groups,” and they regularly reorganized the groups based on evolving student needs. At Dickinson, teachers talked about referring particular students, based on their demonstrated needs, for afterschool tutoring or homework club where they received support from classroom teachers who took turns running the sessions.

Homework club and afterschool tutoring were designed, proposed, and implemented by teachers, with support from Principal Davila. In some cases, teachers provided targeted instruction during regular class time by grouping students based on data analysis and then differentiating instruction for the groups. For example, a Fitzgerald teacher explained that at the end of each math unit, she and her colleagues used current data to group students. To do this, they selected students from across the grade level's four classes for a day of targeted instructional support. During this “intervention day,” they addressed students’ misconceptions or gaps in understanding that were evident in data.

Other teachers spoke of using benchmark assessments of students’ reading to determine guided reading groups. At other times, teachers decided about content that had to be re-taught to all students. A veteran teacher at Dickinson suggested what collaborative analysis might reveal:

[For example,] a skill in reading that they missed in these [district] interims… we’re analyzing. We know that the percentage [that] made it is very low. We need to increase the teaching in these areas …and then we try to see in the next test if they improved or not.
Many teachers across the sample offered examples of how they used data to intentionally provide students additional, targeted instruction within and beyond the classroom setting.

**Data analysis informed lesson and unit planning.** At these schools, data routines were also integrated with curriculum development work. When teachers spoke of writing and revising lesson plans or unit plans, they invariably spoke about how data analysis informed this work. Most teachers in these schools were not working from published curriculum materials but were expected to have common curriculum across classes. Therefore their meetings involved examining and negotiating what they were planning to teach. At Fitzgerald, Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter, teachers developed all of their own curriculum materials or were revising what their predecessors had designed. Dickinson used district provided curriculum materials, but teachers also spoke of routinely adapting and supplementing the published materials in response to identified student needs. At Hurston K-8, initially teachers used curriculum materials provided by the district, though over time developed their own units of study aligned to CCSS, or adopted other programs that better suited their goals.

Across all six schools, many teachers talked about writing and revising lesson plans based on what they had learned from collaborative data analysis. For example, a Kincaid Charter teacher described her most recent weekly content team meeting.

> We talked about what we want [the culminating essay for the unit] to look like. We looked at exit tickets from this past week to look at the data of what it was showing us about their progress. We talked about what book we want to teach in the next unit and then we looked at each other’s lessons for next week.

Planning based on specific data was considered standard practice across the schools.

In a few cases teachers shared very specific examples of how data from assessments had informed future planning. A kindergarten teacher recalled when her
team realized that their students were often unable to solve math problems on paper that they could solve in hands-on activities during class. In response, they maintained their focus on hands-on learning during class but added a short math session at the end of the day where they helped students to apply their knowledge to questions on paper. Teachers were accustomed to administering assessments that were common across classes, collaboratively reviewing students’ results, then making decisions about what to teach in the future.

Much like the interventions that provided students with additional, targeted instruction, many of the examples of lesson planning in response to data seemed to focus on providing current students with more exposure to particular topics or standards. However, some examples focused on using the data to review the efficacy of the curriculum for next year. A Kincaid Charter teacher provided an explanation similar to others. “We’re always talking about where it worked, whether it didn’t work, how are we gauging students’ achievement levels. … How can we fix it next year?”

**Coming to agreements about what we teach.** The process of developing and continually revising lesson and unit plans in conjunction with current data required teachers and administrators to grapple with and coordinate what they intended to teach.

Principal Hinds looked back on the collaborative, ongoing process at Hurston K-8.

And so last year, we finally tackled systematically what are we doing for writing. And I think that’s part of what’s been so hard [about being] a teacher here, is as we’ve built it, there have been years where …[we’re] constantly analyzing the data and making decisions; whereas now, we have a curriculum. We’ve developed a roadmap of units for writing and now reading. And here’s how they play out and here’s … the standards that have to be mastered. Here’s how we’re going to assess it in a performance assessment. Here’s how we’re going to assess it in a standardized assessment.
An experienced science teacher leader reported that her teacher team underwent similar ongoing negotiations about curriculum and assessment, and she believed it created a sense of responsibility among them. “We built accountability with each other that we were all going to bring our data and report our data out and then make decisions about re-teaching or reassessing based on that data.” Through this two-year process, she reported that they eventually agreed on “what we were going to teach, when we were going to teach, when we [are] going to assess.” Across schools, these types of conversations were routinely grounded in the CCSS and other standards the schools had adopted in an attempt to align curriculum, assessment, standards and pedagogy.

In some content areas, and in some schools for all content areas, administrators made the decisions about what to teach as well as when and how to assess the learning. Nonetheless, in these cases, teachers’ accounts of data routines suggest that they were closely examining the learning standards that guided their instruction while monitoring students’ progress in reaching those expectations. The data routines provided them the opportunity to better understand what they were trying to teach. As one teacher explained, “Instead of numbers, I’m looking at what they’re missing. I’m looking at trying to figure out whether they’re missing the concept, how they’re answering questions.” Another teacher explained that they are regularly “dissecting the data [to know] where the kids are at, where they need to go.” A middle school teacher explained how, when they first started using interim assessments, he believed they were “running from issue to issue” reacting to the results of each assessment but now they have settled into routines where interim tests “rather than telling us where to go, letting it tell us how what we just did went.” Many teachers across schools believed that administering,
analyzing, and responding to common assessments helped teachers to coordinate with each other and ensure that they were tracking and supporting all students as learners.

**Data analysis in support of instructional improvement.** Research shows that educators in schools often respond to data with interventions that provide students with more instruction but rarely consider how changes in instructional practice might improve student learning (Means et al., 2010). In this sample, teachers reported otherwise. Many teachers across the sample believed that collaborative data routines provided an opportunity to reflect on and improve their pedagogy.

Teachers and administrators explicitly stated that one of their goals in analyzing data was to improve instruction. A teacher at Dickinson explained this goal in ways reiterated by others. “We’re looking at [data] constantly. We’re trying to improve our teaching, our delivery based on that data.” This description was echoed in a question that a Naylor teacher said guides their work with data and beyond. “What else can we adjust to make [our teaching] better?” An experienced teacher at Fitzgerald described a typical scenario.

We’ll look at a math assessment and say, “My kids really struggled with this. Did your guys?” If they all did, “What can we do?” Or if it is just me, it must have been something about how I taught the information. “How did you present this? Because maybe the way I did it was confusing.”

Although we did not observe instructional practice, this anecdotal data, which was prevalent, suggests that teachers in these schools operated with an assumption that student data not only informed them about their students’ struggles, but also provided insight regarding their professional problems of practice.

**Multi-faceted responses to student data.** In most cases, teachers described multi-faceted responses to student data potentially involving additional supports to
students, adjustments to curriculum, and improvements in their instructional practice. A math teacher with 10 years of experience at Naylor Charter explained that when analyzing assessment data they had identified a type of probability problem that repeatedly “destroyed our kids” in quizzes and tests. He explained that his team decided that their response needed to be two-fold. “There was content [we missed] and there was also the way we delivered it that needed to be changed.” In the case of a teaching team at Kincaid Charter, a teacher explained,

If we have a recent assessment we go into a quick data dive to figure out what students know and don’t know and create what we call a spiraling document, which is like when are they going to see this again. Do we need to fully re-teach it, or was there a piece of something that either they didn’t get or we just didn’t instruct very well, usually the latter.

Teachers and administrators in these schools used the many collaborative structures—progress monitoring sessions, interim data analysis meetings, and weekly planning meetings that were infused with data analysis—to regularly assess students’ learning needs and develop a comprehensive array of responses.

**Data Practices Contribute to Professional Culture**

Given that these data practices played a substantial role in teachers’ daily work, it is not surprising that they contributed to the professional culture of the schools. These organizations functioned in ways that were in stark contrast to the classic “egg-crate” school (Lortie, 1975; Tyack, 1974). They incorporated a range of professional activities, including data practices, which continually reinforced norms of collaboration, collective responsibility for student learning, and high degrees of accountability for each and every child’s progress.
Making teaching public. In these schools, teachers frequently had access to their colleagues’ students’ data along with their own. A teacher at Naylor Charter described the data she typically received after an interim assessment. “We get a bar graph of every single classroom in [our grade level] in all [network] schools. You want yours to be high, and you also want the other people to be high, too.” Similarly, a teacher at Hurston K-8 explained how, when teachers on her team analyzed and created action plans based on their interim test results, they posted the analysis and plans on a Google doc where the whole team including administrators had access. She explained that then, “we’re able to view each other’s action plans and pull each other’s resources if needed or if wanted.” Teachers in all of the schools described routinely sharing student learning data across classrooms and in some cases throughout the school. Data use practices were connected to and accompanied by other structures such as peer observations, shared classrooms, and shared lesson plans, which compelled teachers to make their professional practice known to each other. In this sample, teachers’ professional lives were decidedly public in nature.

Collaboration: “I’m not allowed to [be] on an island here.” The data routines went beyond making teachers’ practice public because they were structured so that teachers relied on each other while monitoring and responding to each and every child’s progress. An experienced teacher at Hurston K-8 explained that she can go to her team and say, “‘Wow, like 30% of my kids were proficient on the standard about contour maps. Here’s their work. What do I do? Here’s what I tried.’ And look to the team [for help.]” Teachers generally appreciated being involved in what Little (1990) calls “joint work”—“encounters among teachers that rest on shared responsibility for the work of teaching” (p. 519). A teacher at Kincaid Charter praised the fact that, “I’m not allowed to
[be] an island here. I have to work and collaborate.” A Naylor Charter teacher who was looking for a new job in another state shared her perspective on the school’s collaborative culture.

I’m looking at all the other schools, all their teachers teach in silos. It’s like, “This is my classroom. I am my teacher. These are my students,” which is not true here at all. I sit surrounded by colleagues more than I sit surrounded by students. There is just that sense and that spirit of collaboration is just incredibly strong.

The data routines were one of the ways that these schools compelled teachers to rely on each other in the context of their daily work.

**Shared responsibility for growth of “each and every student.”** As the instructional coach at Fitzgerald explained, “teachers feel like they’re responsible for every kid.” She continued, “People might say, ‘Well of course you should,’ but…I mean in a very detailed way, they’re held accountable for kids’ behavior and academics and attendance and progress in school.” At Dickinson, the principal pointed out that teachers’ met weekly in a conference room where they had an interactive “data wall” representing current academic data for “each and every student” in the school, serving as a constant reminder that they needed to attend to every student’s progress and to help them do this.

At Hurston K-8 teachers explained that they sent progress memos home with every student once a month focusing on “subject area, behavior and attendance.” These practices, combined with the weekly discussion of student data as part of progress monitoring sessions or lesson planning meetings, created an environment in which teachers were acutely aware of how every child was progressing relative to the standards.

As an administrator said, “things don’t slip through cracks, things or children!”

This level of accountability for each child combined with the sense of pressure that teachers described around MCAS results could have been overwhelming. However,
most teachers seemed to be managing, possibly because they did not feel alone in
tackling this responsibility. They described an environment in which there was a sense of
shared ownership of the children at the school and their progress. A kindergarten teacher
at Rodriguez Charter explained, “People here really do genuinely care about every single
kid in the school whether they’re four years old in K-1 or in eighth grade.” A Naylor
Charter teacher shared a very similar sentiment, “Everybody is really committed to being
a good teacher and invested in not just their own students but every student in the
school.“ Prescribed structures and systems in these schools provided teachers the
opportunity to focus attention beyond their own classrooms. Their many shared
professional activities, including data routines, helped to build a sense of
interdependence, collaboration and collective responsibility among the educators in these
schools that the teachers prized.

**Discussion and Implications**

All of these schools, each serving a majority of students from low-income
families and students of color, were taking on a significant task—developing and
sustaining high-performing schools for historically underserved populations. The
challenge was heightened for three of the schools, given that the MA department of
education had formerly designated them as chronically underperforming schools. At the
time of this study, all six schools had achieved the highest level in the state accountability
ranking system, having demonstrated significant growth or high levels of achievement on
the rigorous state standardized test. Given their histories, it is not surprising that results
on these tests figured prominently in the professional culture of the schools. Most
teachers felt that the heavy emphasis on test scores and ongoing monitoring of student
achievement were ultimately in the best interest of their students, although some teachers worried that it had a detrimental effect by narrowing the curriculum and creating a significant sense of pressure for teachers and students.

Importantly, the data practices in these school extended well beyond responding to results on standardized tests. Ongoing data routines were a significant part of their strategy for improving student outcomes and for improving teaching quality. In all six schools, teachers had developed, adopted or adapted common formative assessments, by grade level and content area, which were aligned to CCSS and their curriculum materials. They also regularly used a range of other types of data to monitor student learning. Teachers responded to data analysis in comprehensive, multi-faceted ways including providing supplementary targeted instruction for students, and revising and developing unit and lesson plans. In addition, unlike the trends reported by other researchers (Means et al., 2010), many teachers in this sample described their school’s data routines as providing an opportunity to improve their instructional practice. Teachers were using data routines, in conjunction with curriculum planning and other professional activities, to build their knowledge of what they were teaching, how to teach it, how to assess student progress and what to do when students were not reaching standards.

This exploratory study highlights the potential benefits of implementing school level data routines and also suggests conditions that enable productive use of data by teachers. It also raises many questions for future research.

**Educational Infrastructure**

Cohen and colleagues (2014) suggest that a major problem that hinders reform efforts in the United States is a lack of “educational infrastructure.”
Public education never developed the educational infrastructure that is common in school systems in many developed nations: common curricula, or curriculum frameworks, common examinations that are tied to the curricula, common educational practices that are grounded in the curriculum, teacher education that focused on helping teachers learn how to teach the curriculum that students will study and a teaching force whose members had succeeded with those curricula and exams as students, among other things. (p.5)

In this sample, the schools were obliged to adopt the CCSS at a minimum and use the state’s high stakes summative assessments, MCAS. However, as is clear in these accounts, they were left to negotiate within their district, network or school, the details of how to align curriculum, formative assessments and instructional practices in their daily work.

In this sample, the schools’ data routines were one component of an integrated approach to constructing and then continually revising their own instructional infrastructure. By adopting, adapting and developing shared assessments, implementing them, reviewing results and then responding to these results, teachers were continually assessing and negotiating with colleagues about their core professional work. They were coming to agreements, or at the very least discussing disagreements, about the elements of their educational infrastructure. Given the ongoing and in-depth discussions of the instructional infrastructure, disagreements were infrequent in these schools. According to teachers’ and administrators’ accounts, their data routines were a productive use of time.

It is unrealistic to think that we can effectively and efficiently develop the necessary educational infrastructure in the US one school, one network, or even one district at a time. Nonetheless, there is something to be learned from the process these schools were undertaking and the effect on their teachers and their organizations. Teachers’ testimonies suggest that there is potential for building substantial capacity
among teachers by integrating work that is focused on student outcomes, curriculum review and instructional practice into ongoing team processes. Through this integration, teachers were collaboratively working through issues that related to all three elements of the “instructional core,” teachers and students interacting in the presence of particular content (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003).

So often in practice, policy and research, we address the components of the instructional core as discrete elements and ignore the interactions among them. For example, data routines in isolation might focus on student achievement without attending closely to the content the students are learning or the instructional practices of the teachers. This was not the case in these schools. Cohen, Raudenbush and Ball (2003) suggest that, as we study and advance our conceptions of learning and teaching, we need to have a more sophisticated model to guide the work. “Teaching is what teachers do, say, and think with learners, concerning content, in particular organizations and other environments, in time. Teaching is a collection of practices, including pedagogy, learning, instructional design, and managing organization” (p.124).

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

Data routines in these schools, although squarely focused on student learning, were a key component of teachers’ professional learning. We know from research that effective professional development is job-embedded, content-focused, connected to other initiatives, employing active learning techniques, requiring collaborative participating and sustained over time (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011; Penuel et al., 2007). However, research has provided little guidance about what this might look like in schools. It is possible that intensive, collaborative data cycles within
schools may be a key element of productive professional learning. These cycles can help teachers to more deeply understand the learning standards, tune their instructional practice and generally be reflective practitioners while aligning their work with colleagues’ work. The examples in this study also suggest that the learning was happening at the individual, team and organizational levels because of the systems and structures that promoted ongoing collaboration.

It is clear that data inquiry practices require significant investment by schools and school systems. In this sample, the schools relied on their district, network or an outside provider, at a cost, to provide common assessments, expert coaching, guidance in managing and engaging with the data, and time to collaborate with colleagues. These were crucial components of their data practices, which varied across the sample. Hurston and Fitzgerald, because they had increased funding during the turnaround years, paid for trained teacher leaders to guide this work on a weekly basis. Hurston also purchased interim assessments and ongoing support from data coaches. Hurston and Kincaid Charter had the resources and flexibility to designate an administrator to oversee all school-level data practices. In contrast, Dickinson was managing their data routines with less resources—interim assessments and bi-weekly data coaching provided by the district. The differences in the resources available to schools affected the depth of each school’s data routines.

The amount of time available for teachers’ collaboration also varied across schools in this sample. Many teachers relied on having significant blocks of time in which to work with colleagues on a regular basis. Dickinson, abiding by the district’s teachers contract, had only one 50-minute period per week designated for data inquiry,
which was significantly less than the other schools in the sample. Teachers had additional planning time, often used for informal collaboration, but the principal could not control this time. With less time available, Dickinson’s teachers did significantly less formal collaborative work on curriculum adaptations than their counterparts in other schools. In contrast, Hurston K-8 administrators used the autonomy originally granted them by the state along with their extended learning time to create 110-minute blocks for each teacher grade level or content team each week. The other four schools in the sample, much like Hurston, had generous allotments of time for data and curriculum meetings, which in some cases were integrated. The longer blocks of time for teacher collaboration allowed teachers to engage in the intensive data routines described and integrate them with other professional conversations about curriculum and instruction. Each school had devised creative scheduling solutions but what the five had in common was the flexibility to dedicate longer blocks of time to teacher development throughout their week. In all six schools, the school leaders further demonstrated their commitment to the collaborative efforts and to using data to inform daily work by participating in the processes and modeling the use of data in their own work. In many cases, school systems, charter or district, and their teachers unions where applicable, would need to work together to restructure teachers’ time to allow for ongoing, intensive collaboration in order to integrate data practices with curriculum and assessment work.

**Future Research**

Many questions remain for further research. How can teachers and schools manage the external pressures of accountability policies, and find a balance that suits their professional judgment and serves students well? Federal accountability policies
have created urgency in schools that can be productive, unproductive, or destructive. As schools become increasingly sophisticated in their use of data, it is important to understand the effects of these policies on students. In this sample, it is unclear how the pressure to succeed on standardized tests and these data practices were ultimately affecting student learning. Further research is warranted.

In addition, there is more to learn about how, if at all, school-based data routines lead to changes in instructional practice. Although teachers widely reported that they were revising the curriculum and improving their pedagogy, we did not observe instruction or examine evidence of student learning to understand the effect of these routines. In addition, we did not observe the data routines in action; so many questions remain about the protocols and frameworks that best support teachers in productively engaging with data. In future studies, researchers could go beyond teachers’ self-report data to conduct ethnographic studies of data teams. These sorts of investigations would allow for careful analysis of the varying effects of different types of data and different ways of using the data on teachers’ and students’ learning.

There is also much to be learned about how data practices interact with and contribute to the professional cultures of schools. We know from prior research that teachers can have collegial interactions that remain shallow and avoid close examination of each other’s instructional practice (Little, 2007; Little et al., 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2005), adhering to traditional norms of privacy and autonomy (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). Teachers accounts in this study suggest that this was not the case, however, there was likely variation within and across schools in the degree to which their processes helped them improve practice and address students’ learning challenges. This variation
warrants future examination. In addition, longitudinal studies could help to identify how professional cultures change over time in schools that engage in ongoing, intensive data practices among teachers.

Federal policies such as NCLB created the impetus for schools and school systems to attend closely to high-stakes, summative student achievement data and in some places this pressure led educators astray (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Cooper, 2007). However, this study suggests that in some organizations, this pressure has motivated schools to regularly examine formative student data in ways that create higher expectations and improves teaching and learning for all students, especially students from low-income families and students of color. This study provides examples of how schools might incorporate ongoing data routines in teachers’ daily work in ways that go well beyond test preparation for students and oversight of teachers. Teachers’ and administrators’ accounts suggest that investments in data practices that involve continuous gathering, analyzing and responding to data can help build teachers’ and organizations’ capacity to support student learning.
Chapter Three

Peer Observation: Supporting Professional Learning in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools

Growing demands on America’s teachers require them to have opportunities to learn and improve throughout their career. Louis and Kruse (1995) suggest that this need is most pressing in urban schools where “the failures of our educational system are nowhere more apparent” (p.4). Although peer observation was identified decades ago as a promising practice to support teachers’ learning in K-12 education (Bird & Little, 1986; Showers, 1985; Tallerico, 2014) it remains uncommon in schools today (Little, 2007) and virtually unstudied.

Scholars have long acknowledged the power of watching others teach as a learning opportunity for educators. In his classic portrayal of teachers and their professional environment, Lortie (1975) suggests that all teachers are influenced by having observed teaching throughout their schooling, what he calls “the apprenticeship of observation.” However, he cautions that this experience comes with significant limitations, because students who spend many hours watching their teacher have no pedagogical framework in which to place their observations, making their learning “intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical” (p.62). Lortie and others argue that consequently, teachers need opportunities to examine the beliefs and traditions that grow out of these early, formative experiences (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Little, 1987). It follows that, if new and experienced teachers were to have systematic opportunities for peer observation and analysis of their observations, there would be great potential for learning. Scholars suggest that teachers can gain knowledge and skills from closely
watching their peers teach, in some cases providing feedback, and/or collaboratively analyzing the learning and teaching observed (Bird & Little, 1986; Little, 1987; Showers, 1985; Tallerico, 2014). Ultimately, peer observation within schools is intended to improve teaching quality and student learning.

In addition, peer observation is one way to reduce the professional isolation that American teachers frequently experience. Lortie (1975) and Tyack (1974) famously described the conventional school as an “egg crate,” where most teachers interact with students in the privacy of their classroom, working largely in isolation. Bird and Little (1986) explain that these cellular structures “deprive teachers of the stimulation of working with peers and the close support they need to improve throughout their careers” (p.495). Youngs and Lane (2014) argue that professional learning activities that engage teachers in ongoing collaborative inquiry are likely to support continuous professional learning “in and from practice” (p.286). Peer observation offers teachers just such an opportunity to see their colleagues at work with students and reflect on their practice with a colleague, contributing to a culture of collaborative inquiry.

However, isolation also affords teachers privacy and instructional autonomy, both of which they have come to expect in American schools (Bird & Little, 1986; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). In recent years, despite new collaborative learning structures introduced in many schools, researchers continue to find evidence that norms of privacy and non-interference among teachers persist (Little et al., 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Researchers and practitioners have long identified these cultural norms as barriers to peer observation practices in American schools (Bird & Little, 1986; Feiman-Nemser, 1983). Teachers who believe that their classroom is their protected space, and that they
alone should determine what and how to teach are not likely to welcome observers—even their colleagues. Similarly, other teachers who respect those norms may be reluctant to interfere. Many questions remain about how peer observation practices are implemented in schools and how teachers experience them. When teachers have the opportunity to observe their colleagues in action and be observed, do they experience this as a positive experience or an invasion of their privacy, or both?

In this study, I focus on six urban public schools (three charter, three district including two former turnaround schools) that are succeeding with students according to state accountability ratings. All six were investing in developing their teachers in an effort to provide their students with improved educational opportunities. I entered this project with the intention of understanding school-based professional learning opportunities for teachers; I did not expect peer observation to be an important mechanism for this learning. I was surprised to find that all of the schools in this exploratory study were arranging for, and in some cases requiring, teachers to observe their colleagues teaching. Given that so little has been written about peer observation in K-12 schools in recent years, these schools offer a promising opportunity to explore how the practice might support on-the-job learning for teachers. In this analysis, I sought to understand how teachers experienced the range of approaches to peer observation implemented by these schools. What did teachers hope to gain from the experience, what did they believe they achieved, and what barriers did they think impeded the process?
Literature Review

Although research focusing directly on peer observation is scant, this practice is grounded in literature on teachers’ professional norms and the role of observation in teachers’ learning.

Traditional Norms of Teaching

Several decades ago, analysts first described the school as an “egg-crate” organization where teachers worked with their students almost exclusively in isolation within the confines of their classroom (Lortie, 1975; Tyack, 1974). Strong norms of privacy, individualism and autonomy grew out of these organizational structures (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). These norms hold that teachers should have a great deal of discretion over their instructional practice and make their professional decisions in isolation.

For decades, practitioners and analysts have contended that when teachers function as isolated educators, who are at best loosely linked to colleagues, the students who move through the schools pay a price (Bird & Little, 1986; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Johnson, 1990; Little, 1987; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sizer, 1984; Youngs & Lane, 2014). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) make the case that in order to serve all learners, schools need to be places where teachers continually improve, in part by being “well networked with each other” (p. 3). In an argument about the power of the organizational context for teachers’ work, Johnson (2012) suggests that policy makers and school leaders need to support individual teachers as professionals and also create systems and conditions that foster collective work that will help all teachers to improve their instructional practice. Youngs and Lane (2014) argue that, in order for teachers to “engage in ambitious instruction” that supports students to learn at high-levels, they need
to participate in professional development activities that engage them in ongoing collaborative inquiry. Despite agreement among scholars and practitioners about the potential benefits of teachers learning with and from colleagues through job-embedded collaborative experiences, little is known about the specific practices, such as peer observation, that support this work.

**Research on peer observation.** Academics have long suggested that providing teachers opportunities to observe and be observed by their colleagues can support improvement throughout their career and, at the same time, change the professional norms of teaching (Bird & Little, 1986; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Little, 1982, 1987; Showers, 1985; Tallerico, 2014). In their analysis of how schools organize teachers’ work, Bird and Little (1986) consider how traditional school structures and norms reinforce teachers’ professional isolation. Teachers seldom watch others teach which might lead them to reflect on and modify their own teaching. In addition, professional isolation means that teaching colleagues do not have shared experiences to inform professional dialogue. They also highlight that a few schools establish strong norms of “collegiality and experimentation” which are reflected in improvement practices that include teachers “observing and being observed at work” (p.498). Despite many and varied claims about the potential of observations among teachers, there is surprisingly little empirical work on the role that observations of colleagues play in teachers’ learning, in part because so few schools create opportunities and expectations for peer observations.

The few studies that focus explicitly on teachers observing their colleagues as a professional learning opportunity reinforce the promise of this practice and highlight the
barriers that may preclude its wide use. Importantly, the specifics of the peer observation models vary from one study to the next.

In the 1980s, Showers and colleagues at the University of Oregon examined the effects of “peer coaching” programs in schools, by which she meant teachers observing and providing feedback to one another as an important means of working together, Showers (1985) suggested that there were two categories of positive effects from peer observation: “facilitation of the transfer of training and development of norms of collegiality and experimentation” (p. 45). Peer coaching, in the form studied by Showers, was specifically designed to help teachers understand and implement practices or curriculum innovations that were being taught to teachers in staff development sessions outside of the classroom. This is philosophically different than the peer observation model examined in this paper, which generally starts with reflecting on teachers’ current practice rather than transfer of skills previously introduced in professional development sessions. While these findings support the possibility of collegial observations positively influencing the professional culture in schools, there are important differences between “peer coaching” and peer observation practices.

A second study of peer observation was linked to external professional development, in this case about teaching writing. A partnership between University of Pennsylvania researchers and Philadelphia Public Schools allowed for an in-depth analysis of “cross-visitation” as one component of the Philadelphia Writing Project (Lytle & Fecho, 1991). “Teacher consultants,” who were participating in ongoing professional development through the Philadelphia Writing Project, engaged in peer observation with colleagues who were not part of the external project. Cross-visitations with a particular
focus on writing instruction were explicitly designed to support collaborative inquiry among teachers and to reduce their professional isolation. Based on interviews with teachers and analysis of their written reflections after participating in the program for one to four years, researchers found that by participating in the cross-visitations, teachers developed awareness of their colleagues’ instructional practices and felt greater sense of interdependence.

Prior to participation, many teachers reported that they had “never seen the teacher next door teach, despite fifteen or more years of proximity” (p. 11). The authors argue that “going public” with their instruction helped teachers to be more reflective and consequently to see their own classrooms as more “intellectually interesting.” Teachers did express concerns about the practice, including their loss of privacy, shame in needing help from others and challenges in negotiating interactions with peers. Teacher consultants found it difficult to negotiate a reciprocal relationship with their peers during observation, given the fact that they were being identified as more knowledgeable in writing instruction. However, most teachers operated with assumptions of egalitarianism—that all teachers were equally skilled—a traditional professional norm in US schools (Lortie, 1975). Teachers also reported being concerned about losing time with their own students, even though the program provided them with long-term substitutes who were trained in the writing program. The intention was that the substitute could function as a member of the teacher team rather than as a traditional outside substitute. Lytle and Fecho (1991) identified cross-visitation as a practice with great potential, but they also recognized that with the loss of isolation comes a loss of privacy, to which teachers had mixed reactions.
I have found only one study focusing on a peer observation practice in which neither teacher was expected to serve as an expert in relation to her colleague. Hamilton (2013) examined a year-long peer observation initiative in a suburban high school, where all 43 teachers were asked to determine a goal for their learning and select three colleagues they wished to observe. The focus was on the observer’s learning and no feedback was provided to the observed teacher. Hamilton surveyed faculty members and interviewed the principal and eight teachers, who had various teaching assignments and years of experience. Teachers appreciated being able to choose their own focus for learning and to select a colleague to observe. They reported that they gained respect for peers because they became aware of their expertise in content and pedagogy. In addition, teachers said that seeing colleagues’ practice first-hand was more valuable than just talking about it and that observations reduced their sense of isolation. Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the process and many described specific examples of activities, strategies or pedagogical approaches that they tried as a result of their peer observation. It is unclear how teachers might have responded to peer observation models that include feedback for the observed teacher, which might have directly challenged norms of autonomy and non-interference (Little, 1990).

Taken together, these studies reinforce the potential of peer observation practices for supporting teachers’ learning and for promoting norms of collaboration and continuous improvement. However, many questions remain: How can peer observations be implemented within traditional school structures, including tight schedules that provide little open time for teachers to visit their peers’ classes? How can they be introduced so that they are not undermined by traditional professional norms? How can
peer observations be organized in order to support improvements in teachers’ instructional practice?

In this exploratory study, I draw on the available research as I seek to understand how teachers experienced peer observation in six high-performing urban, high-poverty schools. In all of these schools, peer observation was embedded in a collaborative professional culture that promoted continuous improvement. In analyzing teachers’ experiences and assessments of peer observation, I will consider the professional norms that guided their interactions and the logistical challenges they encountered.

**Methods**

This paper is based on a qualitative, comparative case study embedded in a larger study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. The larger study examines how six high-poverty, urban schools—all of which had received the state’s highest accountability rating—attract, develop, and retain teachers. It was conducted by Susan Moore Johnson, fellow doctoral student, Nicole Simon, and me. In this analysis, I focus on teachers’ experiences of peer observation in schools.

**Research Questions:**

1) In six schools serving high-poverty students and judged to be successful according to state accountability ratings, how do teachers and administrators describe the purposes of peer observation in their schools?

2) In what ways are peer observation practices similar or different across schools?

3) How do teachers and principals assess peer observation practices in their schools?
4) What factors enable or undermine the effective use of peer observation in those schools?

Sample of Schools

Our sample selection was guided by four principles. First, we sought a sample that included charter and district schools located in one city in Massachusetts. Second, we looked for schools that served high-poverty populations (where 70% or more of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and also enrolled high proportions of students of color. Third, we sought schools that were considered high-performing, having achieved the highest rating in the state’s accountability system. Fourth, we sought schools that employed distinctive approaches to human capital development.

To attend to the first three principles, we examined publicly available demographic and student performance data. In seeking out schools that were having “success” with students with students from low-income families, we used the state’s accountability ratings as a proxy for students’ academic success. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MA DESE] ranks every school on a scale from one to five, with one denoting the highest performing schools. The formula calculating a school’s rating relies heavily on results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS], the state’s high stakes standardized test. The formula accounts for growth in student performance and the school’s success in narrowing proficiency gaps among subgroups of students, using a weighted average from the four most recent years worth of MCAS data. Although this definition of success is limited because it relies heavily on standardized test scores, which are a narrow and often problematic measure of achievement, it was the best proxy available for identifying
schools that have a positive impact on students’ academic outcomes. In addition, these were the measure by which these schools were judged for awards and sanctions by the state and district, as well as by funders, school boards and the popular media.

To attend to the fourth principle, we consulted our professional networks and considered available information about the approaches to human capital development used by specific schools and, in some cases, charter networks. Based on our initial inquiry, we drew up a sample of six schools—all geographically located within the boundaries of one large urban school district, Walker City School District [WCSD]. The sample included three district schools (one traditional and two former turnaround) and three charter schools authorized by the state (one restart of a failing district school). All schools were elementary and/or middle schools, which facilitates cross-site comparisons.

To recruit schools, we contacted school officials explaining our study and requesting their participation. All six schools we approached agreed to participate in the study (For descriptive statistics for sample schools see Appendix A). The purposive nature of our sample has allowed us to conduct an in-depth, exploratory study of schools in a particular context. However, because the sample is small and deliberate, we cannot generalize our findings beyond our sample.

Data Collection

Interviews. Between March and June 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 142 teachers, administrators and other staff in the six schools. Administrator interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and teacher interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. At most schools, all members of the research team were

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6 All names of schools, districts and individuals are pseudonyms.
present for interviews with the principal and CMO director. In addition, all three researchers conducted interviews at each school. This facilitated cross-site comparisons, improved inter-rater reliability in coding data, and ensured that each research team member knew about each school’s structures and culture.

We also purposively constructed our interview sample. At each school, we first interviewed administrators in order to understand both what processes they used to select, develop, and retain teachers and why they used them. Then, at each school, we recruited a sample of teachers, varying in demographics, teaching experience, preparation, and teaching assignment. We solicited teachers’ participation in a variety of ways, including requests by email, flyers in teachers’ mailboxes, and principals’ recommendations. We also relied on recommendations from the teachers we interviewed about others in their school who might hold views different from their own. Teachers were promised confidentiality and anonymity as participants in the study. In addition, we interviewed other key staff members (e.g. curriculum coaches, program and family coordinators) when it became apparent that their work and views would inform our understanding of teachers’ experiences.

In each school, the number of teachers we interviewed varied depending on the school size, the complexity of the organization and the practices used. We interviewed between 31% and 56% of the teachers at each school. (For descriptive statistics about the interviewees, see Appendix B). We used semi-structured protocols (Appendix C) to guide our interviews and ensure that data would be comparable across sites and across interviewers (Maxwell, 1996). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
The interview protocols included several questions that allowed interviewees to discuss systems and processes related to school-based professional learning. Prior to the study, we did not anticipate that peer observation practices would be prevalent in all of the schools, so we had not included a direct question about peer observation in our protocol. However, several of the questions led participants to discuss peer observation and the professional culture that supported these routines. Administrators were asked what supports their schools provided for new and experienced teachers, including supervision and evaluation, formal professional development [PD], and teacher collaboration. With administrators and teachers, we used follow-up questions to explore each of these and to identify other sources of support. In order to learn about how teachers assessed these experiences, we asked them to reflect on which of the opportunities that they discussed worked well for them and which did not. By interviewing teachers and school leaders about a range of strategies to develop human capital in their schools, we sought to understand the connections among approaches within a school. Although this design, by definition, limits the depth of information we collected on any one topic, such as peer observation, it situates that practice among other strategies for developing human capital, allowing me to consider relationships among them in my analysis.

**Document collection.** Although interviews were the main source of data for this study, we also gathered many documents that describe school policies and programs related to recruiting, developing and retaining their teachers. The collected documents that informed analysis of interview data in this study, included teacher handbooks, school policies, peer observation protocols, and peer observation forms used by teachers.
In our visits to the schools, we also observed day-to-day practices and sought evidence of the school’s organizational culture, which we recorded in our notes.

**Data Analysis**

After each interview we wrote detailed thematic summaries describing the participant and summarizing his or her views. First, we identified themes using *etic* codes drawn from the literature on the elements of developing human capital. Then, using the thematic summaries, we conducted a preliminary analysis of each site individually as well as cross-site comparisons, identifying common themes, similarities and differences. We used the preliminary analysis to supplement the *etic* codes with a list of *emic* codes that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, interviewees reported on a range of opportunities for collaboration among teachers, which we had anticipated. It became evident that while school leaders organized some of the opportunities for teachers to collaborate, teachers orchestrated other chances to work with peers. Based on our preliminary analysis we created two codes “FormalCollab” and “InformalCollab” so that we could systematically attend to the differences between these types of interactions in our subsequent analysis. We then used this preliminary list of codes to review a small sub-set of the transcripts, individually and together, in order to calibrate our understanding and use of the codes, as well as to refine the list and definitions. We repeated this process twice in order to finalize the list of codes and to improve inter-rater reliability. We then thematically coded each transcribed interview using the software, Dedoose (For a list of codes see Appendix D).

After coding all interviews, I engaged in an iterative analytic process, using data-analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to address my research questions about
teacher evaluation. I relied on Dedoose’s function that allowed me to sort data by codes and by particular characteristics of interviewees to investigate my research questions. I analyzed the data for each school separately completing a data analytic matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that showed the components of peer observation at each school. I then reviewed school documents such as peer observation protocols and peer observation forms for additional information about these processes at each school. After establishing a clear understanding of the different opportunities for peer observation at each school, I created a cross-school matrix, to allow me to consider similarities and differences in teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives within and across schools. Finally, I wrote an analytic memo comparing peer observation practices at the six schools in order to discern patterns in the data about how teachers and administrators experienced and assessed these practices.

I used several strategies to address risks to validity. Throughout the process, I returned to the data to review our coding and check my emerging conclusions, seeking rival explanations or disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also shared analytic memos, outlines, and drafts with members of the research team, my dissertation committee, and colleagues familiar with this line of research but not involved in this research project so that they might offer alternative interpretations of the data.

The Schools and Their Varying Context

The schools in this study are similar in several respects but quite different in others. A brief discussion of their histories and policy requirements provides contextual information that informs the subsequent analysis and discussion.
The Charter Schools

*Naylor Charter School* and *Rodriquez Charter School* were well-established state-authorized charter schools that opened their doors ten and twenty years earlier, respectively, to serve elementary and middle school students from the area. Both were freestanding entities at their inception, although Naylor later became one of three schools in the Naylor Charter Network. As charter schools, they were completely free of all local district policies and received public funding through the state, rather than the school district.

*Kincaid Charter School* had been selected by the district and authorized by the state to “restart” a failing WCSD middle school in 2011, three years prior to this study. They recruited more than 80% of the students who had been enrolled by the traditional school before the restart, more students than typically returned to the school each year under the prior administration. School officials promised, and Kincaid delivered, significant and rapid gains in student test scores. In accordance with the requirements for restarting a school, Kincaid invited current teachers from the school to apply for positions in the new charter school; however, very few applied and none of those who did were asked to return. When Kincaid opened, all teachers and staff were new to the school. As an in-district charter, the WCSD teachers union represented Kincaid’s teachers. The school had been granted exceptions from the WCSD teachers contract, giving them extensive autonomy to define teachers’ working conditions. In addition, Kincaid Network and school leaders had autonomy over their budget, curriculum and assessments as defined in their charter with the state.
The District Schools

*Dickinson Elementary School* was a century–old district school that served a largely immigrant population, most from the school’s surrounding community. In recent years, the district and the state recognized Dickinson for growth in students’ MCAS scores. The school had a history of having very little teacher turnover and therefore, experienced few opportunities to hire new teachers. Many teachers we interviewed there talked about having waited for years to apply for an opening at Dickinson. In fact, when we conducted our study, over half of their teachers had worked at the school for more than 20 years. The WCSD teachers union also represented Dickinson’s teachers, and the school was bound by the WCSD collective bargaining agreement, as well as other state and district policies.

*Hurston K-8 School* and *Fitzgerald Elementary School*, also part of WCSD, had histories that differed substantially from Dickinson’s. The state had placed both in turnaround status as chronically underperforming schools four years prior to the study. At the beginning of the “turnaround” process, they were required by the state to replace at least 50% of the existing faculty and the principal, unless the principal had started at the school less than two years prior to turnaround designation—as was the case at Fitzgerald. After a process of reviewing the performance of current teachers, the Hurston’s new principal replaced about 80% of the school’s teachers and Fitzgerald’s principal replaced about 65%. In subsequent years, both schools demonstrated substantial growth on state standardized tests, allowing them to exit turnaround status, each in three years. Although school leaders and teachers at both schools were proud of this accomplishment, they were also forthcoming about the need for continuing improvement.
With support from their teachers, both Hurston and Fitzgerald had requested and received significant exceptions to district policies in order to continue their reform efforts after exiting turnaround status. For example, both schools were granted autonomy in hiring and budget, as well as flexibility in scheduling teachers’ time, additional PD hours, extended learning time for students and decision rights regarding curriculum and assessments.

**Findings**

It was striking that all six schools in this sample were implementing a range of peer observation processes. Although norms of privacy among teachers in American schools (Little, 1990) and traditional organizational structures (Bird & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Tyack, 1974) often serve to discourage them from visiting colleagues’ classes, many teachers in these schools welcomed opportunities to observe others’ teaching, and in some cases to be observed. Teachers and administrators viewed peer observation as a chance to get “good ideas,” see specific instructional strategies in action, and get feedback on their own teaching.

Peer observation was embedded in other systems and structures that promoted collaboration among teachers in all of these schools. Across the sample, teachers described their schools as organizations where teachers frequently discussed learning and teaching with colleagues and relied on each other to respond to the challenges of their daily work. Many would have agreed with one teacher who said, “I’m not allowed to [be] an island here.”

The extent to which these schools had developed their systems for peer observation varied across schools. Variation was evident in purpose, procedures, support
for teachers in implementing the processes, and the degree to which peer observation was integrated with other professional learning. In the schools with the most developed peer observation processes—Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter, and Rodriguez Charter Middle School—leaders were sustaining the practice from year to year and teachers consistently welcomed the opportunity to observe and be observed by colleagues. The other schools—Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary—were investing in a range of peer observation practices but facing logistical and cultural challenges that made it difficult to sustain the practices. Notably, across all six schools, teachers and administrators viewed peer observation as having great potential and hoped to continue this practice or in some cases reinstate it in the future.

In what follows, I analyze the schools’ varying approaches to peer observation, situating them in their particular organizational contexts and identifying how they addressed logistical and cultural barriers to this work. I also present teachers’ perspectives on the practice, which varied from school to school and in some cases within schools. I finish by highlighting how the strategic use of video technology helped several schools address implementation challenges.

**Highly Developed Systems for Peer Observation**

At Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter Middle School, teachers viewed peer observation as a routine and valuable part of their professional learning. However, their organizational contexts varied. At Naylor and Kincaid, highly developed peer observation systems were an outgrowth of organizational structures that required interdependence in teachers’ daily work. The organizational structures at Rodriguez Middle were more traditional; nonetheless, they placed a high priority on
teachers observing each other frequently. Although Rodriguez Charter Middle and Elementary Schools operated as a single organization in many respects, the middle and elementary principals had different approaches to peer observation and therefore are discussed as separate entities in this analysis.

**Schools designed to require interdependence among teachers.** Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter were, from their inception, designed to promote high levels of collaboration, fundamentally altering traditional relationships among teachers and boundaries between classrooms. The image of a single teacher working largely in isolation with a group of students was not possible in these schools. Instead, many teachers shared classrooms, office space, students and lesson plans with colleagues in their grade level and content area. Taken together, these organizational structures created an environment in which teachers expected their practice to be viewed and examined by colleagues regularly.

**Shared lesson plans.** At Kincaid Charter and Naylor Charter, teachers were required to split the responsibility for creating lesson plans with colleagues on their team, which meant they implemented plans written by colleagues and vice versa. For example, at Kincaid a team of math teachers would plan a unit together and then divide up the allocated lessons within that unit for individual team members to plan. At both schools, teachers collaboratively critiqued lesson plans before and after implementing them, and then archived them on-line for future revision and use.

**Co-teaching.** Teachers at Kincaid Charter and Naylor Charter were often present when their colleagues were teaching because many special education and English Language Learning teachers co-taught classes with general education teachers. Teachers
talked about these relationships as another source of informal collegial feedback and support. A teacher at Kincaid gave the example that right after class she might approach her co-teacher and say, “What went wrong there?” She remarked that they “give each other feedback pretty often.”

In addition, both schools had cohorts of full-time Teacher Trainees [TTs] who shared classrooms and responsibilities with one or more teachers. Not surprisingly, TTs were observed by their mentors and regularly received feedback. In turn, TTs routinely observed their mentor and other teachers in the building and were expected to provide feedback to any teacher they observed. Many of the current teachers in these two schools, had once been TTs and were therefore accustomed to frequent observation and feedback. In addition, the presence of TTs in the classrooms, observing and critiquing others, contributed to a professional culture in which peer observations were the norm.

*Shared space and shared students.* Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter also used space in ways that encouraged them to collaborate and observe each other. At Naylor, pairs of middle school teachers (one teaching ELA/history and the other math/science) shared a classroom and a group of students. They were regularly present for each other’s teaching, which often led to impromptu observations and feedback. One teacher explained, “My co-teacher and I talk about how it feels…it’s a family dynamic, almost, for better or worse. … We’re all around each other.” Another appreciated receiving impromptu feedback on classroom management from her colleague who shared the classroom and students with her. “She was in the classroom at her desk, like grading or … planning, when I was teaching and she’d [say], ‘you know if at the beginning of class you just give them the [warning]—that’s it. They know better, right?’”
At Kincaid Charter, where teachers moved from room to room while students remained in the same space throughout the day, teachers of a particular grade level had desks in a shared office space. Many said this was a place for ongoing informal collaboration. A teacher at Kincaid explained how these structures created a sense of interdependence and collective responsibility. She explained that in other schools, “you have your classroom with your kids and they’re only your kids when they’re in that classroom. You’re not worried about what anyone else is doing, even in your own curriculum, content area.” She said that Kincaid was a place where teachers are dependent on each other due to shared lesson plans and other organizational structures that promoted a sense of collective responsibility. Formal peer observation processes were a logical complement to the organizational structures that defined these schools.

**More traditional school structures: Rodriguez Charter Middle School.**

Rodriguez Middle School was in many ways more traditional than Naylor Charter and Kincaid. Teachers did not share space, lessons or co-teach regularly. They did, as in most middle schools, share students, since each teacher taught a particular subject. In addition, Rodriguez did have TTs in most middle school classrooms. Middle school teachers met weekly during PD sessions and peer observation was an integrated part of their professional learning experience.

**Implemented various forms of peer observation.** Beyond the incidental observations that occurred due to shared spaces and co-teaching, school leaders at Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter Middle also organized ways for teachers to formally observe their colleagues in person. At Naylor, teachers were assigned an observation partner for each trimester and were expected to observe each other once
every three weeks. Rodriquez teachers were required to observe at least four colleagues per year, chosen randomly during a PD session. In both schools, teachers were provided a structured protocol including a “feedback sheet” for taking notes. According to Principal North at Naylor, early in the year administrators might require teachers to observe for a particular topic that they were working on in PD, but late in the school year peer observations were open-ended. At Rodriquez, teachers identified an area of practice that they wanted their colleague to focus on for the visit. In both schools, the observations were conducted during teachers’ “free time [or] our prep time,” as one teacher explained to us, and followed with a required debrief during weekly PD time. During the debrief, Naylor and Rodriguez Middle School teachers were expected to provide their colleague with feedback and collaboratively reflect on their observations.

At Naylor, teachers were also involved in Lesson Study, “a Japanese form of professional development that centers on teachers coming together to examine their practice by planning and trying out lessons” (Fernandez, 2005, p. 265). At the time of the study, teachers had just started a Lesson Study cycle, which involved a group of four or five teachers planning a lesson together and then having that team plus members of other groups come to watch implementation of the lesson plan.

Principal Ryan also organized in-person peer observations to provide teachers with models of specific instructional strategies. Periodically, he took middle school teachers on small-scale learning walks focused on a particular topic such as routines for the beginning of class. “Let’s just go on a walk around for ten minutes and see how beginning-of-class routines are starting here.” At other times, he suggested that a teacher visit a colleague with a specific observational purpose.
The most common form of peer observation in these schools was video observation which was one step removed from a classroom visit. Naylor, Kincaid and Rodriguez Middle School administrators frequently used video recordings of their teachers’ instruction during weekly PD sessions. This practice created frequent, targeted opportunities for teachers to see their colleagues teaching, analyze their instructional practices and provide feedback to each other. Often, school leaders collected videos that illustrated specific elements of pedagogy that they were studying. Principal Ryan at Rodriguez explained, “When I was doing [a session] about a discrete, specific instructional techniques, I was videoing them doing [the techniques] and then showing them to all of them so we could debrief and see models.” A teacher at Naylor Charter described how a PD session might focus on “turn and talks” or “rigor” and the meeting would include observation and collaborative debrief of videos of their own teachers with a focus on this “very specific aspect” of instruction. Many teachers at all three schools offered examples, citing a range of topics they had explored in part through video analysis.

In these three schools, teachers frequently observed their peers formally, informally and incidentally, and teachers and administrators spoke of this as an ongoing element of their professional learning repertoire.

**Teachers valued peer observation processes.** Teachers at Naylor, Kincaid and Rodriguez Middle embraced peer observation as a valuable process for learning from colleagues. Teachers across schools explained that they often learned more by seeing practices in action rather than just talking or reading about them. A Kincaid teacher explained the benefits of informal, in-person visits. “We can walk in while teachers are
teaching, and observe them, which I think is even more powerful because you can see
great teaching in action. You can take notes on what’s effective.” There was similar
enthusiasm for other types of observations. Many, like this Naylor teacher, spoke
enthusiastically about the benefits of video observations. “You get so many good ideas
because, even if it’s not my grade level, I can just see other things that people do.” A
colleague spoke about an upcoming Lesson Study observation. “It’s actually one of my
classes, which I’m very excited about… teachers are going to sit in when that lesson is
taught and then provide feedback.”

A few of the most experienced teachers had ideas about how to better support
their learning through peer observation. They expressed concerns when partnered with
novice teachers from whom they had less to learn. They hoped for some of their peer
observations to be paired with experienced colleagues who would challenge them.
Nonetheless, teachers’ assessments of peer observation were overwhelmingly positive in
these schools.

**Structure and support reduce barriers to implementation.** At Naylor Charter,
Kincaid Charter, and Rodriquez Charter Middle, administrators reduced the likelihood of
logistical and cultural barriers by providing teachers with structure and support for peer
observations and integrating them into their ongoing professional learning. In all three
schools, the peer observation practices incorporated peer feedback, which many would
assume to be a greater risk for teachers than having a colleague visit without sharing their
perspectives; but teachers did not raise concerns about this expectation. In fact, they
spoke quite casually about peer observation processes, describing them as a standard part
of their professional learning. For example, this experienced teacher in her seventh year
at Rodriguez Middle said, “You [shared] what you saw. …It was very open, so everyone was able to kind of just learn from each other.” An equally experienced colleague explained,

> It’s sort of part of our practice. It’s like, “This is what you should be doing as learning, observing all of these teachers that you work with.” We’re given time to do so. You have a form you fill out and then you debrief with the teacher. You just go back and forth about what you saw.

In these schools teachers were accustomed to their “practices becom[ing] more publicly known and publicly considered” (Little, 1990, p. 521). Notably, administrators in all three schools observed teachers and provided feedback about twice a month, which also contributed to this professional culture and these norms.

By devoting time during whole school PD sessions, school leaders further reduced the potential barriers to peer observation. They not only demonstrated their commitment to the process, but also provided teachers with time to complete most of its elements. The fact that observation debriefs occurred during PD ensured that teachers were engaged in the process. Importantly, this also provided teachers a structured and supportive environment in which to regularly practice and calibrate their skills for observing, analyzing and debriefing learning and teaching. In the cases where teachers observed each other in person, which could not occur during PD sessions, the cohorts of full-time TTs made this easier by routinely assuming full responsibility for teaching when a classroom teacher was not present.

**Peer Observation as a Short-Term Initiative**

At Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald, Dickinson and Rodriquez Charter Elementary, school leaders had implemented a range of peer observation practices in recent years, but these practices were neither stable nor integrated elements of teachers’ professional learning at
the time of the study. Nonetheless, teachers and administrators in these schools spoke of peer observation as having great potential for improving teaching by allowing teachers to share expertise and experience across classrooms. Dickinson’s Principal Davila repeatedly talked about her belief that teachers “need to learn from one another.” Having been a teacher for 20 years prior to becoming a principal, she spoke from experience: “Teaching is such an isolated job. …You are in this classroom. You’re all alone.” She and her counterparts at Hurston, Fitzgerald, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary worked hard to combat the isolation of teaching in traditional schools and peer observation was one of their tactics. In these schools, most peer observation practices focused on the observers’ learning and rarely included feedback for the observed teacher.

Like Rodriguez Charter Middle, these schools were more typical of other US public schools. Most adults taught a group of students on their own within the confines of a single classroom. These schools employed a much higher proportion of veteran teachers than Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter, many of whom had worked in a range of other schools before their current position. (See Appendix B for more information about interviewees’ years of experience.) Notably, they had many systems and structures to promote interdependence among teachers, including weekly team meetings, where teachers collaboratively analyzed and responded to student data, and in some schools developed and revised lesson plans. In these schools, peer observation was arguably the most invasive of the collaborative practices they implemented in terms of challenging professional norms of privacy. Teachers responded differently to peer observation across schools and, in some cases, within schools.
**Peer observation routines varied.** At Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary school leaders organized a range of peer observation practices intended to support improvements in teaching quality. Hurston K-8, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary had paired teachers for peer observations but had done so with different purposes. At Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter, the purpose was explicitly and exclusively to support the observer’s learning. Many teachers at Dickinson agreed with a colleague who said, “You’re not really there to critique. …You’re going in with a …purpose for you, that you want to learn about.” The pre-observation prompt at Rodriguez Elementary highlighted a similar intention; “What do I want to explore/ think about/ learn about my own teaching practice?” What will I look for that will help answer my question?” In contrast, at Hurston, the goal, as described in a grant application, was to enable “teachers to work with several different colleagues to provide and receive feedback and suggestions for improving instruction.”

In order to address the different purposes these three schools, designed the peer observation opportunities differently. At Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary, teachers could request three or four people that they wished to observe over the course of the year but that teacher did not necessarily reciprocate, since the focus was on as one teacher said, “getting good ideas.” A Dickinson teacher explained that she requested to see a colleague who had the reputation of being “outstanding in writer’s workshop and I really wanted to get some ideas.” At Dickinson, the observing teachers were asked to anonymously complete a form with their reflections about their learning. Participation was voluntary at Dickinson whereas at Rodriguez Charter Elementary it varied from year to year as to whether or not it was required or voluntary.
At Hurston K-8, where teachers were expected to provide feedback to colleagues, the process was more defined. A teacher leader organized peer observations, pairing teachers within and across departments and grade levels. Teachers received a printed protocol, which called for a pre-observation conference, in-person observation, and a post-observation debrief, all focused on an instructional challenge identified by the observed teacher. Teachers were encouraged, but not required, to name one of their defined goals from the teacher evaluation process as their focus for peer observations. The pre-conferences, observations and debrief meetings were to be scheduled by teachers on their own time.

In these schools, some peer observations were intentionally focused on particular instructional strategies. Teachers at Fitzgerald and Rodriguez Charter spoke of administrators and instructional coaches orchestrating targeted, periodic visits among colleagues. A Fitzgerald teacher shared an example of the instructional coach bringing a colleague into her room to watch her present a math topic that the other teacher was struggling with. She reported,

The instructional coach who saw me teach it a few times came in with her to observe the way that I did it. How did I execute my lesson? The vocabulary. What did I allow the kids to do? They turn and talk. The group work.

These visits were primarily focused on the observers’ learning although this teacher reported that sometimes they had a debrief including the two teachers and the coach or administrator.

In a different approach at Fitzgerald, teacher leaders facilitated non-evaluative peer learning walks. All teachers were both observed by and observed their colleagues, focusing on how they promoted higher order thinking skills, which was their school-wide
PD focus. A teacher with seven years of experience explained, “We would do three or four learning walks every year, where you just get to go have a non-evaluative look at your peers and pick up on best practices and things of that nature.” When Fitzgerald applied for policy exceptions after exiting turnaround status, they described the purpose of the learning walks.

This has been a powerful strategy for creating a shared understanding of what is happening in our school as opposed to hearing it from external observers. It has also been an opportunity for teachers to see examples of excellent teaching and learning so that they know it is possible here.

At the time we collected data, Dickinson teachers reported on their first experience using videos of some of their teachers’ instruction during PD sessions, which also represented their first organized experience with providing feedback to colleagues. Teacher leaders planned and facilitated a session about “close reading,” an element of the CCSS for which three teachers agreed to be videoed. The faculty watched and discussed these videos of teachers leading “close reading” with their students. One of the teachers who had agreed to be recorded recalled how they had explained the activity to their peers, “We are not showing you things because we think that we’re so good at it. We’re showing you this because we want to talk about how it went and what we can do and learn from it.”

**Mixed views within and across schools.** Teachers in these four schools responded to peer observation in varied ways that reveal the cultural and logistical barriers they confronted. Although few teachers at Fitzgerald even spoke of the peer observation at their school, many teachers at Hurston, Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary did. It is likely that the lack of commentary at Fitzgerald indicated that peer
observations were no longer a prominent element of their professional learning experience, although we did not learn why that was the case.

**Rodriguez teachers were open to peer observations.** Teachers at Rodriguez Charter Elementary described peer observations as providing an opportunity to improve their own instructional practice. For example, one teacher said that he needed additional support in order to implement project-based learning in his classroom. He recalled approaching Principal Rega and saying, “I get it but can I go somewhere and see some schools that are doing this type of teaching?” Rega agreed and arranged a visit, which the teacher described as “super helpful.” It changed his mind about what “he could be doing and how he could be teaching.” Teachers at Rodriguez viewed their colleagues as a resource and peer observation as a way to access each other’s expertise. A teacher who had taught at Rodriguez Elementary for ten years explained, “I would say that the quality of teachers that are here is really high and I think that we’ve all learned more from watching and planning with each other than you could going to PDs and things.” Interviewees throughout the lower school consistently described peer observation as a welcomed and helpful learning opportunity.

**Dickinson teachers were nervous but hopeful.** At Dickinson, teachers widely praised peer observation as an opportunity to learn from colleagues, but were also nervous about ways in which they were testing the limits of norms of privacy and autonomy (Little, 1990). A teacher in her eighth year at Dickinson said the peer observation process had been “really powerful.” She continued, “I feel like you get so much out of it. You get so much from the teaching, but even the classroom set up, the desks or the grouping.” While many teachers expressed this sentiment, they also spoke of
boundaries they believed they needed to respect. One teacher said that the teacher leadership team was discussing the idea of including debriefs after future in-person peer observations, but that some teachers suggested that might not work. “Some teachers wouldn’t be comfortable with that… because it is difficult to hear criticism, especially if it’s not expressed in the nicest of ways, so I don’t know how that would actually play out.” Another teacher said that she thought it was important that their process was focused on the observer’s learning and not feedback to the observed teacher. “… Because if it wasn’t like that and you just felt like people were coming in to watch you, it’d be weird.”

In contrast, the reactions to Dickinson’s recent video peer observation, which included a facilitated critique, were consistently positive and enthusiastic, suggesting that norms of privacy could shift in response to structured routines and protocols that make teaching open to collegial analysis and discussion. When teachers discussed this new approach, they used words like “authentic” and “valuable.” Some teachers described them as the best PD sessions of the year. The teachers who volunteered to be videoed discussed the experience of having the whole faculty watch them teach and provide feedback. “It was a little intimidating at first, but after the feedback, we felt better. Then the second time we felt even better.” Another teacher described it as “nerve-wracking” but worthwhile. “It was really nice and they appreciated it because it was so authentic.” She said that “everyone was really so supportive and kind in their feedback.” Although positive, their accounts contrasted with the matter-of-fact ways that Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter, and Rodriguez Charter Middle teachers spoke of watching videos of colleagues teaching during PD sessions. The fact that initial attempts to use video at
Dickinson were much discussed, some times with mixed feelings, also suggested that professional norms at their school were evolving.

**Hurston teachers had conflicting views.** At Hurston K-8, teachers’ views on peer observation varied widely, as reflected in responses to an anonymous, annual survey asking teachers to assess the process. This survey provided teacher leaders, administrators and us with detailed information about how teachers assessed their experience with peer observations at Hurston. On the survey, although at least three quarters of the teachers agreed that participating in peer observation had helped them to develop professionally, their specific comments reveal a more complicated response to the practice. One teacher commented that the process works better when there is a “pre-existing relationship with their partner” which they equated with a “high-level of trust.” Another said that the process “should be voluntary” and another that “it is better to observe than being observed.” However, other teachers reported welcoming feedback from peers: “I wish I were observed more,” “Really like time to collegially discuss practice,” and “We are developing a great give and take.”

The mixed opinions expressed on the survey were consistent with what we heard from teachers in interviews. One teacher said she was comfortable having people in and out of her room observing, but said “My content partner, it gives her heart palpitations, but she just doesn’t like anybody in her class. She’d get nervous if I [said], ‘I’m in for observing.’ She just doesn’t like that. …I think it’s just personal preference.” Teachers at Hurston K-8 had varying expectations about the extent to which teachers should examine each other’s professional practice. The teacher leader who organized the peer observation initiative did not believe peer observation had become “part of the culture” except in
some “pockets” such as with “a few teachers who come from charter schools” and maybe some “primary grade teachers.”

**Addressing or surrendering to cultural and logistical barriers.** Each of the schools attempted to address cultural and logistical challenges in structuring their peer observation practices. However, these barriers persisted to varying degrees, influencing the sustainability of the practice in these schools. In fact, in all four schools, the primary peer observation initiatives, partner observations and learning walks, were not implemented the year of this study. At three of the schools, Dickinson, Rodriguez Charter Elementary and Hurston K-8, teachers and school leaders talked at length about their past practice and discussed their hopes to continue the routines or develop alternative opportunities for peer observations in the future. In these schools there were also several examples of teachers independently orchestrating peer observations despite the current lack of school wide infrastructure. At Fitzgerald some sporadic opportunities for peer observation continued at the time of the study, but there was no indication that they were planning to reinstate a systematic school wide practice in the near future and no explanation was provided.

**Attempting to minimize cultural obstacles.** Dickinson teachers and Principal Davila believed that in-person peer observations were more comfortable for teachers when no feedback was offered to the observed teacher. It is possible that this assumption was based on traditional norms of non-interference among teachers (Little, 1990). However, the fact that teachers responded positively to the video observations, which included feedback about the teachers’ instruction, raises the possibility that the lack of debrief for the in-person observations actually created more uncertainty than “safety.”
When teachers visited a colleague's classroom in person at Dickinson, their perspectives on what they saw remained un-discussed with the person they observed, which may have been more unnerving than they realized.

Hurston teacher leaders attempted to support teachers in crossing traditional boundaries through peer observation, by allowing them to focus the observation and by prescribing protocols for the process. Peer observation expectations were introduced at a whole school PD session intended to build teachers’ capacity for conducting productive peer observations. Teacher leaders guided their colleagues to collect “low-inference data” when observing in a peer’s class; As an observer, a teacher was supposed to be “the cameraman, not the commentator,” as it was described by a teacher and on a handout provided to all teachers. They theorized that non-judgmental data could support a reflective discussion after the visit without teachers feeling defensive about the feedback they might receive. However, beyond the initial PD session, teachers were paired with a colleague and expected to independently carry out the process, with only the support of printed forms. It was teachers’ responsibility to adhere to the protocols but since they were operating in isolation with only their observation partner, there may have been wide variation in implementation of the protocols. One teacher suggested that they needed “more time to practice the process” while another said, “not all teachers understand the value of low-inference data.” Another way that teacher leaders tried to reduce anxiety about being observed was to let teachers define the instructional focus for the feedback they would receive. The potential trade-off of allowing teachers to identify the focus, was that the process was not systematically connected to other professional learning and therefore could easily become a peripheral, add-on activity for many teachers. Based on
teachers’ assessments of peer observations at Hurston K-8, these structures did not resolve concerns for all teachers.

Rodriguez Charter teachers seemed comfortable with watching colleagues teach and being observed by others. Their peer observation practices did not include feedback, but teachers did not offer a rationale for this as they did at Dickinson. Instead, Rodriguez teachers spoke of working in an environment where classroom doors were “open” and administrators, colleagues, and others visited frequently. Teachers and administrators knew that this was not typical of all schools and required adjustment, especially among experienced teachers. A teacher who had been at Rodriguez for ten years recalled that when she taught in another district she could “count on one hand how many times someone came in my classroom” during her two years there. Initially at Rodriguez, she found the steady flow of visitors in her room unsettling. “It was really nerve-wracking until I just realized that’s the culture of the school.” She explained that she often talks to new teachers about this aspect of the culture saying things such as, “Look, people are going to be in your room day in and day out. You might know them. You might not know them. They might write things down. They might not. You’re just going get used to it, you really are. …That’s just the culture of the school.” This sort of response did not seem to be the result of specific procedures used for peer observation but rather a consequence of a tight-knit professional community with expectations for teachers to work together in the interest of student learning. Teachers described their colleagues as skillful educators working toward shared goals. Notably, many of the teachers at Rodriguez Elementary had been teaching at the school for more than five years and talked about a strong sense of loyalty to the school and each other. “I would say it’s like
working with a family. Because we are so small you really do know everyone … and even though there’s turnover, a good chunk of people stay from year-to-year.” The teachers felt committed to their colleagues as well as their students.

**Limited success in overcoming logistical obstacles.** Teachers and administrators in these schools, acknowledged the challenge of allocating time and resources to support peer observation. At Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary, the principals provided substitutes for peer observations, which enabled teachers to observe each other in person. At Rodriquez, administrators explained that TTs and a permanent full time substitute made this possible. In contrast, Dickinson’s Principal Davila worried about having sufficient funding to continue using substitute teachers for this purpose in the future. Hurston K-8 was unable to provide substitute coverage, which was not surprising given the larger faculty. Many Hurston teachers explained that without substitute coverage or allocated time for observations and debriefs, the practices were difficult to maintain. Teachers variously commented that “coverage was not available” and it was “difficult to meet so often.” Teachers did not want to miss time with their own students in order to observe someone else. In fact, many teachers reported that it was common for teachers to complete fewer observations than expected.

In addition, peer observation competed with other initiatives for time and attention. Davila explained that during the year of the study, a focus on data inquiry cycles at Dickinson had “distracted them” from allocating the necessary resources to support peer observations. Principal Hinds reflected, “People really liked it. And then it fell apart.” He added that “it was great for two years, but …we failed to do our part” to keep it going. The year of the study, the teacher who had organized the initiative during
the prior two years had new teacher leadership responsibilities. She was leading data and curriculum work with a team of upper elementary teachers and no one was in charge of peer observation. At Hurston, it was difficult to discern if logistical challenges were conflated with or masking cultural concerns.

The primary limitation cited by interviewees at Rodriguez Charter Elementary was the challenge of managing peer observation as another demand on teachers’ time. Most Rodriguez Elementary teachers talked at length about managing the demands of extensive professional responsibilities. One explained, “We are a tired group sometimes. Working at that level … at that pace … it’s exhausting.” Principal Rega worried about over-taxing her teachers and therefore made it voluntary some years, as she had done at the time of this study. At four of six schools in this study—Dickinson, Fitzgerald, Hurston K-8, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary—despite wide praise and optimism about the potential of peer observation, it was not yet an integrated, ongoing element of the schools’ approach to professional learning.

**Video Technology Reduced Barriers to Peer Observation**

Video technology allowed educators in schools with both traditional and non-traditional structures to reduce logistical and cultural barriers to peer observation. By using video, teachers could see each other at work without sacrificing instructional time in their own class. Many of the teachers who were dedicated to continuous improvement had similar aspirations for their students and did not want to miss instructional time. Video technology provided an answer to the problem of scheduling and substitute coverage. It also allowed school and teacher leaders to strategically integrate peer observation with other professional learning experiences. This contributed to the strength
of the PD sessions according to teachers and also ensured that peer observations were relevant and integral rather than a peripheral, add-on experience.

Videos assisted leaders in providing teachers with transitional experiences between isolation and co-teaching. It is possible that sharing a video of your teaching with a colleague is less nerve-wracking and less distracting than having that person present during teaching. Also, the teacher may be reassured by the fact that he or she could delete the recording and film again. In addition, video allows school leaders, coaches and teacher leaders to facilitate peer observations and debriefs during PD sessions, modeling the process for teachers and exerting greater control over how teachers participate in the process. In this sample, school leaders recognized that they needed to develop teachers’ observational skills as well as their ability to provide productive feedback if peer observations were to contribute to teachers’ learning. Collaborative video observations allowed for this to happen since leaders could provide or solicit commentary on the peer observation process allowing teachers to reflect on and improve their skills as observers and analyzers of learning and teaching. In these ways, school leaders were able to provide teachers with ongoing structure and support for peer observation when they used video technology to lead group observations and debriefs. Finally, by engaging in large group discussions of video observations of peers, teachers and school leaders were able to engage in continuing conversations about instructional practice, potentially working toward agreements about effective teaching.

Conclusions and Discussion

A plethora of reform efforts aim to support improvements in instructional practice and to reduce variation in teaching quality across classrooms within schools. It is widely
known that a student’s experience from one year to the next, or even from teacher to
teacher within the same year, can differ dramatically based on wide variation in teaching
quality (Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004). Scholars and practitioners offer different
explanations for why that is so; lack of agreement among teachers about instructional
goals, differing levels of experience, and lack of opportunities to learn new professional
skills. When teachers are confined to their own classroom, by choice or by design, they
typically do not know what or how their colleagues teach in other classrooms. Even when
teachers participate in routines that encourage dialogue about learning and teaching, such
as teams for data analysis, they often avoid deep discussion of instructional problems
(Little, 2007; Little et al., 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). There is certainly no
guarantee that peer observation will lead to improvements in teaching or reduce variation
in teaching quality, but it seems likely that at the very least it can support greater
awareness among teachers within schools of each other’s work. Teachers in this study
attest to the fact that watching their colleagues in action contributed to their learning in
ways that discussion without such experiences could not.

School leaders and teachers in this sample demonstrated a strong commitment to
working collaboratively in order to address the pressing needs of their students. They
hired teachers who were interested in working closely with colleagues and designed
structures and systems that compelled teachers to rely on each other. They also created
frequent opportunities for peers and administrators to analyze each other’s work. These
schools were systematically challenging the conventional norms of privacy, autonomy
and non-interference (Little, 1990).
In keeping with these efforts, all six schools provided a range of peer observation opportunities serving various purposes. Teachers’ responses, although generally very positive, differed across and within schools. At Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter, non-traditional school structures fostered an environment in which teachers expected their work to be visible to colleagues on a regular basis both incidentally and through structured peer observations. At Rodriguez Charter Middle, a more traditional school setting, the principal created systems for ongoing, collaboration, including peer observation. Teachers in these schools saw peer observation, which included providing colleagues feedback on their instruction, as a productive and routine component of their professional learning.

At the other schools—Dickinson, Fitzgerald, Hurston K-8 and Rodriguez Charter Elementary School—peer observation was a short-term initiative that was not fully integrated into their professional learning repertoire. Many teachers appreciated the opportunity to watch their peers in action, but administrators had difficulty sustaining the practice from one year to the next. It appears that in some of these schools, conventional norms of privacy and autonomy persisted, even in the presence of structures intended to promote collaboration. In most cases, peer observation processes in these schools did not include providing feedback to teachers. Ironically, in the schools where the practice was designed to be less threatening to observed teachers by not including feedback, the process was not consistently maintained. Notably, in these schools as compared to Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter Middle, teachers were provided less support to build their skills for observing and analyzing other teachers’ instructional practice and in most cases the processes were loosely defined, which may have created
greater uncertainty for teachers. In addition, these schools struggled with the logistical challenges of implementing peer observations. Importantly, despite the barriers, teachers’ views of peer observation practices were generally very positive and many hoped for opportunities to participate in peer observations in the future.

These cases highlight approaches to peer observation that schools might use to increase teachers’ opportunities to observe colleagues’ instructional practice and begin to shift traditional norms of privacy and autonomy toward new norms of collaboration and shared work. Teachers and school leaders alike were optimistic about the potential for peer observations to support teachers’ learning when it was strategically incorporated into teachers ongoing professional learning.

**Implications for Practice**

In order to make peer observation sustainable, schools might develop structures that build observation into teachers’ daily work so that it is an integral part of how they do their daily work, rather than an add-on to their existing responsibilities. Reformers and practitioners will benefit from designing systems that provide on-going structure and support to teachers as they learn to interact in new ways. In order to do this, school leaders can use scheduled times such as team meetings and professional development sessions for peer observation practices as Dickinson did. Video observations are a powerful tool for teaching observation, analysis and debrief skills to teachers. In addition, by using video observations regularly, school leaders can provide teachers with frequent, relevant peer observation experiences with fewer cultural and logistical challenges. Leaders are more likely to develop sustainable, impactful routines if they integrate a range of types of peer observations with other professional activities.
Implications for Policy

Several of the schools in this sample benefitted from having the resources and autonomy to adjust teachers’ schedules, allowing them to designate more time for professional development than is typical in US schools. Each of the charter schools had weekly after-school professional development sessions, which contributed to highly developed systems for job-embedded professional learning for teachers. Fitzgerald and Hurston K-8, through policy exemptions granted during and after turnaround, had more time for teacher meetings and professional development than the WCSD teachers contract provided for teachers in traditional district schools, such as Dickinson. At the time of the study, Fitzgerald and Hurston were not using this time to support peer observation, although they had in the past. It was evident in this sample, that schools could more readily implement and sustain peer observation practices when they had ample, designated time to collaborate with colleagues in structured environments, and where school leaders, teacher leaders and instructional coaches could support their efforts. With sufficient time, school leaders and teacher leaders can plan ways to incorporate peer observations into ongoing topics for professional learning.

Implications For Future Research

Future research is needed to examine the systems and structures used to implement and support peer observation and understand teachers’ responses to the processes. If there is promise in the practice of peer observation, how might schools address the logistical and cultural barriers that deter schools from developing and sustaining routines? In particular, it is important to understand how structures and routines for peer observation and other professional activities might build trust among
teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and gradually shift the professional norms in a school. In this study, it was evident that when processes were defined and teachers received help in implementing peer observations, they were more likely to overcome cultural impediments to the process. Future research could explore how teachers responded to particular aspects of peer observation processes, such as the inclusion or exclusion of feedback. How do schools support teachers in developing their observation skills so that they learn more from these experiences and provide helpful feedback to colleagues? What conditions actually help teachers to embrace the learning opportunity and overcome the cultural disequilibrium of having colleagues watch them and critique their instructional practices?

When researchers explore how schools approach peer observation, it will be important to examine the extent to which the practice is integrated with other professional activities and the effect of that integration. In this study, teachers described tight connections between their experiences with peer observation and professional development sessions or supervisory feedback. In addition, this exploratory study indicates that teachers value the opportunity to observe their peers, but it is not yet clear what teachers take from the experience. What do teachers learn? Does their learning differ by levels of experience? Does peer observation lead to improvements in practice and improvements in student learning? If so, how?

There is growing agreement that schools and school systems need to invest in teachers’ learning over the course of the “career continuum” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Researchers find that teachers continue to improve for at least ten years into their careers
but at different rates, in part depending on the quality of their work environment (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ladd & Sorensen, 2014). Although there is much less agreement about how to support teachers’ development, collaboration among teachers likely is an important component of job-embedded professional learning. Traditional norms of privacy might lead one to think that peer observation would not be well received by teachers; this study suggests otherwise. With structured processes, systematic support and sufficient time, peer observation has the potential to allow teachers to benefit from each other’s experience and knowledge, potentially reducing variability across classrooms and improving teaching quality as well.
## Appendix A

### Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Six Sample Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Estimated Enrollment</th>
<th>% Low-income students</th>
<th>% African American or Black Students</th>
<th>% Hispanic or Latino Students</th>
<th>% Other Non-white students</th>
<th>% White Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson Elementary</td>
<td>Traditional District</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzgerald Elementary</td>
<td>District - Former Turnaround</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurston K-8</td>
<td>District - Former Turnaround</td>
<td>PK-8</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kincaid Charter Middle</td>
<td>In-District Charter</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naylor Charter K-8</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodriguez Charter K1-8</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>PK-8</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>19.8</td>
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### Appendix B

#### Table 2. Number of Interviewees at Each School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Administrators*</th>
<th>Non-Teaching Staff **</th>
<th>Teachers in Training</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>% of Total Teachers in the School Interviewed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson Elementary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fitzgerald Elementary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hurston K-8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kincaid Charter Middle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naylor Charter K-8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rodriguez Charter K1-8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
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</table>

* Administrators include directors of CMOs and school based administrators who directly supervise teachers.

** Non-teaching Staff includes instructional coaches, parent coordinators, data leaders, recruitment officers, deans of discipline and other administrators who do not teach students and do not supervise teachers.
Table 3. Years of Experience for Teachers Interviewed at Each School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Novice* (1-3 years)</th>
<th>2nd Stage (4-10 years)</th>
<th>Veteran (11+ years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson Elementary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzgerald Elementary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurston K-8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kincaid Charter Middle</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naylor Charter K-8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodriguez Charter K1-8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Does not include Teachers in Training
Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Teacher Interview protocol

Intro: Study Explanation emphasizing that we really want to learn about your experience at this school.

1. **Background:**
   a. How did you come to be in your current position at this school?
   b. Starting with college, can you tell us what you’ve done?
      i. Probe for: training and employment

2. **Current Teaching Assignment**
   a. What do you teach here?
   b. How did you wind up in this position?

3. **Overall view of school:** If another teacher would ask you, “What’s it like to teach at ______?” How might you respond? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?

4. **Hiring:**
   a. How were you hired at this school? Step-by-step.
   b. Do teachers play a role in hiring other teachers? If so, how?
   c. Has the hiring process changed at this school? If so, how and why?

5. **Induction:**
   a. Did you have some kind of induction as a new teacher at this school? What worked and what didn’t?
   b. How are new teachers inducted now? How have things changed since you got here?

6. **Support:**
   a. What kinds of supports are available here for teachers to improve their instruction? What works well for you? What doesn’t? (Probe: PD, Coaching, Collaboration, Evaluation)

7. **Evaluation:**
   a. How is your teaching evaluated? Describe the process.
   b. Was it helpful? How?

8. **Administration:**
   a. Who do you go to for support? For what?

9. **Social & Psychological Supports:**
   a. What sorts of social and psychological supports does your school offer for students?
   b. What support do you get for interacting with parents and families?
10. Career goals:
   a. How long do you expect to stay at this school? In what roles?
      i. If yes: What keeps you at this school?
      ii. If no: Why do you think you might leave?

11. Union:
    a. What role does the union or the contract play in this school?

12. More: Do you have any additional comments?
Principal’s Interview Protocol

Overview of Study: 6 Schools, All high-poverty, high-minority. All Level 1

1. **Background**: How long have you been at this school? Prior experience in education? Anything else we should know about how you got here?

2. **School Overview**: We know something about the school, but we’d like your perspective on it.
   a. Could you first provide an overview of its structure and programs?
   b. (Where applicable) What does it mean for ---- to be a pilot school? What does it mean to be a turnaround school?
   c. How did you go about selecting teachers when ---- was placed in turnaround?
   d. How would you describe it to a teacher or parent who might be interested in it—both its strengths and weaknesses?

3. **Teachers**: We’d like to get a sense of who your teachers are.
   a. Where do they come from?
   b. What formal or informal preparation do they have?
   c. What attracts them to the school?
   d. Approximately, what proportion has fewer than 10 years of experience? 5 years of experience? 0-5 years of experience? (Has that changed or remained steady?)

4. **Recruitment and Hiring**:
   a. Could you describe the process you use to recruit and hire teachers? (Applicants per position? Teaching demonstration? Who decides?)
   b. What challenges do you face in recruiting teachers?
   c. Are there specific demographics or subject areas that you have trouble finding/attracting? If so, how have you addressed those challenges?

5. **Assignment**:
   a. How do you assign teachers to a particular grade or subject?
   b. Could you describe the teachers’ responsibilities, both during school hours and outside of school hours? Scheduled and unscheduled time?

6. **Compensation**: Please tell us about the pay scale for teachers. Are there additional stipends? If so, can you describe these opportunities?
7. **Collaboration**: Do teams, grade-levels, subjects organize the teachers? If so, what does that mean for how they do their work? What is the work of those teams?

8. **Supports**: What supports can a new teacher count on in getting started? And for more experienced teachers?

9. **Role**: Are there specialized roles for some teachers? (Team leaders, etc) If so, please describe these roles.

11 **Curriculum**: Does the school provide a curriculum for the teachers? If so, please tell us about it.

12 **Professional Learning**: Do you have formal professional development? Instructional coaches? If so, please tell us about them.

13 **Supervision and Evaluation**: How do you supervise teachers? How do you evaluate teachers? Are these separate processes? Do students’ test scores play a role in evaluating teachers?

14 **Dismissal**: How frequently do you dismiss or decide not to rehire a teacher? Reasons?


16 **Policy Context**: Does state or local policy play a role in how you approach building your teaching capacity?

17 **Union**: What role if any does a teachers’ union play at your school?

18 Have we missed anything?
### Appendix D: List of Codes and Descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Teacher Assignment: What do you teach/ your job at the school, views of your assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Background: Past work history, education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhyTeach</td>
<td>Why teach? Personal sense of purpose can include changes in views over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SchoolOverview</td>
<td>Facts about the school, (the facts but not mission or culture), might include specific school goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HistorySchool</td>
<td>History of School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FacultyComposition</td>
<td>Descriptions of the composition of the faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Interactions, policies or dynamics described in relation to race, ethnicity, social class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring</td>
<td>Related to teacher recruitment, hiring, including teacher’s experience of being recruited / hired. – timing, demo lessons, debriefs, meetings with current teachers, written applications, Who the school seeks and how they find candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhySchool</td>
<td>Why chose school - why teach at this particular school? May reflect changes over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Descriptions of what the school aspires to accomplish (if explicitly talking about mission do not double code with culture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdminAdmin</td>
<td>Interactions / relationships among administrators (including non-teaching positions such as coaches and guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdminLeadership</td>
<td>Descriptions of administrators’ style, vision, agenda, priorities, purposes, etc. (includes self-descriptions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdminRole</td>
<td>Specific responsibilities and job descriptions of non-teaching faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdminStudent</td>
<td>Relationship between administrators and students (include coaches, guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdminTeach</td>
<td>Interactions between administrators and teachers (include coaches, guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles in this code)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands</td>
<td>Teachers professional responsibilities and expectations, work hours, teachers views on demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Material and human resources (money, buildings, positions, --if it is about admin roles will be double coded in Adminroles) - Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Related to external accountability (state accountability status and state testing, turnaround status) - what the state does and then what is done as a result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DistrictNetworkState</td>
<td>Formal relationships / governance from State, District or CMO,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>References to standardized tests, state tests, network tests and interim assessments and how used in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MonitoringStudents</td>
<td>Teachers’ use of assessments and instructional strategies to monitor achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student Characteristics: Descriptions of students and their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Descriptions of the local surroundings of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Ways of connecting families and community to school, Perceptions of parents/ families + Teacher and admin connections to parents / families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CurriculumPedagogy</td>
<td>What and how you teach - including instructional planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SpEdELL</td>
<td>Descriptions of programs or approaches for educating students with special needs and /or ELLs</td>
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<tr>
<td>SpecialSubj</td>
<td>Referring to non-core academic classes (art, music, library, dance, etc) and extra-curricular or co-curricular programs or activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SchoolCulture</td>
<td>Expressions of school-wide norms &amp; values including kids, teachers and parents (not explicit statements of mission), big picture that everyone from school would understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Commentary on colleagues and their characteristics (what I think about the people I work with) - big picture impressions of colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProfCulture</td>
<td>Professional Culture- the norms of being a teacher or admin in this school. Big picture expectations for how we work together as professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eval</td>
<td>Related to teacher supervision and evaluation: observations, feedback, meetings between supervisors and teachers, how work with teachers on instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>Formal instructional coaches, but NOT induction mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
<td>Programs and supports (formal and informal) for new teachers: prior to day 1 and after day 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FormalCollab</td>
<td>Deliberate, structured groups working together-organized by the school- including whole school sessions – including approach to lesson planning and who is included and who is not - JUST TEACHERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>InformalCollab</td>
<td>Specific work with colleagues that is not organized by the school, informal collegial interactions -JUST TEACHERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RolesTeach</td>
<td>Formal roles and opportunities for career advancement-- may have double coding when example of influence through a formal role including leadership teams, teacher trainees, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>InfluenceTeach</td>
<td>Teacher opportunities as brokers of influence (teachers generally in their work having influence), including committees where you can voice concerns - Admin change view because of a teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Descriptor</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>School Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level</td>
<td>Grade Level Currently Taught</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Position in the school or system</td>
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<tr>
<td># years at this school</td>
<td># of years working at this school counting this year</td>
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<tr>
<td># years at charter</td>
<td># of years working at charter schools in total</td>
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<td># years at district schools</td>
<td># of years working at district schools in total</td>
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<td># years at private schools</td>
<td># of years working at private schools in total</td>
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<td># years teaching</td>
<td>Total of charter, district, private years</td>
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<td>Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td>Self-identified race / Ethnicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom type</td>
<td>Type of classroom in which interviewee teaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Age of interviewee</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


References


Johnson, S. M., Kraft, M., & Papay, J. P. (2012). How context matters in high-need schools: The effects of teachers’ working conditions on their professional


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Degree/Role</th>
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<td>1987-1991</td>
<td>Princeton University</td>
<td>B.A. in Art History, cum laude</td>
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<td>1991-1993</td>
<td>Manhattanville College</td>
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<td>1991-1993</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greenwich Academy, Greenwich, CT</td>
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<td>1993-1995</td>
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<td>Wampus Elementary School</td>
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<td>1995-1998</td>
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<td>Colegio Internacional de Carabobo</td>
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<td>2000-2002</td>
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<td>Instructional Coach, Middle School Math</td>
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<td>2003-2008</td>
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<td>Boston Principal Fellowship</td>
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<td>Instructional Coach / Facilitator of Professional Learning</td>
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<td>Doctoral Candidate</td>
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