Kindergarten Teachers Making “Street-Level” Education Policy in the Wake of No Child Left Behind

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Research Findings: New demands emerging from U.S. education policies—such as accountability and student mastery of predetermined learning outcomes—have had a dramatic impact on the professional experiences of public school kindergarten teachers. For many, freedom and flexibility in matters involving curriculum and instruction have been replaced by regulation and standardization. This article presents findings from a recent qualitative study documenting 4 kindergarten teachers’ experiences responding to these new demands. The teachers made their own curricular and instructional policies: They actively interpreted the requirements of their state and school district through the lens of their professional beliefs, preferences, and strategic knowledge base and created classroom policy responsive to their particular professional contexts. Practice or Policy: These findings provide a very different view of teachers’ relationship to policy mandates and point to the central role played by autonomy in teachers’ responses to No Child Left Behind.

Many early childhood teachers are facing new challenges as they try to meet the varied developmental and academic needs of their young students and to accommodate the professional mandates, requirements, expectations, and demands that have emerged in the wake of the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Hatch, 2005). The space for curricular and pedagogical innovation, independence, and freedom has been shrinking (Crocco & Costigan, 2007) as accountability shovedown (Hatch, 2002, p. 457) and the implementation of standards-based edu-

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cation have introduced unprecedented levels of obligation, regulation, and imposition (DeVault, 2003; McDaniel, Isaac, Brooks, & Hatch, 2005).

This erosion of professional autonomy has been a particular struggle for kindergarten teachers (Goldstein, 2007), who are presently managing profound changes in the nature of their work (Valli & Buese, 2007). In the past, kindergarten’s role in the public school system was to prepare children for “real school” (Graue, 2001; Hatch, 2005). Because they were charged with a unique, singular mission (Cuban, 1992), kindergarten teachers were typically afforded a great deal of autonomy (Seefeldt, 2005) and given tacit permission to rely on their professional expertise to make appropriate curricular and instructional decisions (Bredekamp, 1997; Laverick, 2007; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Rodgers & Long, 2002). However, as a result of NCLB’s transformation of the U.S. educational climate, kindergarten’s role has changed.

In the standards-based education systems driven by NCLB, kindergarten functions as the starting point of “a progressing, expanding, non-repeating curriculum of increasing complexity, depth, and breadth” (Ardovino, Hollingsworth, & Ybarra, 2000, p. 91) that extends up through the final year of high school. No longer “a special and unique place for children under the age of six” or “a paradise of childhood” (Seefeldt & Wasik, 2002, p. 17), today’s kindergarten is fully aligned with and linked to Grades 1 through 12 (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2005).

The ability to make principled, independent decisions about curriculum and instruction had long been a hallmark of kindergarten teachers’ practices (Bredekamp, 1997; Rodgers & Long, 2002). However, the recent changes in kindergarten’s role have caused a significant increase in obligation, accountability, and centralized control and a decrease in autonomy. As a result, kindergarten teachers are searching for ways to continue to make thoughtful, responsive curricular and instructional decisions that also allow them to remain in compliance with state and school district policies.

This article replaces the notion of teacher compliance with an alternative perspective on kindergarten teachers’ relationship with education policy. Drawing on the work of Lipsky (1980) and Spillane (2004), I contend that kindergarten teachers do not simply comply with or implement education policy. Rather, they actively make education policy. Teachers interpret the range of state-, district-, and school-level policies affecting their work through the lens of their strategic knowledge and then make “street-level” (Lipsky, 1980) education policy in the form of the curricular and instructional decisions they enact within the specific, particular contexts of their own classrooms.

This article presents findings from a qualitative study designed to explore four kindergarten teachers’ experiences making curricular and instructional decisions in the wake of NCLB. In this article, the study participants’ work as education policy makers, specifically with regard to curriculum and instruction, is foregrounded.
to offer a different view of kindergarten teachers’ decision-making experiences in the post-NCLB educational landscape.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Making professional decisions is a central feature of teachers’ work (Borko, Cone, Russo, & Shavelson, 1979; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). As Hawthorne (1992) pointed out, teachers make “decisions daily by selecting content, texts and materials, modes of presentation, learning activities, and evaluation methods to construct classroom curriculum. The professional autonomy associated with these choices characterizes our conception of teachers as professionals” (p. 1). The research on teacher thinking presents active involvement in interpreting, constructing, and reconstructing curriculum as a fundamental aspect of every lesson taught each day (Bredekamp, 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1981; Marsh, 2002; Shavelson & Stern, 1981).

Although teachers’ work is constrained by “numerous official policies—both written and unwritten—concerning a large range of tasks and activities” (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 99), teachers have typically had a great deal of autonomous control over decisions relating to academic issues, such as curriculum, objectives, instructional materials, and teaching methods (Ingersoll, 2003; Kennedy, 2005). To make professional decisions about these academic matters, teachers must take many factors into consideration. State and district policies (Grant, 2001); guidelines and recommendations from professional organizations (Spillane, 2004); the expectations of stakeholders such as administrators, colleagues, and students’ families (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Da Ros-Voseles, Danyi, & Aurillo, 2003; Geist & Baum, 2005; Helm, 2003; McDaniel et al., 2005); recent research findings (DeVault, 2003); sociocultural issues (Seefeldt, 2005); the subject matter; and the teachers’ own content knowledge in that area (Grant, 2001; Griffith & Ruan, 2003; Stodolsky, 1999) are integrated and interpreted in light of the teachers’ existing knowledge about effective teaching and children’s learning needs. The specific demands, limitations, and affordances posed by the particular learners in the class, the instructional materials available, the physical environment of the classroom, the daily schedule, the culture of the school, and the teachers’ lived experiences also influence these professional decisions.

The multiplicity, ambiguity, and variety involved in curricular and instructional decision making are truly striking (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Teachers manage this professional complexity by employing strategic knowledge, a highly specialized “wisdom of practice” (Shulman, 1986) that is unique to teachers. Fluid and personal, strategic knowledge is a teacher’s intellectual toolkit; it comprises principles of teaching, learning, and development derived from empirical research; accumulated practical know-how and expertise accrued through experience; and
moral, ethical, and ideological commitments—fairness, respect, equity, integrity, dedication, and so on—that are considered fundamental to the profession (Shulman, 1986). A broad and comprehensive notion, strategic knowledge encompasses such varied constructs as craft knowledge (Burney, 2004; Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992), personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), professional discretion (Boote, 2006), personal interpretive framework (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006), and professional identity (Rex & Nelson, 2004).

Shulman’s (1986) assertion that “strategic knowledge comes into play as the teacher confronts particular situations or problems, whether theoretical, practical, or moral, where principles collide and no simple solution is possible” (pp. 12–13) is supported by the recent research spotlighting the astute and thoughtful decision-making practices of teachers at all grade levels (Baum & King, 2006; Grant, 2001; Laverick, 2007; Maloch et al., 2003; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Ogawa, Sandholtz, Martinez-Flores, & Scribner, 2003; Segall, 2003; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007). In the wake of the 2002 implementation of NCLB (No Child, 2001), teachers have lost many of their curricular and instructional freedoms, and “areas previously left up to teacher discretion are now increasingly regulated” (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 220). Thus, in today’s educational climate strategic knowledge plays an increasingly crucial role in guiding complex decisions about appropriate, effective responses to national, state, district, and school policies.

Over the course of the past 30 years, the literature on teachers’ thinking and decision making has focused primarily on curricular and instructional concerns. As federal-, state-, and district-level education policies have come to dominate teachers’ professional landscapes, it is important to note that teachers are also decision makers on matters relating to educational policy. According to Lipsky (1980), teachers are “street-level bureaucrats” (p. 3) who transform policy into practice in their daily work with students. Lipsky argued, “Public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators because in important ways it is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers” (p. xii) as they interact with the citizens whom they serve. In fact, the very nature of schoolteachers’ work “regularly permits them to make policy” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 13).

Lipsky saw teachers as street-level professionals whose position requires them to make sensitive observations and judgments in immediate, direct, and personal encounters with students. Because teachers enact public policy within the specific, particular, local context of interactions with individual students, each teacher–student interaction represents a unique classroom policy encounter. He concluded, “When taken together the individual decisions of [teachers] become, or add up to, [education] policy” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 3).

Spillane (2004) also perceived teachers as education policy makers: “Using an interactive policy making perspective, [teachers] are viewed not only as doers of
higher-level policy, but also as policy makers in their own right” (p. 48). Spillane’s interactive policy-making model acknowledges the significant impact of human sense making on policy as it travels the route “from the statehouse to the schoolhouse” (p. 169). As a policy moves from the state to the district, from the district to the principals, from the principals to the teachers, and from the teachers to the students, it is continually made and remade, colored each time by the beliefs, experiences, priorities, and realities of those involved. Spencer’s (2000) observation that reforms “take on different meanings and forms in the schools and school districts where they are enacted” (p. 63) supports Spillane’s conception of education policy making as an interactive endeavor.

Not unlike the childhood game Telephone Operator, in which a message is transformed as it is whispered from one player to another, education policy making is an interactive process in which each participant is likely to tweak the received message—either intentionally or inadvertently—before passing it along. The empirical literature examining teachers’ roles in the implementation of various reform efforts—particularly the studies in which practitioners appear to be misinterpreting policy—can also be read as literature documenting teachers’ education policy making (Randi & Corno, 1997). Evaluating new demands in light of prior understandings or background experiences (Spillane, 2004); blending new ideas into existing practices (Cohen, 1990; Spencer, 2000); coconstructing the meaning and implications of policy (Marsh, 2002), resistance (Wien, 2002, 2004), and misunderstanding (Sloan, 2006), then, can be seen as some of the many faces of teachers’ street-level education policy making.

This article also documents teachers’ education policy making. Drawing data from a qualitative study of kindergarten teachers’ experiences teaching young children in today’s climate of academic intensification and accountability, I analyze the practices of four kindergarten teachers and examine the ways in which these teachers made their own curricular and instructional policies by remaking the NCLB-informed policies that currently drive the professional practices in their state, their district, and their school campuses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design and Participants

To examine kindergarten teachers’ professional decision making in the NCLB era, I engaged in qualitative case study research (Yin, 1994). Because case study design is particularly well suited to researching situations in which “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1994, p. 13), it was an ideal method for investigating the impact of policy on practice. This method enabled me to position my participants’ experiences, perceptions, and decisions in re-
lation both to the specific demands presented by their school and district requirements as well as to the state and national legislation that shaped those requirements. Although I identify the state in which the study took place, throughout this article I use pseudonyms for the city, the school district, the elementary schools, the administrators, and the participants in an effort to protect the confidentiality of everyone involved.

Context

This study was conducted in the Rockville Independent School District (RISD), a large, pre-kindergarten–Grade 12 public school district serving a mid-sized city in Texas, during the 2003–2004 academic year. In accordance with NCLB regulations, RISD policies on curriculum, instruction, and the assessment of student learning are governed by the Texas Accountability System. In this system, a set of content standards called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) “identifi[es] what Texas students should know and be able to do at every grade and in every course in the required curriculum” (Texas Education Agency, 2001, p. 2). Beginning in third grade, students’ mastery of the benchmark TEKS for their grade level in certain subject areas is assessed by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills standardized achievement tests. Scores on these high-stakes tests are linked to academic promotion for individual students at particular grades and are also used as a measure of school quality for comparing schools and school districts across the state.

In order to improve students’ scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills tests and to support teachers in their efforts to guide their students to mastery of the TEKS, RISD developed Instructional Planning Guides (IPGs) aligned with the state standards in reading/English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The IPGs, introduced in the fall of 2002, organize the standards into a curriculum designed to be completed within a school year and provide detailed daily plans that indicate the appropriate instructional materials to use to teach the specified standards in each core subject area.

Because kindergarten teachers working in all of 74 RISD elementary schools were expected to follow the IPGs and to cover the kindergarten TEKS in those subject areas for which there are no IPGs, I felt this district was a suitable site for studying the ways in which standards and the regulations associated with the implementation of standards-based education impacted kindergarten teachers’ practices. I recruited study participants through my existing relationships with RISD elementary school principals. Two teachers from Burns Elementary School (BES) and two teachers from Lost Creek Elementary School (LCES) volunteered to participate.

Setting and Participants

BES and LCES are situated in suburban neighborhoods approximately 10 miles apart. Although BES is a much larger school than LCES, their demographic and
performance profiles are very similar (see Table 1). Both schools offer only full-day kindergarten programs (see Table 2). Ann Bailey and Jenny Aster taught kindergarten at BES; Frieda Schiller and Liz Brown taught kindergarten at LCES. The four study participants were White, English-dominant women, and all were experienced kindergarten teachers (see Table 3).

It is important to note that both of these schools serve children from families with high socioeconomic status and education levels; experience very little instability in enrollment over the course of a school year; and employ highly qualified, experienced teachers, such as the four participants whose work is the focus of this

### Table 1
Student Information for Participating Elementary School Campuses, Rockville Independent School District Campus Profile Information, 2003–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Burns</th>
<th>Lost Creek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic disadvantage (%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English proficiency (%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance rating&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Recognized</td>
<td>Exemplary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>Note:</sup> Burns Elementary School is pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Lost Creek Elementary School is pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. These data are available to the public on the Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System Web site (www.tea.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/). The specifics of these demographic data have been altered slightly to provide greater confidentiality for the participating school campuses.

<sup>a</sup>The Texas Education Agency assigns one of four possible accountability ratings to all public schools in the state based on student performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills examinations: Exemplary (highest), Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable.

### Table 2
Kindergarten Program Information for Participating Elementary School Campuses, Rockville Independent School District Campus Profile Information, 2003–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Burns</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of classrooms</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of program</td>
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<td>Full day</td>
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article. I believe it is safe to say that these research sites are above the mean on every variable considered to be a factor that makes teaching and learning easier and contributes to students’ academic success. The perceptions and struggles documented here are those experienced by teachers working in circumstances that most would consider a “best case scenario.”

Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation and interviews over a period of 8 months between October 2003 and May 2004. The first 4 months were spent at BES; the remaining months were spent at LCES. During this time I made three or four visits to the campus each week and engaged in participant observation for a period of 90 to 240 min each visit. In total I spent close to 25 hr in each kindergarten classroom. It is important to note that my observations at BES occurred relatively early in the academic year (October–January), whereas my observations at LCES took place toward the end of the academic year (February–May). The change in kindergartners’ academic abilities, self-regulation skills, and school behaviors over the course of an academic year can be quite dramatic, and those developmental changes may have had an impact on what I observed at each school site.

**Participant observation.** I began my fieldwork at each school site with extensive observation. I visited one classroom at a time, remaining there until data saturation was achieved. To be sure that my documentation of each participant’s work was thorough and detailed, I was careful to observe four to five literacy lessons, three to four mathematics lessons, and two to three examples of science and social studies instruction taught by each participant. I documented the skills and knowledge selected for each lesson and the instructional practices used, and, more broadly, I took note of the ways in which each participant organized the classroom and educational materials, structured the activities, and created conditions for learning. Furthermore, I varied my observation schedule to ensure that I had the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Ann</th>
<th>Frieda</th>
<th>Jenny</th>
<th>Liz</th>
</tr>
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<td>School site</td>
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<td>Lost Creek</td>
<td>Burns</td>
<td>Lost Creek</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<tr>
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<td>mid-40s</td>
<td>mid-20s</td>
<td>mid-40s</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years teaching kindergarten</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years teaching at current school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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opportunity to see all of the recurring features of each participant’s typical working day.

After each field visit I spent 60 to 90 min fleshing out my field notes with additional details (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I also wrote reflexive analytic notes (Glesne, 1998) in which I documented my responses to what I had seen and experienced in the field that day, examined the influence of my own experiences as a kindergarten teacher on my perceptions and responses, jotted down questions I wanted to ask my participants, and began to theorize about the meanings of my data.

I engaged in ongoing data analysis and interpretation throughout my fieldwork. My observations in the classrooms raised questions that I would ask my participants during informal conversations. Their responses to these questions focused my future observations, which in turn led to more questions and further informal conversation. Slowly, I deepened my understanding of each participant’s teaching practices and began to shape tentative interpretations. These interpretations were tested during my interview with each teacher.

**Interviews.** Each participant was interviewed once using both a standard set of questions created for the study and a unique set questions that was developed specifically for her. The standard set of questions covered four topics: curricular and instructional decision making, beliefs about children’s learning needs, challenges facing kindergarten teachers, and changes in kindergarten (see the Appendix for standard interview protocol). The unique questions designed for each participant were grounded in my observations in her classroom. I was able to probe more deeply into planning, decision making, and the relationship between the participant’s beliefs and her practices by couching my questions in relation to specific lessons I had observed. I was also able to use these interview questions to test my emerging interpretations of the participant’s practices. Each participant’s interview lasted approximately 60 min and was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Each participant’s data set was analyzed individually using the same processes. First, each participant’s data were considered comprehensively to allow me to develop a clear, nuanced, and thoughtful understanding of her teaching. To begin this process, I read my field notes repeatedly, attending to individual elements of the teacher’s classroom practices. I examined the recurring, regularly scheduled aspects of the day (e.g., opening activities, instruction in language arts and math, and transitions and routines) and looked across all documented examples of each element (approximately 5–10 examples of opening activities, language arts lessons, and math lessons in each classroom, plus many, many transitions and rou-
tines) to establish a sense of the instructional strategies and pedagogical approaches that could be considered typical and representative of the participant’s work. Next I combed carefully and repeatedly through the interview transcript, seeking the participant’s own explanations or reflections on the recurring elements of her classroom practices and using her words to enrich, complicate, and triangulate my interpretations. Finally, I went back to my field notes seeking disconfirming evidence that I might have overlooked in earlier readings. The understandings constructed through this intensive data analysis process established a foundation upon which I was able to base my interpretations of participants’ decision making.

The interview transcripts were then analyzed a second time in order to identify the teachers’ perceptions of their instructional and curricular decision making. In this analysis procedure, each participant’s data were categorized using a process grounded in the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used the participant’s responses to my direct questions about her decisions regarding what to teach and how to teach it to establish codes, then revisited the transcript repeatedly to locate and code every statement in which the participant mentioned explicitly or alluded indirectly to decision making. The codes were (a) the standards, (b) perceptions of the developmental needs of kindergartners in general, (c) perceptions of the developmental needs of the specific children in the class, (d) input from parents, (e) expectations of first-grade teachers, (f) personal practical knowledge, (g) collaboration with colleagues, (h) research, (i) personal preferences, (j) unquestioned commitment to established routines, and (k) pragmatic issues.

In an effort to enhance the rigor and accuracy of my interpretations, a range of trustworthiness strategies shared and regularly employed by qualitative researchers (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) were used deliberately throughout the study. Prolonged engagement, testing my emerging interpretations with participants, and researcher reflexivity occurred during my fieldwork period; member checking, triangulation, and searching for counterevidence occurred during the analysis process. Efforts were made to ensure that the writing was characterized by thick description and rang true to experienced kindergarten teachers, and a manuscript draft was examined and revised using a hermeneutic circle (Moss, 1994). In this approach to strengthening the accuracy of qualitative research studies, a critical community of knowledgeable inquirers—in this case comprising doctoral students in early childhood education, practicing teachers in pre-kindergarten through Grade 1, and a public elementary school administrator—subjected the researcher’s interpretations to “disciplined, collaborative inquiry that encourages challenges and revisions to initial interpretations” (Moss, 1994, p. 7). Additionally, an early version of this article was shared with participants for a second-level member check. I received one response: an email from Ann, in which she wrote, “Yup! You got it, all right!”
FINDINGS

Street-Level Curricular Policy Making

In our conversations about the new challenges arising in the wake of NCLB, participants expressed no concerns about the obligation to teach a mandated, predetermined body of knowledge and skills. Content standards had been in place in Texas for many years. Liz described how the relationship between RISD kindergarten teachers and the state mandates that specified what they were required to teach had changed over time:

It used to be that you knew what the Essential Elements [the state standards that preceded the TEKS] were, [so] you knew what you needed to teach. You planned how you were going to get there and what you were going to do to get there, and you moved your class at the rate that your class was ready to move at. . . . [Then] we had the TEKS, and we all used the TEKS. But we use the TEKS waaaaay more now. I mean, we are looking at them all the time when we plan.1

Though the emphasis on coverage had intensified recently, these teachers were accustomed to working with curricular constraints. Furthermore, none of the participants voiced concerns about the specific content that comprised the kindergarten TEKS. They agreed that, generally speaking, the knowledge and skills included in the TEKS were age appropriate for typically developing 5-year-olds. Ann, Liz, and Frieda, the more seasoned kindergarten veterans, also noted the TEKS covered the content that had been taught in kindergarten for decades.

For this particular group of teachers, the state policy was more than a comfortable fit. The participants found they could continue to use many of their established units and practices—those that already included knowledge and skills found in the TEKS, or those into which additional TEKS could be easily embedded—to satisfy the new expectations for coverage of the mandated content. This vignette of Jenny’s opening activities shows her street-level curriculum policy making: She is simultaneously maintaining her existing classroom routines and addressing the state’s curriculum policy:

Jenny and her students start their morning on the carpet. She looks out at the students sitting before her in their best listening and learning positions and calls on the day’s designated leader, “Come on up and grab a pointer, Kevin.”

Kevin, a coltish boy whose pale, skinny ankles protrude from the elastic cuffs of his khaki pant legs, tentatively leads the class in singing their customary song about the months of the year, using his pointer to identify the names of each month on the brightly colored bulletin board that faces the open carpet area. When the song ends,

1Excerpts from all interview transcripts were lightly edited to increase their readability.
Jenny redirects the students’ focus with her voice and her body like an enthusiastic game show host. Swinging her arm toward the large tagboard calendar page hanging on the bulletin board, Jenny says, “Over to the calendar! Yesterday was January 20th so today is …” Jenny pauses to allow the class the opportunity to respond. And respond they do, loudly chiming, “January 21st!”

The opening activities continue, unfolding just as everyone expects. The children count the number of days they’ve been in school—by ones, by fives, by threes, using a large 100 chart for guidance—and figure out how many days remain until the hundredth day of school. The class recaps yesterday’s activities and decide together that the most memorable activity they did was a math lesson using T. Rex teeth as a unit of measure: Kevin’s next job is to write that sentence in yesterday’s calendar square.

All eyes are on Kevin as he writes the word “We” independently and correctly. Jenny takes the marker from Kevin, writes the words “measured with” on the calendar, and returns the marker to Kevin, who writes “T. Rex” with ease. Jenny helps the class sound their way through the word “teeth”: “Tttttt, T, right! Now eeeeee … E, good. There are two of them. And then th-th-th … what makes that? TH, TH makes that sound. And the sentence needs an ending mark—what kind? Right, a period.” Kevin, listening carefully to the class and to Jenny’s carefully articulated letter sounds, finishes the sentence.

As the children begin to talk (and sing) about the days of the week, Kevin goes to the window to check the weather. When he returns, he adds a marker to the “cold” column on the weather chart. Jenny asks if any of the children would like to make an observation about the information on the weather chart, and many hands shoot up. Children point out that “cold” has four more markers than “rainy,” and that “foggy” and “windy” have the same amount.

The skills and knowledge that form the core of Jenny’s opening activities are contained in the state standards for language arts, mathematics, and science. Jenny explained that the TEKS require kindergartners “to do this special unit on weather. Well, we talk about the weather every day. So I don’t worry about it.”

Jenny’s description of the content found in the TEKS foregrounds the role of personal interpretation in teachers’ street-level curriculum policy making. Observation and documentation of the weather is included in the kindergarten science TEKS, but not as a freestanding topic of study. Rather, taking note of daily changes in the weather is presented as one route to deepening children’s understanding of the ubiquity and significance of change in the scientific world. The kindergarten science TEKS specify the following:

(K.7) The student knows that many types of change occur. The student is expected to:
   (A) observe, describe, and record changes in size, mass, color, position, quantity, time, temperature, sound, and movement;
   (B) identify that heat causes change, such as ice melting or the Sun warming the air and compare objects according to temperature;
   (C) observe and record weather changes from day to day and over seasons; and
Rather than requiring teachers to do “a special unit on the weather,” the science TEKS are structured to suggest teachers might do a unit exploring the many types of change in the observable world, with weather as one of several examples.

Jenny enjoyed the habitual routine of her opening activities, and she felt confident that she had satisfied the state’s expectation that kindergartners observe and record weather changes. However, her personal interpretation of the TEKS overlooked a significant learning goal set out in the TEKS and left an important science concept unexplored.

Regardless of the intentions of the state policy, what children have the opportunity to learn depends ultimately on what their teachers make available to them. Jenny’s curriculum policy—illustrated by her perception of the presence of the science TEKS in her opening activity—warrants Spillane’s (2004) observation that “classroom teachers do heed instructional policies…. [and attempt] in good faith to incorporate the ideas they understood from these policies into their practice” (p. 139). Jenny’s policy also warrants Spillane’s observation that, despite their best intentions, “misunderstandings or partial understandings of ideas are commonplace” (p. 169) when teachers interpret and enact policies.

The participants’ curricular policy making was informed not only by their interpretations of the state policy, but also by their own personal preferences. Hargreaves and Dawe (1989) noted that “the intensely personal dimensions of teachers’ knowledge and action … [are part] of what motivates and informs the teacher” (pp. 16–17), and Segall (2003) acknowledged individual teachers’ “stances, dispositions, commitments, and investments” (p. 291) as critical components of teaching. But there has been scant attention paid to the ways that personal interest, pleasure, and desire influence teachers’ decision making (Baines & Stanley, 2006; McWilliam, 1999). To the contrary, Segall noted that teachers often feel guilty, frivolous, or irresponsible if they choose to teach a topic not included in the standards. My participants, however, did not hesitate to admit they made many curricular and instructional decisions informed by their own priorities and predilections, a factor that is considered more thoroughly in the Discussion.

Recognizing teachers as active agents who are interpreting mandates and making curriculum policy, rather than as technicians who are implementing the state and district requirements, suggests a need for teachers to have a different type of professional engagement with the standards. The teachers surely need to know what content is in the TEKS, but they also need to know why particular topics are included, how they connect with other topics in the kindergarten TEKS, and how they connect with the TEKS at other grade levels. Jenny, for example, knew that weather was a topic in the kindergarten science TEKS, but she did not appear to have a deeper understanding of the structure of those TEKS or the central scientific...
principles around which the TEKS were organized. This kind of knowledge would have helped Jenny integrate the TEKS into her existing units and practices more effectively.

Seeing teachers as curriculum policy makers also suggests the need to establish clear expectations for transparency and accountability and to create opportunities for deliberation around curriculum decisions. Acknowledging that teachers are actively interpreting the state and district policies through the lens of their own strategic knowledge also means recognizing the very real risk of inaccurate understandings; wild departures from the intentions of the policies; and self-serving, convenience-oriented decision making. Currently, this possibility is minimized through centralized control: A focus on standardization coupled with ongoing efforts to curtail teachers’ opportunities to make independent decisions are strategies for keeping things on track. As Lipsky (1980) made clear, however, attempts to eliminate or minimize teachers’ decision making will fail because making autonomous decisions relevant to specific contexts is a fundamental, non-negotiable feature of teachers’ work.

Instead, teachers would benefit from meaningful opportunities to examine and discuss the curricular practices of their colleagues and to have their own practice subjected to careful consideration. The expectation that teachers would be accountable to one another as they engaged in continuing curricular renewal and revitalization could lead to powerful learning opportunities. The goal would not be to standardize curriculum practices but to maintain uniformly high levels of intellectual integrity and richness in all classrooms. These conversations could enhance teachers’ decision-making abilities rather than quash them.

Street-Level Instructional Policy Making

The state’s mandated knowledge and skills were embraced by the participants—perhaps because they were familiar or because they could be incorporated easily into existing practices. However, as the literature on the implementation of top-down decisions about teachers’ practices work would suggest (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Marks & Louis, 1997; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; McNeil, 1988; Ogawa et al., 2003; Segall, 2003), the district’s IPGs were not warmly received. Despite their comfort with the state’s intervention in the kindergarten curriculum, these kindergarten teachers did not welcome the district’s interference in their instructional practices.

The IPGs were intended to improve RISD teachers’ effectiveness and to maximize their students’ learning. Though study participants acknowledged the potential value of the IPGs for some teachers—especially novices—from their own perspective the IPGs were perceived as an insult to their professional capabilities. Ann said indignantly, “I don’t want [the district] telling me what to do … or [telling me] to adopt those kinds of practices that I’m not sold on.” She much preferred a work
environment in which the assumption about teachers was that “we are professionals and know what we are doing.” Frieda concurred, pointing out with disbelief and dismay that the district will no longer “give us that freedom to do what we know works for these kids.”

Despite their concerns about the IPGs, all four teachers “played along” (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 123) and checked the IPGs document regularly. Liz explained she and Frieda liked to “see what [TEKS] we are supposed to be covering this week.” Jenny acknowledged looking at the IPGs but added dismissively, “I don’t worry about the IPGs… I just don’t. I really don’t.” Ann, however, cared less about the IPGs than about the big picture implications of the district’s efforts to regulate teachers’ instructional decision making. The IPGs were “fine,” she said, “as long as they don’t label it as [if] that’s the bible and I have to do it and that’s the only way to do it.” None of the participants acknowledged the IPGs document for what it was: a mandated curriculum that teachers were expected to follow.

As Ingersoll (2003) pointed out, the existence of regulations does not mean that teachers will adhere to them. These teachers paid “selective attention” (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 146) to the IPGs, staying aligned with their colleagues across the district in terms of content coverage and pacing, but making their own street-level instructional policy decisions about how to teach the TEKS designated for each week.

At times the teachers ignored the instructional materials mandated by the IPGs. For example, Liz and Frieda disliked the district-adopted science series, so they simply made other plans for science instruction. Liz explained that the RISD-adopted science curriculum

is from Scott Foresman. It’s gross. They have these little worksheets and they’re [pause] ugh! [Liz sticks out her tongue, crinkles up her nose and makes a “thumbs-down” hand gesture]. So we’re doing our high-interest science units and just making sure that our TEKS are [in there], that we cover what we’re supposed to be covering within our units.

Jenny, on the other hand, often elected to modify the IPGs. She explained, “The language arts IPG is just to follow the order of the stories [in the reading textbook]…. I actually rearrange a lot of the stories because they don’t make sense, [in] the order that they’re in.”

Supplementing the district’s mandated materials was another common practice among the participants. Frieda often enriched the plans in the IPGs using instructional activities and lessons culled from her extensive archives. She said:

Yes, I am going to be using this [recommended] big book and it’s going to be the Book of the Week. Yes, I am going to be using the Scott Foresman [kindergarten language arts series] …. But I still want a little bit of leeway to plug in my things that I like to do.
Frieda saw no need to limit herself to the district’s current textbooks and materials: She explained, “Over the years this is one of those things that you learn—there are [other] excellent projects and activities for us to use to get to this point.” Along similar lines, Jenny provided an overview of her use of the mandated language arts basal series during a typical week:

Usually Tuesday is the day … that we do the Scott Foresman [language arts] stuff. We read the story that goes for that week, we do the little letter pages that go for that week and get that out of the way. And then really the rest of the week is what I want to do.

Jenny addressed the district’s expectation to follow the IPGs in a cursory way; truly, though, she saw the mandated materials as something to “get out of the way” so she could get on with the business of teaching her students.

The teachers also employed cherry-picking, a process in which they reviewed the district’s mandated materials, plucked out the activities and materials they liked, and disregarded the rest (Stodolsky, 1999). The cherry-picked activities were then blended into the teachers’ previously existing plans and taught using their established instructional strategies. Liz confessed, “I like to pick and choose. I only want the really meaty activities, wherever they come from, because I want the kids engaged.” Ann was also a cherry-picker. She described the Scott Foresman language arts series as “very patterned and programmed…. They do the same thing pretty much every week, with every story.” As a result, Ann admitted, “I tend not to use it after about the first six weeks. I like the first book and then after that I pick and choose the books I use.”

Rather than allowing the IPGs to drive their instructional plans, all four participants chose to ground their instructional policy making in the NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In keeping with the developmentalist perspective represented in the DAP guidelines, these teachers understood early childhood to be a period qualitatively different from the rest of the life span and saw kindergarten as a place to honor and respond to the unique needs of young learners. In a comment that reflects this belief, Jenny expressed her consternation about the increasing emphasis on academics in kindergarten: “That’s kinda scary to me. Gosh, [for kids] to be so aware of all that already. It’s like they’re not five [-year-olds]. [I want to allow each child to] just be a five-year-old, you know?” Ann expressed a similar view when she pointed out, “We need to let [children] be five years old and not expect them to

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2Jenny’s academic knowledge of DAP came only from the second edition of the guidelines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). However, the three seasoned veterans’ understandings of DAP were much more strongly influenced by the first edition of the guidelines (Bredekamp, 1987). Therefore I cite both editions.
be 10 years old in the classroom. Five-year-olds have different needs than a 10-year-old would have.”

The participants’ interpretations and implementations of DAP had several significant similarities. First, all valued play as the central force in young children’s learning. Ann pointed out that when it comes to teaching children, “all the research says that play is the way to do it.” She elaborated on the connections between play and learning, saying, “[Kids] need play time because that’s how they learn best: They need to be able to experiment with things and find out [their own answers to questions like] why does a car go faster when you put the ramp at a different angle?” Similarly, Liz explained her instructional decisions typically balanced the district and state expectations “with what children need, which is play.”

Jenny’s strong belief in the inviolable importance of play in kindergarten led her to develop a unique instructional strategy. Her morning literacy block comprised more than 2 hr of instructional time and contained a 60-min period of teacher-directed “learning stations” followed by a 60-min period of child-directed “free centers.” In my field journal I noted:

The literacy tasks that are assigned during [learning] stations include handwriting and letter-sound matching worksheets that are linked to the basal reading series, journal writing, and something related to the science or social studies curriculum that involves writing a word like “seed” or “pumpkin” in the appropriate spot…. The kids are practicing basic skills, doing typical, boring kindergarten seatwork. (Field notes, October 28)

The work produced at each station demonstrated the children’s progress toward mastery of the kindergarten standards. By contrast, free centers was a block of uninterrupted time dedicated to child-directed play in classroom centers such as art, blocks, housekeeping, writing, library, and so on. My field notes resume after the transition from the learning stations’ “typically boring seatwork” to free centers:

Unbelievable! The block closet opened up, the dress-up costumes came out of a basket in the housekeeping area, and the kids GOT BUSY. No wonder they were in such a hurry to clean up the room and start free centers! What a transformation—it’s like Clark Kent going into a phone booth and coming out as Superman! The whole feeling in the room has changed—the energy, the industry, the engagement. (Field notes, October 28)

Although Jenny was a staunch advocate for play in kindergarten, she expressed doubt that the students would master the TEKS through play alone: “I can’t see doing free centers all day long just with the hope that they would get [the TEKS].” She devised this unusual instructional policy to give her students opportunities
both to learn the mandated knowledge and skills and to experience the learning that occurs through uninterrupted free play.

Second, the teachers shared a strong commitment to attending to young children’s developmental needs in all domains. Ann, for example, took her students’ physical needs into consideration. She fiercely guarded her children’s after-lunch rest period because experts “know that their bodies and minds need the down time” in order to continue learning. Frieda emphasized the importance of attending to affective aspects of the students’ development. She asserted, “I think that they need a very nurturing environment, [one] that they feel comfortable in, that they feel safe in…” Pointing out the importance of the emotional domain, she said, “[This is] absolutely one of my main goals: When they leave here I want them to feel successful about themselves.”

All the participants considered opportunities for social development an essential part of the kindergarten curriculum. Liz paid very close attention to her students during their free play periods because “I get to watch them interact with each other…. working together. And that’s where you get to see that cooperating coming out, and that teamwork coming out.” Likewise, Jenny also valued the learning opportunities provided by free centers. She explained, “Especially the socialization that goes on…. how to play with each other, how to talk to each other, how to work out problems.” And for Frieda, “Socialization is so huge. They need experiences getting along with others.”

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings pointed out, “What gets measured gets done. Amen” (quoted in Interview, 2005, p. 371). Because there are no TEKS that address the development of social or emotional knowledge and skills, many Texas teachers feel they must keep their instructional focus on academic skills and ignore other dimensions of development (Texas public elementary school administrator S. Y. Ehly, personal communication, October 9, 2007). However, social and emotional development have been central considerations of kindergarten teachers for more than a century, and both featured prominently in the participants’ understandings of a developmentally appropriate kindergarten curriculum. In addition to paying attention to the knowledge and skills listed in the TEKS, these teachers also attended thoughtfully to what was absent from the TEKS—what Eisner (1979) referred to as the null curriculum—and incorporated those missing elements to ensure their students were receiving the full range of educational opportunities necessary for their healthy development.

Participants also shared a strong understanding of the need to differentiate instruction to provide the students with learning experiences that were individually appropriate. Liz found that the plans in the IPGs did not serve the children who lacked the basic skills needed to complete the specified lessons or who required more time to grasp new content than could be allowed by the IPGs’ tightly prescribed pacing recommendations. She said:
Although the IPGs ... are nice guidelines, there’s some stuff that [specifies] “you need to be doing this and you need to be doing this.” Well, you know what? Little Nick over here isn’t ready for that. He’s still back over there trying to learn how to hold the scissors. And the district is saying that you need to move on and you need to be doing all of this.

Jenny also found it necessary to provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of the struggling learners in her class, particularly toward the end of the school year when the children who were developing academic skills at a slower pace slipped further and further behind their classmates. She observed, “Some of them are not really ready for what we are doing by the end of the year…. I’m really having to modify a whole bunch…. They’re just not developmentally there yet.”

On the other side of this same coin, both Frieda and Liz also found it difficult to use the district’s required materials with their classes because many of their students had advanced skill levels. Liz explained:

The IPGs, particularly in math ... are written to accommodate children who are working on the very bottom [skill] level. And our kids work a lot faster and we get concepts a lot faster. So today [Frieda and I] sat down … [and saw that] we are finished with what we have to do for this [marking period]. So what are we going to do? Twiddle our thumbs for two weeks and do no math?

Differentiation enabled the teachers to adjust the pace and content of their instruction in a range of ways and to address their students’ unique constellations of strengths and needs.

Like many early childhood educators, these teachers felt it had become more difficult to maintain a DAP kindergarten in the wake of NCLB (McDaniel et al., 2005). The main concern they faced was a shortage of time. The teachers reported that in order to cover all the knowledge and skills included in the TEKS, their daily schedules were fuller and their instructional pace was quicker: Jenny experienced the change as “this pressure to do, do, do” that she had never felt before. Ann pointed out, “We used to get to do things for the pure fun of it … [but] now there’s not as much time to do those kinds of units.” Liz agreed, saying, “There’s no time in the day, according to the state, for that kind of stuff.”

Beyond this time concern, the participants did not find it particularly difficult to teach the standards in developmentally appropriate ways. In part, this was because of the standards themselves. The teachers perceived them as age appropriate, saw they were already present in many of their established units, and found they could be easily added to existing units. Another reason these teachers found it easy to balance DAP and standards in their work was the support they received from their campus principals.
According to Ballet et al. (2006), school principals play a critical role in helping teachers manage the demands of standards-based education. This was certainly the case at BES and LCES. The participants’ desire for instructional freedom was transformed into school policy by their principals’ permission to ignore the district’s expectations regarding the IPGs and to teach the TEKS as they saw fit. As Spillane’s (2004) interactive policy-making model would suggest, the principals interpreted district policy—which itself was an interpretation of state policy—and created school policies that suited the needs of their teachers and their student populations. These principals appreciated the complexity of the situation facing their kindergarten teachers and trusted them to make the professional decisions needed to move the students to mastery of the TEKS. By allowing the teachers to forgo following the IPGs, the principals made it possible for the teachers to use DAP as their primary instructional foundation and to make instructional decisions they believed in.

The teachers’ success balancing DAP and standards was also a result of their freedom to enact their own interpretations of DAP. All four were very familiar with this widely influential education policy, and each teacher was committed to doing DAP to the greatest degree she could achieve each day. The teachers believed they were fairly successful in their efforts to teach their students in developmentally appropriate ways, and I found each one enacting DAP principles as part of the street-level instructional policy in her classroom. I also witnessed many different interpretations of DAP over the course of my observations: Not only did DAP look different in each teacher’s classroom, but a single teacher frequently enacted DAP in a variety of ways.

Although they are rarely discussed using this language, the DAP guidelines (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) are education policy. Professional associations and other nongovernmental organizations regularly release policy documents intended to guide the practices of classroom teachers and others involved in curricular and instructional decision making: In this case, NAEYC articulated clear expectations for DAP to guide the practices of educators working with children from birth to 8 years of age. Spillane’s image of interactive policy making, then, can be applied not only to the participants’ engagement with the state and district educational policies, but also to their engagement with DAP.

Spillane (2004) noted that teachers must make sense of any new policy. They have to work out what the policy means, “figure out what these ideas entail for their teaching, and grapple with getting them to work in their classrooms” (p. 156). The end result of this sense-making process looks different for each teacher because each teacher “decide[s] ultimately whether and in what ways policy proposals get worked out in classroom practice (p. 114). This suggests that the variation in DAP that I observed from day to day and from classroom to classroom is exactly what should be expected from teachers’ instructional policy making. As an observer, I elected not to focus on whether the teachers’ practices meshed with my own under-
standing of DAP: The interactive policy-making model indicates that my understanding, like that of my participants and all other teachers, is idiosyncratic and partial. Rather, I did my best to connect with the teachers’ intention and find the DAP within the lessons I observed. This entry from my reflexive analytic notebook, written after watching Jenny’s morning literacy block four times, gives an example of my approach:

At first Jenny’s morning literacy block felt like the ultimate either-or situation. Trying to make sense of this unusual arrangement in relation to what I know about Jenny’s beliefs and practices helped me see this an interesting example of a both/and approach. Rather than nesting the standards within DAP, Jenny positioned DAP and standards as if they were kids balanced on opposite sides of a teeter-totter: the standards and DAP have equal weight and work together as a pair only because of the separation between them. So, because she could easily point to the work the kids did in learning stations as visible evidence of student learning and compliance with district/state policies, Jenny felt safe giving her students a solid chunk of uninterrupted time for free play each day. This crazy-seeming approach allowed Jenny to spend close to 60 minutes each day teaching kindergarten exactly as she believed it should be taught, with no need to compromise, negotiate or apologize to anybody. (Reflexive analytic notes, November 14)

My interest was in understanding and making sense of Jenny’s interpretation of the NAEYC policy, not in critiquing her fidelity to the policy.

Ann, Jenny, Liz, and Frieda approached the challenge of teaching the mandated knowledge and skills in engaging, developmentally responsive ways with confidence and clarity. As Duffy (2002) pointed out:

The best teachers are not followers. They evaluate directives from methods course instructors, in-service speakers, teachers’ guides, and other authoritative sources; override such directives when, in their judgment, something else will work better; and revise and invent yet again on the basis of instructional results. In short, they adjust, modify, adapt, and invent. (p. 333)

These teachers acted as curricular and instructional policy makers. They embraced a broad and loose understanding of the state, district, and professional policies that gave them the wiggle room they needed to teach kindergarten as they believed it should be taught and to do their jobs well. The participants were able to use their strategic knowledge tactically to claim the right to teach the TEKS in their own ways, to carve out free time and safe spaces to protect and facilitate their students’ development, and to give themselves permission to do what they believed to be best for their kindergartners.

Yet, at the same time, these teachers were also very aware that the professional freedoms they enjoyed could vanish at any moment. Frieda knew she and Liz were
able to teach kindergarten according to their own expectations and standards rather than those of the district and state because of their principal’s permission: “I think that a huge part of that is [our] principal and her support of [us] and [our] program.” Although Ann gratefully acknowledged her principal’s support, she also looked deeper and recognized the underlying reality: Her school’s outstanding scores on the state standardized tests shielded the teachers—and their principal—from district-level administrators’ scrutiny. Ann explained, “We don’t have [the IPGs] hanging over our head because we are a high-performing school. If we ever lose that status then there is always … the possibility that [required compliance] could happen to us.” She described the “mixed messages” received by RISD teachers:

When I go to [district inservice] workshops, other kinder teachers say to me, “What do you mean you don’t do the [Scott Foresman language arts] workbooks?” [I reply,] I don’t do the workbooks, I do other things instead. [They say,] “Oh, we get in trouble if we don’t do the workbooks. We have to [make the kids] do it for homework.”

All four teachers understood that their ability to make independent curricular and instructional decisions was a special privilege that could be granted or taken away at whim. In all likelihood, if LCES were to get a different principal, or if BES test scores were to slip significantly, some of the participants would find themselves unhappily following the IPGs and teaching kindergarten according to the district’s established policies.

DISCUSSION

These findings demonstrate the benefit of incorporating Lipsky’s view of teachers as street-level bureaucrats into thinking about teachers’ work. First, Lipsky understood autonomous decision making as a central feature of teachers’ work. He contended that making complex decisions in circumstances shaped by “relatively high degrees of discretion and relative autonomy from organizational authority” (p. 13) is a fundamental, non-negotiable characteristic of the work of street-level bureaucrats. With no need to consult with their superiors, police officers decide who to arrest and who to ignore; teachers decide which student simply needs more time to catch up to his peers and which student should be screened for the presence of developmental delays that would warrant special education services. The responsibility for making these difficult decisions is a defining feature of the job and is reserved for practitioners with highly specialized knowledge in their field—the police officer and the teacher are street-level bureaucrats who make countless decisions each day, however neither would be capable of making the decisions belonging to the other’s professional domain.
At the same time, all street-level bureaucrats’ decisions are constrained by “rules, regulations, and directives from above, and by the norms and practices of their occupational group” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 14). These requirements keep the professionals accountable to the public they serve and honor the rights of individuals receiving the service. To do their jobs, then, street-level bureaucrats are expected to negotiate autonomy and obligation in ways that reflect their expertise and their nuanced professional understanding of the contextual factors involved.

Thinking of teaching in this light moves curricular and instructional decision making out of the realm of endangered privilege, where it existed for the teachers in this study, and returns it to its rightful place as a responsibility inextricably connected to the work of teachers. Were Lipsky’s view to replace the current view, enacting federal, state, or local policies that constrained a teacher’s ability to make instructional decisions would be as unthinkable as enacting policies that constrained a police officer’s ability to make arrests.

Furthermore, replacing the current view of teachers with Lipsky’s understanding of the teacher as the most highly qualified curricular and instructional decision maker would help to resolve the oft-cited tension between DAP and standards (Wien, 2004). Teachers—not administrators or textbook authors or legislators—would be acknowledged as the only professionals who possess the specialized knowledge and skills needed to make street-level policy decisions about curriculum and instruction. Once teachers are allowed to reclaim the ability to draw on their specialized expertise to make decisions about how best to teach required content to the students in their classes—just as the participants in this study were able to do, thanks to their principals—balancing DAP and standards becomes a straightforward and relatively simple process.

Lipsky’s second contribution to our understanding of the work of teachers in the wake of NCLB is the idea of street-level bureaucrats being policy-making agents. As Schwab (1983) bluntly stated, “Teachers will not and cannot be merely told what to do” (p. 245). Shulman offered a twist on Schwab’s statement, asserting the following:

As I read Schwab, the “will not and cannot” entails far more than a mere matter of frustrating fact…. Schwab is arguing that they ought not and may not, that the responsible practice of the art of teaching requires that teachers reserve to themselves the obligation to make decisions and choices regarding what to do, how to do it, with whom and at what pace because the options arise hundreds of times a school day, and arise differently every day with every group of students. (Shulman, 1984, p. 190)

As the data presented here demonstrate, teachers do not intend to memorize policies and implement them faithfully (Randi & Corno, 1997). My participants’ calculated deployment of strategic knowledge in response to RISD mandates demonstrates the accuracy of Schwab’s and Shulman’s insights. Ann, Jenny, Liz, and
Frieda approached the challenge of teaching the mandated knowledge and skills in developmentally appropriate ways by engaging actively and purposefully with federal, state, district, and school policies; with the guidelines for DAP; and with their own professional expertise. As Lipsky’s work suggests, each teacher negotiated autonomy and obligation and made street-level education policy in her classroom.

Referring to the participants’ practices as policy making rather than decision making creates a solid, obvious link to Lipsky’s work on street-level bureaucrats and his conception of decision making as the essential, defining, signature responsibility of teachers. Describing the teachers’ work as policy making also establishes connections to Spillane’s (2004) work on the negotiated nature of interactive policy making.

The benefits of viewing policy making as an interactive process whereby policies are made, reinterpreted, tweaked, adjusted, and customized in an ongoing way at every level in the structure of public education is another significant finding of the study. Spillane’s work provides a realistic alternative to the prevailing view, in which policy in a pure, perfect state is handed to classroom teachers who inevitably fail to implement it properly (Cohen, 1990). Instead, Spillane spotlighted the negotiated nature of education policy, acknowledging that everyone involved—from the federal government and state legislators to the school district superintendents and school principals—creates a partial, specialized interpretation of any given policy that reflects the nature of their position, their own strategic knowledge base, and their professional purposes and goals.

My participants’ curricular and instructional policy making provides many examples that illustrate Spillane’s view. Frieda, for example, explained that she was happy to teach the state standards, as long as she could reserve the right to “plug in my things that I like to do [such as] comparing and contrasting certain books, for instance, with cowboys, [and] with all of these Cinderella stories. I love doing that with the kiddos.”

Frieda felt strongly devoted to the units she had developed and taught over her long kindergarten teaching career, and continued use of this curriculum meant a great deal to her. Frieda’s attachment is clearly visible in her lyrical description of the comfortable rhythms of her curriculum that follows below. Her tone of voice conveyed the depth of her emotion; as she spoke about the topics she liked to cover, she took on the magical, spellbinding timbre I had heard her use when she told her students a familiar and beloved story. She recounted:

So we, over lo these many years—Liz and I have worked together for 10 years—We’ve just gotten to where [pause] Oh, in the spring we are fortunate to … go out and get the milkweed and the monarchs [butterflies] because “We are Texas Maps” segue-ways [sic] into “Cowboys” and “The Kindergarten Rodeo.” And so [pause] they’re just things that flow.
Frieda and Liz made sure there were many different TEKS integrated into these previously established units. Their intent was to take their students along a different path to arrive at the same end points as kindergartners whose teachers followed the instructional plans presented in the district’s IPGs.

At times, however, this strategy of integrating the TEKS into favorite units or activities allowed the teachers to be seduced by the “lure of the traditional” (Britzman, 1991, p. 219). For example, Jenny said:

I always said I would never be one of those teachers who always does the same thing that she did 30 years ago…. But counting pumpkin seeds, and doing the circumference of our pumpkins, and finding things that match and all those [activities], that’s gonna be a really good [learning station] job even 30 years from now.

Jenny also used recollections of her own personal experience as a kindergartner as part of the rationale behind her decision to integrate content from the science curriculum into her literacy block:

To me, everything in kindergarten is intertwined. I mean, [a science lesson is] also a literacy lesson because we’re reading [books], you know? We talk about different vocabulary and that kind of thing, but it is about our science [topic] for the week. I almost don’t want to break things up. To me that’s the way they’re gonna learn the best, to get it all together…. And that’s the way I remember kindergarten being for me. I don’t remember [affects a cartoon-style teacher voice], “Now it’s math time boys and girls.”

In this particular case, Jenny’s memories are pointing her toward practices that are aligned with knowledge about young children’s learning needs (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). However, relying on childhood memories as if they were empirical knowledge can hinder teachers’ efforts to create classrooms that have meaning and relevance for the students (Jacobs & Eskridge, 1999) and can lead to the creation of questionable street-level curriculum policies.

In addition, the lure of the traditional allows teachers to reuse their “old faithful” curriculum units without critically reevaluating the content of those lessons and activities. Liz exemplified this practice in her description of the enjoyment she and Frieda took from returning year after year to

the units we’ve used that are high interest. The kids get into them! And they’re still getting their TEKS. Around Christmas we talk about celebrations and we talk about all the different kinds of celebrations that go on, like Kwanzaa and Chanukah and La Posada and all these things…. We just make sure that we are covering all the TEKS that need to be covered.
Although state-mandated knowledge and skills were covered in this celebrations unit, the content was couched in an outdated, troubling tourist-style view of multiculturalism that can perpetuate stereotypes, misrepresent cultural practices, and oversimplify complex ideas (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Liz and Frieda have always done their celebrations unit, and many other early childhood teachers do similar units; however, this does not mean the unit is worth doing (Leinhardt, 1990). Little (1990) warned of the dangers of “a private version of autonomy” in which teachers independently claim “individual latitude to act on personal preferences—or to act on personal preference unexamined by and unaccountable to peers” (p. 521). Teachers have a strong inclination to teach what and how they have always taught (Crocker, 1983; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Salinas, 2006), but unreflective attachment can impair a teacher’s decision making and compromise the quality of her curricular policy making. Furthermore, it appears that Liz’s and Frieda’s feelings about their favorite curriculum units and activities have led them into a “competency trap” (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 322). Past successes with these units have motivated them to reuse the same units every year, and the promise of another guaranteed success has prevented them from exploring new materials or approaches that might be more appropriate, effective, and educative for their students.

From Ann’s refusal to use the language arts workbooks to Liz’s holiday celebrations unit and from Jenny’s either/or literacy block to Frieda’s commitment to her students’ self-esteem, all of these teachers’ curricular and instructional decisions were actively shaped by personal understandings of the state standards and the DAP guidelines, informed by strategic knowledge and careful thought, and considered in relation to the needs of the particular children in the class and other contextual factors. Every policy decision was unique and deliberate and reflected attention to obligations, desire for autonomy, and the use of professional discretion.

The extant literature recognizes that restricting teacher autonomy undermines good teaching (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), has negative impacts on student learning (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), and decreases school effectiveness (Marks & Louis, 1997; Ogawa et al., 2003). The findings of this study support the existing scholarship by demonstrating that the opportunity to make autonomous professional decisions should be considered a non-negotiable responsibility embedded in the job of teaching. This study also builds on the extant literature by developing the notion of teachers as makers of curricular and instructional policy. Making policy requires active engagement, deployment of a range of professional capabilities, strategic use of specialized knowledge, and excellent negotiation skills. My participants’ curricular and instructional policy decisions bring this to light. However, this was a small study of experienced teachers working in professional circumstances that were close to ideal. There is still much that remains to be learned about teachers’ experiences making curricular and instructional policies in the wake of NCLB.
There is a particular need for examining the curricular and instructional policy-making experiences of kindergarten teachers working in low-performing schools. My own logic suggests that teachers working with the students who need the most academic support would be given greater autonomy and more leeway for instructional and curricular decisions: Teaching high-needs students requires more teacher flexibility and more room for creative problem solving for a variety of reasons. However, Ann’s comment about the “mixed messages” received by teachers at different schools in RISD implies that teachers at the low-performing schools are given less decision-making autonomy than she and Jenny.

Research focused on the curricular and instructional experiences of teachers working at low-performing schools run by principals who strictly enforce the district and state policies would be very useful. I am particularly interested in learning about those teachers’ strategies for finding the pockets of autonomy or opportunity that help them to do their jobs well. It would also be interesting to study low-performing schools headed by principals who respect their teachers’ professional knowledge and give them autonomy in curricular and instructional matters to examine the relationship between teacher autonomy and student learning.

For today’s public school teachers and students, there is little chance of escaping the policies and practices associated with NCLB. However, as the participants in this study demonstrated, there are ways of ameliorating, sidestepping, or strategically minimizing the impact of those policies and practices on the teaching, learning, and life in classrooms. More research that spotlights teachers’ strategies for surviving and thriving in these complex educational times would be a very beneficial addition to our knowledge base.

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**APPENDIX**

**Standard Interview Protocol**

1. How do you decide what to teach and how to teach it? What factors influence your decisions? How much freedom/flexibility do you have when making these decisions?
2. In your opinion, how do young children learn best? What do kindergartners need?
3. What are the biggest challenges you face as a kindergarten teacher?
4. How has kindergarten changed over the years that you have been teaching? How has your work as a kindergarten teacher changed? What changes would you make to your current circumstances to improve kindergarten for you and/or for your students?