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Teach Me Something I Don't Know:

One First-Year Teacher's Experience as an Educator in the US Schooling System

Valerie Daifotis

Claremont Graduate University

Teacher Education Program

Dedication

This project is dedicated to Mom and Dad who were my first teachers. I also want to thank my fiancé for his unwavering love and support during this wild first year of teaching. I cannot wait to become Mrs. Keneally. Nat, Mel, Morgan, and Sabrina—I could not have made it through this year without you.

Abstract

This project documents my experiences before, during, and after my first year of teaching. It examines my own experiences within the education system and my entry into the teaching profession. By looking at my past with a critical social justice lens, I also explore how my positionality affects the students I teach. Finally, this project reflects on the lived experiences of my first year of teaching. This project uses a combination of anecdotal and qualitative data gathered from my past, qualitative and quantitative data from my current students, visits to three focus students' homes, and informational interviews of school and community members. Overall, this project encouraged me to challenge my beliefs, explore and analyze my experiences, and reflect on myself as an educator. By examining my entry into and experience within the teaching profession, I have found that my greatest growth comes as a result of deep reflection and meaningful relationships.

Keywords: education, elementary, social justice, reflection, teacher

Preface

This ethnographic narrative project explores my past—which formed my unique positionality—my present—navigating the challenges and joys of a first-year teacher of record primarily in relation to my three focus students and the community, both at the micro and macro levels—and my future—how I hope to grow as an educator. The beginning of this project required intense self-reflection. I defined my positionality by looking to the critical components that shaped me as a person and educator. Next, I immersed myself in my students' lives. While I only had three focus students: an English language learner, a student needing special education services, and a student with significant life experiences, I dedicated this year to knowing all of my students and their stories. For my three focus students in particular, I gathered qualitative and quantitative data throughout the year to document their growth. I participated in three home visits to glimpse into their lives outside of school and listen to their families speak about their children in order to more fully understand the complexities of each student. To gather an all-encompassing view of not only my students, but also my school site and community, I formally and informally interviewed fellow school site employees and community members throughout the year.

The greatest challenge I experienced while undergoing this research was the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting school closure. The final four months of the school year were conducted remotely, which drastically altered both mine and my students' experiences. During my time in isolation, I was still attempting to gather student data, conduct interviews, and reflect on my (virtual) teaching practices.

Despite all the practicums, observations, and volunteer hours in the world, there is nothing quite like stepping into your own classroom and being the living, breathing, teacher of

record. And, while my first year as teacher of record was far from what anyone could have imagined, I am pleased, nonetheless, with not only my students' growth, but also my own. If anything, I am glad that I had the forced reflection of this ethnographic narrative to help me make sense of this tumultuous and unprecedented year.

To protect the privacy of my students, our school, and community, names in this project have been changed.

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Part A: *My Pursuit of Teaching*

Introduction

I should have known I would end up pursuing a career in education when playing “student and teacher” was one of my favorite games to play with my sisters when I was little. Or maybe the fact that I would cry when I had to miss a day of school was some indicator of how much I loved the classroom. Although I cannot pinpoint one, single factor that I can credit for shaping me into the person I am today, I can credit my family for offering me unwavering support in my pursuit of becoming a teacher. From my early love of school, to my first experiences being in front of my own class, to my path through higher education, there is little surprise as to where I have ended up. Based on the path that I have traveled thus far, I know I have a wealth of knowledge to share with my future students as well as a set of needs that must be addressed and goals that I want to work toward.

Journey to Teaching

My Background. For most of my life, I thought my life was just like everybody else’s, but that is far from true. I grew up in a traditional, conservative, upper class family with a mom, dad, and two older sisters in New Canaan, Connecticut. Many of the fathers in my town commuted into Manhattan and the mothers took breaks from their careers to stay home and raise their children, which is exactly how my parents chose to divide responsibilities. Though this may bring up *Stepford Wives* imagery, I can assure you that I was always surrounded by strong and mindful women—there were no mindless moms in my world! My dad worked on Wall Street and provided the five of us with a more-than-comfortable lifestyle. I grew up never knowing financial struggles. In fact, it was distasteful to talk about money in our household. Despite having a stay-at-home mom, we also had live-in nannies during my toddler years until

my sisters and I entered school. Looking back, I know I grew up in a sheltered, privileged, whitewashed world, but the funny thing about being in a bubble is that when you are in it, you assume that is just the way things are. I experienced very little diversity growing up. My parents took us into New York City often for us to experience “culture”, but that culture was of the upper and middle classes and involved going to the symphony, eating at high-end restaurants, wandering museums, and going to Broadway shows.

When it came time to finally putting me and my sisters into school, my parents met with the local public elementary school’s principal before enrolling. Right from the start this should have been a clue that my parents “knew school” or maybe they just knew what they wanted and would find a way to get it. Despite being an affluent district that consistently ranks near the top in both the state and the country, something about our town’s curriculum and instruction left my parents wanting more and so they turned to private schools for the answer. Therefore, my oldest sister began kindergarten at a nearby private elementary school called Pear Tree Point School that followed the Core Knowledge curriculum; it emphasized small class sizes and individualized attention for each child. As it is often assumed, if the school was a good fit for one child, it will be a good fit for his or her siblings, and so my middle sister began two years later when she was ready for kindergarten. Soon it was my turn to enter the education system and I started at Pear Tree Point School in Pre-K and remained there until fifth grade.

Following in my sisters’ footsteps became a common theme in my academic life. Fortunately, what was a good fit for my two older sisters was also a good fit for me. I credit Pear Tree Point as the place that instilled my lifelong love of learning. I learned how to learn, developed study skills, and created wonderful memories. I excelled at Pear Tree Point—at the time I thought all students loved school and wanted to achieve perfection because that is what I

was experiencing. It was not until later in my academic career that I realized Pear Tree Point had given me a little vacuum-sealed world in which I could rise to the top and nobody could stop me. I felt like I could do anything because I went to Pear Tree Point School! When I was younger it was my dream to go back and work there as a teacher, although that is no longer possible because it closed a year ago.

It was in elementary school that I also began the incredible balancing act of the upper- and middle-classes—participating in as many extracurriculars as possible while maintaining “model student” status. Like most parents, mine just wanted what was best for me and enrolled me in many after-school activities to give me the opportunity of trying new experiences and gaining lifelong skills. From horseback riding, to tennis, to karate, to piano, I tried it all. However, one prerequisite for all of my extracurriculars was that they could not happen on the weekend. Weekends were reserved for family and the majority of my childhood weekends involved packing up into our car and driving to our weekend house in the country about two hours from our primary residence. I can recall missing quite a few birthday parties and other highly coveted elementary school social events because we were gone for the weekend. However, looking back, I would not have changed any of it, and I even wish I complained less about all of the family time I had as a child. Going to our weekend home was somewhat of forced relaxation away from the busy Monday through Friday life of school and extracurriculars that my parents cultivated for me. And, because family was (and still is) so important to my parents, we also had family time every single evening when the five of us ate dinner together (or sometimes just four of us if my dad had to stay late in the city).

Despite appearing very assimilated into traditional American culture (which we were), and wholeheartedly embracing it, my family also maintained its Greek culture. Both of my

parents are Greek, though they were both born in the United States. I feel somewhat upset that my parents did not raise us as Greek as they could have. My dad's first language was Greek, and yet it was never spoken in my house, and we were never enrolled in Greek school as many Greek Americans are, a la *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Maybe my parents wanted us to have the opportunities they did not (my dad was held back in school because of his English language abilities, though this did not stop him from receiving a scholarship to Yale University or attending Claremont McKenna College) or maybe they had other reasons for not teaching us Greek. But, despite not having the language connection to our ethnicity, I still learned many of the traditions, recipes, and customs that help me feel tied to the Greek community. Fortunately, one of the many extracurriculars that I participated in was Greek dancing through my church. I loved that I could fit my Greek and American cultures together seamlessly by adding something traditional to my multitude of after-school activities—one day I would be playing tennis, and the next I was practicing kalamatianos.

Just like growing up in New Canaan, Pear Tree Point (and most of my extracurricular activities, minus, perhaps, Greek dancing) added to my sheltered life. I experienced little to no racial, religious, or political diversity on a regular basis. I am Greek-American, which makes me white. I am Greek Orthodox, which is a Christian denomination. I grew up in a conservative household, which was typical for New Canaan. Then, when it was time to go to middle school, I, once again, followed in my sisters' paths to the local public school (Saxe Middle School) for one year before joining them at Hopkins School. Despite gaining experience at a public school, I can hardly count the New Canaan Public School District as reflective of our country's public schools in general. Not only is 90% of the student body white (which, by itself, is not unheard of, especially in rural America), but also no one qualifies for free or reduced lunch (U.S. News

and World Report, 2016). So, while my middle-school-self liked to think that my one year at public school gave me “street smarts”, that was hardly the case. I was just as sheltered at Saxe as I was at Pear Tree Point, but I had a slightly larger class size to go with it.

And so, my one year at public school felt a little bit like a pretend year of school—I did not feel challenged academically and I had it in the back of my head that I was leaving for Hopkins, the secondary school my sisters attended, the following year so the need to develop roots was not present. I cruised through sixth grade, easily obtaining good grades and favoritism from the teachers because, even among a school full of white students that knew “how to school”, I played into the system even more because I loved the idea of being good at school. I felt that success equaled perfection and it seemed easy to achieve this at Saxe. However, I value that one year for teaching me to branch out socially and emotionally, although that may have been a result of the time in my life rather than the school I was attending.

At this point I was about to enter seventh grade at Hopkins, and I had never had a Person of Color in my class. The most immediate interactions I had with linguistically diverse individuals were with our landscapers and house cleaners. So, although Hopkins was still not the most diverse school, at least it was about a third students of Color and was outside of my New Canaan bubble. For the next six years, from seventh grade until twelfth grade, I commuted to and from New Haven each day from New Canaan, forty-five minutes each way. If I credit Pear Tree Point for instilling my lifelong love of learning, I credit Hopkins for teaching me to advocate for myself. Again, this definitely coincided with formative years in general, but I know Hopkins played a role in my academic, emotional, and social development.

My Decision to Be a Teacher. Looking back, I can pinpoint factors from my elementary and secondary years that helped me decide to become a teacher. First, it was Pear Tree Point as

an entity that made me want to teach elementary school. I loved school more than anything as a child. As I mentioned before, I cried when I had to miss a day. My experience at Pear Tree Point taught me just how formative the elementary years are. I was not only learning how to learn, but also, I was learning how to be a person and having real life experiences interacting with peers, adults, and difficult ideas.

But it was my experience with Breakthrough Collaborative at Hopkins that made me realize that I wanted to be in a classroom helping students—*all* students, not just those who looked like me or sounded like me. I have vivid memories of feeling so depressed day after day during high school, but then having my spirits lifted by spending time with my Breakthrough class. I can remember one evening on my way home after a great afternoon of teaching thinking *this is what I want to do*. It did not matter who I was teaching, but rather I was spending good mental energy on helping other people and that was such an incredible feeling that I wanted to feel again. In a way, my initial decision to want to be a teacher was selfish—I liked the feeling of being in the classroom and I wanted more of it.

As I got more serious about wanting to teach, I realized not all students have, or have had in the past, the educational experiences that I had. Learning both about educational inequities and the power of education, I came to believe that every student should have a teacher that wants them to learn, believes that they can learn, and helps them to learn. To be an effective teacher, I believe you need all three of these things for your students. For every teacher these ideas might play out differently, but in the end, being effective is about providing the right support for your students to succeed.

Because of this belief, I aspire to be a “warm demander” who “[expects] a great deal of [my] students, [convinces] them of their own brilliance, and [helps] them to reach their potential

in a disciplined and structured environment,” (Delpit, 2012, p. 77). Because I *want* all my students to learn, because I *believe* that they all can learn, and because I want to *help* all of them to learn, I also have to improve myself.

Assets and Needs

Needs. I had a traditional, quality education that was grounded in the hegemonic norms of upper-class society. This is synonymous with Whiteness, which Lawrence (1997) claims has layers of meaning, from description, to experience, to ideology—all of which I experienced. Because of that, my education was lacking in some areas and bountiful in others. I believe that somewhere in my first thirteen years of life *someone* should have informed me just how much power the color of my skin gave me in society. Although pleading innocence through ignorance is not a valid excuse, as a child there were very few opportunities for me to get this information because I was growing up in such an isolated reality. I can faintly recall reading a book or two for Black History Month each year at Pear Tree Point and Saxe, but even that felt like it was out of necessity rather than genuine interest from the teacher. Shafer (2016) cited Harvard Graduate School of Education professor and political philosopher Meira Levinson’s advice “to cultivate racially conscious thinkers.” One apt piece of advice that she mentioned was, “Help white children understand how power is distributed and exercised in American society.” And yet, there I was, cruising along through elementary and middle school without truly realizing the power I had in society because I had not genuinely experienced American society at large. I needed someone to “help me understand” as Levinson put it, or else I would go on living in my bubble, blind to the realities that lay beyond my own reality.

Because of this upbringing, I have a lot left to learn about my place in society, which will undoubtedly affect my experience as a teacher with a social justice perspective. I have a lot left

to “unlearn and relearn” about being a “white [person] in a white-dominated society” (Lawrence & Bunche, 1996, p. 531). In all likelihood, I can expect to be a teacher in a classroom where not a single student has a background like my own. Therefore, I will need to work that much harder and be that much more aware of my positionality. This leads to my first need: understanding my white privilege, which “refers to the many ways, typically invisible to White persons themselves, that White skin color is associated with prestige, privilege, and opportunities unavailable to other persons in society,” (McIntosh, 1988 as cited in Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009, p. 575). In my future classroom, I should expect and celebrate the diverse perspectives of my students’ viewpoints. Boatright-Horowitz and Soeung (2009) explain that to do this, “White [people] need to be encouraged to confront their own racist tendencies and acknowledge their privileged statuses” in order to “begin to understand diverse viewpoints” (p. 575).

My second need as an aspiring teacher comes from my experience with mental health. While my previous need—understanding my white privilege—is more socio-culturally relevant, this need is related to socio-emotional and communication deficits. Because of my past and current experiences with depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorder, I have to think about the extra steps required for being present for my future students, despite whatever is happening in my own life. As a teacher, it will be my responsibility to not just show up each day physically, but also mentally. Therefore, if I want to connect with my students and build supportive relationships, I need to ensure that I am taking care of myself as well—I cannot adequately help my students if I am not first helping myself! Recent studies have shown that teacher mental health is closely tied to student mental health (Capone & Petrillo, 2018; Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017; Harding et al., 2019). If my own mental health needs are not being met, there is no way I can expect to serve my students to my fullest extent.

Finally, my last main need is broad in the sense that it is relevant to a variety of areas from conveying academic information, to communicating with my students and colleagues, to exploring new concepts related to teaching. I need to gain confidence, which takes on a multitude of different meanings as a new teacher. First, I have to understand that I will mess up, which is often hard for me to come to terms with. In part due to my perfectionist attitude that started at an early age, I will get an idea of how I want something done and if it is not done exactly that way I struggle to move forward until it is remedied. Second, I need to get more confident asking for help as a new teacher. This might take the form of seeking out a mentor in my first place of work, or it might involve admitting to students when something did not go as planned and asking them to move forward with me in that growing experience. Finally, I need to acknowledge my biases and realize that until I actively work to mitigate them, I cannot be the most effective teacher that I am capable of being.

These biases stem from how I did school. I know that I will be starting off teaching students who do not share many of my own experiences with school. I have to move beyond the idea that quiet and still students are the best kind of students, that parents who care the most about their children's school are the ones who volunteer the most hours, that the parents who care the most about helping their children are the ones who help them study every night, and that the students who care most about their education complete their assignments correctly and promptly. These are biases that I know exist and I know I have to work on adjusting. In order to be the most effective teacher for all of my students, I need to work on my biases. If I do not, I may end up inadvertently hurting the chances for success for students that are different from me and only effectively teaching those students who are most like me.

Assets. Maybe it is just positive mentality, but I believe my three main needs as a teacher are also very closely tied to my main assets. First, because many experiences of my students will be different from my own, my students will be the experts in my classroom. Being comfortable with vulnerability in front my students is something that will help me mitigate my biases. I will not only acknowledge, but also encourage my students to be experts on their own lives—I will encourage them to share experiences, skills, beliefs, and knowledge with the class to make it a more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming environment for everyone.

Second, my own experiences with mental health will give me an awareness that some teachers might be lacking, especially regarding their students' mental health. I know that mental health issues can and do affect all kinds of people. That quiet student who I think is a model student may have anxiety and therefore might not want to speak up in class. That student who has trouble turning in complete assignments may have depression and struggle to get through their day, let alone finish a homework assignment. Knowing about mental health issues will make me more sensitive to the students in my class and the underlying issues that might not be displayed outwardly. Additionally, I will take a preemptive approach towards mental health in my classroom. Mindfulness will play a large role in my classroom ecology, from growth mindset and asset-based thinking, to meditation and positive psychology.

And finally, by acknowledging my imperfections, I am open and eager to improve. Although I strive for excellence, I know that it will take me at least three to five years to become an effective teacher, and even longer than that to become like the teachers that I looked up to during my childhood and young adulthood. However, by acknowledging that the path to becoming an effective teacher is a long one, I can view my mistakes and failures as learning experiences towards a goal rather than setbacks hindering me from success.

Goals

I am excited to have my very own classroom. No amount of volunteering, summer employment, or extracurricular experience can give me the same experience of being the one and only teacher of thirty students for nine months. My first year of teaching will be the culmination of essentially twenty-two years of build up to becoming a teacher. Therefore, I have serious goals that I hope to achieve in that first year. I do not expect to be perfect, but I do expect to learn every single day along with my students. My goals include creating a positive classroom experience through meaningful relationships, celebrating successes (both my students' and my own), and ending the year a better teacher than I started.

Celebrating success and ending the year better than I started are realistic and achievable goals. Cultivating a positive classroom experience through relationship building is also realistic and achievable, but will be more labor-intensive, emotionally-taxing, and challenging. Because the first two goals are more individualistic and self-reliant, I am confident that even if I do not make progress towards them every day, I will still be able to achieve them over the course of the first year. The power is in me alone to achieve them and I know I have control over the outcome. However, building relationships involves other people, something that I do not necessarily have control over. Therefore, I can put as much effort as I am capable of into fostering a meaningful relationship with my students, but if they do not reciprocate, I may face challenges in reaching this goal. Fortunately, cultivating a positive classroom experience through relationship building is a goal that fits on a spectrum. It is not either success or failure; as long as I have a mostly positive classroom experience in my first year, I will feel that the goal was achieved. As long as I put in as much effort as I am capable of into forming meaningful relationships with my students, then I will feel that the goal was achieved. I cannot treat this

goal as an all or nothing situation, or else it will lead to missing out on the positive experiences I can create.

In order to achieve all three of these goals: creating a positive classroom experience through meaningful relationships, celebrating successes, and ending the year a better teacher than I started, I will need the help of my students and their families, my own friends and family, and my administration and colleagues. I need to get to know my students and their families beyond the academic setting in their own communities in order to create a meaningful relationship that will then transfer into the classroom and make it a more positive experience (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). I will seek out experiences and events that I can share with my students outside of the classroom, whether it is their sports game, dance recital, or other performance. I will turn to my own friends and family to ensure that I am celebrating my own successes throughout my first year of teaching. Additionally, I will rely on them to help me keep a positive mindset. No matter what, I will end the year with more experience than I started with, which can only make me a better teacher. If I am having a difficult time at any point during my first year, I may need to turn to my support network to remind me that every day is a learning experience that is making me a better teacher. Finally, I will seek out the help of my administration and colleagues to help me reach my goals. This may come in the form of taking a personal day to complete school assignments, asking my principal to help me interact with a difficult parent, or brainstorming with veteran teachers about the best way to address an issue in the classroom. People from all areas of my life will be my biggest resource during my first year teaching, but that means I will still need to be proactive and reach out when I need help.

Finally, I can assess the progress of my goals by self-reflecting regularly and asking my students to tell me how they think the year is going. Richards, Brown, and Forde (2007) cite

specific ways, according to Gay (2002) and Villegas and Lucas (2002), that teachers can become culturally responsive, and therefore, have more meaningful experiences with their students. They tell teachers to “engage in reflective thinking and writing,” (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007, p. 65). Although I may not have time for daily journal entries, reflecting regularly in writing on how I feel the year is going will give me concrete evidence that shows my progress as a teacher. Similarly, reflecting on how I feel about relationships with my students should give me a good indication of how I am progressing towards my goal. Finally, asking students whether they feel their accomplishments, both small and large, are being adequately celebrated will also ensure that I do not become complacent in celebrating them as scholars and people. I can also ask my students both formally and informally how they feel about the classroom experience. Whether in a casual conversation in passing time or in a written reflection, student responses will be the real testament to whether I created a positive classroom experience, which is my most challenging and meaningful goal for my first year of teaching.

Part B: *My Students*

Introduction

Every student’s experience with education is as unique as they are. No two children fit neatly into a predetermined academic mold, contrary to what administrators, educators, and parents might believe. My own academic experience is proof of this—I followed a *seemingly* identical academic journey to that of my sisters and we all ended up with different experiences. Same household. Same schools. Even the same teachers. But not the same outcome. Because of this knowledge, I know that each current and future student of mine deserves to be known individually, not just how they fit into a larger system.

This section is my attempt to present just three focus students and how they uniquely fall within the education system—not only their demographics, but also their individual assets and needs, and finally, my action plan for each student. I gathered information from student files, conducted one-on-one interviews with students at school, and even broke the invisible barrier between school and home by visiting each student’s family at their place of residence to learn more about them within their own communities. Equipped with quantitative and qualitative data on each student, I utilized what I know about myself as an educator and my newfound information about my students to develop action steps that fit the students rather than fitting the student into preexisting academic plans.

Case Study 1: Maria Vazquez

Demographic information. Maria Vazquez (name changed for privacy) is an 8-year-old Hispanic girl who lives with her mother, father, and two older brothers. Her mother stays home and manages the household—she oversees her children’s after-school activities (i.e. sports) and general supervision after school. Her father is a dialysis nurse and works typical hours, which enables Maria to see him before he leaves for work in the morning and in the evenings when he comes home.

I chose Maria as my first focus student not only because her experiences with the education system are likely much different than mine were, but also because of her language classification. Maria is designated as English Only, although she can understand and speak some Spanish. This fits the language classification of many of the students at my school site. Although not classified as one, I believe Maria fits the qualifications of a Standard English Learner. She speaks in a Chicano English vernacular rather than Standard English. This is evident not only during language arts, but also in our language-based math, science, and social

studies lessons. Maria has language gaps that are similar to those of the English Learners and Standard English Learners in our class and school site. Such gaps are not evident in students that speak Standard English. So, despite Maria's English Only qualification, I believe she should be taught as a Standard English Learner to give her a more equitable experience within the classroom.

Inside of the classroom Maria is a solid citizen; she is quick to follow directions, offer help, and—depending on the subject—volunteer answers. Maria's effort in class is apparent. She tries hard to do what is expected and asked of her, and even goes above and beyond on occasion. These instances are not in an academic context, but rather in the case of behavior and citizenship within the classroom. She will jump out of her seat to help pick up a spilled pencil box, volunteer to sharpen pencils, and happily organize the classroom library.

Maria's main area of growth inside the classroom is work completion, which is likely due to her being below grade level in both reading and math. She struggles to complete work in the allotted time and almost always require extra time for completion. Maria's struggle with work completion is likely due to questions regarding content rather than off-task behavior. Maria can often be seen staring at her work for minutes on end without making any progress. When probed, Maria will appear embarrassed or frustrated and share that she does not know how to do the required task. However, the use of a few probing questions usually reveals that Maria *does* know how to complete the task but is simply lacking the confidence to complete work independently. When working within a heavily scaffolded setting (either individually or in small groups), Maria grasps the content without much issue. This suggests Maria is cognitively capable of meeting standards with help, but when required to demonstrate proficiency on her own, she struggles.

Outside of the classroom Maria is a true team player; she is kind, supportive, and competitive. During our school's organized running/walking mileage program, Maria is often seen walking and talking with all types of students or sprinting around the track to earn the title of fastest in the class. She thrives on competition and loves our weekly organized physical education block because of the competition and team-nature of the games.

Outside of the classroom I would like to see Maria continue to make friends during unstructured time such as lunch, recess, and snack. During structured play and activities, Maria appears confident around her peers. However, once left to interact organically, Maria is a little more reserved. However, Maria does have a few close friends in both second and third grade, which suggests she is open and willing to befriend any of her peers, regardless of them being a grade above her.

Academic standing. Maria does not perform very well on summative and standardized assessments, although she does perform slightly better on formative assessments. Based on the standardized iReady diagnostic test, Maria is working at a Kindergarten-level in math and a first-grade level in reading. In math, Maria struggles with Numbers and Operations, Measurement and Data, and Geometry. However, she is only one grade level below in her Algebra and Algebraic Thinking domain. For reading, Maria's Literature Comprehension is at a Kindergarten level while Phonics, High Frequency Words, Vocabulary, and Informational Text Comprehension are all at a first-grade level. However, she is strong in her Phonological Awareness. Maria's low performance level is also apparent on chapter tests in math and spelling/vocabulary tests in language arts. I believe that the discrepancy between home and school language (Chicano English vernacular versus Standard English) is a large factor in how Maria scores on assessments.

While we are working whole-class, Maria appears to grasp some of the content and follows along with instruction, but once she is left to work on problems independently, she struggles and shuts down. With close teacher support, Maria flourishes and completes close to grade-level work. But, when working independently she has great difficulty with comprehending the content, which, in turn, affects her ability to complete work. But, despite struggling with the content, Maria remains mostly positive and on-task as directed.

During collaborative learning activities and group work, Maria works well with her peers, though she never initiates being the leader of the group. Instead, Maria happily listens to her classmates, helps in a more peripheral role within the group, and offers suggestions, but never takes a boss role. The smaller the group, the more likely Maria is to voice her thoughts and ideas. In table group discussions, Maria is more prone to sharing because she is with a small group of students with whom she has become more comfortable. Overall, Maria's critical thinking and communication are areas that need improvement, with an emphasis on communication via Standard English both written and orally. However, Maria's creativity is developmentally appropriate for an eight-year-old girl and can be seen in full force during various projects and activities completed in class.

I think Maria is having a difficult time academically for two reasons. First, because of her positive attitude and enthusiasm in class, past teachers may have believed her to understand more than she was revealing. Maria appears to comprehend during whole-class instruction, which gives the illusion that she is grasping the content, but when individually questioned, Maria's concerns become apparent. Second, I think Maria's home language is not necessarily Standard English, despite being categorized as an English Only student. This provides an additional obstacle that Maria must overcome at school because she is not fluent in the language spoken in

academic context—Standard English. Therefore, Maria must work even harder to not only grasp the standards being taught, but also comprehend and use another language in which she is not as familiar.

Socio-emotional development & social identity. Despite not meeting grade level standards and having a difficult time reaching academic mastery, Maria excels behaviorally and socially. She respects the rules of the classroom and kindly helps her classmates remember them. She is often seen displaying the quiet signal (one finger over the mouth and the other hand raised in the air to form a “0” for voice level 0—silence) during transitions as a friendly reminder to her peers to transition quietly. She is encouraging to everyone in class, primarily in team activities such as those played during physical education. Maria has made friends with both second and third graders, which indicates her ability to adapt to a more uncommon situation (e.g. a combination classroom).

Maria has a collectivist view of herself and associates more with what she is a part of rather than who she is individually. From her family, to her football team, to her table group in class, Maria thrives when she has a sense of belonging. She both opened and closed the interview we had after school one day talking about her flag football team and how important they are to her. To affirm Maria’s self-concept and strong desire for belonging, I promote a classroom environment that unifies students and gives them a supportive group to which they can belong (i.e. table groups), while still allowing for individual recognition.

By relating what we do inside the classroom to what Maria is so familiar with regarding sports, I can provide her an opportunity to learn about important elements of socio-emotional development. For example, Maria is an avid flag football player and is very familiar with the dynamics of working with a team. I can connect the skills she uses as an athlete on a team to

important socio-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-management, growth mindset, social awareness, and relationship skills. I can remind Maria that like a player on a team, as a student in the classroom she has to be aware of not only what she is currently capable of, but also what she can train to achieve. This concept lends itself well to teaching Maria (and her classmates) about self-awareness (what am I feeling and doing right now), self-management, and most importantly—growth mindset. Many of the areas that Maria already excels in likely come from her athletic background such as encouraging others, following rules, good sportsmanship, and goal setting.

Funds of knowledge. A few hours prior to visiting Maria's home, her mother had sent me a message with the address and gate code. Equipped with another box of cookies from a local bakery, I headed to Maria's house a few hours after school was dismissed. I was greeted at the door by Maria and her mother. We settled into the living room and chatted informally about the Christmas music Maria had playing on the television and their two family dogs who were happily roaming their fenced-in yard. I showed Maria and her mother pictures of my own two dogs who lived with my parents. After briefing them on the interview process, I began reading my formal introduction script.

Shortly after beginning, the interview started to feel like an extended conversation as opposed to any sort of stiff or formal interview. Maria's mom was happy to share information, anecdotes, and commentary. This amicable interview dynamic was important to me because the more comfortable Maria's mother was sharing, the more I could not only connect with Maria inside the classroom, but also connect with her family outside of the classroom, all of which would benefit Maria's education. (El Yaafouri-Kreuzer, 2017, p. 25).

I learned that more than anything else, Maria's mother just wants her daughter's teachers to know "...that she has a huge heart, and she's such a big helper, and since I can remember she's been the mother hen." (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). This knowledge gave me insight into Maria's family's funds of knowledge. Her mother did not mention academics, but rather personality traits when asked what she wanted teachers to know. This could suggest that in their household, building character and having life skills holds greater importance than academic knowledge. Her mother also described Maria as previously being shy and timid, but emerging into a "social butterfly," another indication that she is proud of Maria's social and emotional developments (as opposed to strictly celebrating academics).

About halfway through the recorded interview, Maria's dad arrived home from work. He joined us in the living room and added to the conversation. I learned about the various household schedules that changed with the sports' seasons, the maternal and paternal extended families, Maria's two older brothers, and more about her "sister cousin" with whom she is incredibly close. I also learned that both of Maria's parents are pleased with their children's experiences in the education system so far. Her father explained, "We've had no issues; we've liked all their teachers." (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Her mother added, "We didn't realize when it was time for Maria to enter TK, so we kind of just had her go and didn't really prepare her." This was a little surprising to me, as it contrasted greatly with my own entrance into the education system.

The interview drew to a close naturally and I was also surprised that Maria's parents expressed a genuine interest in hearing more about my graduate program and the project itself, which I happily shared with them. I was glad I had a chance to shed more positive light on the

collaborative relationship between teacher, student, family, and school. After a hug from Maria and her mom, and a firm handshake from her dad, I was out the door.

Experiences, interests & developmental considerations. Maria is interested in sports, her friends, and her family. She is motivated by the successes of the groups she belongs to. For example, Maria said she is most proud of “doing football, and trying to catch number three's catch, so I could get an interception, get a touchdown, for my points, and for my team.” (M. Vazquez, personal communication, October 11, 2019). Maria aspires to become a police officer because her “Nino” (“Spanish nickname for one's godfather”) used to be one. During the interview she explained that she is really worried for his safety but is inspired by what police officers do for a living: “They can catch the robbers. And I really don't like the robbers because they steal money from people...Because that isn't fair for people that, they don't have money, and that's how they come homeless. So that's why they can't have food, they're starving, for their kids. And they can die from that. So that's why I don't want any people to die.” (M. Vazquez, personal communication, October 11, 2019).

In addition to her “Nino”, Maria is most influenced by her cousin. She does not have any sisters, and, therefore, is very close to one of her cousins, despite being multiple states apart. When describing her cousin, Maria said, “We're like sisters, cousin sisters, because we're kind of best friends, because we are.” (M. Vazquez, personal communication, October 11, 2019). Despite being new to the school this year, Maria has made close friends. However, she still talked at length during the interview about her friends from her old school, which suggests she still feels a greater connection to them. So far, moving schools and finding a new group to belong to has been one of the biggest events in Maria's life. She explained that “...sometimes I

cry a lot, because I miss my old school, and my teacher, my old friends.” (M. Vazquez, personal communication, October 11, 2019).

Likely due to moving schools and being new to this school site, Maria felt more comfortable at her old school. But, even at this new school site, Maria does have a positive attitude towards school. She relies on a core group of friends from her class for support and she is most comfortable in the classroom or outside at P.E. As previously noted, Maria is athletic and competitive and enjoys physical activity in both structured and unstructured settings (i.e. P.E. and recess).

Maria’s actions and motivations make sense for her developmentally and culturally. Developmentally, Maria is very typical for this age group. She seeks peer-approval and wants to be part of a group. Her background likely intensifies this quality as she comes from a collectivist culture where all family members contribute to the group. Maria is required to do many chores at home and that has influenced her willingness to help out in the classroom. Although it may be a result of her devotion to the collective group, Maria’s willingness to contribute may also be a result of her earnest respect for authority. When talking about her home routines she explained, “I do kind of like it when we do chores, but not that much, because my mom yells at me a lot when we don’t listen. So that’s why moms do that, because that’s what the kids do. I really love my mom and my dad, because they’re nice, and sometimes they’re mad and mean.” (M. Vazquez, personal communication, October 11, 2019).

Action Plan. Based on my home visit and my in-school experience interacting with Maria, I have a few key takeaways that work together to create an action plan that not only helps Maria as an individual, but also better my teaching for the entire class. One thing I learned from Maria’s home visit is the priority placed on after-school sports in her family. Her mother

explained that immediately after school, and pretty much all day on weekends, their family is occupied with football games and practices. With an exasperated laugh she said, “When we get home all three of them have football practice. Two of them are in the same league so their practice is easy. On game days, if they had away games, we had to take separate cars, separate ways, take off early. It was a mess.” (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). I can use this information to inform my pedagogy regarding homework policies. Knowing that students, such as Maria, have certain days that are more hectic than others due to sports or extracurricular commitments, I intend to create a flexible homework option. For example, as long as students complete their homework by the end of the week, daily checking would not be required. This would not only benefit students with busy schedules, but also would teach all of the students about prioritizing and time management. Whether it is the busyness of organized sports, some other after school activity, or even the uncertainty of where to complete one’s homework when doing it at home is not an option, all students could benefit from this type of flexible homework adaptation.

Another thing I gleaned from my interview was just how competitive Maria is. In class, she will talk about sports, but it was not until I was in her home listening to her mother talk about it that I realized just how motivating competition (and teamwork) is for her. “It’s really important to [Maria],” her mom explained. “She cares so much about her team and doing well. When we signed her up, I didn’t even realize it would be like this.” (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Knowing that Maria thrives on teamwork and competition, I can plan for activities and lessons that allow this part of her to excel. Knowing that at times in whole-class instruction Maria can act reserved, allowing her to thrive in smaller team-like settings (e.g. stations, table groups, mini-games) will give Maria a chance to be

successful and confident within the classroom. The carry-over from field to classroom is clearly evident with Maria, I just have to give her those opportunities to use those specific funds of knowledge.

In addition to the love of competition and teamwork that comes from being part of a team, I also learned that for Maria, sports in general are a special interest. “I want to try baseball also. Real baseball,” she clarified. (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). I can use this information to facilitate her learning by coming up with sports-related examples in class, picking sports books for her to read, and asking her to share her expertise on sports topics as they come up in class. This is quite a common interest among the students in my class, so making a conscious effort to tailor lessons to connect to sports could have widespread, positive effects on my class.

Another thing that I learned from conversations with Maria and received clarification on during my home visit was that Maria is originally from New Mexico. When asked about the move, Maria’s mother recounted, “We moved here four years ago. It was a big change. We moved here because my husband’s mother was ill...She started deteriorating and I told my husband, ‘your parents need you right now,’ so we moved out here.” (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). I can relate to Maria and her family because I, too, am from out-of-state. Knowing this similarity, I can bond with her over missing a past home and feeling out of place. This can help our classroom ecology because I can create a more meaningful relationship between student and teacher. I can also use this knowledge to help create assignments that encourage the entire class to reflect on where they come from, whether or not it is where they currently live, which will help all students with intrapersonal reflection and mindfulness.

Finally, Maria's mother revealed that, partially due to the move, they did not have many longstanding traditions still in place. When asked about it, she explained that they were trying to create new traditions here. She went on to say, "My husband has a flag football game on Thanksgiving Day and this year will be the third annual. I think we'll start hosting Thanksgiving dinner at our house, that will be our tradition...I want to make these cookies at Christmastime that my mother used to make where she's from." (Vazquez, personal communication, November 21, 2019). With this information, I can be mindful that not all of my students have special traditions that they do every year at home, so creating traditions or norms within the classroom could be a valuable experience for them. As a first-year teacher, I, too, am lacking in traditions within the classroom and could easily turn to my students to help create them.

Reflecting on what I learned about Maria both from herself and her family, I think incorporating sports themes into the classroom will bring the confidence that Maria has playing football into her academic life. As I mentioned above, not only being cognizant of Maria's passions outside of school and conscientiously planning for them (flexible homework checking), but also bringing the funds of knowledge she harbors from sports into our learning environment will prove invaluable.

Utilizing these takeaways in the formation of my action plan for Maria, I believe she is set up for success within my classroom. In addition to the instructional and pedagogical practices listed above based on evidence collected through interview and home visit, I will be utilizing our school's intervention program (RTI) to support Maria's academic goals, specifically in literacy and language development. To increase her confidence through more intimate support and instruction, I have also selected her for our school's after school tutoring program in both

language arts and math. Both RTI and after school tutoring are in addition to the small groups run within my classroom.

I will assess Maria's progress quantitatively through assessment results and qualitatively through my observations inside and outside the classroom. I will pay particular attention to her language arts scores, as that is the area where I would like to see the most growth due to her being a Standard English Learner. I would also like to pay close attention to her interactions in the less structured times of lunch, recess, and parts of P.E. I want to see whether my team-focused instructional strategies, socio-emotional recognition/mindfulness, and classroom tradition-building have an effect on her ability to connect with peers outside of the classroom.

I intend to share Maria's progress with her and her parents perhaps through another home visit in the spring of this school year. The connection I felt visiting Maria's home the first time around, and the receptiveness of her parents to my own goals for reflective teaching, lead me to believe they would receive a second visit quite well. On a more short-term basis, I will communicate small milestones via the ClassDojo app, as that has proved to be the easiest and most convenient way for Maria's mother to communicate with me.

Case Study 2: Gary Johnson

Demographic information. Gary Johnson (name changed for privacy) is a seven-year-old African American boy who lives with his mother, father, and younger sister. Gary's maternal and paternal grandparents are actively involved in his life and frequently perform many of the childcare duties including picking him up from school and watching him during the afternoon. Gary is classified as English Only, though he speaks in African American Vernacular English. Although he is approaching standards in language arts, Gary is meeting standards in math; this academic discrepancy is just the opposite of what many students experience due to the

widespread phenomenon of math anxiety (Tobias, S., 1993). On the contrary, Gary will often share that math and science are his favorite subjects.

I chose Gary because, although he does not have an IEP or 504 plan, I believe he could qualify for additional services—namely Speech and Language. Based on my observations during class, Gary takes longer to process instructions than his peers and formulate verbal responses both when answering peers and adults. Such services could help him in his language processing and production. I also believe that these services would result in an improvement in his writing as well, simply because of the connectedness between his production of written and spoken language.

Inside the classroom, Gary is friendly, eager to please, and excited to learn. He knows when to ask for help from his teacher or classmates if he does not understand something. I can count on Gary to genuinely try before asking for help rather than using it as a default behavior to avoid academic rigor. Although he does have a harder time in certain academic areas such as language arts, he is quick to follow teacher instructions and has rarely, if ever, had a behavior issue. Gary's two areas of growth within the classroom are responsibility and organization, which go hand-in-hand with one another. He would benefit from fully utilizing the organization system put in place by the teacher to manage his work and taking responsibility of keeping track of his work.

Outside of the classroom, Gary is agreeable, kind, and appreciative. He gets along well with other children and is appreciative of those who show him kindness. He is not bashful about sharing his gratitude for his friends during community time (e.g. our closing circle). Outside of the classroom, Gary could work on self-assuredness and leadership. I notice that Gary will often wait for other children to initiate play rather than asking his peers to join his games. I am aware

that Gary may have an introverted personality, but I do believe advocating for himself and reaching out to classmates is a valuable area of growth, albeit a challenging one for him.

Gary loves, and I mean *loves*, superheroes, which helps his creativity and imaginative play as he enjoys making up games and activities pertaining to superheroes and related themes. Gary is not lacking in creativity or ability to engage in pretend play. In fact, I believe this ability to engage in high-quality play is, in part, responsible for Gary's social and emotional maturity, which will be touched upon later.

Academic standing. Gary performs average to below average on assessments. On formative assessments during class, Gary demonstrates a low-to-satisfactory level of understanding concepts. However, on summative assessments, Gary demonstrates a lower level of understanding. This may be due to test anxiety, lack of review at home, or the requirement of greater independence on assessments. Based on the standardized iReady diagnostic test, Gary is at a kindergarten level in math in all domains (Numbers and Operations, Algebra and Algebraic Thinking, Measurement and Data, and Geometry). Based on the same standardized diagnostic test in reading, Gary is working at an overall first grade level. His phonological awareness, high frequency words, vocabulary, literature comprehension, and informational text comprehension are all at a first-grade level while his phonics is at a kindergarten level. While the low standardized test results could be a result of unfamiliarity with the testing program as well as time of testing (immediately following summer vacation), they are fairly aligned with Gary's daily level of understanding in class. He is likely struggling in these areas because of his difficulty following certain types of directions, which could be a result of an auditory or cognitive processing issue. It takes Gary significantly longer than other students to process directions and express himself verbally.

Gary is not very self-sufficient when working independently. He struggles with understanding the directions and task completion. His struggle for work completion is not a result of behavior issues, but more so a result of lack of comprehension of directions or content. His critical thinking skills are still being developed, but with enough scaffolding, Gary is capable of forming critical thought. However, in groups Gary is a cooperative and encouraging team member. Although he does not usually take a leadership role, he is willing to share his ideas and contribute to the group. Despite being willing to contribute his ideas, at times Gary struggles with communication. He can be slow to form his thoughts and verbally express them. On his own, Gary completes an average to below average quality of work. When he is directly working with a teacher, Gary is capable of producing a higher quality of work.

Socio-emotional development & social identity. Gary's self-concept is dependent on his relationship with others. His view of himself is directly related to the people with whom he associates—whether those are his desk neighbors, his groupwork partners, his younger sister, or his friends out on the playground. I affirm Gary's self-concept by encouraging supportive relationships within our classroom. Because Gary is heavily reliant on others, making our classroom a place that thrives on students helping students respects his self-concept rather than negates it. While Maria is a team player literally, Gary is a team player in other regards—he not only relies on peer and teacher support, but also unabashedly and graciously accepts it. This, more than cheering on his peers or relying on their support, is the sign of a collaborative learner.

Gary is motivated by pleasing others, which is both a strength and an area of growth. I would like to see Gary focus on considering not only other's feelings, but also his own. Developmentally, Gary is typical in wanting to please both adults and peers, but I think it would be beneficial for him to begin practicing the delicate act of considering oneself and others at the

same time as that is a lifelong skill. At the moment, Gary is almost entirely focused on pleasing others. When talking about his grandmothers, Gary said, “I try to do it like making my Grandma Dee (name changed for privacy) happy is very easy. But making my Grandma Gail (name changed for privacy) be happy is not that easy.” (G. Johnson, personal communication, October 18, 2019). By stating how difficult or easy it is to make both of his grandmothers happy, Gary revealed that he has tried many times. In addition to his grandmothers, Gary is greatly influenced by his mom and dad, two other adults he tries to satisfy on a daily basis. His background and culture are very family-oriented, which may be why Gary feels very motivated to please them so much. Similarly, Gary also shows this desire to please his peers, which suggests that he sees his peers as his school “family.”

Gary’s socio-emotional development is typical for that of a seven-year-old. In addition to simply wanting to please others, Gary appears to have a strong, developing sense of compassion. When a special event was going to take place in the classroom, he asked if his toddler-age sister could come in and join us for it. “She gets sad when I can do it and she can’t,” he explained to me. While I felt bad that his younger sister could not join us, I was moved by Gary’s ability to acknowledge how his sister would feel knowing he participated in an event and she did not.

I believe some of Gary’s emotional intelligence comes as a result of his fascination with superheroes and the pretend play that he engages in. First, Gary views superheroes not only in terms of their superpowers, incredible resources, and adventures, but also in terms of their courage in the face of adversity, commitment to serving others, and resourcefulness when solving problems. To put it simply: Gary admires and respects superheroes. This admiration appears to be an integral part of Gary’s socio-emotional development. Second, Gary engages in imaginative play pertaining to superheroes and their stories. This not only helps his creativity,

language, cognitive organization, behavior regulation, and emotional complexity (Jenkins & Astington, 2000; Russ, 2004; Singer & Singer, 2005 as cited in Kaufman, 2012), but also showcases the “theory of mind”, indicating that while Gary may have his own thoughts and opinions, he can acknowledge that others have their own as well (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Overall, Gary is socially and emotionally typical for his developmental age, albeit with extraordinarily noticeable empathy.

Funds of knowledge. By the time I was heading to my third home visit, I felt confident, excited, and just a little tired. I was greeted at the door by Gary’s mom and handed over my box of cookies. We sat down at their dining room table and she apologized that Gary and his dad were not home yet. But, like clockwork, the back door opened, and I saw Gary walk through the door and his eyes light up. Then came his dad and his younger sister. Contrary to the other home visits where the focus students were present while I was conducting the interview, Gary’s parents had Gary go upstairs and play with his sister so as to give the adults a chance to talk. For this home visit, that setup just felt right.

I told Gary’s parents I did not want the interview to feel stiff or uncomfortable, but more like a conversation—and they did just that! I stayed for at least two hours listening to Gary’s parents talk nonstop about the entire family, Gary, and even their own lives in the form of heartwarming and hilarious anecdotes. They were so skillful in drawing me in with their stories, that I wanted to constantly respond, relate, or add, but I tried to refrain from doing so in order to allow uninterrupted flow of the emotions, events, or experiences they were sharing with me. As opposed to the other home visits where I stayed more in line with my interview questions and probed during the lulls in conversation, this home visit truly felt like a *visit* as opposed to an interview—and there were no lulls in conversation!

I gained so much valuable information about Gary's funds of knowledge and what he brings to my classroom everyday by just listening for nearly two hours straight. I learned that Gary's parents had recently taken a parenting class in the last year and were testing out the "Parenting From The Heart" program. Gary's mom told me a detailed story about an incident driving with Gary and his younger sister where she tried hard to put the practices she had learned into place and was rewarded by a quick de-escalation of Gary's negative emotion and a rewarding learning experience. Perhaps due to their engagement with this program, or perhaps this was always the case, but Gary's parents had an extremely asset-based way of speaking about their son—not only in terms of his behavior and personality, but also in terms of his mind and intellect. His dad told me, "[Gary] will remind us about his homework, not the other way around. And he'll sit right here and finish it before doing anything else with his sister, too." (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019)

Gary's parents value all kinds of education. They place a high value on his moral education and teach him prayers, affirmations, and coping strategies. One of their beliefs is to thank God each day and they taught Gary how to build that into his morning routine. They hold an equally high regard for his academic education and explained to me all about the science camp they enrolled him in. His mother happily told me, "As long as he's willing to put in the work, we'll make it work. They do things we could never do at home. It's incredible."

During my conversation with Gary's parents, I also learned that Monday through Friday, Gary has a schedule that is "organized chaos". (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Monday through Wednesday, Gary is with his maternal grandparents after school, while Thursday and Friday he is with his paternal grandparents. Knowing more about his split childcare situation informs how I communicate with his parents. And, rather than viewing this

as a negative, I should be viewing this as an asset—Gary is accustomed to many adults’ styles of discipline and scheduling (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2012). Additionally, now I know that to contact Gary’s parents, the best way is likely through either Class Dojo or email. Similarly, I can be more cognizant of permission slips that go home in our home/school communication “Monday Folders”. Perhaps for Gary, or even as an option for the entire class, I could also send a digital copy via email to make it easier for parents to access.

Finally, I learned that Gary has parental tendencies both with older and younger generations. Gary’s mother shared, “When my father was still alive, Gary would sit with him and tell him, ‘No, grandpa, you’re not supposed to stand up’ if he tried to stand up on his own.” (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Similarly, his parents both shared instances where he would play with his younger sister and then switch into “parent mode” and try to correct her or discipline her. (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Knowing that Gary has natural parental and protective tendencies can influence how I view his interactions with his peers (what is typical versus atypical for Gary). Also, it influences how I can create assignments and roles in class that play to these strengths.

Towards the end of the visit, I learned that I had made it onto Gary’s list of favorite teachers. His parents told me about the other teachers that had so positively influenced Gary’s life, and I was surprised and honored that I had made it on the list! Finally, hours after I arrived, I said my goodbyes and left feeling exhausted, yet much closer to Gary, even though I had only spoken with his parents.

Experiences, interests & developmental considerations. Overall, Gary enjoys school. He loves recess, math, science, and circle time. When asked why he liked those parts of school, Gary explained, “Because recess you get to play. And I like playing with my friends and science

you get to learn new things about all things. And it's super fun to do that. And I love it a lot. Because [closing circle] we get to answer questions like science, but to say that we can tell what it is.” (G. Johnson, personal communication, October 18, 2019). Based on conversations with Gary, it is evident that he enjoys speaking his mind, but does not always feel capable of sharing out, except at designated times such as during our closing circle.

Gary is interested in superheroes and video games. Superheroes are a common interest among his friends and often dictate his play during recess. In school Gary is supported by his friends, which he described as his team: “We have like a team because we both are Spider-Man and we like playing with each other.” (G. Johnson, personal communication, October 18, 2019). In addition, when asked about who his biggest hero was, Gary said, “My biggest hero is Jacob (another student in the class) (name changed for privacy) because he's very smart. He knows a lot of things; he helps me read and he's super nice.” (G. Johnson, personal communication, October 18, 2019).

Behaviorally, Gary has very few issues. He respects his peers and adults. He also has a strong sense of justice and what is right or wrong. This could be due to a number of factors including his socio-emotional developmental stage, his religious upbringing and his family's belief in God, or his passion for superheroes/crimefighting. Gary also has developmentally appropriate social skills. One area of growth for Gary is his confidence and self-assuredness. Gary is extremely gentle to the point of submission among his peers. In order to provide Gary, and his peers, with continued socio-emotional development, I will incorporate socio-emotional mini-lessons into our community time during morning meeting and closing circle.

Gary is developmentally very typical in terms of attachment to family and friends. However, Gary is atypical in his thought processing and expression of ideas; he is slower than

his peers in comprehending directions and verbally expressing ideas. When asked what he is good at, Gary said kicks and punches. Upon further probing, he explained that his parents wanted him to do karate, but he revealed, "I don't understand what they say at all." (G. Johnson, personal communication, October 18, 2019). This suggests that verbal directions (likely given during karate class) are difficult for Gary to understand, perhaps due to an auditory processing delay. Despite his many areas of growth and areas of atypical development, Gary does not appear distraught by academics or peer interactions.

Action plan. Strengthening my relationship with Gary through interview and home visit gave me incredible insight into how to better serve him inside the classroom. Gary's parents gave me such valuable information to utilize in order to create a plan that fits not only who Gary is as a student, but also as an individual. I am eager to implement these action steps for Gary, as I know it will allow for his strengths to be highlighted and his areas of growth to be addressed.

The first, and foremost, piece of information that Gary's parents shared with me through endless anecdotes was Gary's love of Marvel's *Iron Man*. Although I had witnessed his love of superheroes in class, I learned about his *passion* for Iron Man during this visit. "Everything [he] does connects back to being Tony Stark or Iron Man." (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019). After his parents drew this to my attention during my home visit, I started noticing that for every single piece of artwork or coloring we did in class, Gary's was done in the iconic red and gold of Iron Man's suit, from nutcrackers to penguins to cats. I can use Gary's passion to connect to what we are learning, not only by using superhero examples for math problems to increase his engagement, but also, more importantly, by encouraging him to think and behave like Tony Stark (an engineer). This is something Gary's parents revealed that they do at home. Anytime they want Gary to do something or to create a positive habit, they relate it

to what Tony Stark would do. Not only would thinking like an engineer encourage Gary to persevere during math when he is having a difficult time coming up with a solution to a problem, but also it would help the entire class see the relevance in what we are learning and how it applies to actual professions.

I also learned during my visit with Gary's parents something that reinforced what I had gleaned from my interview with him at school—Gary is an old soul. His mother described that when she talks to him, "I'm not talking to a seven-year-old, I'm just talking to another person. I can be real with him." (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019). This influences not only my pedagogy with Gary, but also with the entire class. This information reminded me that even though my class is seven and eight years old, "I can be real with [them]," as Gary's mother had phrased it. Although it varies based on the individual student's understanding, as a whole, I should be elevating my language, not bringing it down to address my class. I believe this will directly address Gary's language proficiency, his area of greatest need. I will use academic language whenever possible, while still providing the common term to increase understanding.

Another thing I learned that informed my plan was Gary's sensitivity—especially to adults raising their voices. His mom was serious when she said, "If I don't raise my voice with my son, why should his teachers?" (Johnson, personal communication, November 21, 2019). She went on to explain that she could use a serious tone with him and that was enough; she would refrain from outright yelling. This reinforces the practices I use for classroom management and building classroom ecology. I do not raise my voice at my class, but rather, I adjust the tone to show my expectations. This information specifically relates to my steps addressing Gary's socio-emotional development.

As mentioned above, Gary is experiencing a carefully thought out parenting style that is influenced by professional coaching and strategies. Therefore, I would like to remain as closely in line with the socio-emotional education he is receiving at home. First, I do not raise my voice in the classroom, and I intend to continue this practice. Next, I will focus on asset-based/positive interactions as much as possible. I hope this will be effective in both how I interact with students and with how they communicate with themselves and their peers. And finally, I will encourage positive self-reflection of not only Gary, but also the entire class. This can be done in the form of teaching about affirmations during wind-down time or with gratitude at closing circle. We already have an organized system of sharing compliments, apologies, thank-you's, and shares (CATS), so an exclusively-gratitude focused whip-around would be simple to implement.

Finally, I will ensure that Gary receives as much small group and collaborative learning time as possible. To do this, I will meet with his leveled reading group a minimum of two times per week and small math group for each new lesson taught. Additionally, I will implement more cooperative learning beyond just think/pair/shares and table group discussions. This will not only address Gary's strength of working in groups, it will also increase whole-class independence by encouraging students to seek help from peers rather than endless whole-class practice.

I will monitor Gary's progress under these action steps through quantitative and qualitative data. I will consider Gary's summative assessments, but I will try to present them in such a way that does not induce test anxiety or confusion due to inability to comprehend directions. Therefore, I will mostly be looking at Gary's formative assessments, classroom behaviors, and peer interactions. In particular, I will be looking at his interactions during unstructured time to see how he grows in his relationships with peers.

I will convey Gary's progress with his parents through electronic communication (by ClassDojo app or email) because I know Gary has a hectic after school schedule that involves caretakers other than his parents based on the day of the week. I might also request a spring conference with Gary's parents not for the typical reason of academic concern, but rather as a time to share positive feedback. However, I could also accomplish this through another evening home visit, which would also ensure that Gary's parents would not have to leave work early to meet me (in the case of an afternoon parent conference).

Case Study 3: Sophie Jones

Demographic Information. Sophie Jones (name changed for privacy) reminds me of myself, albeit she is a bit more outgoing than I was in second grade. She is a white female who lives with her mother, father, and two older sisters who are in middle and high school. Sophie's mother is actively involved in her schooling and volunteers regularly in the classroom while her father works a nine to five job. Sophie is seven years old and in the second grade. Sophie's language classification is English Only and English is the only language spoken at home. As a fellow white female who grew up speaking English in a traditional nuclear family consisting of a mom, dad, and two sisters, I know that it is easy to think we have no defining characteristics. However, *everyone* has defining characteristics and I want to know what her unique qualities are.

I chose Sophie in part because of our demographic similarities, but also because of her significant life experience. Although nothing has been explicitly shared with me about Sophie's mental health, I believe her experiences at home or school cause her to show symptoms of anxiety and feel intense academic pressure. Although Sophie is only in second grade, she has revealed some anecdotal evidence that suggests she feels the need to perform well in school by pleasing the teacher in order to get into college. In my interview with Sophie, I asked if she

wanted to go to college when she's older and she answered confidently, "I'm going to college." (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019). Similarly, when asked about academic achievement, she revealed that she tries to do well in school "and [she] will get good grades and [she'll] feel good." (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019). This pressure to perform could be a result of academic and emotional pressure coming from her home life, or from her kindergarten or first grade teachers. Because Sophie is new to this school site this year, I was unable to get anecdotal evidence from her previous teachers. However, going forward, I would like to make Sophie feel emotionally supported and academically challenged, but not pressured.]

Inside the classroom, Sophie is helpful, eager-to-please, and cheerful. She actively participates in table-group discussions and will sometimes volunteer during whole-class discussions. Sophie has one key area of growth inside the classroom; she could work on her self-confidence. When she knows the answer or has valuable insight, at times she will hesitate to contribute in a whole group setting. Similarly, I want to encourage her to try contributing even when she is not entirely sure of the answer. This is challenging for people of all ages, and even more so for Sophie, considering her life experiences with academic pressure and her resulting fear of getting the wrong answer. Outside of the classroom she appears playful, friendly, and agreeable, but I would like to see her push herself out of her comfort zone (once again) and try things that might seem scary at first.

Academic standing. Sophie typically does well on assessments. Formative assessments show that she is mostly grasping concepts in class. Summative assessments so far have shown even greater results, suggesting she studies at home, likely with her mother. Based on the standardized iReady diagnostic test, Sophie is mostly at grade level with some domains where

she is one grade level below (i.e. Measurement and Data, Number and Operations, Vocabulary, and Reading Comprehension) and only one domain where she is two grade levels below (i.e. Geometry). However, based more heavily on data from her formative and summative assessments, it is likely that her lower standardized test results were due to unfamiliarity with the program, time of testing (immediately following summer vacation), and potential test anxiety.

Sophie thrives during group work, but she also demonstrates a strong ability to work independently once directions have been explained. This slows her down at times, causing some lag in work completion. I believe this is related to her struggle with reading comprehension, as she needs someone to explain explicitly what is expected of her, rather than working it out entirely on her own. However, once she has a clear understanding of what is expected of her, Sophie produces average to above-average work. Overall, Sophie is creative and communicative, but lacks critical thinking and comprehension skills. She is capable of expressing what she is thinking but will refrain from sharing for fear of being wrong. Similarly, she will refrain from even trying problems for fear of making a mistake in the process of learning.

Socio-emotional development & social identity. Sophie seeks others approval and does not like being wrong or struggling, which limits her willingness to try difficult things. I would like to see her embrace the struggle of learning new things as well as learn to be comfortable with being *uncomfortable*. However, Sophie appears to be outgoing socially, and, despite being new to the school this year, made friends by the third day. Since preschool her behavior has reflected that she has been instructed how to fit into this specific school system designed for middle-class white students; she seeks teacher approval, keeps her desk neat and organized, and responds to feedback (e.g. praise, correction, prompts, etc.). At an early age, Sophie was aware that acting a certain way would get her teachers to like her. Sophie said, “I feel like I was her

favorite student!” (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019), as she talked about her preschool teacher.

By using Sophie’s need for teacher approval, I can hopefully help her to develop a growth mindset. I will encourage her to try difficult or unknown tasks and show my approval when I see her engaging in the struggle of learning something new. I will constantly remind her that I care more about the process rather than the product—that I would rather see her stretching her brain than completing something perfectly that she already knows how to do. During morning meeting and closing circle is when I provide explicit opportunities for Sophie, and the rest of the class, to practice socio-emotional wellbeing. I often ask for students to self-reflect and reflect on themselves in relation to their peers through compliments, apologies, thank-you’s and shares. So, it would be an effective time to also bring in mini-lessons about growth mindset and the power of making mistakes.

Sophie’s self-concept is overall positive. Although she has developmentally appropriate fears (i.e. spiders, the dark), they do not hold her back. She views herself as a good friend, sister, and student who likes school-related things to be clean. Like many students, Sophie loves recess and lunch because she “[likes] to play and eat and talk with [her] friends” (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019).

Within the classroom I promote and affirm Sophie’s self-concept by admitting my own fears to the students and not feeling ashamed of what frightens me. Similarly, I encourage positive self-reflection; I remind students that they should take time to think about what they are good at or what makes them special and not feel selfish for doing so.

Funds of Knowledge. On the day of my home visit, Sophie had shared during our closing circle two things she was most excited about for the afternoon—wearing her new

pajamas to bed and my visit to her house. I arrived at Sophie's home a few hours after school was dismissed and was greeted by Sophie and her mom. I was offered water and coffee and was told there was no need to remove my shoes. I handed over the box of bakery cookies I had picked up for the visit. Before settling down to our interview, Sophie showed me to her room and introduced me to her two older sisters. With the Food Network on in the background, Sophie, her mom, and I settled into the living room for the interview. Shortly after starting my recording and reading the introduction script, Sophie's father came home and joined us.

The interview started off more formal, but as all parties became more comfortable, Sophie's parents started opening up. While they were sharing household routines, family norms, and views on education (Her dad explained, "School is important, but it's not everything. I just want them to be successful and happy."), Sophie was stretching, somersaulting, and cartwheeling around the living room before ending up on the sofa between me and her dad. The conversation began to flow naturally between me and her parents, with Sophie chiming in every so often.

I learned that Sophie thrives on minute-by-minute routines and schedules. When asked about her family's routines, Sophie's mom first explained, "We're pretty structured, we always have been." (Jones, personal communication, November 20, 2019). Then, Sophie, her mom, and her dad entered into a detailed recount of their family's typical morning and afternoon routines (down to the minute). Sophie's extremely structured home environment brings valuable funds of knowledge into the classroom because I can count on Sophie being accustomed to detailed and precise scheduling. On the other hand, I can also assume that if we a more free-flowing day with less structure, Sophie could be thrown off by the lack of routine. Based on this information, I want to plan both types of days—highly structured and less structured—to encourage students to become accustomed to both.

Another thing I learned came from something Sophie's mom said about her. Her mom explained, "She's very proactive. A lot of times [Sophie] reminds me 'Oh, we need to do this. Oh, we have to do vocabulary.'" (Jones, personal communication, November 20, 2019).

Knowing that Sophie naturally wants to stay on top of her work and does not procrastinate leads me to believe she would also do the same thing in school for group assignments, which is a beneficial skill she can share with her peers. For example, when assigning group work, I could also assign individual roles and have Sophie act as the timekeeper or facilitator, which would capitalize on her naturally proactive and goal-oriented nature.

The official, recorded interview lasted about 45 minutes, with the entire visit lasting just over an hour. Sophie wanted to show me a few other things in her home (iPad, photos, and workout room) before I left. The visit came naturally to a close and Sophie and her parents escorted me to the door, leaving me with a warm and friendly feeling.

Experiences, interests, & developmental considerations. Sophie enjoys dancing, singing, reading, playing on her iPad, watching tv, playing with her friends, and spending time with her family. She looks up to her two older sisters and wants to go to the same middle and high schools that they go to. She also wants to be in cheer when she is older because they used to do cheer. She does not play with her sisters as much because they are in a different phase of life and typically spend time after school doing homework and sports rather than playing with their younger sister. Sophie does spend a lot of time with her mom, who "stays at home. Like cleaning the house, or whatever she does" (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019). Because of this, Sophie's most influential figure is her mother, likely because of the sheer amount of time they spend together. When asked what makes her want to do well in school,

Sophie replied, “My parents. And I will get good grades and I’ll feel good.” (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019).

The cooperative nature Sophie has developed living in a household of five is useful when working in groups in the classroom. She is able to share her thoughts at her table group, but does not dominate the conversation. Sophie welcomes her peers’ comments and often takes a follower role in groups (perhaps due to her being the youngest sister). Her dancer background translates to the classroom quite well as she is very detail-oriented, precise, and neat (however, this also could give way to perfectionist tendencies, which would be an area of growth for Sophie).

Sophie has a positive view of school, which is likely fostered by her mother’s involvement in the classroom (e.g. donating supplies to the classroom, weekly volunteering, etc.). Similarly, when asked if she wanted to go to college when she’s older, Sophie answered confidently, “I’m going to college.” (S. Jones, personal communication, October 4, 2019). Sophie is most successful in school when she is demonstrating a concept that she is familiar with, which returns to her aversion to failure and struggle. During the school day she is most comfortable at lunch and recess because that is when she is socializing with her friends. She has a few friends in her class as well as a few in the other second grade classes.

Sophie’s development is very typical for that of a second grader in her specific situation: white, female, involved parents, stable home life (Sophie could describe her typical afternoon and weekend routines, which suggests there is a sense of consistency and routine at home). She enjoys talking with friends but is hesitant to talk in class if she is not one hundred percent certain of her answer. This is a behavior that I consider more developmentally advanced as it shows

hints of perfectionism and possible anxiety. She thrives on positive reinforcement and has a strong desire for her teacher's approval.

Action plan. During my visit to Sophie's home, I gleaned valuable information that I could use to create an action plan consisting of pedagogical strategies that specifically draw upon Sophie's strengths and address her areas of growth. First, I learned that Sophie's homework routine is occasionally done in the car as she and her mom wait to pick up her older sisters from middle and high school. Her mom explained to me, "Between when I pick up the girls, we sit in the car for twenty minutes waiting for the other one. She'll sit in the front seat with me and we'll do homework in the car—our reading. Most of the time [Sophie] will read herself—sometimes I'll read to her, depending on the book." (Jones, personal communication, November 20, 2019). Based on this information, I can be more mindful of the types of homework assignments I assign so that students can complete them in a variety of locations, not just at home or in a traditional work setting (e.g. library, school, home). This will not only benefit the students such as Sophie who complete their homework in a variety of locations, but also the students who complete their work at home or in a study space because it will encourage me to vary assignments more.

Another thing I learned about that influenced my action plan for Sophie is her relationship with her two older sisters. I, too, am the youngest of three girls and can relate closely to Sophie's experiences of either being included or excluded based on my youngest-sibling status. Sophie revealed her love for her sisters, though, when she said, "Even when I'm old and a grownup, I'll still want [them] to call me by my nickname." In class, I can connect stories and anecdotes from my own life as the youngest sibling to Sophie's life to build our rapport and increase positive classroom ecology and socio-emotional confidence.

Finally, I learned, that out of all of Sophie's characteristics, it is her positive disposition that her parents are most proud of. Her mother said, "She's always happy. That's probably the number one thing." While her dad explained, "She has a very good disposition. She goes to bed happy and wakes up happy." (Jones, personal communication, November 20, 2019). This information is reinforcement of what I had already observed in the classroom about Sophie. I can use this insight from her parents to better communicate with Sophie's parents. Knowing that inside and outside of the classroom she is a very happy girl, I can be hyper-aware if Sophie's disposition is atypical on a given day and be in contact with her parents. I know that nobody is expected to be happy all the time, but knowing her typical personality helps me know that if she is not feeling that way, something could have happened, she might be sick, or maybe she is just developing complexity in her emotions. However, I also want to be mindful to communicate even when Sophie *is* exhibiting her typical, cheery disposition. Williams (n.d.) explains that "So much time is devoted to students who are not doing what they are supposed to that students who perform well do not receive adequate praise." So, whether or not Sophie is cheerful or upset, I want to be in constant communication to let her parents know how she is doing in class.

I will continue to assess Sophie's academic and socio-emotional progress using qualitative and quantitative data. I will use both formative and summative assessments to determine whether her areas of growth improve. Then, I will use observations inside and outside the classroom and quick conversations/check-ins to assess whether Sophie's socio-emotional skills are improving.

My communication with Sophie's parents can easily be done at dismissal, as her mother is the one who picks her up every day. Even if it is not an official conference, having a quick 30-second check-in at dismissal with Sophie's mother could be a valuable time to share progress in

Sophie's socio-emotional development including her confidence inside and outside the classroom.

Concluding Thoughts on Case Studies

Conducting research on my three focus students has taught me that being an effective educator is as much about the technical training put into bettering our pedagogical practices as it is the relationships we cultivate with our students. In particular, I was astonished at the power of my three home visits, especially with Gary. I suspect that because Gary was not present for the majority of my conversation with his parents, they were able to be more real and honest with me regarding their son. What I gained from not only his home visit, but also the other two, has given me a greater appreciation in the role parents/families play in creating a positive learning environment. Even though children's families are not there with us in the classroom, what children bring to school *from* their families is astounding.

Part C: *My Community, School, and Classroom*

Introduction

This section of ethnographic study is completed through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drastically changed the educational landscape for the last three and a half months of the school year due to the forced school closures and implementation of distance learning. Even with the current school closure, my school community and the community-at-large have remained intact and supportive. Although physical distancing is being enforced, we remain socially and emotionally close. From virtual spirit weeks to video read-alouds, the current situation has proved that a community is not only about the place, but also about the people.

Community Context

Demographics. Anywhere, California is a large town of approximately 36,000 people on the edge of Los Angeles County. The community is primarily suburban with a mixture of residential, commercial, and unincorporated spaces. There are 21 city-owned parks and sports fields with 2,534 acres of public parkland (City of Anywhere, 2020). Anywhere feels somewhat idyllic, especially around the local colleges and downtown shopping area. Architecture in Anywhere is an eclectic mix of Victorian, Spanish, colonial, and bungalow among others (Anywhere Heritage).

Founded in 1887 by a branch of the Santa Fe Railway, Anywhere soon developed into an educational hub due to Anywhere College's establishment (also 1887) (Britannica). The town's nickname, "City of Trees and PhDs", originates from the abundance of trees (24,108 city trees to be exact) and percent of the population holding doctoral degrees (32.6%) (Census 2016 as cited in City of Anywhere, 2020). As a whole, the Anywhere population is predominantly white and English-speaking. Approximately 68% of the population is white, 25% is Hispanic, and 15% is

Asian. While 71% of the population speaks only English, about 25% of the population speaks either Spanish or Asian/Pacific Island Languages (US Census 2018 ACS 5-Year Survey).

All of this together makes Anywhere an intriguing town with a rich history—from the original Serrano and Cahuilla tribes inhabiting this area, to the Mission San Gabriel, to the official incorporation of the town during the railroad era. Anywhere evaded becoming yet another railroad ghost town as a result of Anywhere College. Overall, Anywhere feels like a mix of an east coast college town, an eclectic arts community, a thriving educational hub, and a retro southern California tourist location all wrapped up into one town.

But, while the Anywhere community demographics paint one picture, my school community demographics paint another. My class has many inter-district transfer students who reside outside of the Anywhere community. This is because Hollow Ridge Elementary School (name changed for privacy) is part of the Anywhere Unified School District, which allows for open enrollment from other towns. Thus, Anywhere is only 25% Hispanic, but my school's community is 56% Hispanic or Latino (ed-data.org). This makes my school community feel more ethnically and racially diverse than it would otherwise if it simply reflected the demographics of the town.

Housing and Resources. Within Anywhere and the surrounding areas where my students reside, housing consists mainly of stand-alone homes and apartment buildings, with my students living in both kinds of housing. Even within the same type of housing (i.e. stand-alone home) there is great variety. Having visited a handful of my students' homes, I was able to see this variety: from traditional neighborhoods, to housing complexes and developments, to gated communities.

In addition to the varied housing, Anywhere and the surrounding towns provide a variety of resources and services to members of the community. There are a number of shelters in the area that some of my students' families utilize from general family shelters to shelters specializing in victims of domestic violence. Most of the places of worship offer regular assistance to the community and have even donated supplies to my school. Finally, there is an organization that specializes in assisting newly arrived, displaced refugees that seek to make this area their home.

Despite having a wide selection of resources and services available already, Anywhere could do with more resources that integrate the colleges and the community. In my own experience as an undergraduate in the area, I realized that despite having five incredible institutions just minutes away, not all students knew they existed or how to access them. Especially in the towns surrounding Anywhere where many of my students reside, there appears to be a lack of information provided to college-bound students and the possibilities available to them just minutes away.

Given all that Anywhere and the surrounding communities have to offer, and what they yet need to provide, this area is full of assets. From the 21 city-owned parks and sports fields, to the 2,534 acres of public parkland, to the incredible weather (less than 20 inches of rain per year and an average temperature of 63 degrees Fahrenheit), to the third of the population holding a graduate degree, Anywhere rightfully earns its nickname of City of Trees and PhD's (City of Anywhere, 2020). However, it is more than just a well-educated and physically beautiful place. Anywhere is a reminder that it is possible to have "the best of all worlds": access to a major metropolitan area, natural resources, arts, cultural exhibitions, and so much more, which makes it a community of possibilities.

Problematize the Issue. Regardless of what Anywhere is today, it has gone through various transformations as it has evolved and dealt with the needs of changing times. Although it narrowly missed becoming just another western ghost town, Anywhere still rides the waves of other large-scale changes that have occurred within the last few decades.

Throughout the twentieth century, Anywhere's citrus industry reigned supreme. At one point, all non-residential areas were covered by citrus groves (Anywhere Heritage, 2013). According to Anywhere Heritage, Anywhere's citrus grading, shipping, and marketing model even became the one adopted by Sunkist. With the highway boom in the mid twentieth century primarily thanks to President Eisenhower, the demand and search for affordable housing, and skyrocketing population (and pollution), Anywhere and the surrounding areas slowly lost their citrus groves (Federal Highway Administration, 2017; LA County Library, n.d.).

Most recently, in the past five, ten, and twenty years, Anywhere (and the surrounding towns that actually reside within the Inland Empire) has experienced housing-related issues. Industry is booming in the Inland Empire, which "joined the Bay Area in fasted job growth in the state." (UC Riverside News, 2019). Alongside this job growth that the area is experiencing is incredible population growth, which is said to be "[growing] three times faster than that of the coast." (UC Riverside News). What these job and population surges mean is that housing is in critical demand. Therefore, Anywhere and its neighbors are suffering from skyrocketing housing prices because of the high demand; thus, the people that desperately need the housing (the workers of lower paying industries in the Inland Empire versus the coast) cannot afford it.

Community Events and Community Members

Events. Anywhere hosts many events throughout the year that draw crowds from both the city of Anywhere and surrounding areas. Many of these events have been happening for years, while others are new additions. Held every Sunday, The Anywhere Farmers and Artisans Market brings together local farmers, artisans, and the community. Set up on a closed off street in the Anywhere Village, this weekly market supports California-grown and direct-to-consumer produce and goods. Not only can the market be utilized as a place to purchase weekly produce, food products, and craft goods, but also it can be a place to simply gather as a community.

When I attended my first Sunday market in Anywhere, I was caught off guard by the crowds. While the crowds in the Anywhere Village generally ebb and flow depending on the time of day and day of the week, I had always been fortunate enough to find parking even on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. The Farmers and Artisans Market brings a whole different level of crowds to Anywhere's downtown area. I was fortunate that I was able to walk from my place of residence to Harvard Avenue where it is held. As I approached the market there were others around me flocking to the couple of blocks of closed off street as well as cars circling like vultures looking for parking.

Despite the crowds, I was mesmerized. Fruits, vegetables, honey, meat, spice blends, baked goods, flowers—the market seemed to have it all. Having gone back multiple times since my first visit, the novelty of visiting a farmer's market right in my own town faded somewhat, but the general experience remained the same. Something about the market made me feel so quaint and neighborly, even though I did not run into anybody I recognized. I was chatting with other visitors and vendors. From my conversations, it seemed like most people were not doing their entire week's grocery shopping at the farmer's market, but rather went for the experience of strolling the market with friends, listening to the live musical performances, and enjoying the

community aspect of the event. One woman summed up the general experience when she said, “I won’t do the majority of my shopping here, but if I see good-looking carrots or plums or something, I’ll get them. And I never leave without getting flowers.” (personal communication, October 6, 2019). I also found that all the vendors were eager to talk about their farm or business, even if I was not purchasing from them. So, whether visitors are looking to buy all their produce, pick out a few choice items, or even to just learn more about the vendors, the experience of going to the farmer’s market brings the Anywhere community together.

In addition to The Farmers and Artisans Market, Anywhere also hosts a variety of other events for entertainment, fundraising, and celebration that appeal to a wide range of interests. For example, the Anywhere Educational Foundation hosts a craft beer festival called Brews and Bros Fest that supports the enrichment of Anywhere public education. The Rotary Club of Anywhere hosts an annual fundraiser called Taste of Anywhere that brings together samplings of food and drink from over 40 local establishments. The Anywhere Chamber of Commerce puts on an annual Village Venture Arts and Crafts Faire, which hosts over 450 booths and draws over 16,000 visitors. Seasonal events put on by the town include a Halloween Spooktacular, a Holiday Promenade and Tree Lighting, and a Spring Celebration.

My school community hosts events on a smaller scale, which encourages engagement and buy-in from not only families, but also staff. Arguably one of the key factors in a meaningful relationship within the classroom is a meaningful relationship outside the classroom, which can be fostered at such events (Emdin, 2016; Tan, 2008). From book fairs, fun runs, and family dinners, to movie nights, spelling bees, and assemblies, our community looks forward to these events throughout the school year. What I have learned as an educator in this community is that these events are integral to the relationship-building we do with the families in our school

community. My students and families want to see the teachers serving spaghetti on a Friday night to raise money for our school; they want to see us cheering them on during race day. Not only do these events strengthen the relationships with my students outside of the classroom, but also, they improve the relationships we have within the classroom. The majority of the teachers I spoke to regarding school events had similar sentiments. One told me, “I try to make a point of at least showing my face and helping out a bit—my students love seeing me so much that I can spare one Friday evening.” (personal communication, April 8, 2020). Another teacher who had been a parent in this school community before she began teaching here remarked that the school events’ purposes have shifted from community-building to primarily fundraising over time to adapt to the needs of the school. And, while many of the same events still take place, the intention of the events has shifted.

What I gleaned from both the community at large events and my smaller school community events is that no matter the publicly announced reason for the event (e.g. fundraising, arts, food, etc.), the underlying benefit is that they bring the community together. Both types of community events, large and small, allow people to bond over common interests, socialize, support, rally, and celebrate each other’s presence.

Services. My school has partnerships and relationships with surrounding businesses and organizations. First, our closest geographic relationship is with the church across the street from our school site. Our relationship with the church allows us the use of their facilities as well as provides amicable encounters throughout the year such as supply donations. Our school also has relationships with local businesses that provide resources and treats to students and staff throughout the year such as free ice cream scoops or fundraiser nights.

A variety of services and resources exist in and around our community. In addition to the aforementioned shelters, Anywhere has a variety of before- and after-school programs ranging from play-based, to tutoring centered, to sports focused. Anywhere also has a community center, dozens of parks, trails, sports fields, recreation programs (scholarships available), summer camps, and public art exhibitions. Although Anywhere does have many existing services, they are missing accessible health clinics. However, there are clinics in neighboring towns, but the lack of clinics in the immediate area could be stigmatizing for those in need of their offered services (McCleary-Sills, McGonagle, & Malhotra, 2012).

Problematize the Issue. While there are many community events and resources currently in place, Anywhere is missing cultural events that highlight the heritages of its residents. I believe this could be a result of minority versus majority, where the majority is able to determine what kind of events are most sought after, and, therefore, executed. Another possibility for this more limited range of events could be that those wishing to diversify them do not have the means or resources to do so.

My students and families access many of the events and resources within the town and school community. I have families that rely on the after-school childcare program at our school, others that utilize the after-school tutoring programs, and even more that participate in the extracurricular classes offered at our school. I know this because my students tell me how much they enjoy their particular programs they attend regularly. I can hear and see that my students love these community programs as much (and possibly more than) being at school or home. I also know that many of these programs make it possible for my students' working parents to continue to work and provide for their families because of the extended childcare hours they provide.

Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

My school responded to the COVID-19 crisis as quickly as our school gained information from the district level. During the weeks leading up to our school closure, our school did not appear to be planning for any form of distance learning. In the classroom, though, I was discussing proper hygiene and healthy habits more frequently with my students. Then, just a few days before our school closure, most nonessential school events were cancelled. The day of our school closure, no plans were yet in place and the decision to close school had not yet been decided. Therefore, the day itself was very chaotic as talk was circulating among staff about the potential closure. Hour by hour and minute by minute, teachers were receiving emails, text messages, and in person messages from the school site, district, and union. We were finally told to prepare for a school closure, even though the official decision had not yet been made. I addressed this situation carefully with my students, abandoning lessons for the day and opting for a midday circle (usually reserved for opening or closing our school day). I explained to my class, a combination of second and third graders, that we may not be returning to school on Monday. I fielded many questions, heard their comments, listened to their concerns, and told them what I knew. I would be sending them home with their entire collection of English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum books as well as the next couple of chapters of math books. It was not until about one hour before dismissal that we were told students would not be returning on Monday.

In response to the crisis, our school and community have put the families first. In order to provide food for those students that relied on school lunches, our school continues to serve lunches. In order to provide access to academic content electronically, our school has loaned out hundreds of iPads to families. Our school and district have compiled dozens and dozens of

resources for families to utilize during the school closures from how to access free internet to how to keep children healthy at home.

Despite all that is being done, this crisis has numbed me. All year long I was fighting to keep my head above water as I navigated my first year of teaching. It was not until some point during January or February that I began to feel truly at peace with my situation: parents, administrators, students, colleagues—it all started to make sense. Then, in what felt like an instant (although I know the crisis had been developing for a lot longer than that), I lost out on the remainder of my first year of teaching, right when I was finally feeling good about my teaching situation.

No amount of video calls or electronic assignments will make this situation feel like teaching to me. Although I am still technically teaching now via a remote learning platform, I am not strengthening my relationships, exercising my creativity, or developing my efficacy in the same way I was in the classroom. Without face-to-face interaction with my students, I do not feel like a teacher. I miss the small side conversations that happen organically during transitions. I miss the minute interactions I used to take for granted such as giving a student “the look”, pointing to a reference poster on the wall, or smiling at a student as I called their name for attendance. I miss the physical closeness that comes from twenty children in a classroom working towards a common goal.

So, while I am technically still teaching, it looks and feels very different from what I am accustomed to in the classroom. Although we are still a community of learners, physical distance has taken away some of my personal joy in teaching. However, as with every challenge presented in my teaching journey thus far, I can and will adapt to this one (perhaps even learning to enjoy it).

School Site Research

The school site. My school site is located in a suburban neighborhood just blocks from the town's middle school. Like many schools in the area, it has open-air hallways with classrooms opening directly to the outside rather than housed within a larger building. The campus itself is fenced-in to deter unwanted visitors from wandering campus. The upper grade classrooms (fourth, fifth, and sixth) are centered around a common courtyard with plantings, benches, and tables suitable for outdoor collaboration. On the other side of campus, another similar courtyard houses the TK/Kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms. Set off from the rest, the two third grade classrooms and my combination second and third grade classroom are housed in a three-classroom portable unit next to the primary grades recess field. Primary and upper grades have separate recess areas that are in close proximity to their corresponding academic buildings. All students share a common lunch area that is centrally located next to our office and multipurpose room.

The main entrance area displays a sign with our school name and three of our school accolades: California Blue Ribbon School, California Distinguished School, and a Title I Academic Achievement Award School. Nearby on one of the building walls is a faded ocean life mural, a relic from decades ago. When I inquired about its origins, even the most veteran teachers were fuzzy on its beginnings. But, restoring it or replacing it entirely have both been topics of discussion at staff meetings. On the corner of the campus closest to the main road, a school sign and letterboard displays upcoming dates, announcements, or words of encouragement.

Physically, my school site looks like many other elementary schools in the district, but it has a reputation that makes it stand out from the others. First, my school is one of the four Title I

schools within the district, meaning we have a large concentration of low-income students for which we receive additional government funding. Next, our school has a reputation for being given the so-called “problem students” or students that did not work well in our district’s other elementary schools. In addition to our students having a particular reputation, our school’s staff also has a reputation. I have heard our school staff described as “the difficult younger sibling” within the district—such that we cannot simply take what we are given without voicing our opinions or demanding better for our students. I have also heard that our school’s administration has a reputation for being subpar compared to the rest of the district because any administrator that is successful at our school site is frequently “plucked” for another role within the district, leaving our site with temporary, interim, and short term administrators. I have learned all of these various reputations from conversations with staff at my school site as well as from other site’s staff at district-wide professional developments.

Personnel. At the interview for my current teaching position, I was told that the school site was like a family. Staff not only fight like family here, but also care for each other like family. Since that day I first interviewed, I have learned the verity of those words firsthand. From formal interviews to conversations in passing, I have been indoctrinated into the school site family. Despite differing opinions, experience, and beliefs of the school personnel, I have learned from other teachers, non-teaching staff, and administrators that my school not only values family, but also *is* a family.

For many of the school personnel (including those three that I formally interviewed), our school site is not only a work home for them personally, but also a home for their children and families as well. One of the teachers I spoke with explained in great detail how decades ago she had been searching for a school that would fit her eldest daughter’s schooling needs, and Hollow

Ridge was just the right blend of developmentally appropriate learning and structure of traditional schooling. When asked to describe the school she said, “It’s a beautiful school. I love the diversity. I love the small group work. I love the family, the culture, the connectedness. Relationships are what fuel it.” (personal communication, April 10, 2020). As we continued to talk about the school and her experience as parent within the school community and then as a faculty member, I came to realize that, at least in this teacher’s eyes, Hollow Ridge is about the relationships with not only the students, but also their families—Hollow Ridge is about the connectedness between school and community.

Similar sentiments were expressed about the importance of the family when I spoke with our administrator who also happens to have a child at the school. She told me that she expresses to parents during the Kindergarten orientation that if family and diversity are not important to you, Hollow Ridge might not be the best fit. When asked about how Hollow Ridge compares to her previous school, my principal explained, “My last school had no economic diversity. It was 98% poverty. Hollow Ridge is incredibly diverse. Just peeking your heads into the classroom, you wouldn’t be able to tell the rich kids from the poor kids.” (personal communication, April 30, 2020). She went on to tell me that out of the seven elementary schools in the district, she believes ours focuses most on the whole child, not leaning too heavily towards social-emotional development or academics—a trending theme in the education realm. (Miller, 2010).

Finally, when I spoke with our school librarian, I gathered an even broader perspective about how the various staff members view the school. Like many of the teachers and our administrator, our librarian has family (grandchildren) that attend Hollow Ridge. When I asked her to pick one word that describes Hollow Ridge she instantly said, “Amazing.” She felt immediately welcomed by the staff when she joined the team seven years ago. She then dove

deeper into her experience as a non-teaching staff member and how she believes her job as the librarian is to help the teachers. Curious about staff relations from her perspective, I asked what she noticed as a librarian who interacts with all of the teachers on a weekly basis. She explained that “any potential conflict [between teachers] doesn’t affect the way the teachers teach.” She also went on to add, “Hollow Ridge seems to be most focused on academics, then family, then community.” (personal communication, April 10, 2020). So, in her experience, the foremost characteristic at Hollow Ridge is the academic instruction given by the teachers (followed by family and community).

Based on my experience at Hollow Ridge this year, I can relate more with the words that my fellow teacher shared—that Hollow Ridge as a place devoted to serving its students *and* families by strengthening relationships. Although I only formally interviewed three members of the staff, I had spent my time on campus before the school closure getting to know the school community through afternoon chats with our custodial staff, impromptu collaboration in the copy room with other teachers, formal staff meetings, and everything in between. Especially as a first-year teacher, I was eager to listen and learn from anyone that would share their personal insight with me about the Hollow Ridge experience.

Problematize the issue. While my school has reputations both good and bad, it also maintains consistency across a few key areas. First, my school is a PBIS school, meaning we have positive behavior intervention and supports from our regulated incentive systems to thoughtfully created behavior contracts (Check-In Check Outs or CICO forms), to our systematic referral system. Next, utilize technology to best support our students. Finally, we have programs and services in place to help vulnerable populations.

My school is recognized by the California PBIS Coalition as a GOLD status school meaning we reflect “excellence in the measurement of fidelity as well as efforts in implementing the core features of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.” (CUSD, 2018). With our PBIS implementation, we focus on (as the name suggests) positive behavior. In particular, we follow an acronym that encompasses our desired characteristics: Respect, Effort, Attitude, Cooperation, and Honesty (REACH). Each characteristic has corresponding behaviors throughout our school and these behavior examples are posted in matrixes in classrooms and throughout campus. Thus, students have clear expectations of how to demonstrate respect, effort, attitude, cooperation and honesty throughout campus.

We have various schoolwide incentive programs based on REACH. One program involves fake money or “mustang dollars” that students can earn for displaying positive behaviors that exemplify REACH. These dollars can be given out by any adult at school, not just the student’s classroom teacher. They can be used by the student to purchase prizes from our Mustang Market. We also utilize Bucket Filler slips (based on the children’s book by Carol McCloud) that are another form of positive behavior recognition. If a staff member sees a student displaying REACH, they may write the student a slip with a blurb describing the positive behavior. One copy is for the student and their families and the other copy is put into a bucket in the office. Each morning, our principal reads three slips for the entire school to hear.

My school leverages technology in order to best serve our students—not only improving educational equity, but also providing state-of-the-art learning experiences. My school is fortunate to have 1-to-1 technology in the form of iPads for grades third through sixth and shared technology kits for grades TK/K-2. Teachers utilize technology how they feel most comfortable

within the classroom, but all teachers receive various technology-focused professional development sessions throughout the year.

Although technology use is mostly at the discretion of the teacher, there are a few school-wide uses in place. First, my school is in its pilot year of utilizing an iPad-based intervention and academic enrichment program called iReady. This program not only gives teachers a clear indication of gaps in student learning, but also adapts and meets students at their current instructional level, which may be below, at, or above grade level depending on the content. Additionally, our use of technology allows for easier implementation of various accommodations written in student IEPs such as text to speech or typing instead of writing. Finally, the exposure our students get from technology at school helps improve educational equity because students are learning twenty-first century skills. Although our students are digital natives, they often struggle with technology as it is used in an educational context rather than a gaming or social media context. Therefore, because our teachers have access to and utilize technology on a daily basis in the classroom to some extent, students that might not otherwise have access gain confidence navigating technology in an educational setting.

My school has a few programs and resources to address the needs of specific vulnerable populations. First, we have a silent mentor program in place for teacher-selected students that appear to be needing acknowledgement, support, and general adult recognition/attention. My school also facilitates pull-out response to intervention (RTI) programs that run in six-week increments that serve students needing additional academic support. To specifically address the needs of our EL students, my school's language arts curriculum, McGraw-Hill Wonders, has embedded ELD instruction. This allows me as a classroom teacher to pull small groups to deliver designated ELD instruction during the day. To address the needs of students we special

needs, we have a resource specialist program (RSP) that facilitates pull out and push in minutes according to students' IEP's. At the moment, my school does not have a special day class or any specific resource in place for LGBTQ+ students. However, we do have a meditation room that can act as a safe haven and quiet place for students needing a break from the bustle of the typical school day.

School Mission/Vision and Demographics

Demographics. My school has a diverse student population that adds to the richness of each student's learning experience thanks to a blending of cultures within our classrooms. Our ethnic diversity is at 46 (According to ed-data.org, "The Ethnic Diversity Index reflects how evenly distributed these students are among the race/ethnicity categories. The more evenly distributed the student body, the higher the number. A school where all of the students are the same ethnicity would have an index of 0.) The breakdown of ethnicities at my school during the 2018-2019 school year was 56.2% Hispanic or Latino, 18.3% White, 10% Asian, 7.1% Black or African American, and the remainder being split between Filipino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Two or More Races, and None Reported. The gender identity of our students is only measured along the male/female binary, which in itself is prejudiced against those students that do not identify as male or female. But, according to ed-data.org, we had 244 female students and 247 male students during the 2018-2019 school year. During that same school year, we had 13.1% EL students. The breakdown of our population of English Learners native languages was Vietnamese (6), Spanish (34), Mandarin (Putonghua) (3), Farsi (Persian) (4), Arabic (9), and Other (5).

While our students bring many ethnicities to our school site, we have only two ethnicities represented by our teachers: White (77%) and Hispanic/Latino (23%). This mismatch in

demographics is likely due to our staff and administration representing the demographics of our town, while our student demographics represent that of the neighboring towns, which is likely due to our large number of inter-district transfer students. Although there is a mismatch in demographics between students and staff, it does not appear to impact the care and effort our school gives our students. In fact, I might even see *more* advocacy for students, *more* consideration for different cultures, and *more* asset-based instruction because of the discrepancy of demographics between students and staff than at other schools I have observed. This could be a result of our staff acting as not only allies, but also advocates for our diverse community.

Mission/vision. My school references its mission on a daily basis. First, our mission is clearly stated on the school website: “Hollow Ridge believes all learners can reach individual success through critical thinking and collaboration. Mustangs REACH for success with Respect, Effort, Attitude, Cooperation, and Honesty.” Additionally, our principal states the mission every single day during announcements. Finally, each classroom has customized their own classroom mission statement to reflect what the greater school mission means to them. Aside from simply promoting the statement itself, my school aims to embody it. Our mission statement is based around our PBIS system and acronym REACH, which stands for Respect, Effort, Attitude, Cooperation, and Honesty. These qualities are celebrated, learned, and discussed regularly at our school site.

In addition to its vision, my school has a vision statement: “Hollow Ridge's diverse community members are all valued and supported in a collaborative environment.” Similar to our mission that addresses support and collaboration, my school’s vision reflects the students that attend the school. It celebrates the “diverse community” and reminds us that everyone is “valued and supported”. My school’s vision is part of my own classroom’s culture. My students are

ethnically, culturally, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse. But we all have a common goal of learning collaboratively within our classroom and support one another in doing so.

Problematic the issue. As a California public school, my school site takes the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) tests. In the most recent testing year for the English Language Arts/Literacy assessment, 22.9% of students exceeded standards, 34.34% met the standards, 22.56% nearly met standards, and 20.2% did not meet standards. In that same year for the Mathematics assessment, 16.5% exceeded standards, 28.62% met standards, 31.65% nearly met standards, and 23.23% did not meet standards. These data were retrieved from ed-data.org, which sources directly from the California Department of Education CAASPP Office.

This information is most valuable when looked at not in isolation but compared to other schools in our district. For example, one of the other non-Title I schools within my district that has a reputation for being high achieving has a student population comprised of more intra district students (those that reside within our district). That school, in comparison to mine, had 9.65% of students not meet English Language Arts/Literacy standards and 12.8% of students not meet Mathematics standards. But, these comparisons for the school populations as a whole. When looking strictly at the data from economically disadvantaged students from both schools, the data show 24.36% and 31.41% of economically disadvantaged students not meeting English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics standards respectively. And, in comparison, at the higher achieving school, 23.38% and 25.97% of economically disadvantaged students did not meet the English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics standards respectively. Thus, the achievement data has to be looked at in context. My school site has a greater proportion of economically disadvantaged students (as a Title I school) than the higher achieving school in the

district. Therefore, this achievement data simply highlights the inequity in not only our school system, but also my individual school district.

Although the achievement data highlights some inequities within our school system (lower socioeconomic status (SES) correlated with lower academic achievement), the parental involvement at my school site challenges the typical notion that lower SES means lower parental involvement and vice versa (Veas, Castejón, Miñano, & Gilar-Corbí, 2019). Despite having more economic diversity than some other schools within our district, we have actively involved parents. Within my classroom, there is moderate to high parent involvement, mostly in the form of helping students with their homework or donating supplies to the class. Our school has a very active Parent Faculty Association (PFA) that organizes a number of events throughout the year (primarily focused around fundraising). In addition, most classrooms have at least one “room parent” who volunteers to organize classroom specific events throughout the year, usually in the form of holiday parties (although, my classroom does not have a room parent). In addition, awards assemblies, parent conferences, community events, and other events that include parents are mostly well-attended.

In my experience, parent involvement at our school comes down to two categories: time involvement and monetary involvement, with others that may fall into some other iteration of parent involvement. For example, I can usually count on parents in my class to either contribute goods (supplies for a party, craft, etc.) or time (volunteer for event, chaperone, help their student at home etc.). Perceived barriers that might stand in the way of parents contributing one way or another may be employment-based (if parents have a job that conflicts with school events during the workday) or monetary-based (not enough extra income to spare for school purposes).

Therefore, my students' parents that are willing and able to contribute or involve themselves in some way tend to gravitate towards one specific type of involvement or the other.

On campus, it appears that most students are thriving. However, as it is likely the case (as with many other institutions) those that deviate from the norm in any direction are less likely to feel 100% sense of belonging or that they are thriving to the fullest extent. For example, the students who do not follow community expectations (respect, effort, attitude, cooperation, and honesty) are more likely to encounter issues with other students, faculty, and the administration. Additionally, it appears based on my observations during structured and unstructured time that the more extroverted students are more satisfied and engaged on our campus versus the less vocal/more introverted students. However, this could easily be a misconception based on what is outwardly displayed versus how students are actually feeling.

Classroom Reflection

Ecology. My classroom ecology stands out within our school community. First, my class is smaller than other classes and has experienced more turnover than many of the other classes. A full primary classroom has 24 students, while my class currently has 17 (it has fluctuated between as small as 15 and as large as 19 over the course of the year). Because my class has never been filled to capacity, it has felt at times like a revolving door of students. When new second or third graders arrive at our district or school site, they are put into my class. In addition to getting new students, my class has also lost quite a few as well for various reasons.

Although there is research suggesting the negative effect on academics in classrooms with students entering mid-year (Whitesell, Stiefel, & Schwartz, 2016), in my experience, the social-emotional benefit has been noticeable, especially for my combination class. Despite (or perhaps *because of*) the coming and going of students, my class is extremely tight knit, so much

so that it has been hard for visitors to pick out who is in what grade because of how closely integrated the classroom feels. I have even had parents surprised to find out that their child's best friend is actually in a different grade because of how close my students are with one another. I use the combination class to my advantage and make all students feel welcomed, regardless of their level or how long they have been a member of our class.

I joined my school site after the start of the school year, and, as a result, never felt I was able to successfully make the space my own. Despite "inheriting" the classroom from the long-term substitute, I am pleased with the classroom's functionality. For ease of grade-specific grouping, I have my third graders clustered together, but around the room there are various seating and working spaces that make mixing up the class easy to do. Because my classroom is so large and open, I have student desks up towards the front whiteboard and television monitor and a large open back carpet area near the library. On one side of my room there are two small group tables (a lower round table and a regular height kidney shaped table) that work well for pulling small groups or setting up stations. On the opposite side of my room I have two large armchairs (can fit 2-3 second graders) positioned around an end table and lamp that are yet another seating and workspace for students. Although my classroom does not have a "theme" necessarily, it has been described to me as "bustling" and "full of learning" by volunteers that have passed through.

I utilize my classroom setup to reinforce the norms, routines, and procedures of my class. Every morning I have a welcome message and instructions either on the whiteboard or projected onto the television. Students are familiar with the morning routine of unpacking their backpack outside, entering the classroom, and checking the morning message for further instructions (which usually involves some form of morning work). By the door I have two large bottles of

hand sanitizer that students will place on their desk to signal they are in the restroom. I intentionally did not want to use a boy's pass and a girl's pass, because even in the primary grades I did not want to make questioning students uncomfortable with the binary. At the front of the room I have posters that show hand signals for bathroom, drink of water, and question/comment which are next to my voice level poster to help students practice volume control. In addition to the basic routines and procedures, I also utilize the school wide incentive systems (mustang dollars and bucket filler slips) as well as one of my own (a pom pom jar with a student-determined prize for filling it as a class).

Contrary to many other classes, I do not rely on classroom jobs in the traditional sense. Each week I highlight one student as our "Student of the Week" who will not only be celebrated with drawings and handwritten letters from their classmates, but also tasked with being the teacher's helper. By not having set classroom jobs, I have more students wanting to help on their own initiative rather than relying on being told what to do by their assigned job. This also allows for students to display and leverage their personal assets and funds of knowledge (from organization to cleaning to supporting others). I can see it makes my students feel proud to be able to help out in a way in which they are most comfortable, which promotes their individual responsibility to our classroom.

Another way that I highlight my students' funds of knowledge is during our circle. At the end of every day before dismissal, we gather as a class on the back carpet. We typically rely on a structured sharing using the acronym CATS (compliment, apology, thank you, share) and some form of quick whip-around (one prompt and each student goes around and briefly answers or shares). This time is for my students—they know they can share, communicate, and listen to one another without interruptions, which is valuable for their socioemotional development. I am

consistently impressed by my class for the empathy they show during circle and the vulnerability they show to their peers knowing that they will be supported and encouraged by not only me, but also their peers.

Demographics. My class is a diverse mix of second and third graders that fairly accurately reflect the demographics of the school as a whole. My class is composed of 11 second graders and 6 third graders who identify as Hispanic (4), Asian-Vietnamese (3), Black or African American (3), White/Not Hispanic (2), Asian-Filipino (1), Asian-Chinese (1), Asian-Asian Indian (1), Asian-Other (1), and Mixed (1). Although there are only four identified English Learners in this class, the majority of students are either bilingual or understand another language besides English. There are 10 female students in my class and 7 males. In addition to being racially and ethnically diverse, my class is geographically and socioeconomically diverse. Because our district has open enrollment, 12 out of the 17 students reside in other school districts but travel to this district for school. I have no identified GATE students or students with 504 plans. Only one of my students has an IEP. To accommodate for the student with an IEP, I work with the RSP teacher and the push-in paraeducator to provide sentence stems, extra time, intervention groups, peer support, and brain breaks.

Problematize the Issue. I am fortunate to have a resource-rich classroom in which I am able to teach my students. In this section I will be addressing physical resources only, although I do have a many different cultures, ethnicities, and languages represented in my classroom which are powerful resources in themselves for student learning (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). I have a complete curriculum for ELA/ELD as well as math. In addition to a 1-to-1 iPad cart, which allows me to utilize technology, there is also a mounted television screen, which allows me to project from either a document camera or a device. I have two large whiteboards at the

front of my room as well as extensive wall space to display student work. I am fully stocked with a seemingly endless supply of crayons, colored pencils, scissors, glue sticks, paper, folders, and various other school supplies. I have a weekly parent volunteer who helps with miscellaneous clerical tasks from putting up student work to stuffing folders to send home student work. Our school librarian pushes in two to three days a week for about 45 minutes to help oversee centers, which allows me to pull grade-specific groups, which is essential in a combination class. Overall, I am extremely fortunate to have so many resources available to me and my students and do not necessarily feel that we are lacking in any particular area.

Because my classroom is rich in resources, I have an internal feeling that I must perform to a certain standard based on these resources. For example, one might say, “You have iPads so you should be doing XYZ with them.” Partially due to the abundance of resources, I do feel driven to leverage them to the best of my ability and ensure they are being put to good use for my students. Though I would strive to do the very best for my students in any situation (regardless of resources), having a wide array of resources does provide additional encouragement to genuinely utilize them.

Concluding Thoughts on Community, School, and Classroom

The last third of my first year of teaching has proven to be quite the formative experience, especially as a result of the drastic shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though it feels like I am approaching some sort of closure, I am only at the beginning of my teaching journey as a whole. However, this first year has given me incredible insight into not only the inner workings of a school community, but also the community-at-large in which I serve. So, while I will not be ending my first year of teaching physically near my school community and school family, I will definitely be ending the year more attuned to not

only my school community, but also all of the communities in which my students are completing *their* school year.

Part D: *My Reflection as a Critical Social Justice Educator*

Introduction

Over a year ago I created a list of three goals I had for my first year of teaching: create a positive classroom experience through meaningful relationships, celebrate successes (both my students' and my own), and end the year a better teacher than I started. Looking back on the year as a whole, I believe I met two out of my three goals.

Without a doubt, I know I cultivated meaningful relationships with my students that ultimately made for a positive classroom environment this year. And, considering the nature of the school year (beginning in the classroom and ending online), I would even rephrase this to say the relationships that formed made for a positive *class* environment, not simply *classroom*. This year taught me that four walls do not define your class or your relationships with your students. Even when we transitioned to online learning, the relationships remained, the positivity remained, and class continued even without a classroom.

Next, though I am still an extremely novice teacher, I ended the year a way better teacher than I started. Ten months in the classroom (or rather, our seven/three split with distance learning) will do that to a person! Thankfully, I was not just passively existing in the classroom—I was trudging along through my journey: experiencing, learning, growing, reflecting, and improving. So, while each individual day may not have felt miraculous in and of itself, the culmination of that time with students *was* miraculous. Now that I have made it through one year, the fire has been relit within me to take on this next year, eager to, once again, end the year better than where I started.

And now that leaves my last goal—the goal I do not feel that I adequately met. I wanted to celebrate successes this year; and though I did congratulate, praise, and celebrate my students, it was not to the meaningful extent that I had hoped for. I believe this comes from not setting goals with my students from the start. I wish I had helped set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely (SMART) goals this year with all of my students, not just those requiring intervention. That way, it would have been very clear when we could reflect on progress towards a goal and truly celebrate the learning achievements that were happening in the classroom.

Similarly, the overall feel of this year (at least in my eyes) was physically and emotionally negative (though there were definitely many positive days during the later months). Maybe if I had celebrated even the small successes that came earlier in the year, I would have had a different overall feeling. Maybe if I had also used SMART goals for myself, I would have been able to celebrate the great work I was doing rather than harping on the negative feelings I was experiencing. Thankfully, CGU requires extensive reflection during and after the Teacher Education Program, and I am now looking back on my year more favorably as you will notice below.

Classroom Ecology and Teacher Presence

My classroom ecology and teacher presence were two domains that I felt very comfortable with just a few months into my first year of teaching. Although I had contemplated them both extensively before actually starting in the classroom, it was not until I had a classroom of my own that I could genuinely craft the environment and my presence in it. While I excelled in certain strands within this domain, others fell into an area of growth for me.

Strengths. First, my “withitness” (Kounin, 1970, 1983 as cited in Marzano, 2017) was superb. Marzano defines this term as meaning “that a teacher is alert and aware of what is

occurring in the classroom at all times.” I believe it was my teacher presence and “withitness” that established a baseline of respect for students and their learning. My students knew that I respected their time in the classroom, and, in turn, they respected not only me, but also their peers.

For example, during ELA/ELD rotations I would have a small group of three to six students at a time with me at a side table and knew that, after setting, demonstrating, and practicing expectations, the rest of the class could handle the independence of station work. This practice of rotating through stations and meeting with small groups supported all my students because I never assumed all students needed the same kind of support in their learning. Students that benefited from teacher support received it. Students that wanted to collaborate with peers had the chance. Students that thrived on completely independent work had that opportunity. By first acknowledging that not all students have the same needs, and second, acknowledging that students are the experts in what *they* want and need from the classroom made this model successful with my students. Kay (2018) explains not only this benefit, but also the necessity of relying on student voice and input in the classroom.

While the above description addresses both the classroom ecology and my teacher presence, I also want to highlight another facet of our classroom ecology that I believe was a driving force in the success I found later in school year. I dually acknowledged the individual and the collective in the classroom. At the beginning of the year, I made every effort to genuinely connect with the individual students that made up my class. But I was still missing something—and that was class unity. Ayers (2019) beautifully describes the uniqueness of each student as “a three-dimensional creature, a singular character who will walk the earth but once, forging a twisty, one-of-a-kind track across the landscape.” Got it. But Ayers also acknowledged

the juxtaposition between being an individual and part of a group. He explained that “since teaching is always relational, we interact with the group, and we attend to each distinct individual.” I needed to do more collectively. Yes, we had morning meeting and closing circle, but that still felt disjointed. I believe a pivotal moment for bringing unity to my class was when purely recreational, nonacademic moments (i.e. games) were introduced into the class. We went from feeling like a class to feeling like a family (as cheesy as it sounds, I do believe it).

Development. Going forward, I will continue to balance the individual and the collective. But, my biggest area of growth and development regarding classroom ecology and teacher presence is anticipating and limiting unproductive behaviors. Although I did my best in terms of creating an environment that had norms, expectations, and procedures that ensured students knew the desired classroom behaviors, this by no means prevented all unproductive behaviors. Next year, I will continue making an effort to get to know my students to anticipate and limit unproductive behaviors. For example, a few key actions this year greatly improved one student’s behavior and overall productivity in class. All it took was teamwork between me, the student, and the parent to devise a daily check-in that allowed me to best serve that student by asking what *they* needed on a regular basis. This routine and practice of checking in daily one-on-one not only supported that student, but also gave them a simple practice they could take with them to future teachers and future areas of life.

Another area of growth and development for me is harnessing instructional cohesion and intensity. I tried and tried with my class this year to find that sweet spot between “productive struggle” and “way too easy” regarding instruction. I found that I started off the year lacking instructional intensity and noticed my students could handle more. However, when planning to increase the rigor, I believe the pendulum swung too far and I went above where I should have

been for my second/third grade combination class. This back and forth of too easy, then too difficult continued throughout the year, though I do think I was getting closer and closer to that ideal level of instructional intensity. Considering my experiences prior to entering the classroom as a teacher had mostly involved upper elementary school students, I know this is an area I will improve in as I gain experience in the primary grades.

Content Knowledge to Promote Access, Learning, and Achievement

Again, given my lack of experience and unfamiliarity with the primary grades, I felt that this domain as a whole was more of a challenge than others for me. While telling someone that you struggle with second grade content knowledge might get you a laugh in the face, there is more to this domain than simply knowing the life cycle of a butterfly or how to add and subtract two-digit numbers. I know how to add and subtract! Knowing the ins and outs of the curriculum in order to best teach second grade minds is a whole different beast. And that is where I need to improve.

Strengths. First, my joke regarding butterfly life cycles is only partially a joke. I do believe I had more comfort in delivering science instruction due largely in part to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) training I attended this year. This training gave me the confidence to break free from the traditional classroom structures that I would sometimes rely on for math and reading instruction. For example, it was during science that I would incorporate gallery walks, virtual field trips, campus field trips, sustained inquiry projects, collaborative learning, and meaningful interdisciplinary instruction. While at times I fell prey to the group work for the sake of group work, I believe during science instruction I was more apt to execute the meaningful collaborative learning that Marzano (2017) claims is so important to student learning and engagement.

Knowing that a professional development training increased my confidence in instruction and facility with the curriculum so much, I am eager to attend more to continue my personal facility with all areas of the curriculum. To clarify, I do feel quite confident in my breadth of content knowledge, it is rather my lack of nuanced understanding of grade level specifics that make me hesitate within this domain.

Development. Given that this was a more challenging domain in my mind, I know I have a lot more work to do to reach a satisfactory level of understanding. In particular, the strand aligning curriculum and instruction with measurable goals was, truthfully, not a strong area for me this year. Although I know the power of goalsetting in my own life, I do not believe I brought that into the classroom this year for me or my students (see this section's introduction for further reflection in this area). Next year, I intend to have a clearer roadmap with SMART goals. While I did know what my second and third graders needed to know by the end of the year in order to ensure a successful transition to the next grade, I did not have the milestones along the way in place. This shortcoming in my planning is something that Hattie and Zierer (2019) say, once addressed and executed properly, will make the learning more successful because everything will be clearer to not only teacher, but also student. Research aside, I think having a more open line of communication with my students regarding their goals for the year (from the get-go!) will make a world of difference next year, not only in terms of student growth and achievement, but also my planning, preparation, and reflection.

Instructional Practices to Promote Learning and Engagement

Whether it was my graduate studies, my own experiences as a student in elementary school, some combination of the two, or something else entirely playing into effect, I felt quite comfortable in the instructional practices domain. I think this largely came as a result of knowing

my students and knowing myself. The more I got to know my students and the stronger our relationships grew, the better equipped I was to implement a practice in the classroom that would best suit my students. And, as time passed, I also got to better know myself as a teacher.

Similarly, this helped me best choose practices that not only worked for my students, but also worked for me. I knew that role playing, singing, and dancing might work for some people, but I preferred sticking to humor, personal stories, and direct statements about application of content in real life.

Strengths. I believe my instructional practices (coupled with my classroom ecology) was one of my greatest strengths this year. First, I had the whopping challenge of teaching a combination class my first year of teaching. I needed to figure out a way to make productive learning accessible to two different grade levels that spanned the academic levels of kindergarten through fifth grade. Fortunately, good practices are good practices, no matter the grade or instructional level.

When in doubt, I asked the students! *What do you already know about this topic? Have you heard of this before even if you don't remember what it means?* Marzano (2017) reported that “previewing strategies help activate students’ prior knowledge.” Plus, having my students think about what they already knew about a concept increased their engagement and investment in the lesson—they relished in the ability to shoot their hand up and share their familiarity with the class.

Similar to tapping students’ prior knowledge and expertise, I frequently encouraged connection-making that encouraged students to talk about themselves, which Marzano (2017) explained makes students “perceive that they are welcome in the class.” A double whammy in the form of a beneficial instructional practice that also cultivates a positive classroom ecology.

Finally, I improved my feedback to students over the course of the year. Once I got past the “old-fashioned” view of feedback (grades and comments, or, *gasp*, just grades) and realized the comments were the best part. This was a concept my teachers had been trying to instill in me since my elementary days, but I could not get over my fixation on grades as a student. Now that I am in the teacher role, I see the incredible value of comments that Hattie and Clarke (2018) discuss in their text entirely dedicated to feedback during learning.

Development. A few areas that I could have improved upon within the instructional practices strand were physical movement and self-reporting engagement. Marzano (2017) and Marzano & Pickering (2011) tout the benefits of physical movement during academic instruction. While I have used movement frequently in more nonacademic areas, I would like to incorporate it more during content instruction. So, instead of relying on a class-favorite called four corners as a break from academic instruction, I might look to adapting the game to use with academic content because “...to most students, games are intrinsically engaging.” (Marzano, 2017).

In addition to getting my students up and moving during lessons instead of just after them, I want to have students self-report their engagement during lessons instead of just after them as well. Marzano (2017) notes that in addition to teacher-monitored student engagement, students should be asked to self-report engagement. I think increasing movement and asking for student feedback in the form of self-reporting engagement will do wonders for my students’ learning and engagement. Movement, engagement, reflection, and feedback will be even more important with the likelihood of distance learning during the upcoming school year given the difficulty of teacher-monitored engagement that is often relied upon in the classroom.

Assessments to Inform Instruction and Promote Learning

Before professionally embarking on my teaching journey, assessment was a scary word. It invoked memories of pop quizzes that made my heart fall out of my chest, images of rows upon rows of tables and chairs set up in the gymnasium for standardized testing, and also a weird sense of pride. I was good at taking tests and assessments throughout my time in the educational system, from my first foray into standardized test taking in second grade to taking the CBEST, CSET, and RICA for my teaching credential. Despite feeling well-equipped to take such assessments (which I later learned were *not* the be-all and end-all of the academic world but were rather a relic from the origins of the deep structures of schooling (Tye, 2000)), they still made me a sweaty, nervous mess. Fairly quickly I discovered the power of using assessments strategically to inform my instruction and promote student learning.

Strengths. One of the first practices I introduced during the year was the idea of a quick self-reflection. Students would show me one, two, three, or four fingers based on their self-assessed level of understanding. This practice not only informed my instruction on the spot, but also promoted greater learning for my students. For example, after teaching a new concept in math, usually in the form of direct instruction with guided practice, I would then ask my students to self-assess their level of understanding. Based on their assessment, I would then differentiate the latter part of my lesson, tailoring to the students' needs (from working independently, with a peer, with the teacher, or some combination). This practice took time to perfect, with the early stages involving lots of clarification, examples, and nonexamples of how to self-assess. *Do I understand this enough to teach it to a classmate? Do I understand, but probably couldn't teach someone else? Am I starting to get it? Am I completely lost and need to be retaught?* This was an example of a strategy “for reflecting on learning [that] not only [focused on] students' attention on the content but also on themselves as learners. This [rendered] their thinking highly

metacognitive.” (Marzano, 2017). The more I got my students thinking about their learning, the more confident they became as learners. Though it was not always utilized or executed perfectly, using self-assessment and reflection as a form of formative assessment was invaluable this year.

Development. An area that I am looking to grow in within this domain is meeting students where they are academically and socio-emotionally, an important, though arguably extremely difficult task when considering all facets of its application in the classroom (Nieto, 2013). I think I can improve in this area by harnessing my strength in utilizing self-assessments. So, instead of always waiting until after a lesson to have students self-assess, I can have them use the same practice as a pre-assessment. That way I am not only operating reactively within the classroom, but also proactively.

Social Justice Dispositions to Promote Access, Learning, Achievement and Future Opportunity and Success

Despite being enrolled in a social justice-oriented program, this domain was quite a bit more challenging for me, or so I thought, until I realized social justice teaching practices are simply good teaching practices. So, while at times I questioned whether I was doing all I could regarding social justice practices and dispositions that would promote access, learning, achievement, and future success for my students, I do think I had quite a few strengths in this area. But, along with my strengths, I also have some areas for continued development as a social justice educator.

Strengths. First, I valued and emphasized growing self-awareness and raising consciousness. I did so by utilizing positive recognition in the form of verbal and nonverbal affirmations both directly to students and to their families. This asset-based approach made

students hyper-aware of what I did want to see in the classroom versus harping on what I did not want to see in the classroom in a deficit-based approach.

Another practice I used for raising consciousness was the incorporation of mindfulness. My students came to request our “wind-down time” not only at the end of the day, but also midday when they needed to check in with themselves. I think this proved successful because, as Marzano (2017) states, “motivation and inspiration occur when students have opportunities to be self-actualized and when they have opportunities to be connected to something greater than self.” So, I believe my students became more conscious of not only themselves as individuals, but also of themselves as members of our class community by engaging in mindful practices such as stretching, deep breathing, and circle.

Development. One strand that I would like to improve in is sharing power and tools. Although I was far from intentionally restricting power and tools within the classroom this year, I would like to do a better job next year of making hidden curriculum explicit. For example, I would like to be more transparent with my students and families about encouraging them to ask for help, extensions, clarification, and other additional resources that they may not have been aware of. I can do this by reiterating in my newsletter and parent updates rather than limiting the “I’m-here-for-you-pitch” to the beginning of the year.

Letters

Dear Future TEP Candidate,

I want to take a final moment to share the endcap on my journey, just in case it can help you. As you decide to embark on this journey, just know that it may feel nothing like what I describe, or it may feel identical to my descriptions—and that is ok. Everyone is different, and

so are their teaching journeys. But just as we should celebrate the differences, we should embrace the shared experience. It might just make you feel less alone this year.

As I think back about my journey through this program, and this year, it feels clearly segmented into pre-teaching, teaching, and post-teaching. Before I had my own classroom (TLP1, Literacy and Methods, and Pre-Teaching/student teaching), I was a perfectionist. That has been me since day one of kindergarten when the teacher (gently) reminded me I had to sit with my legs tucked in crisscross-applesauce at circle and I was devastated at the idea that the teacher was mad at me and I was no longer perfect. Fast forward to pre-teaching and I still put the same kind of pressure on myself, but I knew how to do school, and, therefore, it came very easily to me. Reading, papers, discussions, no problem. Towards the end of pre-teaching, though, I got a wakeup call. Maybe I was not going to get an internship in a district like I had originally planned. After turning down an offer at a charter and accepting the fact that residency did not mean failure, I was ready to get going on the second third of my journey: teaching (this time, under the tutelage of a mentor teacher). As fate would have it, I *did* end up in an internship in a district and continued to chug along. Nope. Getting my own class after the start of the school year in an unfamiliar grade level (a combo, no less) was the real wakeup call. I was not chugging along. I was crashing and burning (or so I thought).

How on Earth was I supposed to apply what I was learning in my Saturday classes when parents were yelling at me, I didn't have a plan, and I was no longer perfect? Googling how to quit teaching (I'm ashamed to admit) was a near daily occurrence. I was willing myself to get through the next hour, the next day, the next week. Daily calls to my mom across the country. Trying to keep it together. The fall was a nightmare. I had long since given up on perfection and was in pure survival mode. In hindsight, things were fine. They were *more* than fine. My kids

were learning, they knew I loved them, and the world was not ending. I am so grateful for this time of reflection, because it makes me think about what was really going on during those first few months in the classroom. A perfectionist was forced out of her comfort zone. I was *comfortable* as a student—I had been one for over two decades! But now I was the teacher and that was different. Challenging. Uncomfortable. I see now that my disastrous fall was not disastrous; it was simply a learning experience.

Fortunately, I did learn. I learned so much between TLP1 and where I stand now having just completed my first year in the classroom. I learned that you bring your whole entire *being* into the classroom and that is a good and a bad thing. I learned that my internal pressure would cause me to think myself a failure day in and day out because my first few months did not look or feel how I *wanted* them to look or feel. But, as I said, the time from TLP 1 to the end of the program is one huge, undeniable learning experience. And I am so grateful for that.

Despite what felt like a physically, emotionally, and mentally painful experience (stress-induced ER visits, anyone?), I knew I could get through it. I had cheerleaders by my side who were looking at the situation with 20/20 vision rather than my own, personal “learning pit vision”. Plus, I’m tough. I made it through with only a few stress-induced physical ailments and only occasional flareups from my depression and anxiety.

My advice for you is to not seek perfection, find your cheerleaders (be your own if you cannot find any), and “do you” as the kids say these days. And by that, I mean do what works for you. For me, it was taking things a week, a day, or an hour at a time (despite the encouragement to look long term and big picture) and making time for something fun and/or mindless each day (mine was working out and eating dinner in front of the television).

Good luck. You’ll do great.

Sincerely,
Ms. Daifotis

Dear Maria,

I am so proud of how much you've grown this year! Yes, your hair got a little longer and you got a little taller, but what I'm really talking about is how much you've grown as a student and person. I think back to our early days in class together versus where we ended the year, and I see a magnificent transformation. Your comfort level within the classroom (and then online). Your confidence and sense of belonging. Your humor and personality. All of these things developed throughout the year and I am so lucky to have witnessed it.

Looking ahead, my wish for you is to lean on your home family and lean on your school family. I saw how much your parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles meant to you. I believe they are your "why". I saw glimmers of those same powerful relationships forming in school and I only hope you and your future teachers and classmates continue to nurture them.

I feel so fortunate to consider myself part of your school family after this year! I hope you remember not only what you learned this year, but also (and more importantly) how you grew this year.

Love,
Ms. Daifotis

Dear Gary,

I cannot wait to see all that you will accomplish not only in school, but also in life. Your sensitivity, compassion, and curiosity will take you far. I can remember our early interactions and wondering what makes Gary, *Gary*. Well, now I know! From sharing your passions, to your explosive progress in reading, to the evident love for your family and friends, all of these things made you not only an asset to our class, but also an integral factor in its foundation (one of the seventeen building blocks, to be exact).

I look forward to the creations you have yet to build, the ideas you have yet to develop, and the journeys you have yet to embark upon. I feel so fortunate to have been welcomed into your circle. In a day and age where race, tragically, still causes strife, I want you to know that you have an advocate in me. Though some people might try to tell you otherwise, your skin color, and your story, are beautiful. I know you will achieve whatever you set your mind to.

Love,

Ms. Daifotis

Dear Sophie,

At the beginning of the year, you reminded me a bit of myself, but you are oh-so- uniquely your own. While we still may have many similarities, I found that learning about our differences strengthened our relationship. I loved helping you find new favorite books, watching you lead with confidence, and seeing you nurture a sense of community among your peers in the classroom and online. Not to mention your smile, twirls, and laughter made our community so much brighter.

I hope you know how special you are. Please don't let anyone try to dismiss you as basic, shallow, or ignorant based solely on your fair appearance. But, please remember the

power and privilege you hold in this society and leverage it. Stand up for your classmates, community, and generation. You have the ability to make the world a better place.

Love,

Ms. Daifotis

Conclusion

Writing this ethnography, as mentioned above, was a powerful form of reflection for me given the two defining factors of this year: 1) being a first-year teacher of record and 2) teaching during a global pandemic. As such, one of the largest takeaways from undergoing such a feat (regardless of pandemic status), was that meaningful growth happens as a result of intentional reflection. Before entering my own classroom, I reflected on my own educational experience and positionality. During the arduous task of teaching a combination grade level class my first year of teaching, I reflected on my teaching practices, my presence in the classroom, my aspirations, and my students' experiences. But it was not until the conclusion of this academic year that I had breakthrough reflections about my teaching experience. I realized firsthand what I was so hesitant to admit—I was a good first-year teacher. Despite my very real struggles, I did a fine job teaching. I cared for my students by showing them love and respect, and I grew as an educator by reflecting upon and improving my practices.

What writing this ethnography helped me realize is that although your first year of teaching is difficult, as long as you adequately reflect (and thus, grow), you are succeeding. Given my past experience with the deep structures of schooling, I have been conditioned to believe there is usually one best answer. So, upon entering the classroom, I believed that if I was not teaching my students exactly as my teachers taught me, then I was failing. But, that aspiration of giving my students *my* exact educational experience was both impossible and not beneficial. Therefore, it was a necessary and wonderful realization when my lived experience as a teacher affirmed the various theories I had been learning about during my graduate studies. Students are individuals that bring unique experiences into the classroom. So are teachers. And, effective critical social justice educators leverage not only their students' funds of knowledge,

but also their own. Thus, teaching is not sterile, nor is it one-size-fits-all. Teaching is as wonderful and fluid as its students and educators.

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