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## Knowledge, the Marketization of Education, and High-Stakes Accountability: Curriculum Differentiation in Chicago Public High Schools

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

KNOWLEDGE, THE MARKETIZATION OF EDUCATION, AND HIGH-STAKES  
ACCOUNTABILITY: CURRICULUM DIFFERENTIATION IN CHICAGO PUBLIC  
HIGH SCHOOLS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
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MASTER OF ARTS

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BY

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## ABSTRACT

Over the course of the twentieth century curriculum differentiation became a mainstay in education, particularly in secondary schools. Much has been written on how this is a purposeful selection process often tied to larger social and political status and relationships. Moreover, knowledge is largely deemed appropriate based upon whose knowledge it is and for what student it is appropriate. Also, within the past two decades, there has been an increase in neoliberal school choice policies and neoconservative standardization policies in public education largely in the form of charter schools and high-stakes testing. These market policies aim to increase innovation and academic achievement via increased competition among schools and students. Nevertheless, many scholars argue that these policies only serve to exacerbate educational inequality. Standardization policies also claim to increase educational equality by holding all students to the same standards, though they have been critiqued for their potential biases against disadvantaged population, their one-dimensional measure of success, and their effect of narrowing the curricula to testing skills only. These two themes in educational research and reform raise questions concerning how curricula content is affected by choice and accountability policies. As a result, this study finds that overall, even among different institutional options within Chicago's school choice policy, low-performing, low-status schools are increasingly similar in stated course plans which emphasize test

preparation and skills specifically for standardized tests, particularly in the test taking year. Also, schools that have the highest achievement scores, ironically, also have the most authority to deviate from a test preparation focused curricula with the ability to focus on developing abstract skills in students, such as critical thinking and cultural awareness.

## Introduction

With the rise of public school enrollments during the early part of the twentieth century in the United States, especially within the urban centers, student populations increasingly became divided into different groups based upon ability. As a result of this ability grouping, curriculum differentiation has become a mainstay within American public schools. Over the years, different curricula, defined as sets of knowledge and skills, have been explicitly imparted to various student populations based upon both ‘measured ability’ and perceived future role in society, both socially and economically. Michael Apple (2004), originally writing in 1979, argues in *Ideology and Curriculum* that these different curricula are purposefully selected for students by those in power within public school systems. Furthermore these selections are the results of specific power relationships and larger social and political contexts in society. Moreover, in the past two decades there has been an increase in the usage of choice plans in various forms, such as voucher programs, charter schools, and magnet schools in educational policy. These choice programs aim to increase the quality of education by allowing for more options and increasing competition. Many advocates of choice programs view them as a viable policy to remedy the supposedly failing public, neighborhood schools. The notions that underpin choice programs fall in line with the larger neoliberal agenda that encourages competition and deregulation. Although, the growing empirical literature on the subject of school choice increasingly finds that these policies are not necessarily living up to their

claims to raise academic achievement within public education systems. As a result, it is necessary to further explore the effects of choice policies and increasing standardization on students' educational experiences, particularly in regards to curriculum content and implementation across the various institutional options.

### Statement of Problem

In *Ideology and Curriculum* Michael Apple (2004) devotes a chapter to "Curricular History and Social Control" where he aims to historically place his arguments that curriculum and knowledge within American public schools, and arguably within all schools, "are linked through their everyday practices to other powerful institutions in ways that are often hidden and complex" (p. 59, p. 60). He looks historically at the development of curriculum in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in regards to urban education. According to Apple (2004), schools are obviously related to their communities and curriculum plays a key role in mediating this relationship. Moreover, the curricula, that is the knowledge and skills, which are chosen are by no means "random" or "neutral," and looking at the early development of the curriculum field can demonstrate these biased relationships and interests (p. 61). Apple (2004) definitively asserts that curriculum, "is selected and organized around sets of principles and values that come from somewhere, that represent particular views of normality and deviance, of good and bad, and of what 'good people act like'" (p. 61). Moreover, Apple (2004) claims that schools participate actively in reproducing unequal societal relationships and that "one important tacit function of schooling seems to be the teaching of different dispositions and values to different school populations" (p. 62). For



example, he states that for children of higher social status schools will encourage and foster “flexibility, choice, [and] inquiry,” while for children of lower social status schools will expect, if not demand, “punctuality, neatness, [and] habit formation” (p. 62).

Urban American public schools, Apple (2004) argues, began as purposeful mechanisms to acculturate different schools populations, mainly South and East European immigrants and Blacks, into native, middle-class values and beliefs. Schools functioned to protect native, middle-class culture in an effort to create sameness of values and morals across the urban population. This particular function of schools clearly had important effects on the shape curriculum would take. Also, curriculum development was fueled by theories of scientific management that aimed to efficiently educate the growing school population for their future economic roles in the new industrial society. As a result of this ideological climate of cultural preservation and efficiency, curriculum took on a particularly conservative approach, which focused on curriculum differentiation among various populations, whose legacy Apple (2004) argues carries on through the present. Though, rather than explicitly labeling students based upon race, ethnicity, or class, key developers in the curriculum field shifted their focus to varying intellectual abilities, which could be measured ‘scientifically,’ rather than varying social backgrounds. As a result, curriculum was differentiation among public school populations in an effort to preserve supposed intellectual abilities as opposed to cultural preservation. Though, Apple (2004) asserts, this was by no means a shifting in looking an actual or real intellectual ability. The ways of measuring this ‘ability’ were still very much embedded with previous unequal notions or views of those who were poor and different ethnically

and culturally because of precisely who was determining and how they were determining intelligence and ability. For example, the ‘smartest’ populations in society were those who were in the professions of “businessman, scientist and lawyer” (p. 73). As a result, ‘logically’ the next generation of intellectuals would invariably come from this class as well. One of the most important implications of this conservative approach to curriculum, according to Apple (2004), was the fact that it provided scientific justification for the sorting of students in public schools, all in the name of differing ability and efficiency.

Herbert Kliebard (2004) in *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958* also discusses the rise of scientific curriculum making which has had a lasting impact on curriculum and education in American. Kliebard (2004) focuses on how scientific managerial principles, deriving from a type of Taylorism, were applied to curriculum making. In agreement with Apple (2004), Kliebard (2004) asserts that social stability and control were key concerns of early curriculum developers, partially as a result of the decline of familial influence in youth’s lives. Citing Bobbitt as a key early curriculum figure, Kliebard (2004) asserts that early reformers were in favor of constructing curriculum based upon individual ability and that, in order to eliminate waste, one should only be taught skills and knowledge that he or she would use in his or her determined social and economic role. According to Kliebard (2004), “within the framework of the new theory, ‘education according to need’ was simply another way of saying ‘education according to predicted social and vocational role’” (p. 84). Further Kliebard (2004) addresses the role the field of psychology played in this heighten impulse towards efficiency and curriculum differentiation. Because supposed innate intelligence was the

most important factor in educational grouping, there was an increase in the belief that this intelligence could be measured and that standardized IQ tests provided an accurate and reliable measure. As a result the first half of the twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in the use of standardized IQ test for ability grouping within education. This, along with the resulting curriculum differentiation, had lasting impacts on American education. Lastly, again in agreement with Apple (2004), Kliebard (2004) also discusses how this approach to developing curriculum allowed for the specific cultivating of leaders and followers. Because students were grouped based upon perceived future role in society, often gauged by their parents' current social and economic position, and upon scores on standardized intelligence tests, the resulting curriculum only served to maintain current social positions and power relationship and to limit mobility. Looking at Kliebard (2004) serves to provide an historical context for a present day analysis of curriculum differentiation and content among various secondary institutions.

More recently, in *Standardizing Knowledge in a Multicultural Society* Sleeter and Stillman (2005) analyze curriculum standards documents in California for reading/Language Arts education and History/social studies education across all grade levels and how the movement to standardize is a part of a larger movement to reassert power in the post Civil Rights era which saw an increase other types of knowledge, such as multicultural education and bilingual education. This reassertion involves choosing what and whose knowledge is most legitimate and for which populations it is most appropriate, rather than simply about raising academic standards and achievement. Sleeter and Stillman (2005) employ Bernstein's (1975) codes of power framework to

conduct their analysis and, similar to Apple (2004), are guided by previous theoretical frameworks that aim to address curricular content and the relationship with larger social and political contexts. They state that curriculum is one of the key places where the purpose of schooling and what beliefs, values and knowledge is to be taught is debated, and that in essence those who control standards and curriculum also control “the consciousness of children and youth” (Sleeter and Stillman, 2005, p. 28).

According to Sleeter and Stillman (2005), codes of power consists of a two part analysis which addresses how a curriculum is both classified and framed. Classification involves looking at how strongly or weakly knowledge is isolated. This can be analyzed either in terms of isolation between defined school subjects or between the knowledge presented in schools and the knowledge, particularly minority, both racially and in terms of class, students bring to school with them. Moreover, a *collection code* curriculum is one where knowledge is increasingly isolated and demonstrates hierarchal positionality of knowledge. On the other hand with an *integrated code* curriculum there is less isolation and is more focused on the “knowledge construction process” (Sleeter and Stillman, 2005, p. 28). In addition to analyzing how curricula is classified, framing within codes of power addresses the extent to which students and teachers have authority over the content, implementation and evaluation of curricula. A strong frame denotes little decision-making power in the hands of students and teachers, while a weak frame allows students and teachers to have a voice in the selecting and implementing of curriculum (Sleeter and Stillman, 2005). Similar to Apple (2004), the key interest of the analytical frame codes of power is to explore the ways in which students and teachers come to

understand and work within their position in an unequal society. While the particular methods and terms of classification may be different for Apple (2004) and Sleeter and Stillman (2005), they both aim to theoretically, and for Sleeter and Stillman (2005) empirically, explore and critique the ways in which curricula content is constructed, selected, and by whom.

In addition to the saliency of curriculum differentiation, knowledge selection and the relationship to broader social and political contexts, the marketization of education in the form of neoliberal school choice policies has increasingly become a pivotal issue for debate in education research and reform. While choice policies may take on many different forms, such as the implementation of voucher programs, magnet schools and charter schools in addition to others, on a theoretical level many of the arguments for and against choice policies rely on the same logic and assumptions. Christopher Lubienski (2003) in *Innovation in Education Markets: Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Competition and Choice in Charter Schools* focuses on the extent to which and the ways charter schools are actually innovative in practice. He begins by discussing the theory of choice and markets in education. Theoretically, if schools are not under bureaucratic restrictions and are in competition with other institutions for students, educators will then be motivated to innovate and discover new teaching practices. Lubienski (2003), however, claims that little is known empirically if this innovation actually happens in practice. Also, following the logic of market theory, because innovation, in both organization and curriculum, is a central goal, it is required for and will necessarily lead to increased student achievement. Moreover, the introduction of markets into education

assumes the inefficiency of the public sector. Further, advocates claim that choice policies can serve to combat inequality because they break the link between housing and school attendance. That is, under resourced parents and families will be able to choose better schools which will, first, give immediate benefits to their child and, second, benefit others by encouraging or forcing neighborhood schools to change practices in order to prevent further loss of students to better, by whichever measure, schools (Goldhaber, 1999).

In contrast to advocates of the introduction of the free market into education, many education researchers and scholars claim that when considering equality of access and experience of education, school choice policies, especially those that are unregulated, will only lead to isomorphism of educational institutions and exacerbate racial and economic segregation. Sirkka Ahonen (2000), in *What happens to the common school in the market?*, addresses the differences in the theoretical assumptions of those who advocate markets and social conflict theorists, who argue school choice policies and increased competition sacrifice education equality both in access and in outcome. Ahonen (2000) argues that neo-liberal movements, which encourage competition for schools among students and for students among schools, in education have been detrimental to the publically-funded common school ideal that, arguably, has been the mainstay of education, at least rhetorically, beginning in the nineteenth century and throughout most of the twentieth century. Moreover, she asserts that social conflict theory provides a basis for countering the theoretical arguments made by pro-school choice researchers. According to Ahonen (2000) a family's school choice, rather than being determined on

an equal footing, will be determined by the social and cultural capital of the parents and students, which will in turn lead to increased stratification, as opposed to higher integrated learning environments. Also, as a result of standardized testing measures of accountability, schools will become more similar in pedagogy and in curricular content in order to ensure higher achievement scores. Lastly, and arguably most importantly, because of increased stratification the educational experiences and achievement scores of under resourced and economically isolated schools will suffer. That is, while there may be academic gains made for those students that opt out of their neighborhood schools, the students that are left behind lose educationally, creating a zero-sum game (Ahonen, 2000).

In *Comparing Neo-liberal Projects and Inequality in Education*, Michael Apple (2001) builds upon his previous work concerning knowledge and power in education and addresses both how neoliberal and neoconservative agendas are influencing current educational reform policies. The neoliberal agenda, as stated previously, aims to introduce the free market on public education via encouraging competition and deregulation in order to increase innovation and achievement. The neoconservative agenda, in line with Sleeter and Stillman (2005), seeks to raise achievement and effectiveness of schooling by increasing standardization and making claim to what is legitimized as “real-knowledge” and as a “common culture” (Apple, 2001, p. 409 & 410). While these two groups have slightly different goals and motives, they, according to Apple (2001), have had real effects on educational experiences of students, especially those who are economically and socially disadvantaged, in relation to the dominant

typically White, middle class position, because of the meaningful compromises they have made concerning the direction of new educational reforms. Apple (2001) reviews the claims made by those in favor of the marketization of education; that is, that the markets are neutral, reward merit and will lead to more efficient and effective schools because they must necessarily respond to parental and student demands. Moreover he asserts, in agreement with Ahonen (2000) and others, that this neoliberal theory in reality will only lead to increased educational inequality as a result of the inability of the policies to function as true free markets and the differentiated social and cultural capital students and parents bring to the table. Further, neo-conservative reform policies exacerbate inequality because they serve to legitimate punitive action towards schools and students due to the ways in which achievement is measured increasingly solely based on standardized test scores, which involves the regulation of what and whose knowledge is most legitimate. By looking at the effects social and political power have had on school knowledge and curriculum differentiation, both theoretically and historically, in combination with the conflicting theoretical arguments concerning the marketization of public education and increased accountability, one can see how an investigation of curricular content within a district with an active education choice policy and high publicized system of sanctioning underperforming schools would have important implications for future curriculum and policy decisions.

#### Literature Review: School Choice, Accountability and Curricular Knowledge Selection

There is a rise in recent research that empirically challenges the assumptions and logic of markets in education. Many publications find that choice programs are not



achieving theoretical or practical goals, such as increased innovation, increased equality of access, increased academic achievement, and decreased stratification and institutional inequality. In his discussion of the extent to which charter schools are innovative, Lubienski (2003) compares charter schools to neighborhood schools in regards to educational practices and administration practices. Through analyzing fifty-six published studies on charter school reform, he addresses the consistencies between policy and practice of charter schools. He finds that though there is an increase in diversification in options for parents, rather than for students, there is little actual innovation occurring within classrooms. Rather, charter schools are diverging from public schools in regards to organizational and administrative practices. Thus Lubienski (2003) asserts that the logic of the market theory fails because a central component, innovation, is largely absent in classroom practices, including curriculum.

*In Making the Global City, Making Inequality: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Chicago*, Pauline Lipman (2002) links educational policies to larger urban policies and addresses the negative effects of neoliberalism and globalization on Chicago. She claims there is little analysis of education policy's connection to urban social policy and little analysis of what these educational outcomes mean for most students. Lipman (2002) maintains that globalization and its connection to the economy in Chicago increases both economic and racial segregation, increases institutional inequality, and has increased the service sector economy within the city. As a result, the city has become increasingly stratified, and has become closer to two different cities within one geographic area. She goes on to discuss how these processes have affected

educational reform. Lipman (2002) conducted a qualitative analysis of four elementary schools the Chicago Public School district through interviews and observations, focusing on grades three, six and eight. She analyzes three different aspects of educational reform, including high-stakes testing, remediation, and the creation of new specialized schools and programs. Regarding the ever-growing choice programs within Chicago Public Schools, she maps out the geographical placement of old and new magnet schools and programs, which are separated by the 1995 school reforms, dividing them into plus and minus groups. She categorizes plus schools as those that are college prep or have a strong specialized academic focus, and minus schools as those that are vocational or have a reformative behavior focus. She also includes strict, military academies in the minus category. Overall she finds that new plus-group magnet schools are majorly geographically situated in the Northern, more white and wealthy areas of the city. Conversely, she finds that new minus-group magnet schools are majorly geographically situated in the Southern, more non-white and low-income areas of the city. As such, Lipman (2002) firmly asserts that magnet schools do not provide increased access to resources for the majority of students, and when they do, they are increasing stratified, serving larger exploitive interests of globalization. Her findings are particularly important here because she provides a strong basis for the geographic placement of these new choice institutions and raises questions concerning a more in depth analysis of the actual curricular content within these new programs in comparison with curricular content in neighborhood secondary schools.

Cobb and Glass' (2009) closing article, *School Choice in a Post-Desegregation World*, to a special issue on school choice policies, which addresses various issues such as student achievement, peer environments, familial choices and stratification, is particularly important because it makes three key claims concerning school choice and presents an expansive research synthesis of recent empirical findings. Also, Cobb and Glass (2009) are guided throughout their article by educational equality and how research findings can inform future choice programs and education policies in general. Additionally it is important to note that they discuss the recent Supreme Court ruling *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* (2007) which deemed unconstitutional the use of racial classifications as a factor in determining student placement in schools. As a result of this ruling, many regulated choice programs are employing some socio-economic classification in place of race, as in Chicago for example.

Cobb and Glass (2009) state that unregulated choice programs serve to increase racial and economic stratification, that controlled choice programs have the potential to decrease stratification or at the very least to make it no worse, and lastly that there is little empirical evidence to support claims that either unregulated or regulated choice programs increase innovation or student achievement. They cite multiple articles from this issue and from previous research to support their first claim. For example, Bifulco et al. (2009), cited in Cobb and Glass (2009), analyze a data set where they examine the theoretical school compositions if all students attended their neighborhood school against the actual school compositions as a result of the unregulated choice policy, which includes charter

schools and magnet schools, in Durham, North Carolina. Bifulco et al. (2009) ultimately found that the most advantaged students exercise choice most often, in agreement with Apple (2001) and Ahonen (2000), leaving higher concentrations of economically and socially disadvantaged students behind and thus increasing segregation. Also, according to Cobb and Glass (2009) there is ample evidence that parents choose schools not based solely on academic quality but also, and at times more so, on demographic and peer environments. Moreover, these choice policies leave the hierarchal structures intact and transfer the responsibility of 'solving' educational inequality to families by forcing them to opt out of under resourced schools if they desire a quality education. In order to support their second claim Cobb and Glass (2009) cite two different studies of regulated choice programs. In these two contexts students were classified based upon a combination of race, academic achievement, socio-economic status and, at times, language abilities and then placed in different institutions after an application process. As a result of this consciousness, these programs were able to either reduce stratification or at the very least there was no significant difference than if all students had attended their zoned neighborhood schools. From this, Cobb and Glass (2009) gather that if educational equality and decreased isolation is an explicit policy goal, rather than school assignment by randomized lottery for example, choice programs have the potential to positively affect students' educational experiences.

For their third claim, Cobb and Glass (2009) focus specifically on the two key claims of the neo-liberal agenda in education and address whether deregulation and competition will lead to innovation, both organizational and curricular, and increased

academic achievement. In actuality, they find, through their synthesis of research literature, that market pressures lead to increased conformity and centralization of educational institutions. This happens as a result of schools trying to demonstrate their legitimacy to the public, which usually takes on the form of a back-to-basics, traditional academic preparation with an emphasis on high scores on standardized achievement tests. While Cobb and Glass (2009) are not saying educational changes do not occur in some circumstances, overall there is little evidence to support widespread innovation in school choice settings. In regards to increased student achievement, Cobb and Glass (2009) assert that the empirical evidence is “mixed at best” (p. 268). First, achievement is often only measured according to standardized test scores which are susceptible to many external factors beyond to control of simply changing schools. Also, there are arguments regarding the skimming of the most advantaged students out of neighborhood schools, thus providing above average scores for choice schools. Moreover, because debates surrounding educational choice and standardized tests are highly political, as are most debates concerning education, it is increasingly hard to compare various studies across different contexts fairly or objectively. Cobb and Glass (2009) conclude their article with suggestions on how these findings can inform future policies guided by the idea of educational equality and focus on developing controlled choice policies that emphasize integrated peer environments and increased opportunities for the most disadvantaged. This article is important because it synthesizes some of the most recent research on school choice, it confirms and reiterates the findings of Lubienski (2003) and Lipman (2002), and is guided by equality and justice.

As stated earlier, Sleeter and Stillman (2005), in *Standardizing Knowledge in a Multicultural Society*, conduct a document analysis of statewide curricular standards in California for reading/Language Arts and History/social studies. They aim to demonstrate how these standards are a part of a larger movement to reassert authority over what and whose knowledge is most valid in public education. According to Sleeter and Stillman (2005), beginning with the Civil Rights movement and continuing throughout the 1960's and 1970's, different equity movements, including racial, gender and ethnic, challenged traditional production and selection of knowledge that was largely based upon a privileged, White, male point of view. While meaningful gains were made by these new academic fields and in new areas for public education, such as multicultural and bilingual education which followed a more integrated code and weak frame, the 1980's, and throughout the 1990's into the new millennium, saw an increased backlash against these movements. In response, neoconservative reforms, under the guise of raising standards at the national and state level, initiated an increase in standardization of curricula and of testing accountability which often delegitimized these new fields and forms of knowledge (Sleeter and Stillman, 2005).

Sleeter and Stillman (2005) find via their analysis of curricular standards documents that these standards are very much a part of this reassertion of authority. According to Sleeter and Stillman (2005), these two subjects were highly classified with strict boundaries not only between subjects but also between the knowledge a diverse population would bring to school. For example the reading/Language Arts standards increase focus on the superiority of the English language while native language

knowledge and proficiency is discredited, not only via classroom experience but also through standardized testing which requires English language use only. Moreover those not yet proficient in English are subjected to instruction that emphasizes phonics and rote memorization as opposed to any type of critical thinking or analysis (Sleeter and Stillman, 2005). Additionally, History/social studies standards emphasize a historical account that focuses on the trajectory of European Americans in the United States with immigrant stories inserted sporadically into this nexus. For example, “[o]f the 96 Americans names for study, 82% were male and 18% were female. They were 77% White, 18% African American, 4% Native American, 1% Latino and 0% Asian American” (Sleeter and Stillman, 2005, p. 38). Moreover, Sleeter and Stillman (2005) found that the standards, when evaluated against the codes of power framework, were highly framed as well. Because standardized tests were the main, if not only, evaluative agent, teachers had little room to deviate from the prescribed standards. This pressure was intensified for those students whose first language was not English. California only recognizes, though it offers tests in non-English languages, English tests as a measure for ranking schools. As a result for ESL learners there is even smaller room to deviate. Also text book usage contributes to increased framing and decreased authority for teachers and students. Further, standards encourage curriculum differentiation on the part of teachers for students. Moreover, these standards, particularly in History/social studies, encourage the consumption of a single story or knowledge rather than fostering critical thinking or questioning of the construction of knowledge. The findings of Sleeter and Stillman (2005) align with the theoretical position of Apple (2004, 2001) because they

demonstrate how new standards favor the dominant groups' views and interests via top-down implementation in the name of efficiency and academic achievement.

Buendia, Ares, Juarez and Peercy (2004), in *The Geographies of Difference: The Production of the East Side, West Side and Central City School*, conduct an analysis of the production process of spatial codes within the metropolitan area of Salt Lake Valley and how these codes are then related to curriculum selection. According to Buendia et al. (2004) teachers and administrators within these institutions employ spatial terms such as 'East Side' or 'West Side' as a way of denoting the racial, economic, and to some extent academic status of the students who attend these schools. For example, within the Salt Lake Valley area, West side schools are viewed as non-White, poor and in dangerous areas requiring different treatment and resources. On the other hand East side schools have student that are typically more affluent and largely White. Moreover Buendia et al. (2004) emphasize how these codes are socially constructed via the media, personal relationships and public discourse, with historical context linked to overall city patterns and are used instead of explicit statements regarding students' ability, race and class. Further Buendia et al. (2004) analyze the ways in which different curricula are employed across this divide of schools as a result of the spatial codes which affect school practices. With the implementation of new literacy programs emphasizing increased learning and achievement for all students, which was a district wide initiative, they found that these programs were differentially chosen for particular schools. For example all but two of the West side schools chose to implement either Success for All (SFA) or California Early Literacy/Extended Literacy Learning (CEL/xLL). Both of these literacy programs have



strong foci on phonic acquisition with compensatory education themes and are a basic or remedial, structured approach to language. Moreover, as stated by Buendia et al. (2004), “the programs on the West Side of the city were adopted for children who were viewed as socially and intellectually different from other children” (p. 848). In contrast schools on the East side and some in the Central city developed their own literacy programs based upon the viewed needs of their students rather than purchasing pre-packaged literacy programs. Literacy for All (LFA) was developed as a “balanced literacy program” which focused on whole language acquisition and the use of literature texts as a means cultivating literacy. Not only were East side students deemed academically advanced enough for the incorporation of literature texts into their program, East side teachers were given the authority to develop their own program for their students. Through Buendia et al.’s (2004) findings and analysis, one can see how the status of particular students, here codified in spatial terms, is nearly directly linked to the type and status of curriculum deemed appropriate. These findings also reaffirm, as did Sleeter and Stillman (2005), the theoretical arguments made by Apple (2004, 2001) concerning knowledge, power and a students’ social and political ties to the larger society.

In addition to addressing school choice and the implications of the geographic placement of new programs in the Chicago Public School district, Lipman (2002) also discusses the accountability and standards policies of the district. According to Lipman (2002), after the school reforms of 1995, as a whole the district heightened its focus on standardized tests as the sole tool for assessing school success or failure, which as she explains, has important impacts on the educational experiences of students. She accounts

the variation in emphasis on these tests, that is, how much influence they had on the content of curriculum and how much time was spent specifically in test preparation, across the four different elementary schools in her analysis. Lipman (2002) details the repeated sentiments of teachers and school-level administrators as regretful that so much emphasis was placed on standardized tests by the district, though these sentiments did not prevent the narrowing of the curriculum or limit the classroom time spent preparing for the tests. She reiterates that, perhaps not surprisingly, those schools with higher concentrations of poverty and non-White students and those with the lowest test scores are most affected by these pressures. For example, in an elementary school that was overwhelmingly African-American and low-income, the three to four months preceding the test were strictly dedicated to test preparation, including skills that were only useful on the tests, such as how to strategically eliminate answers on a multiple choice question. Additionally, this same school held school-wide assemblies stressing the importance of test preparation and encouraging positive test performance. In contrast, at an elementary school which had strikingly fewer low-income students, less than fifty percent, and an increased ethnically diverse population, high test schools were viewed as a natural outcome of a well-rounded, in-depth curriculum, which emphasized the ability to think freely and to produce thoughtful answers, as opposed to memorization and selection. The effects of high-stakes testing, that is the condition in which all principal, teacher, student, and school futures depend on high scores, Lipman (2002) asserts not only exacerbates inequality by cheapening or narrowing the curriculum for the most disadvantaged students, but also it leads to the de-skilling of teachers. This de-skilling of teachers is

accomplished, for example, via the implementation of scripted guides and leads to the flight of many well-qualified and socially conscious educators that focus on critical thinking and awareness in their teaching from these test-driven schools. Moreover, high-stakes testing produces increase retention rates in key testing grades which is either ‘solved’ through summer school, where the curriculum is strictly test oriented, or through transition high schools, where students are subject to remedial coursework and where African-American and Latino students are overrepresented.

Further, Lipman (2002) addresses the symbolic effects of standardized testing and accountability. She asserts that the extreme focus on testing is a part of a larger process of regulation. This form of accountability privileges and legitimates a particular kind of knowledge which is in the interests of those in power and devalues knowledge that is culturally relevant to a diverse, non-White population. For example, at a majority Latino elementary school, by privileging the English language in test-taking and the knowledge only applicable to the testing process, accountability served to devalue the native language and cultural knowledge of the majority of students, while undermining critical thinking for simple answer selection on multiple choice questions. Also, testing accountability serves to transfer the blame for underperforming schools from the lack of funding for material resources, such as new text books or high quality staff, for example, to individual teachers and students who fail to live up to high-stakes test standards, leaving the larger political and governance system without fault.

Also, as mentioned above, as a result of the focus on high-stakes testing, those who fail to achieve high scores are subject to punitive action, most often through

probation on the school-level and retention on the individual student-level. Lipman (2002) states that the academic standards set by the state and district do little to provide meaningful support in the day-to-day task of teaching. For example, those students who perform poorly on tests and who are as a result retained are then subject to a curriculum that, rather than cultivating critical knowledge or skills, strictly focuses on improving test scores through various worksheets and drills. For example, in the summer school provided for underperforming students there is no discussion of specific literature texts and no complex writing assignments (Lipman, 2002). Also, she discusses how teacher often addressed state standards in their curricular plans, the ways in which these various standards were achieved varied widely from classroom to classroom. For example, many teachers expressed that they often developed their curriculum and teaching plans first and then went back and inserted the standards as they would fit. Moreover, Lipman (2002) emphasized that simply because these standards are developed and theoretically implemented, that does not mean the resources, support, or practical tools exist for implementing them. That is, in face or in name the standards may be apparent in course plans or in district goals, but the state-level or district-level support may not be in place to fulfill such plans. As a result, these standards, and the tests used for assessment, then only serve to further exacerbate inequality by rationalizing punitive action at the student-level and school-level for not meeting these standards that regulate what and whose knowledge is more worthy of measure. In essence, Lipman (2002) states, “Like high-stakes testing, the standards help legitimate a system that, as a whole, continues to produce inequality” (p. 397).

In *Assessing No Child Left Behind and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies*, David Hursh (2007) discusses neoliberal theory in relation to the premises of No Child Left Behind, or NCLB, and the effects of accountability via standardized testing on New York and Texas, assessing the theoretical claims and the reality of their outcomes. Regarding neoliberal theory, in line with Apple (2001), Lipman (2002), Lubienski (2003, and others, Hursh (2007) states that neoliberal policies of deregulation, choice and accountability are presented by their advocates as inevitable given global markets and competition economically. Thus first, schools must be more accountable to the economy by producing competitive workers, and second the introduction of markets into the education system is the only way to increase school quality, as measured by objective test scores, across the board. According to Hursh (2007), current educational policy of markets and accountability exemplifies a shift from a social democratic liberal conception of society and education towards a neoliberal conception, emphasizing markets, and a neoconservative conception, emphasizing accountability. Beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which blamed poor economic performance on the decrease in educational quality in American schools, particularly in urban, non-White schools, education policy has increasingly emphasized the need to raise standards, accountability and choice, which was epitomized by the enacting of NCLB (Hursh, 2007). Moreover, Hursh (2007) asserts that advocates of NCLB claim that theoretically if all students are held to the same standards, all students are assessed by the same objective test and parents have access to test results and other school information enabling them to make choices on school attendance, these reforms will both increase educational quality

and efficiency while at the same time decreasing educational achievement gaps among student groups based on race and class. Though, as Hursh (2007) demonstrates through his analysis of New York and Texas educational outcomes since implementing high-stakes testing forms of accountability, the various claims of neoliberal and neoconservative reformers rarely hold true in practice. Further Hursh (2007) demonstrates that these policies specifically undermine democratic concepts of education. For example, under NCLB, schools are required to make Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP, in effort to have one hundred percent of students proficient, as determined and assessed individually state-by-state, by the year 2014. Because schools are subject to a variety of sanctions, including restructuring or turning over control to an outside source in the form of a charter or contract, school failure is not only detrimental to public image, which becomes increasingly important in a competitive environment, but also in the specific interest of for-profit and non-profit entities looking to take advantage of privatization of education. Moreover, rather than AYP accurately assessing actual student progress, even if granting that the standardized tests are a valid measure of student achievement, which Hursh (2007) later addresses, on standardized achievement tests, it focuses on if schools are on track to have one hundred percent proficiency, including special education students and English language learners, by 2014. That is, even if a school makes substantial gains in scores or skill levels, if the same gains will still not allow achievement of one hundred percent by the deadline, schools are still in danger of restructuring or privatization in various forms.

Regarding the reality of the effects of NCLB policies in New York and Texas, Hursh (2007) finds that, first, in both New York and Texas test scores and rigor were both manipulated at various points for desired outcome. For example, in New York the ‘cut-off’ score was changed so as to allow more students to pass, thus boosting overall achievement claims. Also, Hursh (2007) states that tests have been repeatedly questioned regarding their validity and reliability. Hursh (2007) accounts various examples of poorly formed questions and answers, questions that favored non-poor, typically White students, or the altering of reading passages so as to not reflect any cultural or social diversity. Further, rather than being an objective indicator of student competency, tests were a better predictor of family income level (Hursh, 2007).

Secondly, Hursh (2007) asserts, in agreement with Lipman (2002), that high-stakes testing leads to an increased pressure to narrow the curriculum to specific test skills and subjects, such as solely Math and Reading, for example. Moreover, also in agreement with Lipman (2002), this narrowing of curriculum occurs most often in schools that are not meeting the stipulations of AYP, which are typically the most disadvantaged, underfunded schools. For example, in Texas, schools emphasized writing formulaic five-paragraph essays over any other form of writing, in addition to increased focus on rote preparation for those with less social and cultural capital in order to compensate for the potential bias in the tests. Further, the sparse resources that were available to schools were diverted to test preparation materials over other non-tested subject areas, such as Science or Art (Hursh, 2007).

Also, Hursh (2007) addresses the ways in which schools and districts strategically altered the test taking pool in order to boost overall scores. Specifically, Texas saw an increase in student retention and in student drop-outs. For example, urban districts with poor tests scores had high rates of retention in the ninth grade, the year before students move on to take their standardized tests for the first time, and that African-American and Latino students were overrepresented in the population of retained students. As a result of this increased retention, Texas also saw an increase in students dropping out of school. Though, as Hursh (2007) details, these students were strategically classified not as drop-outs, rather as a school transfer for example, so as to not drastically increase the rate that is reported to the public. Nevertheless, through looking at student body counts in the ninth grade in contrast to the twelfth grade, Hursh (2007) and other were able to assess, to a more reliable extent, the actual change in student population over the course of four years. As a result, because NCLB is not increasing education achievement or decreasing gaps in education achievement, in line with Lipman (2002), it is in reality only serving to exacerbate inequality and diminish educational quality via the narrowing of curriculum and the punitive measures taken against underperforming students which leads to increased drop-out rates.

Lastly, on a national level, Hursh (2007) adds to the assertion that NCLB has detrimental effects on education by citing NAEP test scores over the beginning years of NCLB and the previous decades, finding that there has not been significant growth in scores and in some cases students are performing even more poorly than in the time before NCLB. Moreover, rather than emphasizing education as a social right in national



education policy discourse, the neoliberal and neoconservative policies of NCLB focus on the individualism and assertion of 'real' knowledge. For example, as Hursh (2007) states, in a democracy decisions are made via communal discussion, which requires the provision of reason and deliberation, but in educational markets where parental votes are made on an individual level, as if there is not great effect on the surrounding social environment, via attendance without discussion of reasons or motives. Moreover, these decisions are largely based on high-stakes test results, which are controlled by the state and corporations that develop the standards and the tests to assess them.

Overall the studies cited here seek to present two different though connected themes in educational research; one being the effects of neoliberal school choice policies on education and the other being neoconservative reforms that aim to reassert which knowledge is most worthy of measure via increased accountability through high-stakes testing and how these two trends affect curriculum differentiation and the ways in which school knowledge is tied to societal power relationships. While Lubienski (2003) and Lipman (2002) present important findings regarding innovation in education and the geographic placement of new choice institutions, both raise questions regarding how both innovation and geographic placement affect curriculum practices in choice settings. Sleeter and Stillman (2005) in their analysis of curriculum standards provide insight into how standardization and reassertion of authority affect curriculum, though again, it would serve well to conduct a similar curricular content analysis to examine the ways in which neo-liberal choice policies and neo-conservative standardization policies interact within a school choice setting. Also, Buendia et al.'s (2004) analysis of school level practices and

curriculum differentiation within one metropolitan region offer important insight into how socially constructed spatial codes intersect with the selection and implementation of different curricula. Lastly, Lipman (2002) and Hursh (2007) present important analyses and findings regarding how high-stakes testing and sanctioning in the name of raising standards affects the educational experiences of students, particularly those that are most disadvantaged and underperforming to begin with. Though again, these studies raises questions as to how a similar analysis of standards and curricula would compare within a district with an increasingly active school choice program.

### Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which there is curriculum differentiation among various types of secondary schools in the Chicago Public School district. My primary research question is:

What similarities and differences exist between the knowledges selected for Language Arts curriculum and how they are framed across four Chicago high schools and in what ways is this knowledge selection embedded with larger social and political power relationships via official policy implementation?

Answering this question will allow me to explore the ways in which neoliberal school choice policies and neoconservative standardization policies intersect with the processes of knowledge selection in curricula content. Moreover, this research will allow me to address to what extent this selection and differentiation for various school populations is tied to race and socio-economic status. Also, while answering this question would have important implications for the specific Chicago context, the issues of

educational markets, standards and accountability, and curriculum differentiation are much larger and relevant to education research and policy as a whole.

### Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which issues of knowledge selection, student social position, and curriculum differentiation intersect within an educational market and accountability setting. In order to investigate this issue, I sought to examine the stated and planned curricula across the English/Language Arts subject for four high schools at the ninth and eleventh grade levels within the Chicago Public School district. The four high schools were selected according to the following criteria: one selective enrollment high schools based on scores on an academic standardized test, one charter high school which selects students from an applicant pool using random lottery, and two zoned neighborhood high schools. Of the two neighborhood high schools, they were selected based up their standing with the Chicago public school district and how this standing had affected their curricular content.

I sought out course syllabi for these ninth and eleventh classes in order to view stated course goals and objectives regarding the skills and knowledge to be fostered. I selected ninth grade because it is the first year, particularly in choice settings, where the aim is to develop students' skills to the same level. Eleventh grade was selected specifically because it is the year in which all students take the Prairie State Achievement Exam. All of the information came from public postings on individual high schools' websites. In an effort to obtain the same information that would be available to parents researching high schools for their children or other interested community members, no

contact was made for specific, additional information regarding course content. Also, due to this constraint, the amount of information available publicly from the school affected the selection process. For example, ASPIRA Charter- Mirta Ramirez was the only charter high school, apart from the Chicago Virtual Charter School, that had specific course syllabi posted on their official website. In cases where multiple syllabi were available for the same level course, the syllabi were taken as a composite to be analyzed.

Once the final set of material had been selected, I conducted a thorough document analysis. All documents were coded for themes and patterns. This was particularly important for course goals and objectives, as the themes and patterns were then compared among the high schools and compared to Illinois Learning Standards documents. Further all texts used in courses, homework assignments and large projects that were outlined on the syllabi were assessed according to the degree in which they explicitly encouraged critical thinking, to the degree they allowed for flexibility in the classroom, and to the degree of authority they gave both teachers and students. Moreover, syllabi were analyzed according to how they framed or approached the course; that is which standards, if any, goals and skills sets guided the course and from where these frames were derived or selected. Additionally, the listed assignment or course outlines were assessed in regards to how they were supporting the stated frame. Lastly, key themes in both the course and in the syllabi were drawn out, for example if course work focused on primarily concrete, grammatical skills or more abstract analytical-thinking skills.

### Chicago School Reform: From Local School Councils to Renaissance 2010

The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act, brought on over the previous decades by the sharp increase in non-White populations to the city and the failure of the district to respond appropriately to outside pressures, created Local School Councils, or LSCs, comprised of educators, parents and community members for each individual school. LSCs were given the power to hire or fire principals, endorse or deny various schools plans, and allocate funding to programs (Lipman, 2002; Lewis, 2001). In theory, increased parental and community involvement in the governing of schools, in various forms such as programming or curricula, would positively affect student performance resulting in higher achievement rates, particularly for schools with high concentrations of low-income and non-White students (Lewis, 2001). While these councils varied widely in practice across schools, they did serve to increase democratic participation (Lipman, 2002). Though, because the 1988 School Reform Act did not relieve pressures on schools to achieve, when significant positive results were not achieved or when they differed across schools, state-level and district-level administrators became impatient with the progress schools were making, and thus advocated for the school reforms enacted in 1995. The Chicago school reforms of 1995 undemocratically recentralized control over the entire district in the hands of Mayor Richard M. Daley who now had the power to appoint a five-member Board of Trustees, which replaced the Board of Education (Lipman, 2002; Lewis, 2001). These reforms brought on both an increased focus on accountability via standardized testing, complete with sanctions and remediation for underperforming schools, and the provision for the introduction of new magnet schools

and programs, a portion of which accepted students through a process of selective enrollment as detailed above in Lipman's (2002) discussion of the geographic placement of new programs, as alternative options for students and families. Both of these reforms were centered on the logic that changes in school governance would directly and positively affect student academic achievement, thus both specifically restructured school controls. Moreover, because of external pressures, both at the community-level and the corporate-level, these reforms were layered over one another resulting in tension between democratic decentralization and authoritative recentralization.

After the creation of new magnet programs under the reforms of 1995 and the creation of a small number of charter schools that were approved by the state of Illinois ([www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us](http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us)), in 2004 Mayor Daley and the Board of Trustees approved a large scale choice initiative called Renaissance 2010. The goal of Renaissance 2010 was to open over one hundred new charter and contract schools by the year 2010 so as to drastically increase options for students and their families. Run under the Office of New Schools, Renaissance 2010, in agreement with neoliberal policy and reform, aims to increase educational equality by providing quality options to those students wanting out of their poor performing neighborhood schools and by forcing neighborhood schools to compete for students. According to the Office of New Schools website, charters are given freedom from traditional district constraints but are still evaluated on a five-year time frame according to scores on standardized tests. In order to attend these new charter and contract schools students and their families must submit a separate application, though in contrast to selective enrollment schools, generally no test scores are required to be

submitted, for each school during the December of the preceding school year. In order to educate the community about the variety of schools available, the Chicago Public School district publishes individual school report cards, which include quantitative demographic information about schools and test scores on either the ISAT for elementary schools or the PSAE for secondary schools. Additionally the district holds an annual school fair where families visit booths to collect information in one outing on a number of schools. In the *Options for Knowledge Guide* (2009) published by the district, families urged “to apply to all of the schools in which you are interested,” since students are not assured a spot in any school (p. 43). As a result, oversubscribed schools employ a randomized lottery to fill the open spaces within the school.

While, in contrast to selective enrollment schools and other various magnet programs, the lotteries of charter and contract schools have the potential to serve all kinds of students within the Chicago Public Schools, particularly those that are most economically and socially disadvantaged, the Renaissance 2010 policy still, in practice, favors those students that have the most resources, for example parents who have the time and knowledge to sift through the plethora of Renaissance 2010 publications and charter school information. In building upon her previous research and activism, and in collaboration with David Hursh, Pauline Lipman (Lipman and Hursh, 2007) discuss Renaissance 2010 in conjunction with accountability policies that further exemplify the neoliberal theories both have addressed in previous work (Lipman, 2002; Hursh, 2007). According to Lipman and Hursh (2007), Renaissance 2010, which at the time of its passage in 2004 was the largest district-wide school choice initiative in the country,

builds upon neoliberal and neoconservative policies that inspired the centralized accountability reforms of NCLB and that strengthened the recentralization of control in CPS that began in 1995. One critical and arguably detrimental aspect of Renaissance 2010 was the elimination of the democratic Local School Councils of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act in new charter and contract schools. Moreover the Board of Education and the Office of New Schools, which are appointed by Mayor Daley, oversee the approval and funding of new schools, further attempting to remove democratic processes in the Chicago school system. Also, in contrast to the Office of New Schools website, Lipman and Hursh (2007) stress the provision in Renaissance 2010 for the closing of a significant number of underperforming schools and they stress that these schools most often are reopened as charter or contract schools with governing bodies of either for-profit corporations or non-profit organizations, though, due to funding and resources, they state that corporate run schools are most privileged in the Chicago choice environment. Lastly, Lipman and Hursh (2007) stress the relation of Renaissance 2010 to larger trends of gentrification of neighborhoods, particularly in racialized terms. They cite Englewood, an area in the far South portion of the city with some of the highest concentrations of poverty though seen as next on the list for new high-cost housing development, as an example. In order to attract high-income, typically White families, Renaissance 2010 provides the means to set up new 'quality' schools for these children, while displacing neighborhood students and families to other still economically disadvantaged areas and schools. Though Lipman and Hursh (2007) emphasize that Renaissance 2010, the culmination of nearly two decades of public school reform, has



created new community alliances and coalitions to resist such policies, such as school closings or housing developments for example. While Lipman and Hursh (2007) discuss the elimination of Local School Councils in charter and contract schools, according to the Office of New Schools website, in 2009 the district initiated Transition Advisory Councils that are comprised of community members, parents and others to serve as an intermediary between students, school officials and the community, though it has yet to be seen to what extent these councils are or will be involved in the decision making on various school issues. Overall the school reforms of the past two decades have only increasingly been based upon neoliberal and neoconservative theories and goals. Though rather than achieving their claims of increased educational quality, particularly for low-income, non-White, largely urban students, policies of choice and high-stakes testing in Chicago have only served to further exacerbate educational inequality (Lipman and Hursh, 2007).

#### Illinois State Learning Standards and Prairie State Achievement Exam

Published and enacted in 1997, the Illinois State Learning Standards are, in short, the key skills, rather than previous broad goals, students are expected to learn during their elementary and secondary years and framed as a part of larger standards-based reforms. The standards were developed through a combination of writing teams for each specific subject area and community input. After the initial draft created by the subject writing teams in 1996, they were presented to the public for comments, critiques and debate. During the early part of 1997 revision teams were assembled to alter the standards based upon the thoughts and submissions of public, which produced the final set of standards

still in place today. The standards put forth by the state are divided into seven different subject areas, all of which include, “five cross-disciplinary abilities;” “solving problems, communicating, using technology, working on teams, and making connections” (Introduction to Illinois Learning Standards, 1997, p. 6). The Illinois Board of Education details briefly the growing standards movement and provides a research-based argument stating the need for standards. Simply, according to the Illinois Board of Education, students learn best and teachers can educate more effectively if there are clear, specific directives as to what students should be achieving and to on what they will be assessed. Moreover, they stress the need to align education with the changing, technological economy, to target limited resources efficiently, and to hold all students to common high standards as a means of increasing educational equality. Also, the standards naturally coincide with increased accountability, though it is stated that this will be a combination of classroom assessment and standardized tests. The Illinois Board of Education additionally provides five guiding philosophies for the standards, which focus on community involvement in student learning, the importance of cultivating skills useful for employment, the incorporation of current technology in education, the process of continual standard revision and development, and making sure students are provided with ample opportunities to learn these various skills (Introduction..., 1997).

In contrast to the standards documents analyzed by Sleeter and Stillman (2005), the Illinois Learning Standards for English/Language Arts do not provide for the specific content to be included in the curriculum, such as particular literary works for example. Rather, the English/Language Arts standards are divided into five state goals, with both

reasoning for the necessity of the goal and various charts that explain the goal in different levels from early elementary to late high school. The five state goals include, “reading with understanding and fluency, read and understand literature representative of various societies, eras and ideas, write to communicate for a variety of purposes, listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations, and, finally, use the language arts to acquire, assess and communicate information” (State goals 1-5). Each state goal has between two and three sub-goals, with sub-skills under each that emphasize specific proficiencies. Thus, for example, there are four different levels to identify each standard, labeled as 1.A.1a, which would mean state goal 1, skill set A, for Early Elementary, sub-skill a.

All of the goals stress the importance of literacy and other Language Arts skills to success in all areas of education and life, via reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In essence, if a student fails to acquire or if an educator fails to foster these standards, the student will be unable to thrive in all other subject and all other interactions with their environment. The standards provide for a large variety of skill acquisition, totaling over thirty-nine different standards for Early High School alone. These standards range from specific mechanical or technical skills to more broad conceptual skills. For example, under State Goal 3, which centers on effective writing, in Early High School students should ideally be able to, “use standard English to edit documents for clarity, subject/verb agreement, adverb and adjective agreement and verb tense; proofread for spelling, capitalization and punctuation; and ensure that documents are formatted in final form for submission and/or presentation” (State Goal 3.A.4). Further, by Late High School students should be able to, “produce grammatically correct documents using standard

manuscript specifications for a variety of purposes and audiences” (State Goal 3.A.5). Again, these two goals are representative of very specific technical skills students are expected to acquire regarding the standard written English language, which also demonstrates the acknowledgement of appropriate language use depending on context. In contrast, under State Goal 2, which addresses reading comprehension in a variety of contexts, by the end of Early High School students should be able to, “analyze form, content, purpose and major themes of American literature and literature of other countries in their historical perspectives” (State Goal 2.B.4b). Additionally, by Late High School students should be able to, “apply knowledge gained from literature as a means of understanding contemporary and historic economic, social and political issues and perspectives” (State Goal 2.B.5b). These standards are meaningful because they provide the space to enact a curriculum that fosters critical thinking and cultural awareness. Moreover, from Early High School to Late High School students are expected to move beyond an isolated reading or analysis of literature to one that bridges social and political realities to the literature they produce. While overall, as demonstrated, the Illinois Learning Standards for English/Language Arts balance technical and conceptual skills and provide the opportunity to include analytical discourse in curricula, the extent to which standards are implemented across different contexts often varies widely.

In the Spring of his or her eleventh grade school year, each Chicago Public School student first takes the Prairie State Achievement Exam that is required for graduation, which is comprised of the ACT Plus Writing exam, with reading, writing, math and science sections, an Illinois State Board of Education science exam, and

WorkKeys exam, with reading and math portions

([www.isbe.state.il.us/assessment/psae.htm](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/assessment/psae.htm)). The PSAE scores, as stated earlier, are then used as a measure of student ability, teacher effectiveness, and overall school standing. Again, failure to meet PSAE standards and to make AYP carries the heavy burden of remediation and sanction, often in the form of retention of the student-level and restructuring or privatization on the school-level. Because of the extreme weight placed upon this examination, it is important to address the skills and knowledge emphasized and assessed by the PSAE. According to the ACT website, the English portion of the test contains seventy-five multiple choice questions and assesses students' skill level regarding punctuation, grammar and usage, sentence structure, strategy, organization and style ([www.actstudent.org/testprep/descriptions/engdescript.html](http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/descriptions/engdescript.html)). Students are asked to read a variety of short passages and either make changes or leave in the original form underlined portions regarding the above skills. For the Reading portion of the ACT, students read selections from, "social studies, natural sciences, prose fiction and the humanities" ([www.actstudent.org/testprep/descriptions/readdescript.html](http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/descriptions/readdescript.html)), and are asked forty multiple choice questions both about explicit and indirect topics within the selections. This portion of the test lasts thirty-five minutes, thus both comprehension and speed are crucial to success, as in other sections of the test. The identification and understanding are the most important skills targeted this section, rather than the recollection and expression of facts or knowledge learned previously. Lastly, in the Writing portion of the ACT students are allotted thirty minutes and are assessed based upon their ability to write persuasively. Students are presented with two arguments

regarding a specific topic and then are asked to clearly write a defense for one of the positions ([www.actstudent.org/testprep/descriptions/writingdescript.html](http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/descriptions/writingdescript.html)). Overall, the ACT stresses the speed of reading comprehension in all sections, via the various directions, questions and prompts, and, apart from the Writing portion, the identification of correct answers from a set rather than the expression and explanation of responses.

Students are also assessed in both reading and math in the WorkKeys section of the PSAE, which is also developed and distributed by ACT, Inc, though this section addresses workplace specific skills. Particularly the reading portion, titled Reading for Information, focuses on students' ability to comprehend text in order to complete or perform a task. According to the WorkKeys website, the texts of exam, "include memos, letters, directions, signs, notices, bulletins, policies, and regulations" ([www.act.org/workkeys/assess/reading/index.html](http://www.act.org/workkeys/assess/reading/index.html)). Because these types of texts are not always written specifically for their intended readers, students are asked to extract only the most relevant information for the task at hand. For instance, one example test question given on the site for level three, the lowest level, abilities provides a directive regarding the process and information about employees receiving a store discount. The question asked students to identify from the directive what he or she, "should write on a store employee's receipt," which would be, "E. Your initials" ([www.act.org/workkeys/assess/reading/sample3.html](http://www.act.org/workkeys/assess/reading/sample3.html)). According to the PSAE parent brochure, the WorkKeys exam is included within the PSAE so that students are able to submit their scores to future employers, in order to enable the employers to identify proper eligibility for various positions. That is, they are able to identify the students who

are most able to read, understand, and follow directions. Even though reading comprehension is already assessed via all three sections of the ACT Plus Writing, WorkKeys is specifically geared toward economic and business interests, arguably more beneficial to employers as a means for selecting employees, than to students who are already being tested for their reading ability level in another section of the PSAE.

#### Four Chicago High Schools: Background and History

William Jones College Preparatory High School, or Jones College Prep, is a selective enrollment high school located in the South Loop, an area in downtown Chicago (CPS school page online). In order to be considered for admission to Jones College Prep students must score a minimum of stanine five on the Illinois ISAT in elementary or middle school. Also, students must additionally fill out a selective enrollment application and take the school's entrance examination ([www.jonescollegeprep.org](http://www.jonescollegeprep.org)). Since its opening in 1938, Jones College Prep has gone through various school changes from a vocational and business emphasis to one of college preparation. In 1982, Jones College Prep was designated as an Options for Knowledge school, which opened enrollment to students across the city in an effort to achieve an integrated educational setting. In 1998 Jones College Prep became "an entirely new school" with a strict academic college preparatory focus for the curriculum ([www.jonescollegeprep.org](http://www.jonescollegeprep.org) > About Us > History). This reform as a completely new school was a part of the opening of six new selective enrollment high schools across this district (Lipman, 2002). Though, according to Lipman (2002), this transformation was not uncontested. Parents and community members voiced their concerns and frustrations that their community school was being

turned over to a selective enrollment policy in order to attract and serve wealthy parents and families in a new South Loop housing development. Lipman (2002) states that, “the displacement of the previous students was itself a process of gentrification, removing the working-class high school students who fought to keep it open as much as working-class families have fought developers in the neighborhood” (p. 408). Currently, Jones College Prep serves a diverse student population, with its two largest groups being Latino and White at approximately thirty-three and thirty percent respectively, and with only fifty-four percent of its students being low-income (Illinois State Report Card, 2009).

According to the state report card, ninety-four percent of the students meet or exceed the PSAE standards with an average ACT score of 24.5, well above the district average of 17.6. Moreover, the Jones College Prep website presents the characters and values educators are aiming to impart at this school. The Jones College Prep mission statement emphasizes leadership cultivation via holistic and demanding education. Innovative, relevant and diverse curricula are stressed. Further Jones College Prep also describes their Grad @ Grad values which are the characteristics that students are expected to be in the process of developing at the time of graduation. Jones College Prep aspires that students will be, “socially skilled and mature, compassionate, socially just and responsible, well-rounded and holistic, and intellectually competent”

([www.jonescollegeprep.org](http://www.jonescollegeprep.org) > Mission & Grad at Grad). Across the description of these five values, Jones College Prep repeatedly emphasizes the ideal ways students should respond to and think about complex social and political contexts via a concern for the greater good of others, specifically traditionally marginalized populations, and the world.



With a focus on the process of education, students are encouraged to critically inquire across academic disciplines guided by principles of social justice in order to become future leaders that are intelligent and caring. Again, this information provided on the official Jones College Prep website is meaningful, in addition to course syllabi and descriptions, because it is the ideal image that is presented to parents that are investigating and deciding which school they would like their child to attend.

ASPIRA Charter – Mirta Ramirez Computer Science, or ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, is a charter high school that was opened in 2003 in the Logan Square neighborhood on the near Northwest side of Chicago. In order to attend ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez students and families must fill out a standard application which is available from the school, CPS website, school fair, among various other locations, and submit it by the December of the preceding school year ([www.mrcscs.aspirail.org](http://www.mrcscs.aspirail.org)). Unlike Jones College Prep and in agreement with Renaissance 2010 policy, no test scores are required for entrance and the school conducts a randomized lottery when it is oversubscribed to fill spaces. ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez is one of three charter schools in Chicago, the other two being ASPIRA Charter – Early College and ASPIRA Charter – Haugan Campus, run by the ASPIRA, Inc. of Illinois non-profit organization. According to the main website for ASPIRA, Inc. of Illinois, the need for the establishment of ASPIRA was born out of riots that occurred in the largely Puerto Rican community of West Town in 1966 over inequalities and discrimination in education, housing, healthcare, among other issues. ASPIRA as an organization existed first in New York and was expanded to Illinois with the work of their first leader, Mirta Ramirez ([www.aspirail.org](http://www.aspirail.org)). While serving many needs of the

Puerto Rican and Latino community, educationally ASPIRA is guided by what they call the ASPIRA Process, which includes Awareness, Analysis, and Action ([www.aspirail.org](http://www.aspirail.org) > About Us > ASPIRA Process). Similar to the Grad @ Grad values of Jones College Prep, according to ASPIRA Inc., of Illinois this “intervention model” emphasizes the need for students to be conscious of and think critically about their social and political environment, particularly in regards to their cultural heritage, in order to have the capacity to act as positive leaders of change within their communities. Specifically, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez is geared toward a technological education in order “to bridge the ‘digital divide’ for Latino students” ([www.mrcscs.aspirail.org](http://www.mrcscs.aspirail.org) > About Us). In contrast to Jones College Prep, where all students are expected to attend a post-secondary institution after graduation, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez emphasizes both college and employment after high school. Due to the relatively small size of the school, the curriculum of ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez is inclusive with all students taking the same or similar courses. That is, within one academic area there are not different tiers, such as honors or general for example. Moreover, according to their website, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez participates in High Tech High which is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation ([www.mrcscs.aspirail.org](http://www.mrcscs.aspirail.org) > About Us). Currently, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez serves a student population that is approximately eighty-three percent Latino and largely low-income, at ninety-four percent. Despite their aims to be an opportunity for increased educational quality for disadvantaged youth, when measured against the Chicago Public School district as a whole on test scores, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez students on average score a 17.9 on the ACT, roughly the same as the district average of 17.6, with only

approximately seventeen percent of students meeting or exceeding PSAE standards in Reading (Illinois State Report Card, 2009). As a result, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez is failing to meet NCLB standards for AYP as has been on Academic Watch Status for one year.

Theodore Roosevelt High School, or Roosevelt, is a neighborhood high school located in the diverse neighborhood of Albany Park. In contrast to both Jones College Prep and ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, Roosevelt has an open enrollment to students living in the attendance areas, and if space is available students from outside the attendance areas may attend by submitting a standard application. Principal Dr. Alejandra Alvarez, in her welcome message on the school's official website, describes Roosevelt as a "tapestry of hope" due to the diversity of the student body and the school's emphasis on "treating everyone with dignity and respect" ([www.rhsroughriders.org](http://www.rhsroughriders.org) > Principal's Message). Rather than providing the history of Roosevelt, in either her message or on the website, Dr. Alejandra Alvarez emphasizes the school's usage of College Board's SpringBoard Math and English curriculum, making it an EXCEerator School. According to the Roosevelt website, the school has been employing this curriculum since it was selected for funding by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2005 along with ten other schools nationwide ([www.rhsroughriders.org](http://www.rhsroughriders.org) > About Us > EXCEerator School). The SpringBoard curriculum aims to prepare students for college entrance exams, Advanced Placement coursework and post-secondary success. The Roosevelt website briefly reviews other programs offered by the school, such as AVID and AP, in addition to general and honors coursework found under their class listings, and directs students and parents to the official SpringBoard website for more information about the program

([www.collegeboard.com/springboard](http://www.collegeboard.com/springboard)). At the official SpringBoard website one can find general information about the curriculum, research conducted on SpringBoard, policy and funding information, and sample lesson plans. The website stresses the difficulty of the curriculum and plethora of resources available to educators and students including, “Consumable Student Editions, Annotated Teacher Editions, Professional Development, Formative Assessments, and SpringBoard Online and Community” ([www.collegeboard.com/springboard](http://www.collegeboard.com/springboard)). Also, according to SpringBoard, the curriculum is also aligned around four goals, “rigor, relevance, relationships, and results” ([www.collegeboard.com/springboard](http://www.collegeboard.com/springboard) > Program at a glance) and specifically emphasizes the positive results SpringBoard enables in schools using the program, particularly in disadvantaged urban settings (Executive Summary, 2008). Currently, Roosevelt serves a population similar to that of ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez with the largest demographic being their Latino population at seventy-three percent, with their next largest groups being Black and White at eleven and eight percent respectively, and a student body in which ninety percent of its students are low-income (Illinois State Report Card, 2009). Also, Roosevelt students on average score a 16.2 on the ACT exam with only about twenty percent of its students meeting or exceeding PSAE standards in Reading. As a result, Roosevelt, similar to ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, is failing to make AYP according to NCLB standards and has been on Academic Watch for six years at the state level.

William Rainey Harper High School, or Harper, is a neighborhood high school located in West Englewood, an economically disadvantaged area in the far South side of Chicago that employs the same open enrollment policy as Roosevelt High School.

Beginning with the 2008 school year, Harper was deemed a Chicago Turnaround School which involved significant governmental restrictions and the laying off of all previous teachers and administrators, with a ‘fresh’ start in 2008. The explicit goal of the reform aimed to raise student scores on standardized tests in order to fulfill AYP requirements ([www.teachchicagoturnarounds.org/harper](http://www.teachchicagoturnarounds.org/harper)). According to the official website of the Office of School Turnaround, the other five goals for turnaround schools aim to, “Develop to scale a replicable and sustainable model for turning around low performing schools, Identify and develop high quality leadership and staff, Design, build and maintain safe student-centered learning cultures, Strengthen collaboration with all internal and external stake holder groups, and Provide strong leadership for effective and efficient operations” ([www.cpsturnaround.org](http://www.cpsturnaround.org) > Our Goals). While the first goal of Turnaround Schools concerns student education, though geared toward high-stakes testing, the rest of the goals emphasize structural, governance, and behavioral issues over the educational experience. As a result, according to the CPS Harper High School page, the High School Transformation Curriculum, which like ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez and Roosevelt, is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is the type of curriculum not employed by teachers aiming to increase standardized achievement. Also, Harper is a part of small school initiative in the Chicago Public School district. Therefore, after ninth grade, students will choose from a variety of tracks, such as Academy of Business and Entrepreneurship or Communications Education Technology for Success, which are treated as smaller, Education-To-Career schools ([www.harperhighschool.org](http://www.harperhighschool.org) > About Harper > School Profile). In contrast to Jones College Prep for example, who’s mission

statement stresses leadership cultivation via challenging and critical coursework, the Harper mission focuses on “skills and values” for citizenship and states, “We will empower students to be on time, on task, and take ownership of their education, their life and their future” ([www.harperhighschool.org](http://www.harperhighschool.org) > About Harper > Mission and Vision). Rather than focusing on a holistic and challenging education to enable active participation, Harper emphasizes the behavioral traits they are aiming to develop, which are strikingly similar to the traits described previously by Apple (2004) for students of lower social status. Also, rather than addressing school achievements or background in her Principal’s Message, Kenyatta Stansberry discusses school governance and that as a result of Harper being a model turnaround school, she will be leaving Harper for John Marshall High School, Chicago’s newest Turnaround School, beginning with the 2010 school year ([www.harperhighschool.org](http://www.harperhighschool.org) > Principal’s Message). Currently, Harper serves an overwhelmingly African-American student population of nearly one hundred percent in which seventy-seven percent of students are low-income. Also, out of Jones College Prep, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez and Roosevelt, Harper is the lowest performing school with a composite ACT score of 14.4 and only ten percent of their students meet or exceed PSAE Reading standards, despite recent drastic reform measures (Illinois State Report Card, 2009).

#### Four Chicago High Schools: Syllabi and Course Content

Both of the ninth and eleventh grade syllabi for English courses at Jones College Prep begin with the department’s mission statement and the school-wide Targeted Instruction Area, or TIA. The English department at Jones College Prep aims to assist

student skill development in Language Arts according to “ACT English College Readiness Standards, which naturally align with the Illinois state standards” (Fritsch, 2009, p. 1). Further, as stated on the official school website, the TIA for the entire school is critical thinking, which, in short, they define as, “the well-reasoned problem-solving process where one examines evidence and decides what to believe, communicate, or do” ([www.jonescollegeprep.org](http://www.jonescollegeprep.org) > About JCP > Critical Thinking > Critical Thinking at Jones; Fritsch, 2009, p.1, Achettu, 2009, p. 1). As freshman at Jones College Prep, all students enroll in Survey of Literature (Jones College Prep Course Request Book 2010-2011, 2009). According to the syllabi, the course description emphasizes the variety of literary works and styles students will both be reading and writing. Further they course description stresses the ways in which the Survey of Literature course will bridge technical literary skills, such as correct grammar, with meaningful dialogue and analysis with the various texts that will address the global diversity. In regards to course goals, the instructors employ the Illinois Learning Standards, listed verbatim, in addition to other related skills. The syllabi list state goals 1 through 5 with between one and four selected Early High School skills from each section. Again, the variety of, as well as interaction with the course texts is stressed, using key verbs such as interpret, evaluate, analyze and apply. For example, the skill, “applying critical multicultural and historical perspectives and practices to their analyses of texts” is representative of the skills this course is aiming to foster (Fritsch, 2009, p. 1). Also included on the syllabi are the Grad @ Grad values that were discussed previously on the school’s website. Going beyond simply listing the values, it is also explicitly stated that these values were the guiding principles for

selecting course literary works. As a result, the key texts for the course are *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, in addition to other shorter selections from various literary genres and film. Lastly, the Survey of Literature syllabi include fairly detailed tentative plans for the timeline of the course with readings, written assignments and the targeted skills from ACT College Readiness Standards that is fostered by each assignment. Each of the school year's four quarters are divided by theme concerning the definition of self, which are as follows; "through experience, through societal expectations/demands, through historical influence and through gender" (Fritsch, 2009, p. 3-4). The standards listed are numbered according to the level of ACT difficulty and are different from previous course objectives in that they are much more mechanical or grammar based. For example, in weeks five through nine of the first quarter students will read *The Bluest Eye* and conduct a literary analysis which will address their ability to, "use commas to set off simple parenthetical phrases," and "delete unnecessary commas when an incorrect reading of the sentence suggests a pause that should be punctuated" (Fritsch, 2009, p. 3). Also, the syllabi stresses the revision process in writing via mandatory visits to the school's Writing Center to receive feedback on their writing which is to be included with the grading of the written work. Overall, the Survey of Literature syllabi approaches the course using the Illinois Learning Standards, the ACT College Readiness Standards and the Grad @ Grad Values with a focus on critical thinking. They aim to achieve the standards and goals via the text selection, such as *The Bluest Eye*, the variety of writing assignments, such as a literary analysis, and the revision process in writing. These tools and



approaches are significant because they exemplify their aim to focus on cultural awareness, abstract thinking, such as concerning identity, and the continual process of learning. While the course syllabi do address briefly issues of class policy and expectations, such as late work, grading and academic dishonesty, as will be demonstrated later in comparison with other schools and courses, it occupies relatively little space in the syllabi.

After all students take Survey of Literature as freshmen and American Literature as sophomores, juniors at Jones College Prep have several options regarding their English coursework. According to the Course Request Book (2009), students may select from African-American Literature, AP Literature and Composition, British Literature (English III) or Latin American Literature, which all fulfill a graduation requirement. Though not all students enroll in British Literature, it is the only syllabus analyzed here as a result of it being specifically classified as English III and of the other courses also being available to enroll in as a senior. The British Literature syllabus is formatted in the same manner as the Survey of Literature syllabi and begins with the department mission and TIA. The course description states that the literature of the course will incorporate both literature from Britain and literature concerning the global and historical effects of British imperialism. Also, the course, as it is the students' eleventh grade year, will cover the, "skills necessary to prepare for the ACT and the Prairie State Achievement Exam" (Fritsch, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, similar to the Survey of Literature course, which encouraged dialogue and analysis, "students are encouraged to form and share their own opinions and to back their opinions up with specific support from the texts" (Fritsch,

2009, p. 1). The course objectives are then listed and though are not verbatim from the Illinois Learning Standards, they are still similar. Students are expected to interact and engage with the literature in an analytical way and are expected to demonstrate their ability to synthesize a variety of information to produce different styles of writing. Also, the syllabus states specifically students will need to recognize and understand standard English and grammar, implying the acknowledgement of the potential various language backgrounds of students and various language uses. The class will use their *Glencoe Literature* for various selections, in addition to reading *Grendel* by John Gardner as a whole and *Pride and Prejudice*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* within groups. Also, in agreement with the Survey of Literature course, the process of writing is stressed, again with mandatory visits to the school's Writing Center. Lastly, the syllabus ends with a one and a half page chart that detail the tentative plan of study, including the timeframe, course readings, written assignments and the ACT College Readiness Standards addressed. Similar to the Survey of Literature syllabi, the ACT standards focus on grammatical skills, such as sentence structure or word choice, over broad concepts or abstract thinking. The course is centered on four themes, "What is a Hero?, Literature in Transition, From Reason to Romance, and The Sun Does Set on the British Empire" (Fritsch, 2009, p. 2-3). For example, in weeks fifteen through twenty of the second quarter students will read the play *Macbeth*, write a research paper on a Renaissance or *MacBeth* topic, which will address their ability to, "use the word or phrase more consistent with the style and tone of a fairly straightforward essay," and to "add a sentence to accomplish a fairly

straightforward purpose such as illustrating a given statement” (Fritsch, 2009, p. 3).

Again, while classroom rules and expectations are briefly discussed, they center on issues of tardiness, absent/late work, grading and academic dishonesty. Overall, similar to the Survey of Literature course, British Literature focuses on developing and strengthening students’ critical thinking skills via reading and writing in various forms. Moreover, particularly of importance in eleventh grade, the PSAE is only mentioned once in the syllabus during the course description, and is not listed at all in the course plan. As will be demonstrated in comparison with other schools, Jones College Prep focuses little of its stated curricular plans on PSAE preparation and testing.

In contrast to Jones College Prep, Roosevelt, Harper and likely many other high schools, rather than label the department English, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez has the Humanities department which bridges traditional English and Social Studies departments. As a result, each year students enroll in two courses, one that covers each of the traditional subjects that are highly integrated in subject matter. Moreover, in addition to the World Literature course students take freshman year, all students also enroll in a College Literacy course. The College Literacy course aims to focus on the processes and strategies related specifically to reading comprehension. According to the course description provided on the syllabus, students are encouraged to develop their own Reader Identities through the reading of individual and assigned texts. The syllabus then addresses information regarding grading, academic dishonesty, and absent or late work. The course plan lists the three thirteen-week units that the class will cover, which include, “Reading Self & Society, Reading History, and Reading Science” (Lager, 2009,

p. 2). The first unit focuses on the techniques of effective or active reading with lessons such as, “Text Study of ‘How to Mark a Book’” (Lager, 2009, p. 2). The second unit focuses on government texts, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Toward the beginning of the unit, lessons include, “Understanding Rights,” and “Fighting for the Right to Vote,” though toward the end of the unit lesson take a potentially more analytical stance. For example, lessons eleven and twelve, “Comparing Textbook Accounts,” and “Reading the Historical Record,” potentially provide the space to critically examine the construction of various historic accounts depending on their context, though this is by no means stated explicitly in the syllabus. The third unit, Reading Science, mainly focuses on reading health topics, such as nutrition, obesity, and disease prevention information. Also, during the last unit students are to write a persuasive essay, which, while again not stated, is the style of writing necessary for success on the PSAE. The last page of the syllabus is devoted to classroom expectations, both on behalf of the student and teacher. Students are expected to be respectful, on time, and responsible for their environment, such as cleaning up after oneself. Overall the College Literacy course focuses on reading comprehension and the variety of reading strategies that can be employed depending on the type of text. Also, students have some authority in the selection of the texts for the course on an individualized level, though it is not explicitly stated or planned in the course outline. Lastly, in contrast to Jones College Prep, and as will be shown in other schools, the College Literacy course is not framed with any specific outside standards, such as the Illinois Learning Standards or the ACT College Readiness Standards.

In addition to the College Literacy course, freshman students at ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez also enroll in World Literature which is closely integrated with the World History course that students take simultaneously. According to the course description provided on the syllabus, the emphasis of the course is primarily on grammatical and writing skill development, which complements the reading focus of the College Literacy course. Also, students are required to read from various literary genres. The course is comprised of five units which include, “Grammar & the Far East, Grammar, Thesis Writing & the Middle East, Current Conflicts: Africa, Ancient Mythology, and Modern European Literature & the Holocaust” (Louis, 2009, p. 1). The first unit focuses on, “basics of English grammar and mechanics,” while including Chinese poetry, philosophy and literature (Louis, 2009, p. 1). The second unit still maintains the focus on grammar though moves onto “more complex aspects” while reading various non-fiction and *The Kite Runner* (Louis, 2009, p. 1). For units three through five, according to the syllabus, will still emphasize proper grammar though not as centrally as in the first two units. The third unit addresses the social issue of child soldier with a particular emphasis on narratives from Africa. Additionally, the syllabus states that students will also be active participants in Red Hand Day, aimed at social awareness and activism. The fourth unit focuses on concepts of heroism and the writing of a persuasive essay, which, again, is the style of writing assessed on the ACT. In the last unit, the students discuss and engage in what the syllabus explicitly calls, “social justice issues,” while reading *Night* and other non-fiction and film with an increased focus on composition (Louis, 2009, p. 1). The World Literature syllabus also addresses classroom policies, grading and expectations,

again for students and for teachers. Like the College Literacy course, students are expected to be honest, respectful and put forth adequate effort, while the students can expect the teacher to be honest, fair and consistent. Lastly, the syllabus includes a note to the class of 2013, which stresses the important of independence, self-motivation and responsibility for his or her own learning and states, “we are here, not to hold your hand and pour a bunch of facts into your brain, but to train you to work and learn independently and effectively” (Louis, 2009, p. 2). Overall the World Literature course at ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez centers on grammatical and writing skill development, while engaging with texts and various issues from around the world. Specifically it is important to note that, similar to Jones College Prep, students address different social issues and their relationship to the literature they produce, while in one instance participating in activism, though the explicit guiding questions or frames for these issues are not stated. Lastly, like the College Literacy course, World Literature is not approached or framed with outside standards, such as the Illinois Learning Standards.

In junior year, students at ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez enroll in Junior English & ACT Prep, subtitled College Reading & Composition. According to the letter to students describing the course at the beginning of the syllabus, this course focuses on continuing to develop “reading, writing and communication” skills (Louis, 2009, p. 1). Ideally, this course will prepare students for college and the ACT simultaneously. That is, the course, despite its title, states that the ACT is secondary and naturally aligned with college-level reading and writing proficiencies. Also, the beginning of the letter stresses the increased difficulty of the course. The syllabus then directly moves along to addressing student and

teacher expectations. In agreement with the other courses at ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, students are expected to be honest, prepared, and to put forth their best effort. Students can then expect their instructor to be honest, encouraging, and prepared. The syllabus particularly stresses the need for students to be respectful, specifically stating that, “Hateful comments concerning race, gender, sexuality, political views, appearance, or anything else will not be tolerated” (Louis, 2009, p. 2). This statement, to an extent, resembles the socially conscious values at Jones College Prep and in the World Literature syllabus, though only focuses on discriminatory comments rather than a critical analysis of larger social issues. Out of the four pages of course description, only roughly one-third of a page is devoted to describing the curriculum. The course reviews literary concepts and continues a review of Western literature. The main guiding frame for the course and texts are, “How to read, How to connect to a reading, How to summarize, analyze, and interpret a reading, and Expository Writing/Essay” (Louis, 2009, p. 2). Particularly the curriculum description stresses PSAT/ACT preparation via developing reading comprehension and effective writing skills, with writing assignments every day. The syllabus does not provide any list of the texts in the course or any specific plan for the course. The syllabus concludes by addressing classroom policies regarding grading, absent/late work, materials and day-to-day processes of the class. For example, there are three subheadings that address the processes of the classroom which include, “entering the classroom, warm-up work, and class dismissal” (Louis, 2009, p. 4). Overall, the Junior English & ACT Prep syllabus focuses mainly on class policies and the proper behavior that is expected from students rather than on the curricular content of the course.

Moreover the space that is devoted to the curriculum emphasizes the PSAE/ACT and skills that, while applicable to Language Arts as a whole, are particularly useful for the standardized test, such as expository writing and correct grammar for example. Thus, even though the ACT standards nor the Illinois Learning Standards are not explicitly stated in this syllabus or the other syllabi from ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, one can still see that this charter school, which is innovative in integrating English and Social Studies as Humanities and the potential for critical analysis in World Literature, cannot escape the pressures of achieving high standardized test scores, particularly during the eleventh grade year of testing.

As stated previously, students at Roosevelt High School participate in College Board's SpringBoard Math and English curriculum. The curriculum is designed to begin in sixth grade and end in twelfth grade; as a result freshmen students enroll in SpringBoard Level IV. Though they are using the SpringBoard curriculum, the course for freshmen is still titled Survey of Literature, like Jones College Prep, and is offered in regular and honors levels. According to the course description students read texts from a variety of genres in order to develop critical and analytical reading skills in addition to more technical skills regarding grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, the syllabi state that the overarching theme for the course is the concept of "Coming of Age" (Terrell & Katz, p. 1). As a result, in addition to the SpringBoard Level IV textbook, the key texts for the course include *Romeo & Juliet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Oedipus Rex*. Apart from the course description, very little space of the syllabi is devoted to addressing the curricular content and course work. Regarding the assignments of the course, students are directed



to the official SpringBoard website to retrieve assignments, in addition to listing the six main writing assignments that are required of the students, which include, presenting an interview, character analysis, poet research, another character analysis, with the last assignment to be announced ([www.collegeboard.com/springboard](http://www.collegeboard.com/springboard); Bloom, 2009, p. 4). Similar to ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, the majority of the syllabi space is devoted to classroom policies, such as grading or late work, and student expectations. The syllabi stress that students be prepared, by being in uniform with their ID, on time and respectful. Moreover, students and parents are made aware of the specific consequences for repeated infractions, such as being directed to the main office. Also, students can expect that teachers will be available for additional help and foster an environment that is secure and conducive to learning. Overall, the Survey of Literature course at Roosevelt, in contrast to Jones College Prep and ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, is approached via the standards and curriculum of SpringBoard. The course focuses on basic reading and writing skills though no detailed course of study is presented so as to give insight on how this will be achieved, apart from directing students to the SpringBoard website for assignments. Further, though the stated theme of the course is Coming of Age, it is as if the theme of the syllabi at least is behavior expectations with the majority of space devoted to these concerns.

Students in their junior year at Roosevelt enroll in SpringBoard Level VI American Literature, also available in regular or honors level. The course description and purpose provided on the syllabi stress continued skill building, particularly in regards to analytical skills. Also, the course description states that students will develop persuasive,

expository and research-based writing proficiencies, of which persuasive and expository, again, are the writing skills assessed on the PSAE. Moreover, PSAE/ACT preparation skills are explicitly included in the course in the form of, “writing, grammar and reading activities and resources” (Terrell & Katz, 2009, p. 1, Torres, 2009, p. 1, Garcia, 2009, p. 1). Also, the course is guided by the view of Literature as a way of representing or informing about society, specifically American society in this course. The course texts in American Literature include the SpringBoard Level VI textbook, *The Crucible*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*, along with other American fiction and non-fiction. Additionally the brief course outline, divided into four units, includes the main assessment for all units and the course readings for units three and four. For example, in unit two students will write both a Persuasion Essay and a Letter to the Editor, though no reading is listed. Moreover, PSAE/ACT Prep is listed in the course plan for all of the first three units, essentially the entire year leading up to the test itself. Also, students, similar to the Survey of Literature course, are referred to the official College Board website for additional course readings and assignments. In regards to learning outcomes, the syllabi, similar to the course description, stress the development of reading and writing skills and the achievement of a high PSAE score. Though, interestingly, the learning outcomes also state that reading comprehension skills are to be fostered per Roosevelt’s Targeted Instruction Area, in contrast to the TIA of critical thinking at Jones College Prep. The course syllabi then move on to address course policies and expectations. In regards to the grading of the course, it is explicitly stressed that students must take the two-day PSAE in order to be eligible to pass American

Literature, which, again, demonstrates an increased focus on PSAE performance during the students' junior year. Also, similar to the Survey of Literature course, the majority of the space of the syllabi is devoted to classroom behavior expectations. As such, students are again expected to be respectful, prepared, by being in uniform with their ID, and to participate. Additionally, the consequences for repeated infractions are stated to inform both parents and students. Overall, the syllabi for the American Literature course at Roosevelt stress skill development for the PSAE/ACT in addition to other literary skills. Moreover, the course, in addition to being guided by PSAE standards, is also highly formed around the SpringBoard English curriculum with the incorporation of the official College Board website as a resource for readings and assignments. Lastly, behavior and classroom policies and expectations occupy the majority of the space in the syllabi, in contrast to Jones College Prep for example where the majority of space is devoted to academic content.

Freshmen at Harper High School also enroll in a Survey of Literature course. In contrast to other syllabi, the course description here focuses on teacher support and action at Harper. That is, after stating simply that Survey of Literature is the, "foundation for further English coursework," the description addresses what Harper as a whole enable its teachers to accomplish, which includes primarily holding high standards for all student and advancing necessary reading and writing skills (Robinson, 2009, p. 1). Also, it stresses that students contribute to their learning and development of, "problem-solving, critical thinking, and reasoning skills" (Robinson, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, various sets of standards, labeled at the course objectives, along with which the course is formed, are

listed occupying the majority of the second page of the syllabus. This Survey of Literature course is aligned with the Illinois Learning Standards, Chicago Reading Initiative Standards, and the ACT College Readiness Standards. The Illinois Learning Standards list state goals 1-5, verbatim, without any specific sub-skills, and the Chicago Reading Initiative standards center on four subgroups, “writing, word knowledge, fluency, and comprehension” (Robinson, 2009, p. 2). Additionally, the syllabus includes the ACT College Readiness Standards, which are divided into lists of five to six skills by Reading, English, and Writing. Further, the Survey of Literature course is also divided into four units, which include, “Dilemmas of Youth, Social Justice, Love and Tragedy, and Courage” (Robinson, 2009, p. 2). While the syllabus does provide a list of main texts for each unit, no specific plan, no guiding frames or questions, nor any specific assignments are included. For the first unit students will read *Monster* and *The House on Mango Street* and for unit two students will read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. *Romeo & Juliet* along with poetry is listed for Love and Tragedy, while only “various non-fiction and fiction” is listed for the last unit, Courage (Robinson, 2009, p. 2). After devoting little space to the academic content of the course, the syllabus moves on to discuss classroom policies and behavior expectations of students. In addition to expecting students to be prepared, including again in uniform and with ID, and respectful, the syllabus at Harper also states that rubrics will be made available as to how behavior, rather than academic content, will be assessed, as well as the various consequences for behavior infractions. Moreover, behavior is addressed repeatedly under various subheadings, such as, “classroom expectations, classroom procedures, and behavior

policy” (Robinson, 2009, p. 3-4). Overall, the Survey of Literature course at Harper is highly aligned with several sets of standards. Moreover, while these standards occupy a fair amount of space, actually course plans or outlines are only addressed briefly with a list of five specific texts. As such, though the course description does mention the importance of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, no information is provided to make students or parents aware of how the course aims to achieve these skills. Lastly, behavior guidelines are repeatedly stressed throughout the syllabus, which overshadows academic content.

Similar to Jones College Prep, juniors at Harper also enroll in a British Literature course. The description for the course frames it explicitly as a “Readers & Writers workshop” in which students will learn “how to effectively write, read, and speak across genres” (Bellows, 2009, p. 1). According to the syllabus, the workshops will focus on developing vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and writing skills. Also, the syllabus states that even though British Literature will compose the bulk of the text for the course, “various contemporary poets and writers will be used to bridge the gap between background knowledge of our students and British writers, such as William Shakespeare” (Bellows, 2009, p. 1). This is interesting because it first assumes that the student population is unfamiliar with or unaware of one of the arguably most famous British authors. Second, it acknowledges the potential gap between traditional or formal academic knowledge and the students’ background knowledge and further legitimates student knowledge and interests by attempting to incorporate different authors into the official curriculum. Moreover, in addition to both British and contemporary texts,

students will also focus on three key styles of writing, which include “narrative, persuasive and response or analysis of literature” (Bellows, 2009, p. 1). This course is also divided into four units, which last six to eight weeks each, that include, “Response to Literature: Poetry, Mystery Genre Study, Argumentation Genre Study, and William Shakespeare Author Study” (Bellows, 2009, p. 1). Also, the syllabus states that test preparation will be included in each of the units, which is hinted at with the Argumentation Genre Study, as it is scheduled for the quarter before students take the PSAE. The second page of the syllabus is devoted to a list of standards which draw from both Illinois Learning Standards and the ACT College Readiness standards. The standards mainly focus on language use, vocabulary and grammar, along with analytical skills and strategies for effective writing and reading. The British Literature syllabus ends with classroom policies and expectations which are similar to those of the Survey of Literature course at Harper. Again, proper behavior is stressed, particularly with the use of rubrics that state how behavior will be assessed. Overall, the British Literature course is guided by Illinois Learning Standards and the ACT College Readiness Standards which aim to develop effective reading and writing proficiencies. The PSAE, though not quite as emphasized as in third year English at Roosevelt for example, its focus can still be seen via the emphasis on persuasive writing, the Argumentation Genre Study, and the explicit statement that test preparation will be included within each of the course units. Additionally, while the instructor aims to theoretically legitimate students’ own background knowledge by integrating it with British literature, the syllabus does not provide any list of course texts or assignments to provide insight as to how this will be

framed or approached. Lastly, in agreement with the Survey of Literature course and syllabi from Roosevelt High School, behavior and standards are the key focus of the syllabus and course in which addressing academic content is secondary.

The analysis here, as stated previously, is important because it addresses the stated curricular plans that are available to parents, who potentially are investigating potential schools for their children, and other community members interested in local education. Moreover, they provide insight to four different high schools that are both subject to neoliberal school choice policies and neoconservative standardization and accountability policies. In general there are significant differences among the high schools regarding how they are approaching English courses, that is, their specific standards and goals, and how they aim to achieve said objectives. Further, there are also significant differences among the high schools and courses in relation to the actual content and information provided on the syllabi for public viewing. On one hand, Jones College Prep, the arguably high-status school with its selective enrollment policy, diverse and balanced student population, and decreased rate of low-income students, explicitly aims to develop future leaders that are both culturally aware and critical thinkers. The courses at Jones College Prep are framed within the Illinois Learning Standards, though they are additionally framed with their own Grad @ Grad values. Moreover, as a result of the extensive academic content provided on their syllabi, often occupying roughly two full pages, parents and community member are able to assess how Jones College Prep aims to achieve these goals via their academic content. In contrast, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, Roosevelt and Harper all provide significantly less information regarding the

specific academic content of their courses. Particularly the syllabi of English courses at Roosevelt and Harper focus the majority of their space on classroom policies and behavior expectations, even going as far as to list specific consequences and rubrics for assessing behavior, where as behavior, in the form of preparation and tardiness, is only addressed briefly at Jones College Prep.

The amount of space and focus devoted to the Prairie State Achievement Exam in the course syllabi is also meaningful and telling of these schools, particularly in the syllabi for junior year courses. At Jones College Prep the PSAE is mentioned only once in the course description and is not mentioned at all within the extensive course outline. In contrast, the third year courses at all ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, Roosevelt and Harper all focus extensively on skills related to PSAE/ACT success. At ASPIRA Ramirez the course is explicitly titled Junior English & ACT Prep, and the course plan and description all focus on effective reading and writing strategies, with a particular emphasis on persuasive writing, the style of writing assessed on the PSAE. Roosevelt's American Literature, though implemented from the SpringBoard English curriculum still emphasizes PSAE success in the course description and learning outcomes, while also stressing that taking the test is required to pass the course overall. Additionally, Harper also focuses on PSAE preparation in its third year British literature course with the inclusion of preparation activities in each unit, focus in persuasive writing, and an entire unit titled Argumentation Genre Study. Moreover, these findings are important because of the four schools Jones College Prep is the only school making Adequate Yearly Progress according to PSAE test scores. The other three schools are all in different stages



of academic warning or watch with the Chicago Public School district and the state of Illinois. Roosevelt, as a result its poor performance on standardized tests, was selected for the use of the SpringBoard English and Math curriculum which is specifically designed to improve test scores and college readiness. Also, Harper is in its second year of being designated a Chicago Turnaround School and undergoing major restructuring regarding the school's administrative and instructor staff. Additionally, ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, which on certain levels is outside of normal district constraints so as to develop an innovative educational environment for traditionally underperforming students, maintains a strong PSAE/ACT focus during the students' junior year. While ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez does show some signs of innovation, with its Humanities department for example, and of critical and socially-aware academic inquiry in its first year World Literature course, these initiatives are somewhat pushed to the side during third year English due to the fact that the school is still held to the same 'standards' as other schools which are only measured by PSAE/ACT performance. Overall, the course syllabi provide insight on how the accountability standards of NCLB affect the stated curricular plans of several types of schools. Though the curricula of ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez, Roosevelt and Harper are all developed in different contexts, they all still converge and are strikingly similar in the third year of English coursework, the year that all students take the PSAE. The exception to this is Jones College Prep, where the PSAE is only mentioned once and is not included in the course plan, yet this selective enrollment school, which has the ability to specifically control its test-taking pool to an extent, maintains the highest PSAE scores of the three schools. Despite neoliberal aims to create a variety of quality

Table 1: Summary of Findings

	Jones College Prep	ASPIRA-Mirta Ramirez	Roosevelt	Harper
School Type	Selective Enrollment	Charter	Neighborhood-zoned	Neighborhood-zoned
Demographics -Race/Ethnicity -SES	White: 29.7% Af.-Am. 24.7% Latino: 33.3% Asian: 11.6% Low-income: 54.1%	White: 5.4% Af. Am.: 8.8% Latino: 82.5% Asian: 3.3% Low-income: 93.7%	White: 8.2% Af. Am.: 10.7% Latino: 72.5% Asian: 8.4% Low-income: 90.1%	White: 0.1% Af. Am.: 99.7% Latino: 0.1% Asian: 0.0% Low-income: 76.9%
PSAE/ACT Score -Academic Status	24.5 -None	17.9 - Federal: Corrective Action -State: One year Academic Watch	16.2 -Federal: Restructuring - State: Six years Academic Watch	14.4 - Federal: Restructuring Implementation - State: Eight years Academic Watch
School Information/ History	- Deemed completely new school in 1998 as a selective enrollment which was contested by community members. - School-wide Target Area of Instruction: Critical Thinking	- Opened in 2003 and founded by Puerto Rican/Latino Non-Profit - Guided by Awareness, Analysis, & Action -Integrates English and Social Studies into Humanities Department	- Chosen to employ College Board's SpringBoard Math & English Curriculum in 2005 as a result of poor standardized test performance - School-wide Target Area of Instruction: Reading Comprehension	- Underwent major restructuring (firing of all staff and hiring new teachers/admin) in 2008 as a Chicago Turnaround School - School description include empowering students to be on time and on task (behavior expectations)
Ninth Grade English Course	- Survey of Literature - Framing Standards: Grad @ Grad Values, IL Learning, ACT College	- Two courses: College Literacy & World Literature - CL: Reading comprehension; no detailed plan;	- SpringBoard Level IV- Survey of Lit. - Framing Standards: College Board SB	- Survey of Literature - Framing Standards: IL Learning, Chicago Reading

	<p>Readiness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social &amp; political awareness to create future leaders</li> <li>- Detailed course plan; little focus on behavior expectations</li> </ul>	<p>persuasive writing (PSAE skill)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-WL: Emphasis on grammar; social activism; persuasive writing; no detailed plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use official SB website for readings &amp; assignments</li> <li>- Overwhelming focus on behavior vs. academic content (eg. Uniforms &amp; IDs)</li> <li>-No detailed course plan</li> </ul>	<p>Initiative, ACT College Readiness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Little academic content information</li> <li>- Larger focus on 'correct' behavior (discuss rubrics for assessing behavior and punitive actions)</li> </ul>
Eleventh Grade English Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- British Literature</li> <li>- Framing Standards: ACT College Readiness Standards</li> <li>-Social &amp; political awareness (eg. Effects of Brit. Imperialism)</li> <li>- Mention PSAE/ACT only once</li> <li>-Detailed course plan; little focus on behavior expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Junior English &amp; ACT Prep</li> <li>- Effective reading &amp; writing skills</li> <li>- Strong emphasis on PSAE skills (grammar and persuasive writing)</li> <li>- Increased focus on behavior expectations</li> <li>-No detailed course plan; only ACT prep</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SpringBoard Level VI- American Lit.</li> <li>- Framing Standards: College Board SB</li> <li>- PSAE prep in all units of course; focus on persuasive writing</li> <li>-Use official SB website for readings &amp; assignments</li> <li>- Overwhelming focus on behavior vs. academic content (eg. Uniforms &amp; IDs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- British Literature</li> <li>- Framing Standards: IL Learning, ACT College Readiness</li> <li>- Strong year-long PSAE focus; effective reading, writing, speaking; persuasive/argumentation emphasis</li> <li>- Larger focus on 'correct' behavior (discuss rubrics for assessing behavior and punitive actions) vs. academic content</li> </ul>

educational options in both neighborhood and choice schools through increasing competition, the schools presented here, particularly the lowest performing schools, are in practice of course syllabi increasingly similar, particularly in the year that students are assessed by the PSAE, due to the pressures of high-stakes testing and accountability.

### Discussion

Many of these findings also support the findings regarding knowledge, neoliberal theory and policy, and neoconservative theory and policy discussed earlier. Apple (2001, 2004) and Kliebard (2004) emphasized, both in a historical and present context, the ways in which curriculum decisions were made based upon what and whose knowledge was appropriate for different student populations, depending on their social and political relationships with the larger society. Also, Buendia et al. (2004) in their discussion of literacy program selection within the Salt Lake Valley school district, address the ways in which the program selection and development is directly tied to the student population for which it is selected. In the same way that Buendia et al. (2004) found that the higher-status, largely White, high-income, students participated in a literacy program that was developed by their educators as a holistic approach to literacy that incorporated actual literary texts, the diverse, higher-income student population of Jones College Prep also participated in a curriculum that is well-rounded, fosters critical thinking skills and social awareness, and was developed by Jones College Prep teachers without a strong focus on standardized tests. In contrast Roosevelt students, which are largely non-White and low-income similar to the West side student population in Buendia et al.'s (2004) analysis, are subject to the pre-packaged SpringBoard English curriculum that focuses on test

preparation skills, such as persuasive writing, and on the strict following of the curricular design via the official SpringBoard website, which is again similar to the pre-packaged literacy program, which emphasized phonics and learning via rote memorization, deemed appropriate for West side students.

Lubienski (2003), in addition to Ahonen (2000), Lipman (2002), Cobb and Glass (2009) and others, found that overall there is little increased innovation and increased academic achievement for the traditionally most disadvantaged populations as a result of increased school options for families and students. The findings of this analysis support this conclusion. For example, all ASPIRA- Mirta Ramirez, Roosevelt and Harper are increasingly isomorphic in their stated curricular plans with strong emphases on PSAE preparation, particularly during the testing year, and on technical, grammatical skills over abstract, analytical skills, despite one being a charter school and the educational reforms of the neighborhood schools. Also, this increasing isomorphism is despite Roosevelt and Harper being a part of Renaissance 2010, which, in theory, requires them to be innovative in order to compete for students and families. Only Jones College Prep, which is able to control the makeup of their student population, has a curriculum that fosters complex, critical thinking skills and gives teachers and students authority over curricular decisions. Moreover, they are the school with the highest average PSAE score and with the least direct focus on test preparation.

Sleeter and Stillman (2005), Lipman (2002), and Hursh (2007) all discuss the effects of increasing standardization and high-stakes testing on students' educational experiences. Sleeter and Stillman (2005) address the extent to which California

curriculum standards foster the isolation of school subjects or knowledges and the extents to which teachers and students have authority over curricular decisions. The frame Sleeter and Stillman (2005) use to evaluate California curriculum standards can be applied in a similar way to the English coursework analyzed here. For example, at ASPIRA-Mirta Ramirez the English and Social Studies coursework are highly integrated, as demonstrated by their Humanities department and the pairing of courses, such as World Literature and World History in the ninth grade. Also, at ASPIRA-Mirta Ramirez teachers are given some authority to develop their own course plans without a strict standards focus in the ninth grade, though grammatical skills are still emphasized. Nevertheless, in the eleventh grade, the year of PSAE testing, test taking skills become the main focus of the English coursework. Because ASPIRA-Mirta Ramirez, despite being a charter school, is still held to the same high-stakes test standards as the sole evaluator of success, it still must narrow their curriculum in the test taking year. In contrast, English courses at Roosevelt are highly isolated and provide little developmental authority to teachers or students. English courses are implemented verbatim via the pre-packaged SpringBoard curriculum without any stated integration with other knowledges at Roosevelt, all in an explicit effort to raise students' scores on the PSAE.

Both Lipman (2002), in her analysis of four Chicago elementary schools, and Hursh (2007), in his discussion of the effects of NCLB on New York and Texas schools and achievement levels, address the narrowing of the curriculum, particularly during the testing year to skills that are specifically applicable to standardized test success. Lipman

(2002) found that this narrowing occurred most often in the lowest performing, largely non-White, low-income, schools and found that nearly the opposite was true for more diverse, high-status schools. That is, in the elementary with the most racially or ethnically balanced population and with the lowest rate of low-income students, the emphasis during the school year on standardized testing was the lowest. Similarly Hursh (2007) found in New York and Texas that the schools with the most heightened focus on test preparation were most often the schools that were failing to meet AYP by NCLB standards. The findings here regarding the ninth and eleventh grade English curricular plans support the conclusions of both Lipman (2002) and Hursh (2007). Roosevelt and Harper had the strongest foci on PSAE test preparation, while at the same time having the lowest PSAE scores, longest periods of time on academic watch, strongest sanctioning measures, and the highest concentrations of non-White, low-income students. Moreover, ASPIRA-Mirta Ramirez, which also has a relatively high concentration of non-White, low-income students, also was unable to escape high-stakes testing pressure, at least during the testing year, which resulted in curriculum narrowing. Lastly, Jones College Prep, which has the most diverse, both racially and economically, student population of the four high schools, both had the highest PSAE test scores and the least amount of focus on test preparation, with the PSAE being mentioned only once on the syllabus for the eleventh grade English course. Again, these findings are important because they support previous findings and conclusions that increasing standardization and increasing high-stakes testing serve to exacerbate educational inequality because, among other reasons, they most often lead to the narrowing of curriculum to test taking skills, as

opposed to critical or analytical skills, for students who are already conventionally the most disadvantaged socially and politically.

### Limitations

While a study of this nature is imperative to understanding curriculum differentiation within school choice and accountability settings, it is limited both by its scope and by the fact it is only looking at stated or planned curricula. This study is primarily intended to be a preliminary analysis of curriculum plans in that it is only looking at one subject across a relatively small number of high schools within a large school district. The findings of this research raise questions that would warrant further study of curricular plans with a larger sample. Also, the findings theoretically raise questions concerning the implementation of said curricular plans. That is, the actual lived classroom experiences that students and teachers encounter could very possibly provide a different context for the intersection of knowledge, power and curriculum differentiation.

Lastly, this research acknowledges fully that the final set of data that is analyzed has gone through multiple layers of selection. First, the four high schools were by no means selected through any sort of random sample. Moreover both the high schools and the curriculum documents chosen within them were subject to an extent to convenience sampling. That is, the large determinant in deciding what information was used was the ability to obtain such information from these institutions via their public postings on official websites. Though all information was explicitly selected, rather than randomly sampled, all efforts were made to gather and evaluate a large general set of material and



then select course and information that were generally representative of secondary coursework across these four institutions.

### Conclusion

Curriculum plays a key role in mediating the relationship between a school and its community, both locally and globally. Historically Apple (2004) and Kliebard (2004) address how cultural preservation and efficiency were key motives in curriculum development, both of which have legacies that carry through to current educational policy, as exemplified by the neoconservative policies of standardization and neoliberal claims of efficiency in school choice policies. Moreover, neoconservative and neoliberal theories and policies are critical because of the meaningful compromises they have made in regards to educational policy and reform. As discussed and analyzed in previous literature, these two forces have had numerous, and arguably detrimental, effects on a large number of students' educational experiences. Importantly, neoliberal and neoconservative policies serve to transfer the blame for underperforming schools and students on two levels. First, through school choice, they leave the hierarchical structures of unequal schools intact, and transfer the responsibility of solving educational inequality to families and students who are forced to opt out of under-resourced schools in order to have quality educational experiences. Secondly, through neoconservative high-stakes testing policies, the responsibility for low performance is transferred to individual students and teachers who fail to meet testing standards which both legitimates punitive action against both students and schools and absolves governing bodies of any responsibility for educational struggles. Looking at Chicago is useful because it is often

looked to as an example of urban education for other urban centers and because it fully employs both high-stakes testing and school choice in current education policies and reforms. The analysis here of stated curricular plans for secondary English courses presents interesting findings that largely support previous literature regarding neoliberal and neoconservative education policies and regarding knowledge and power relationships. Overall, the English courses in ninth and eleventh grade demonstrate increased isomorphism towards a strict test preparation focus for the lowest performing, largest non-White, low-income populations, which counters both neoliberal theory, due to lack of real academic options, and neoconservative theory which states that standards will increase academic achievement. In actuality, these two forces in education policy only serve to exacerbate educational inequality, both in access and in experience, for the conventionally most under-served populations by creating an environment where only those with the most social and cultural capital have access to quality, well-rounded education options and where punitive action is legitimated on a student, school and district level due to poor standardized test performance.

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## VITA

Paige Jessee was born and raised in Cincinnati, OH. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended the Ohio State University, Columbus, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish, with a minor in African-American and African Studies, in 2007. While at the Ohio State University, Paige also became a member of Alpha Psi Lambda, the nation's first co-ed Latino-interest fraternity.

Currently, Paige is serving as a Literacy Americorps member through the Corporation for National and Community Service. She lives in Dayton, OH.