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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**Finding a Fit:  
Recruitment and Hiring for Urban Teacher Retention**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

EDUCATION  
with an emphasis in SOCIOLOGY

By

**Alisun Thompson**

June 2014

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Tyrus Miller  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## **Abstract**

### Finding a Fit: Recruitment and Hiring for Urban Teacher Retention

The distribution of well-prepared and experienced teacher has been a policy concerns for decades. Research has established that schools serving concentrations of historically underserved students struggle disproportionately to attract and retain teachers, resulting in the most vulnerable students being taught by the least qualified teachers—teachers with minimal professional preparation or experience (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002). These schools have also been found to struggle the most with high degrees of teacher turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Shen, 1997). However, research has also documented that while many schools serving high-need student populations struggle mightily with teacher turnover, some do not, and turnover differences between schools with similar student demographics are more significant than between schools with different student demographics (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Ingersoll, 1995; Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2011). Furthermore, a compelling link between teacher turnover and student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2013) has incited policy interest on how to recruit and retain more well-prepared and experienced teachers to the schools that need them the most.

This dissertation examines teacher recruitment and retention at one high-need urban school that demonstrates all of the markers of high teacher turnover but, in fact, does not struggle to attract and retain experienced teachers. The study utilizes a single-case case-study design and ethnographic methods to investigate what attracts



teachers to the school, how teachers are recruited and hired, and what organizational conditions contribute to their decisions to remain teaching at the school (i.e., retention). The study was conducted over the course of an academic year and data sources include thirty-two semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators, field notes of observations, and school-related documents. Findings revealed that a hiring orientation to finding teachers that “fit” at the school played a significant role in teachers experiencing job satisfaction and demonstrating high organizational commitment, two variables that are associated with retention. Findings also found that the school’s culture and organizational identity were fundamental in attracting teachers to the school who shared the school’s orientation to urban teaching, contributing to the phenomenon of “fit.” This dissertation makes a contribution to two bodies of literature. First, it contributes to studies on urban teacher hiring by documenting the mechanisms that bring experienced teachers to a high-need school. It also adds to organizational analyses of schools as workplaces by investigating the conditions that support and retain teachers.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of an amazing and diverse community.

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My advisor, Lora Bartlett, supported my growth as a researcher and scholar in countless ways. Like all good advisors, she stressed the importance of methodological and theoretical rigor. More importantly, however, she encouraged me to trust my instincts and the process of qualitative research—to wade into the unknown, confident that a story would emerge if I remained curious and asked good questions.

While not directly involved in this project, the teachers I have worked with over the years, beginning with those in the Salinas Union High School District, are part of the fabric of my thinking about teachers and schools, and for that reason their mention is important. This includes Ann Jaramillo, Alma Saucedo, Elise Payne LaPlace, Nina Wolf, Trish Jorquiera, Patricia Garcia, Kelly Smith, Cindy Lenner and my father, Rudy Perez. Also, my deepest thanks to my good friend and teacher

companion, Lysa Tabachnick, who was always available to lend an ear or engage in a lively debate about education reform and never let me get too far from the lived reality of classrooms and schools. I am indebted to the teachers at Landmark High who graciously offered their time and gave the gift of their remarkable stories.

I am grateful for the loving support of my family, who supported my decision to return to school with encouragement and enthusiasm. This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Linda Perez, who did not have the opportunity to attend college but planted the seed of possibility in each of her children to dream big and strive to do meaningful work in the world, whatever form that might take. And to my father, Rudy Perez, who showed me through example what it meant to be a dedicated life-long educator.

I am truly humbled by the unwavering support of my husband, Marty Schrank, who suggested I go back to school for a PhD and, when I questioned the feasibility, replied, “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.” I am also grateful for my daughters, Molly and Emma Schrank, who handled me being unavailable, distracted and stressed out with grace and good humor.

## Chapter One: Landmark High School

### A Hard-to-Staff, Easy-to-Staff School

*You know, we aren't a hard-to-staff school, right? We look like one on paper and we are even on the district hard-to-staff list. In fact, our teachers get an extra stipend for teaching here. (laughs) The only time we have trouble filling a position is if something happens and we have to fill mid-year, but that would be hard for any school.*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/20/2013)

Landmark High School<sup>1</sup> is a comprehensive inner-city high school. The school serves a largely non-white student population, a high percentage of the students do not speak English as their first language, and almost all of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch.<sup>2</sup> By these measures, one might assume that Landmark is plagued by the staffing problems that frequently come with these demographics—high teacher-turnover and a teaching faculty made up of beginning teachers with minimal professional preparation. This assumption, however, could not be further from the truth. The teaching faculty spans a range of career stages with a balance between beginning and veteran teachers. Turnover<sup>3</sup> rates are low, and teachers queue for job openings there. When asked what drew her to teach at the school, a recently hired English teacher from a prestigious local teacher preparation program commented, “Everyone wants to teach at Landmark ... In my program I

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<sup>1</sup> Landmark is a pseudonym, as are all of the proper nouns in this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> In 2011/2012 the student demographics at Landmark were as follows: 85% students of color, 75% socio-economically disadvantaged, 40% English Language Learners.

<sup>3</sup> I define teacher turnover as the departure of teachers from schools. My work looks at turnover from an organizational perspective and does not make a distinction between teachers leaving schools to teach in other schools (referred to in the attrition literature as “migration”) and those leaving teaching altogether (referred to as “attrition”).

heard it all the time: Landmark this, Landmark that. But nobody ever leaves, so I was very surprised to hear they even had an opening.<sup>4</sup>” The school had eight student teachers in the math department, and when a position opened at the end of the year because a teacher left to have a baby, seven of the eight applied. The teacher who was hired considered herself “lucky,” because in addition to the student teachers she was sure “there were loads of applications.” Landmark has no trouble recruiting and retaining teachers, yet is identified on its district’s website as being hard-to-staff. What accounts for this contradiction?

### **Framing the Study**

There is a compelling but under-examined paradox regarding the staffing of urban high schools. Within the educational literature, they are frequently framed as being uniformly unable to attract and retain teachers, to the point where the terms “hard-to-staff” and “urban” are frequently used interchangeably. It is true there exists a sizeable body of work identifying urban schools as being the most disadvantaged when it comes to attracting and retaining well-prepared and experienced teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002; Shen, 1997). However, it is also true that research does not always clearly distinguish between the particular features of the urban location, the racial and socio-economic composition of the student population, and actual staffing challenges. Urban schools are assumed to be high-poverty. High poverty schools are assumed to be hard-to-staff. Lack of precision causes the boundaries between these

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<sup>4</sup> Angela Thomas (teacher interview, 2/18/2011)

labels to blur and the terms “urban,” “hard-to-staff,” and “high poverty” to become conflated. While studies have concluded that there are relationships between these forces, the exact nature of these relationships is unclear. Reflecting this paradox, Landmark exists as an easy-to-staff school that is assumed to be hard-to-staff by state and district standards.

Research has concluded that not all urban schools struggle with teacher turnover. Ingersoll (1995) investigated which types of schools had the highest teacher turnover and found the difference between high-poverty urban schools and more affluent suburban schools statistically insignificant. While turnover rates in urban schools were somewhat higher than suburban schools, (8% to 10% respectively), the within-group differences between schools were more significant than the across-group differences. In other words, the difference in turnover between urban schools (within group) was more significant than the difference between urban and suburban schools (across group). This pattern was found in a recent analysis of new teacher attrition<sup>5</sup> in Illinois, and researchers DeAngelis and Presley (2011) concluded that “rather than thinking of new teacher attrition from schools as primarily an urban school problem, or primarily a disadvantaged school problem, these results suggest that policy makers and administrators need to be thinking of it as primarily an individual school problem and thereby work to identify and provide more targeted assistance to schools of all types that are burdened by high teacher turnover” (p.616).

Susan Moore Johnson and colleagues at the Project on the Next Generation of

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<sup>5</sup> New teacher attrition in this study refers to teachers leaving the profession (leavers) or changing schools (movers) in their first five years of teaching.

Teachers (2011) came to a similar conclusion. They studied how working conditions predict job satisfaction and career plans for a sample of 25,135 teachers in 1,142 schools (61% of all K-12 schools in Massachusetts) and concluded that while many urban schools suffered from high turnover, others did not. The crucial difference between the schools was not whether or not they were urban or suburban, but the context they provided for teachers' work, strengthening the case that organizational conditions are more salient than student populations in understanding why teachers leave (or remain in) schools. To address the maldistribution of well-prepared and experienced teachers, this body of work suggests shifting the focus from finding more teachers for urban schools, to improving urban schools as workplaces for teachers.

While this foundational work has illuminated the issue and reframed the problem from *supply* to *retention*, and highlighted the salience of school level differences (working conditions) over school type differences (urban vs. suburban), there are methodological and theoretical shortcomings that need to be addressed before policy solutions can be sought. First, much of the work that captures the significant role of workplace conditions in teacher attrition is done with large quantitative data sets that are unable to offer nuance or clarify *how* conditions matter. Teachers are asked to report on the extent to which workplace conditions (such as the presence, or absence, of strong leadership or ample opportunities for professional development) influenced their decision to leave their school. What this data does not report is precisely how these conditions contributed to a dissatisfying workplace. In other words, what constitutes "administrative support" for one teacher might be

significantly different from such support for another teacher. Also, because the unit of analysis for these studies is the teacher, and not the school, little is known about how these factors come together to create a dissatisfying workplace. Most importantly, most of the studies address how to increase retention by *decreasing attrition* and assume that the reasons teachers stay in school are the opposite of why they leave.

My research takes its point of departure from the premise that teacher quality develops, and is sustained, in the context of schools as workplaces. It challenges the assumption that urban schools are necessarily hard-to-staff and proposes that teachers are seeking better working conditions when they migrate from one school to another, and not a different student population. However, it also proposes that what constitutes a satisfying work environment is more complex than the presence or absence of a generic set of “conditions.” Understanding teacher retention from an organizational perspective requires attending to a complex mix of sometimes competing factors. For example, one teacher might tolerate challenging working conditions because of a strong professional commitment to work with urban youth, while another would not. This work departs from a rational framing of working conditions and sees them instead as part of the complex ecology of schools.

This dissertation documents how one urban school successfully attracts, supports, and retains teachers. The purpose of the research, broadly, is to illuminate the mechanisms that bring teachers to teach in an urban school and to better understand the organizational conditions that contribute to job satisfaction and, ultimately, to urban teacher retention. It uses the theoretical constructs of



organizational identity, culture, and commitment, and the premise of organizational fit to understand how teachers are attracted to the school, how they experience it as a workplace, and what contributes to their decision to remain teaching there. The questions listed below guided this inquiry.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do teachers come to teach at Landmark High School?
  - a. What are teachers' motivations or reasons for coming to the school?
  - b. What are the hiring practices for the school?
  - c. What are the beliefs and orientations about staffing?
2. What factors influence teachers' decisions to remain teaching at the school?
3. How do teachers experience the school as a workplace?
4. What role does commitment play in teacher retention?

### **Review of Prior Work**

The next section sets the context for considering urban teacher retention from an organizational perspective by reviewing prior work. It focuses on three overlapping areas: (1) teacher distribution and mobility (where teachers teach and the movement of teachers into and out of schools), (2) attrition, retention, and working conditions (why teachers leave and remain in schools, and understanding schools as workplaces), and (3) labor markets and hiring practices (structural forces that bring particular teachers into particular schools).

### **Teacher Mobility and Distribution**

Teachers prefer some schools over others. One explanation is geography, and a body of literature explores the movement of teachers into and away from schools based on school type or location. Boyd, Lankford, Loeb and Wykoff (2005) found that teachers seeking their first jobs overwhelmingly choose to teach in school

districts near to where they grew up and concluded that this preference put urban schools at a distinct disadvantage because they produce fewer teachers. The study found that first year teachers who lived in or near urban centers often commuted to suburban schools that were close to where they grew up. The oft-cited “draw of home” theory has spurred an interest in attracting more teachers of color, specifically for urban schools (a supply-oriented solution), with the assumption that these teachers are more likely to have come from urban communities, will feel a strong affiliation with the student population, and will be more likely to stay teaching at their schools (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2009; Quartz, Lyons, & Thomas, 2005). While this work found that 85% of teachers took their first teaching job within 40 miles of their hometown, it could not (being a quantitative study) determine why teachers demonstrated this preference. It could be argued that this was less about geographical location and more about seeking a familiar school type. It has been shown that teacher candidates show a strong preference for teaching in communities that resemble the communities in which they grew up and because the teacher workforce is largely white, schools with populations of students of color are at a distinct disadvantage (Gay, Dingus & Jackson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Teacher mobility and distribution have also been linked to the racial and socio-economic status of student populations. When teachers leave schools serving low-income or low-achieving students, they typically choose schools with a distinctly different demographic profile, preferring more affluent schools with higher-achieving students (Bacolod, 2007; Chandler, Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004; Hanushek, Kain, &

Rivkin, 2004). Studying teacher mobility in Georgia, Scafidi, Sjoquist, and Stinebrickner (2007) disentangled race, socio-economic status, and achievement to understand which of these factors was most important in understanding teachers' movements out of urban schools. They identified race as the strongest variable and found that "teachers are much more likely to exit schools with large proportions of minority students." Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor (2005) offered a similar finding, showing that schools with high minority populations were more likely to have more novice teachers. This trend, however, was the result not only of teacher preferences but also of the systematic sorting, by outside forces, of teachers into specific schools. They found pressure from parents to be a determining factor in the unequal distribution of experienced teachers, with affluent parents influencing the placement of experienced teachers in schools serving non-minority populations. While there is variation in *how* teachers end up in non-white or high-poverty schools, research concludes that there is a general sorting of teachers based on school demographics.

Finally, there are studies that adopt a human capital approach to mobility and distribution and examine characteristics of teachers who move out of urban schools. These studies generally classify teachers based on various measures of quality and find that more effective teachers leave urban schools for higher achieving or more affluent schools. Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2008) found that teachers with higher value-added measures of evaluation were more likely to move from lower-achieving to higher-achieving schools and less effective teachers were more likely to move to other low-achieving schools. They identified a cycle in which

the more effective teachers were leaving lower-achieving schools and being replaced by less effective teachers. Studies have also demonstrated that urban schools attract and retain few teachers who (a) come from prestigious universities, (b) are higher scoring on standardized tests such as the Praxis, (c) hold advanced degrees, or (d) have National Board Certification (Guarino, Brown & Wise, 2011; Podgursky, Monroe & Watson, 2004). This work finds that high-need schools don't just lose teachers; they lose teachers with the most desirable qualifications.

### **Attrition, Retention, and Working Conditions**

Another explanation for teachers' school preferences is working conditions. Horng (2009) asked teachers to "trade-off" student demographics, salaries, and working conditions to investigate the influence these variables had on their workplace decisions, and she concluded that working conditions were the most powerful determinants of where teachers choose to teach. While there is mounting agreement that working conditions are a critical determinant of attrition, the category of working conditions is vague, and it is difficult to ascertain what belongs in it and what doesn't. A 2005 report on retention states that, "Although the research evidence in support of the impact on teacher recruitment and retention of any single factor or set of factors related to working conditions is modest, at best, there is sufficient research to indicate the working conditions of teachers should be an important policy concern, especially in at-risk schools" (Allen, 2005). In other words, while it has been proven that working conditions matter a great deal, establishing which conditions matter has been an empirical challenge. This section will focus on three areas that are most relevant to

this dissertation, and have been identified as significantly influencing teachers' experiences of their workplace: (1) professional relationships, support, and school community, (2) administration and leadership, and (3) professional autonomy and accountability.

**Professional relationships, support, and school community.** The social context of teaching has a strong influence on where teachers teach. Studies have found that teachers are more likely to stay in schools when they experience collegial relationships in a professional climate of mutual trust and respect (Allensworth, Ponisciak & Mazzeo, 2009). In a review of the literature on teacher retention, Susan Moore Johnson (2005) makes the point that while “good studies exist that examine how teachers view their work with colleagues and how collaboration is vital to school improvement ... very few examine teacher retention as an outcome” (p. 67). That said, there is a significant body of work that clearly connects teachers' professional relationships to job satisfaction and highlights the benefits of collaborative work cultures. In a groundbreaking study of teachers' workplaces, Rosenholtz (1992) found one of the significant differences between “low-consensus schools” and “high consensus schools” was the extent to which structures supported teachers' professional relationships. High consensus schools were characterized by professional relationships based on shared values, collaboration, and opportunities for professional growth, while in low consensus schools teachers felt isolated and generally unsupported in their teaching. She linked teachers' professional relationships and cultures of collaboration with increased satisfaction and workplace commitment.

Maclaughlin and Talbert (2001) observed similar findings in their study of sixteen high schools. In schools with “strong professional communities” teachers seemed to “experience more of the intrinsic rewards of teaching” (p.68). Weiss (1999) found that a “collaborative school culture” made a significant difference in the morale of first year teachers and their intention to remain at the school. In fact, advocates for collaboration were seen to be part of a systematic induction program for new teachers. In a study attempting to understand which elements of teachers’ work environments influenced satisfaction and the intent to remain at their schools, Johnson (2011) reported conditions “that are social in nature tend to matter the most” including “collegial relationships, or the extent to which teachers report having productive working relationships with their colleagues” (p. 25). Some studies directly addressed the importance of collegial relationships for new teachers, finding that new teachers were more likely to remain teaching at the school if they encountered professional cultures that they felt supported their work (Bryk, Camburn, Louis, 1999; Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffma & Liu, 2001). While the level or amount of preferred collaboration might differ between teachers, these studies make the case that good collegial relationships are part of a satisfying workplace.

In addition to professional relationships, mentoring and induction<sup>6</sup> play a role in teacher retention. A review of the literature by Ingersoll and Strong (2011) concludes that beginning teachers who participated in a systematic induction program

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<sup>6</sup> Mentoring can be defined as a relationship in which a veteran teacher provides support (formally or informally) and coaching to another teacher, while induction is generally understood as formal support during the first years of teaching.

had higher job satisfaction, commitment, and retention. They add “induction differed by school poverty level, with very strong effects in low-poverty schools and no effects in high-poverty schools” (p. 40). The authors propose that induction’s efficacy may depend on the school setting and that induction alone, “may not be sufficient to reduce the high levels of teacher turnover that normally exist in many urban, low-income, public schools” (p. 41). Another challenge of linking induction to retention is the variety of induction models and the uneven level of quality. Induction programs differ in content, duration, and intensity with variety at state, district, and even school level. While these challenges make it difficult to assess the influence on retention, a few findings do shed light on the influence of some features of induction. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found that, although having an out-of-field mentor did reduce the risk of attrition by 18%, having an in-field mentor reduced the risk by 30%. While increased professional development had a small effect on retention, common planning time with experienced (in-field) teachers reduced the risk of attrition by 43%. Addressing variation in the intensity of induction programs, they argue that the risk of attrition is reduced as more supports are added to the basic “package” of induction. Taken with findings on professional relationships and collegial school cultures, these studies on induction make a compelling case for workplace structures that support teacher engagement. Teachers are more likely to stay in schools that have a professional culture and provide opportunities to work collaboratively with their colleagues, including mentoring through formal induction.

**Administrative support and leadership.** Teachers identify the presence of a

supportive administrator and instructional leadership as foundational components of a satisfying workplace; in fact, they are perhaps the most crucial components. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) and Boyd et al (2011) reported the most significant reason given by teachers who quit teaching altogether or moved to another school was dissatisfaction with the school's principal or with the overall way the school was run by administration. In a report from the Teacher Follow-up survey, Marvel et al (2007) reported that over one-third of the teachers who left their schools reported that dissatisfaction with "support from administrators" was either "important" or "very important." Other studies found similar patterns with school administration as being the primary or sole reason teachers gave for leaving a school (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2011; Useem, 2003). While some of these studies gave particular areas of dissatisfaction, rich detail about how or why administration was found lacking was not provided. In a qualitative study of elementary schools, Weiss (1999) found that teacher morale and career commitment improved significantly when principals involved teachers in decision-making and helped sustain a general culture of teacher engagement. Johnson, Kraft and Papay (2011) addressed the issue of efficacy, reporting that new teachers' satisfaction with school administrators was related to how well they felt supported in being successful in the classroom. When teachers felt administrators were invested in their professional success and provided them with the support they needed to engage fully in their work, they reported high degrees of satisfaction and the intent to remain teaching at their schools.

**Professional autonomy and accountability.** Teachers identify professional



autonomy as a crucial component of satisfying working conditions. While historically there have been debates about the extent to which teachers should control the parameters of their work,<sup>7</sup> accountability reform has provided a particularly rich context for considering the importance of autonomy to teachers. Ingersoll (2001) found lower rates of teacher attrition in schools where teachers reported more influence over decision-making and greater professional autonomy. He also found that teachers in urban schools reported less autonomy and greater dissatisfaction with their level of control than teachers in suburban schools. In a report on teachers' perceptions of the work environment, researchers found that teachers in hard-to-staff schools were less satisfied with their involvement with decision making and the extent to which they were "recognized as educational experts" when compared to teachers working in schools that were not identified as such (Glennie, Coble & Allen, 2004). Shen (1997) and Weiss (1999) both found that teachers who reported more autonomy and control over decision-making were less likely to leave their schools. In a study that specifically studied the relationship of increased accountability and teacher retention, Tye and O'Brien (2002) tracked the graduates of a large teacher preparation program and found that among those who had left teaching, 70% ranked pressure from accountability and diminished autonomy as their number one reason for leaving. Among respondents who were still teaching but thinking of leaving, these reasons were ranked second or third in importance. Studies have also found that the use of scripted curricula in schools under accountability pressure influenced teachers' satisfaction and resulted in teachers leaving their schools (Achinstein & Ogawa,

2006; Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010). Kauffman (2004) found that approximately three times as many new teachers in low-income schools (20%) reported encountering “excessive direction” in terms of curriculum and instruction as those in higher-income schools. While some appreciated the transparency of scripted curricula, most teachers were adamantly opposed to relinquishing their professional control over materials and methods. Teachers are more likely to choose (and remain in) schools that offer them professional autonomy and support them in having control over instructional decisions.

### **Urban Teacher Labor Market**

Teacher preferences are not the only explanation for why teachers teach where they do, and for the maldistribution of qualified and experienced teachers. Urban schools have been found to draw disproportionately from alternative pathways<sup>7</sup> into teaching. Programs such as Teach For America,<sup>8</sup> Troops To Teachers,<sup>9</sup> and district sponsored intern programs enable college graduates to begin teaching with minimal preparation. These programs have become a viable way for districts to fill content specific shortage areas (i.e. math, science, and special education), and positions in

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<sup>7</sup> Alternative pathways refers to ways into teaching that fall outside the full-time, four- or five-year traditional pre-service preparation programs. Alternative certification programs are a common pathway, and typically involve a period of intensive, condensed academic course work or training, sometimes occurring while the candidate is already teaching.

<sup>8</sup> Teach for America is a program that recruits graduates from elite universities to teach in high-need urban and rural schools for a two-year service.

<sup>9</sup> Troops to Teachers is a program developed in 1999 that assists eligible members of the armed forces to obtain certification or licensing as elementary or secondary school teachers, to become highly qualified teachers, and to facilitate their employment as teachers.

hard-to-staff schools (Ng, 2003; Shen, 1997). Alternative certification pathways have increased in the past two decades; in 1983, only eight states authorized alternative certification, while in 2006, every state had an alternative certification program and fully one third of the teacher workforce entered teaching through an alternative pathway (Zeichner, 2008). Research has documented a number of issues pertaining to alternative certification that are particularly relevant to this study. First, as noted above, alternative certification directs underprepared teachers to schools serving high-minority populations, resulting in more alternatively certified, as opposed to traditionally certified, teachers in these high-minority and high-poverty schools (Goe, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2008). Shen (1997) found that in addition to lacking extended formal teaching preparation, alternatively certified teachers had “lower academic credentials than traditionally certified teachers.” Stoddart (1993) and Shen (1997) identified positive aspects of alternative certification, finding that in addition to bringing in more teachers of color, they attracted local paraprofessionals who were more familiar with the urban context and, they speculated, better suited to working with urban youth. Shen (1997) has shown that alternatively certified teachers are less likely to “see teaching as a life-long career,” a concerning finding that directly pertains to the issue of retention. While it is difficult to untangle whether it is because of the type of school they are most likely placed in or their credential status, rates of attrition are higher for alternatively certified teachers (Grissom, 2008; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001).

Bartlett (2013) investigated the hiring of “overseas-trained teachers” on short-

term work visas specifically to work in urban districts. In order to meet the qualifications of NCLB's Highly Qualified Teacher<sup>10</sup> provisions, districts that had long relied on emergency credentialed teachers began drawing from a global labor market to fill their labor market needs. She found that while these teachers were fully credentialed and had professional preparation (many had advanced degrees and were highly regarded professionally in their home countries), they lacked an understanding of local contexts and the necessary cultural competencies to be successful with the racially diverse and low-income student populations they were brought to the U.S. to teach. She also found stark differences in the extent to which these teachers were regarded as either a temporary fix or a capacity-building solution. Although overseas-trained teachers and alternatively certified teachers are significantly different, they are similar in that they represent a distinct labor market that exists for historically under-resourced schools. In addition, they have minimal preparation or experience with urban students, and, in the cases of TFA and overseas trained teachers, they provide a steady stream of effectively *temporary* teachers.

### **Hiring Practices**

The hiring practices of urban districts have a significant influence on teacher distribution. Levin and Quinn (2003) found that urban districts draw from a diminished and less qualified applicant pool than suburban districts because they hire late, communicate vacancies poorly, and are bound by contracts that require hiring

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<sup>10</sup> No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 mandated that teachers be fully licensed by the state, hold at least a bachelors degree, and demonstrate subject matter competence in the subject area.

teachers with more seniority. With strategic recruiting, high-quality<sup>11</sup> candidates do *apply* for positions in urban districts, but due to highly bureaucratic hiring processes and, in particular, late hiring, many of the most qualified candidates withdraw their applications. For example, one district received 5 to 7 as many applicants as needed to staff its schools, and more than 30% of the applicants applied to teach in high-need schools. However, in August, when the district was prepared to make job offers, many candidates had withdrawn, leaving a significantly diminished and poorer quality applicant pool. Thus, candidate attrition is one factor that exacerbates the staffing challenges of urban districts.

Levin and Quinn (2003) also propose that late vacancy notification requirements and transfer provisions in collective bargaining agreements tie up positions and, in particular, disadvantage new teachers from entering the labor market by prioritizing teachers already in the district. Other factors such as school reconstitution, more common in urban districts than suburban districts, cause even more instability within the urban labor market. These researchers reiterate findings from other studies that hold that collective bargaining agreements restrict who can and can't be hired and put urban schools at a distinct disadvantage because when teachers transfer out of these schools, they are frequently replaced by under-qualified or less experienced teachers (Ballou, 2000; Hess & West, 2006; Moe, 2006). Other studies, however, challenge these findings. Kelly (2006) analyzed the collective bargaining agreements in twenty randomly selected districts at the Bureau of Labor

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<sup>11</sup> The study used GPA, education level, and credential status as determinants of teacher quality.

Statistics and coded transfer provisions according to their level of restrictiveness. The study found that transfer restrictions varied tremendously and that highly restrictive transfer provisions were often couched in ambiguous language. They concluded that the conventional wisdom that collective bargaining agreements necessarily control the distribution of teachers was not empirically substantiated.

Korski and Horng (2007) also found significant variation in the level of restrictiveness in transfer provisions and established that transfer provisions were not related to staffing patterns in schools. In other words, districts with highly restrictive transfer provisions were no more likely to have an inequitable distribution of teachers than districts with unrestrictive transfer provisions. Furthermore, when they interviewed principals about hiring practices, they found important variation among principals who were under the same contract. Some principals describe various skills for “working around” contract constraints, including hiding open positions until involuntary transfers had been placed or taking advantage of ambiguous language in the contract. The authors argue that these findings disrupt the popular notion that collective bargaining agreements uniformly hinder urban districts and propose that more qualitative studies are needed to investigate *how* various structures such as collective bargaining are interpreted and enacted at the school level.

Jacob (2007) adds centralized hiring practices to the challenges of urban staffing. He argues that the centralized hiring that marks most large urban districts does not take into account a school’s unique needs and ignores the particular strengths and weaknesses teachers bring to a school. A more decentralized approach,

he contends, would result in a better match between teachers and schools. Liu and Johnson (2006) reiterate this: “Better matches—or a closer fit between new teachers’ skills, interests and expertise and the positions they secure—are important for both improving schools and improving teacher satisfaction and addressing teacher shortages” (p. 327). The critical role districts play in determining who is hired and where they are placed runs across all of these studies. All make similar recommendations about the need to reform hiring practices to increase the potential for qualified teachers to seek and secure positions in high-need urban schools and to make the hiring process more de-centralized so that teachers find schools that will be a good fit for their preferences and skills.

### **Theoretical Framework**

While I draw extensively from this reviewed literature for the initial research questions and design, my study is theoretically situated in other bodies of work. To understand teacher recruitment and retention at Landmark High school I draw from institutional and organizational theory and the constructs of organizational identity, culture, and fit. Organizational identity and culture are viewed in the context of institutional theory. This allows for attending to the role the environment plays in the development of school culture/identity and, in fact, how institutional logics facilitate the development of shared meaning among organizational members. If organizations are governed by “rationalized myths” or deeply institutionalized logics about how best to structure their work, and organizations depend on conforming to these myths in order to survive (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), it stands to reason that organizational

identity and culture would also reflect the institutional environment. In other words, just as human cultures develop in specific environmental conditions, schools will develop cultures in relation to the dominant values in the institutional environment. For example, a core aspect of Landmark's identity and culture is the premise that it is "not your typical urban school," and it is only through shared framework of understanding that this holds meaning. A collective understanding of what it means to be an urban school is historically situated and responsive to shifting political and economic fields (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). The macro to micro relationship of institutional environment to school identity and culture, and consequently to working conditions and teachers' work, contributes to the theoretical foundation of this study.

### **Institutional Theory and High-Stakes Accountability Reform**

Institutional theory stems from an open-systems perspective of organizations, one in which the organization is fundamentally influenced by its environment. Thus, the institutional environment is a critical source of resources, constraints, and opportunities, and organizations are continuously adapting to their environments to ensure their continued existence. Wiek (1976) posits that schools are loosely-coupled systems<sup>12</sup> in order to respond and adjust to their environments. In sum, organizations survive and thrive (or struggle and perish) because they can (or cannot) successfully adapt to the organizational environment.

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<sup>12</sup> Loose-coupling refers to components of an organization lacking coordination or linkages with one another. Loose-coupling allows the organization to respond to changes in the environment and survive amid uncertainty.



Institutional theory frames the organizational environment as socially constructed and casts organizations (and highly-institutionalized organizations, in particular) as largely symbolic systems. When an organization embodies conventions and norms that take on meaning and significance beyond the practical aspects of the organization's work, the organization is said to be "institutionalized." It has been argued that schools are particularly susceptible to institutionalization because the work of schools is inherently unstable (Ogawa, 2003; Rowan, 1990; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Institutional theory draws attention to the primacy of cultural and social values as the root of organizational structure;<sup>13</sup> schools are organized not for efficiency but so they make sense to the public by conforming to norms and values. For example, schools do not have the common structure of content departments and administration that oversees student discipline because that is the proven way to enhance learning, but because that is what society expects a school to "look like."

Although institutional theory is frequently theorized as a branch of the open systems tradition, it is more complex than merely adapting to environmental conditions. Meyers and Rowan (1977) argue that, "beyond the interrelations suggested in open-systems theories, institutional theories, in their extreme forms, define organizations as dramatic enactments of the rationalized myths pervading modern societies, rather than as units solely involved in exchange—no matter how complex—with their environments" (p. 346). This distinction is an important one. It

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<sup>13</sup> Meyer and Rowan (1977) define formal structure as, "the blueprint" for activities including "departments, positions, programs." It is assumed that these elements will be coordinated towards the explicit goals of the organization.

suggests that the formal structures of organizations reflect (and respond to) the values of the institutional environment. Institutionalization occurs when concern in an organization shifts from production to form—from what it *does* to what it *looks like*. Schools, as highly institutionalized organizations, magnify society's values.

The consequence of utilizing these theories for understanding the structure of schools is profound, as it suggests that formal structure operates almost exclusively through shared vision rather than the rational advancement of organizational goals. This is to say that schools are structured according to *political, social, and cultural* expectations rather than concerns about *purely technical* outcomes. For example, standardized test scores that are used to rank schools, or sanctions that result when schools do not make their score targets, have less to do with *the technical production of* student achievement and more to do with reflecting current social norms and maintaining social legitimacy. These “accountability” measures communicate to the public that there is an established measure of performance and when schools don't meet that measure, it is noticed and something is done. It matters less whether or not these measures accurately correlate with levels of success or failure and more that they symbolically represent “accountability.” Institutional theory proposes that rather than being structured to effectively enact the work of the organization, organizational structures depend on external legitimization. That is, the survival of the organization relies on public opinion and collective support (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Scott (2008) proposes that when faced with changes in political, social, or economic conditions (i.e. the institutional environment), organizations “scan the

environment” to see what other similar organizations are doing (p. 127), and that common responses to changes in the institutional environment become broadly accepted and naturalized, serving to further legitimize the organization. Similar organizations look the same not because they share common technologies that have been found to be the most effective or efficient. Organizations copy other organizations that are perceived to be “successful” (a phenomenon known as coercive isomorphism) in order to pursue and maintain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In terms of the study of schools, institutional theory provides a way to bridge macro-level policies, such as accountability reform measures and public support (i.e. pressures from the environment) with micro-level, within-school processes (such as recruiting, interviewing, and hiring). In other words, institutional theory offers an alternative to seeing the relationship between reforms and the practices of schools as technical, rational, or even common-sense.

Legitimacy,<sup>14</sup> rather than efficiency, is the real work of an institution. In order to survive, organizations need to glean more from their environments than material resources and technical information—they also need to garner public approval and maintain credibility. Because schools are highly institutionalized and publicly funded, they are more susceptible than other organizations to the social conditions that pervade the organizational environment. Lacking a clear technology or a way to

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<sup>14</sup> Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as a, “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” (p. 575).

demonstrate technical effectiveness,<sup>15</sup> schools adopt structures according to institutional logics—broad, often symbolic, ideas that reflect social norms (Friedland & Alford, 1991). For example, a logic of high-stakes accountability reform is that (1) all students can learn and achieve at high levels and (2) teachers and schools should promote increased achievement for all children. It could be argued that under the threat of reconstitution or other accountability-based sanctions, schools are pressured to focus on external means of maintaining legitimacy, rather than the pursuit of meaningful change. For example, in the current reform context, schools may adopt technologies such as scripted curricula or the Common Core Standards not because they are better suited to meet the objective of student learning, but in order to uphold public opinion. Similarly, a school might publicly announce when it has met achievement targets even though it questions whether or not this data communicates anything meaningful about student learning. Finally, organizations tend to become self-replicating; similar organizations seeking to establish or maintain legitimacy will mimic each other's behaviors in order to be positively associated and garner approval. Continuing the example above, districts will adopt scripted curricula or states the Common Core Standards in order to join the ranks of other seemingly successful organizations.

In the case of this study, institutional theory provides a way of illuminating the relationship between Landmark High School and other schools. Landmark's identity is deeply rooted in institutional scripts and rituals that have developed over

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<sup>15</sup> See Rowan (1990) for discussions of the goals and technologies of schools being inherently vague and the influence that has on formal structure.

time and have become an integral part of the school's collective sense of itself. That Landmark understands and projects itself as a school that "turned itself around," is no accident. The institutional environment, rich with rhetoric, myths, and symbols, provides plenty of raw material for Landmark to construct this historically situated identity. A central aspect of Landmark's narrative of improvement is the school's upgraded reputation (a topic that will be taken up in detail in subsequent chapters). From an institutional perspective, it could be said that Landmark's improved reputation resulted more from efforts to repair the school's legitimacy than from any verifiable improvement. Schools, as highly institutionalized organizations, replace evaluation with public approval and trust. Meyer and Rowan (1977) comment: "Organizations whose structures (reflect) the myths of the institutional environment, in contrast with those primarily structured by the demands of technical production and exchange, decrease internal coordination and control in order to maintain legitimacy. *In place of coordination, inspection, and evaluation, a logic of confidence and good faith is employed*" (p. 340; emphasis added).

### **Organizational Culture and Identity**

**Organizational culture.** Organizational culture is commonly understood as the system of values, norms, beliefs, and practices shared by the members of an organization (Martin, 1992). Organizational culture provides a means of considering the social nature of organizational life by illuminating notions of belonging and inclusion. Members of an organization are related to one another through their collective participation in shared practice, and the more pronounced the culture, the

stronger the feeling of connection (or alienation). Furthermore, culture is the normative glue of the organization; it is the set of tacit agreements about how organizational members should act apart from a regulative system that governs behavior. Members behave a certain way not because of formal rules or policies but because of social obligation or norms of appropriateness, given the cultural context. As mentioned in the prior section, organizational culture develops in socio-political contexts. Just as the physical environment provides the specific conditions within which human cultures develop, the institutional environment provides the conditions within which organizational cultures develop.

The most commonly used framework for understanding organizational culture comes from the organizational sciences and was developed by Shein (1985, 1991). According to Shein, organizational culture exists simultaneously on three levels that build on one another. *Underlying Assumptions* include foundational ideologies and the taken-for-granted beliefs that are so widely shared that people are not aware of them. In the context of schooling, an example would be that all children can learn, or that schools are places for learning. Stemming from assumptions, *Values and Beliefs* are social principles that are assumed to have intrinsic worth and importance. Values and beliefs are the most fundamental ideas about what is important in the organization—frequently expressed as, “what we are all about.” Believing that schools should foster equity is an example of a value/belief that would be an aspect of a school’s organizational culture. Tangible or visible elements exist at the level of *Artifacts*. This includes material manifestation of culture—ceremonies, stories or

myths, practices, and routines. Artifacts are the tangible elements that give shape and substance to the organization's values. An example linked to the prior examples would be the practice of ensuring that African-American and Latino students are proportionally enrolled in Advanced Placement courses (reflecting the value of equity) or, in the case of Landmark, the process of analyzing grades to ensure that disproportionate numbers of Latino or African-American students are not failing. While Shein's model is frequently cited, it has been critiqued as being stagnant and not foregrounding the involvement of members in the development and maintenance of culture.

Drawing from Shein, Hatch (1993) proposes a dynamic model of organizational culture that more persuasively addresses the involvement of organizational members. While Shein conceptualized assumptions, values, and artifacts as growing out of one another and being hierarchically linked, the model did not frame these levels of culture as mutually constituted or dynamically engaged. To address this, Hatch adds (1) *Manifestation*: the process by which primary assumptions are translated into recognizable values, (2) *Realizations*: the process by which values are realized as artifacts and the ways cultural values take on a material form, (3) *Symbolization*: the process by which artifacts are imbued with meaning beyond their literal meaning or technical function, and (4) *Interpretation*: the process of making sense of cultural forms. These processes shift the unit of analysis from cultural *elements* to cultural *processes*. What Hatch adds to Shein's model are the ways in which culture is made and remade; culture is "constituted by continuous cycles of

action and meaning-making shadowed by cycles of image and identity formation” (p. 1993). Furthermore, the members of the organization are the critical component; members don’t merely adopt the cultural norms but participate in shaping and reshaping them.

While sufficiently dynamic and including the participation of members in the development of culture, Shein’s model presents the nature of the relationship between individuals and the organizational culture as neutral or benign. It is important to recognize that culture influences the behavior of individuals by exerting normative control. It has been proposed that highly institutionalized organizations, such as schools, rely less on formalized systems of control than on common beliefs and norms that govern behavior (Smircich, 1983; Walton, 2003). Organizational culture exerts control by encouraging behaviors that are aligned with the values and norms of the organization and discouraging deviant behaviors that are in tension with these values. While organizational culture is diffused and not regulative in nature (i.e. not based on formal rules or structures), it nonetheless calls for a certain degree of conformity. This is perhaps why the concept of organizational culture is addressed so thoroughly in the literature on administration and management; culture is seen as a means of benefitting the organization by eliciting favorable behaviors from workers. Further, culture is frequently framed as a variable that can be manipulated to increase organizational efficiency and productivity. This was especially the case in the focus on “corporate” cultures and the high performance work systems that emerged in the 1970s. In these contexts, culture was treated as an organizational variable that could



be “engineered” to have a direct influence on productivity (Kunda, 2006; Walton, 2003). Kunda (2006) defined normative control as “the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions” (p. 11). It is coercive in nature and frequently relies on cultural norms—members behave in ways that support the goals of the organization not because they are mandated to, but because they feel cultural pressure to do so. Rather than a “top-down” directive, members feel a “bottom up” pressure to conform because they don’t want to risk alienation.

**Organizational identity and image.** While it is fundamentally tied to organizational culture, organizational identity has distinct attributes that are particularly important to this study. Whereas culture is theorized as the internal experience of values, beliefs, and practices of the organization, identity is the external expression of organizational culture; in essence, it is the face of the organization—what it is and what it values. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) define organizational identity as what organizational members believe others see as distinctive about the organization. This is echoed by Gee’s (2000) definition of identity as, “being recognized as a certain kind of person” in a specific context. In the context of this study, this would mean being recognized as a certain “kind” of urban school. Hatch (1997, 2002) adds to organizational identity theory by again proposing a dynamic process in which culture shapes identity (internal to external) and identity shapes culture (external to internal). She goes on to propose that “organizational culture is expressed through identity claims” (p. 995) and uses Mead’s (1934) theory of the “I”

and “Me” to illuminate the relationship between internal processes of culture and external pronouncements of identity. Mead theorizes that the self arises in a process of social experience and activity. He calls the self that arises in relationship to others the “Me,” and describes it as developing in contrast to others through social interaction. In other words, my sense of myself is constituted in relation to others; it is based on how I am recognized (and then responded to) by those around me. Hatch applies this principle to organizational identity. The “I” relates to organizational culture—the internal experiences of values, beliefs, and practices, and the “Me” relates to image—the external face of the organization. Combined, these comprise organizational identity. Image is expressed and reflected back through responses from the environment. Drawing from their environment, organizations make identity claims—pronouncements of “this is who we are” that are accepted or challenged by their environments. Conversely, the environment mirrors back to the organization what it sees as essential and important, and the organization receives that, accepting or challenging these claims. In the context of schools, an example could be the official designation of failure—being labeled “Program Improvement.” This message would interact with the existing culture of the school, be taken up and affirmed or resisted, and would ultimately manifest as identity claims. What is important here is the active process of social negotiation. Organizational identity is a relational construct formed in interaction with the environment.

Hatch identifies a number of dysfunctions that can occur in the process of forming organizational identity. For example, “organizational narcissism” results

when an organization, responding to a hostile environment, becomes so invested in its image that it takes on either (1) an exalted sense of worth and performance (and thus becomes blind to its weaknesses) or (2) a lack of worth (and similarly becomes blind to its strengths). Hyperadaptation occurs when the organization lacks sufficient buffers between itself and the environment and over-responds to environmental feedback (i.e. public opinion). When an organization suffers from hyperadaptation, it becomes overly concerned with image at the expense of the internal processes of the organization. In other words, “looking good” becomes more important than cohesiveness or cultural heritage, and the organization ultimately loses its internal compass to guide behavior. While Hatch does not use the term institutional theory, his concept of organizational adaptation is very compatible with this theory.

### **Workplace Commitment**

This dissertation draws primarily from sources outside the literature on teacher commitment for its theoretical framework. Within educational studies of teacher commitment, however, a few considerations are important.

First, there exists a lack of consensus on a definition of teacher commitment. While some scholars adopt a more psychological classification and frame commitment in terms of attachment (Firestone & Pennell, 1993), others propose an organizational definition, focusing on the degree of goal coherence between the teacher and the school (Fresko, Kfir, & Nasser, 1997; Reyes, 1990; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990). In all of these cases, a clear definition of commitment is missing. For example, while Reyes (1990) identifies the positive characteristics of a highly

committed teacher and links commitment to a number of positive workplace behaviors such as being committed to student achievement or devoting more time to activities outside the contract day, she does not explain what commitment is, only what it does. Perhaps because a definition is not developed, some studies discuss commitment as a *cause* of certain behaviors (Reyes, 1990) while others present it as an *outcome* (Fresko, Kfir, & Nasser, 1997). This lack of distinction illuminates the need for a clearer definition of the construct of commitment.

Second, there is inadequate distinction in the teacher commitment literature about the object of commitment for teachers. For example, there is no distinction made between teachers being committed to their students, their school, or the teaching profession, in general. Related to this, Kushman (1992) addresses possible tensions between organizational and professional commitment. In articulating the finding that in “disadvantaged schools” teachers demonstrated a high degree of commitment to student learning but a low degree of organizational commitment, he suggests that, “teachers can experience a strong attitudinal conflict between a moral commitment to helping at-risk students and a lack of dedication to a school” (p. 37). This tension is represented elsewhere in the literature although not framed as an issue of professional or organizational commitment. For example, studies investigating current reform efforts to standardize curricula and instructional practices have highlighted resistance from teachers who find these reforms in opposition to their professional beliefs (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008; Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010). Thus, teachers working in schools

that adopt curricular methods in tension with their pedagogical beliefs (for example, scripted curricula or test-driven instruction) are likely to feel a lack of organizational commitment because it is in tension with their professional commitments. My work aims to contribute to the literature by clarifying the distinction between teachers' professional and organizational commitment.

I draw primarily from the literature on workplace commitment, as opposed to teacher commitment, for the theoretical tools to understand teacher retention at Landmark High School. The theoretical framework of workplace commitment allows for considering retention broadly and not necessarily as a positive response to working conditions. In other words, this perspective provides a means for considering why people stay in organizations for reasons other than job or workplace satisfaction. This framework is primarily drawn from the literature on organizational behavior (primarily in the psychological and administrative sciences) and the sociology of work.

**Definitions of organizational commitment.** Organizational commitment is generally understood as identification with, or attachment to, a particular organization and a willingness to support organizational goals. This definition frames organizational commitment as a phenomenon of congruence between an individual's beliefs or values and the work of the organization. It is sometimes framed as *attitudinal*, focusing on the ways that members experience congruence with the organization, and *behavioral*, focusing on the particular organizational behaviors that committed members demonstrate, such as reduced absenteeism, effort, or retention

(Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979; Mueller, Wallace, & Price, 1992; Steers, 1977).

However, there is sometimes a lack of distinction in the literature regarding whether or not commitment is an experience (as in the experience of congruence with organizational goals), a mindset, or an outcome (as in retention).

Meyers and Herscovitch (2001) contend that the lack of consensus on a definition of commitment results in various multi-dimensional models, and they propose a general model of commitment based on its “core essence.” They review various definitions and settle on commitment as “a stabilizing force that gives direction to behavior” (p. 300-301). Two important aspects of this definition that are missing from the literature on teacher commitment is the recognition that commitment binds the person to a set of behaviors, and the proposal that commitment might not necessarily be experienced as a positive experience. Indeed, commitment can be seen as stemming from a general feeling of obligation, a lack of viable options, or normative pressure to conform. For the purposes of this study, workplace commitment is defined as a *mindset that binds an individual to the organization and results in behaviors that support the workplace*. This dissertation aims to illuminate what accounts for different experiences of commitment among teachers in order to understand the role commitment plays in teacher retention.

**Dimensions of workplace commitment.** Several multi-dimensional models of commitment are presented in the literature. Rather than compare or critique the various models, it is helpful to identify dimensions that are conceptually similar across models. For example, multiple models include a dimension of commitment

that focuses on the experience of attachment to an organization based on congruence or identification with its goals, values, and practices (Meyers & Allen, 1991; Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979; Kanter, 1968; O'Reilly & Chapman, 1986). This dimension reflects the most common understanding of commitment—commitment as an experience of congruence and identification. For example, a teacher exhibiting this dimension of commitment would feel a strong affiliation with a school if they (the teacher and the school) had a strong commitment to equity and social justice. This dimension of commitment is largely affective, and treatments of teacher commitment have predominantly described it in these terms.

Another dimension of commitment focuses on the aspect of “continuation.” This dimension involves the perceived benefits of staying with the organization considered alongside the perceived costs of leaving (Meyers & Allen, 1991; Kanter, 1968; O'Reilly & Chapman, 1986). From this perspective, commitment is more calculative than affective; members are aware of the balance of *costs* and *benefits* of membership, and commitment is fundamentally tied to decisions to stay or leave. While they did not define it as commitment, early organizational theorists conceived of a similar relationship between organizations and members, and theorized what accounted for compliance (Bernard, 1968; March & Simon, 1993). Bernard (1968) theorized a “zone of indifference” to organizational demands and proposed that it varied based on the relationship of inducements (i.e. benefits) and the required contributions or costs (i.e. demands made on the individual). The zone of indifference “will be wider or narrower depending upon the degree to which the inducements

exceed the burdens and sacrifices which determine the individual's adhesion to the organization” (p. 168). It could be said that this dimension of commitment is transactional or based on a type of exchange. The person trades adhesion to the organization for a set of inducements.

A similarity among all the aforementioned dimensions is that they are based on reasons why an employee would remain in a workplace. In other words, for either affective or calculative reasons, employees perceive that remaining with the organization is in their best interests. Contrasting models, however, offer dimensions of commitment that reflect why members of an organization remain attached *despite* a lack of congruence, identification, or a perceived fair exchange. For example, Meyer and Allen (1991) and Weiner (1982) include a *normative* dimension that represents feelings of obligation. Normative commitment would include the experience that remaining with the organization is the “right thing to do” because of a moral imperative. This might be due to a sense of loyalty to the organization, but could also be reflective of other obligations. For example, teachers who believe they should stay at a school because they shouldn’t leave their students would be reflecting normative commitment. Similarly, Penley and Gould (1988) include *alienative* commitment and propose that despite dissatisfaction with their work or workplaces (i.e. low affective or calculative commitment) workers remain attached to organizations because they lack viable alternatives. For example, in the context of a particularly tight labor market, with teachers receiving “pink-slips” signaling possible dismissal, organizational commitment might be fostered despite dissatisfaction with working



conditions. These dimensions add nuance to the construct and help theorize why people remain in organizations when they do not experience them as supportive workplaces.

While commitment might have specific dimensions, as these models propose, theorists commonly agree that commitment likely emanates from a mixture of affective, calculative, normative, and alienative impulses. This provides a way of considering commitment as multi-dimensional. Thus, rather than assuming that individuals *lack* commitment if they do not demonstrate strong identification with organizational goals, other dimensions of commitment can be explored to account for their continued engagement in the organization. Importantly, it is not the intention of this work to evaluate the influence of commitment on work-related behaviors (including the intent to stay) but to use commitment as a sensitizing construct to better understand retention.

## **General Findings and Dissertation Overview**

### **Coming to Teach at Landmark School**

This study seeks to understand how Landmark High School manages to recruit and retain teachers, despite having a demographic profile that commonly signals high turnover. It finds that teachers come to Landmark because they anticipate that it will be a compatible workplace that is specifically suited to their professional commitments and conceptions of what it means to be a teacher. The school, in turn, recruits and screens candidates that will be a “good fit” at the school. By the time the interview happens, a solid teacher/school match is well on its way. Two necessary

components make this process possible. First, Landmark has a strong organizational identity and culture and prioritizes “fit” in its orientation to hiring. Second, the school uses decentralized hiring practices that facilitate making sure that the “right” teachers are hired at Landmark. This study makes the case that not all schools are right for all teachers and that retention begins *before* hiring.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

Chapter Two describes the methodology, data collection, and data analysis techniques. Based on organizational theory and the premise that schools are open systems, embedded in, and fundamentally influenced by, their institutional environments, data for the study includes observations, documents (from inside and outside the school), and interviews with teachers and administrators. In this chapter I lay out the grounded theory methods of data collection and analysis and address my rationale for a single-case design, along with the limitations of the study.

Chapter Three situates Landmark in a larger context of urban school reform and documents the history of the school through local media accounts, state published achievement data, and teacher interviews. It illuminates the constructed and sometimes contested nature of history in organizations and presents Landmark’s history through three “stories.”

Chapters Four through Six provide the findings for the dissertation, utilizing a macro-to-micro structure. Chapter Four presents the development of Landmark’s organizational identity and image as “not a typical urban school.” It discusses organizational culture and highlights the role of normative control in maintaining the

school's culture. Chapter Five presents how teachers come to teach at Landmark High and examines information-rich hiring practices and orientations based on the premise of "finding a fit." Chapter Six, "Being a Teacher at Landmark High," discusses the working conditions at the school and reveals how they support and maintain Landmark's culture. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses this research in comparison to prior work on information-rich hiring and offers implications for policy and practice.

## **Chapter Two: Research Methods**

### **Methodology**

This study aims to understand the dynamic interaction of teachers' professional decisions (how and why they come to teach and remain teaching at a school) and the organizational conditions of their workplaces (the formal and informal structure of the school<sup>16</sup>). It assumes that teachers' professional decisions are shaped by a confluence of forces that include their reasons for entry into the profession, their personal and professional biographies, and their conceptions of what it means to be a teacher. The work frames teachers as highly agentive, actively seeking a work environment that provides a suitable and sustaining context for their work. It also assumes that organizations are social, not rational, systems and that understanding a school as an organization means investigating the social and symbolic structures that shape how the organization develops and functions.

The topic of urban schools is highly charged. Popular opinion, the media, education reform— all convey a similar message: urban schools are failing countless youth, and teachers are largely to blame. An Internet search quickly uncovers numerous examples of horrific teaching. The public embraces “turnaround” strategies involving the firing of an entire teaching staff by their school board, and documentaries that target the negative effects of collective bargaining and tenure are

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<sup>16</sup> Formal structure includes aspects of organization that are explicitly established by the school (i.e., bell schedules, teacher assignments, the master schedule) while informal structure refers to the social structures that govern how people work together in practice (i.e., norms, professional relationships, social networks).

reviewed as “important and revealing.<sup>17</sup>” Given this context, I understood that telling the story of Landmark High School—of how it managed to attract and retain teachers, when so many schools like it were unable to secure a stable teaching staff of qualified teachers—would be a challenge. It helped that I was telling a story of retention, of what made people stay at Landmark, not what was pushing them out. It helped that I had been a teacher myself—a fact I established often to enlist trust (and a topic I address in the subsequent section on researcher positionality). It helped that the epistemological tradition of my work seeks to tell *a* story and not *the* story. In any case, I was acutely aware that my research was situated in the contested space of an urban schooling.

To understand Landmark and the work it was doing, I employed a single-case case study design using ethnographic methods. Case study research seeks to understand a complex social phenomenon by investigating a particular “case” in which the phenomenon is situated. Yin (1994) states, “case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed ... and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with some real life context” (p. 1). Data collection focused on capturing the nuances of what it was like to be a teacher at Landmark School. While most of the data is qualitative interviews, observations and field notes were also crucial to my analysis. Two additional research paradigms—grounded theory and organizational analysis—informed design, data collection, and analysis. This chapter will present the methodology, document how data was collected, and

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<sup>17</sup> This review is on the cover of the film “Waiting for Superman,” a documentary that documents the failings of the American public school system.

describe the tools I used for analysis. After discussion of methods, I will address researcher positionality and the limitations of the study.

### **Organizational Theory and Unit of Analysis**

Becker (1961) asserts that design begins and ends with a set of “theoretical and methodological commitments” (p. 17) and that these commitments are the foundation upon which every design decision is made. My research questions, design, and methods were fundamentally shaped by how I conceived of an organization: what an organization is, how it operates, and, most importantly, what it means to the members of the organization. While the unit of analysis for this study was the school itself, much of the data are qualitative interviews with the members of the school and field notes from observations of school activities, reflecting my perspective of organizations as primarily social systems. As addressed in Chapter One, this study was guided by institutional theory, an alternative to viewing organizations as closed, rational systems. Institutional theory casts organizations as open systems, powerfully shaped by their environments and comprised of symbolic as well as regulative and normative features (Scott, 2008). From this perspective, while organizations may appear to operate in ways that prioritize efficiency and productivity, organizational activity is shaped more by processes of collective sense-making and cultural scripts than by the pursuit of rational goals. Similarly, member compliance and the basis of order within the organization are established through common frameworks of understanding, and normative, rather than regulative, control. A good example of this is the contractual arrangement in most schools of a “duty-free” lunch but the informal

norm that teachers be available to help students with their homework at lunchtime. In this example, it is important to view the teacher contract as a regulative force and the lunchtime practice as normative one. Approaching an organization from an institutional perspective requires attention to all aspects of organizational life, including the influences that are outside the boundaries of the organization.

When one studies an organization from an open-systems/institutional perspective, the unit of analysis broadens from focusing entirely on the formal structure (as it would from a rational systems perspective), or even the formal and informal structure (as it would from a natural systems perspective<sup>18</sup>), to focusing on both the internal workings of the school (formal and informal) and the institutional environment in which the school is situated. In other words, understanding how and why teachers come to teach in a particular school from an institutional perspective necessitates studying teachers in the context of their work, viewing their participation in the organizational life of the school, as well as their reaction to larger socio-political forces that originate outside the school.

How does one approach something as broad and vague as the institutional environment? Meyer and Scott (1983) write that institutional environments “are characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform in order to receive legitimacy and support” (p. 132). For a school, this includes concrete elements such as current reform mandates, state

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<sup>18</sup> While a rational systems and a natural systems perspective differ in terms of their units of analyses, they are similar in that they both view an organization as buffered from the environment.

published test scores, and district attendance policies, as well as past stories of the school, public opinion, reputation, or shifting ideologies about the work of schools – things not easily captured in field notes and traditional document collection. Scott (1991) offers a schema for deciding which environmental elements to study in order to focus data collection. Two categories from this schema are particularly suited to this study’s research questions. The first, environmental elements that *impose* organizational structure, refers to aspects of the environment that are sufficiently powerful to impose or alter structural forms. In the case of schools this would include federal, state, and district policies that have a direct impact on how schooling is organized (for example, district attendance policies or state sanctions due to low test scores). The second, elements that *authorize* organizational structure, refers to aspects of the environment that serve to legitimize or delegitimize the structure of the organization through normative pressure (for example, media documents that praise or denigrate the school for its performance). To include the institutional environment in this study, I collected documents that adhered to these categories as well as documents that helped illuminate data from interviews and field notes. To clarify, these documents were not secondary sources intended to provide “context,” but were seen as primary data sources for answering the research questions. This is a central point when approaching a study from an open-system/institutional perspective.

Studying both organizational structure and teachers’ decision making animates the topics of structure and agency. Scott (2008) addresses the limits of rationality when considering individual behavior by asserting that they “portray



action as simply an adaptation to material conditions—a calculus of cost and benefits—rather than a multidimensional alternation of freedom and constraint” (p. 67). He offers Giddens’s theory of structuration as an alternative model for understanding the relationship of agency and structure. Structuration theory views actors as knowledgeable and reflective, “engaged in the ongoing production and reproduction of social structures” (p. 77). Individuals do not just accept or resist – they *produce* (and reproduce) organizational conditions through their on-going involvement in organizational life. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) theorize a similar model of agency that does not prioritize rational choice (i.e. unbounded agency) or structural constraints (i.e. structural determinism) but presents it as a dynamic process of social engagement that is influenced by the past (schemas of social experience and internalized limits), oriented towards the future (imagined options) and constituted in the present (normative judgment). From this perspective, formal structure can be seen not as a determining set of conditions to accept (or resist) but as “contexts of action” (p. 970) that both enable and constrain. My methods address this complex intersection by exploring how teachers understand and actively engage with the organizational conditions of their work, and by viewing organizational structure as offering constraints as well as resources.

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is the basic methodology for my research. Being suited to under-examined or under-theorized phenomena, grounded theory features an iterative approach to design, data collection, and analysis. The most essential feature of

grounded theory is an open theoretical scheme that allows for emerging findings to drive data collection and analysis. My research sought to tell the story of how teachers came to work at the school and why, despite Landmark having all of the features we normally associate with high teacher attrition, they remained. While I began the study drawing from preliminary frameworks of teacher distribution and an organizational perspective on teacher attrition and retention, I did not seek to confirm assumptions or even build on a set of findings from prior work. In fact, most of the findings, even those associated with organizational analysis, required me to draw from literature outside of educational research. For example, when the theme of organizational identity and image emerged in early rounds of data collection and analysis, I began to read and review theories of organizational culture and identity, which were mostly situated in the sociology of work literature. I strove to achieve the necessary balance by drawing from theories that helped me make sense of what I was seeing, but not so much that it colored new themes and categories of analysis.

Also in keeping with grounded theory was the iterative nature of my data collection and analysis. Grounded theory requires early rounds of data analysis in order to stimulate conceptual development and to direct data collection. Glasser (1978) uses “theoretical sensitivity” to describe the researcher’s ability to generate concepts from data and associate them with existing theoretical constructs. I began data analysis immediately and was careful not to rush to judgment but to remain flexible and maintain a necessary degree of analytical distance from the data.

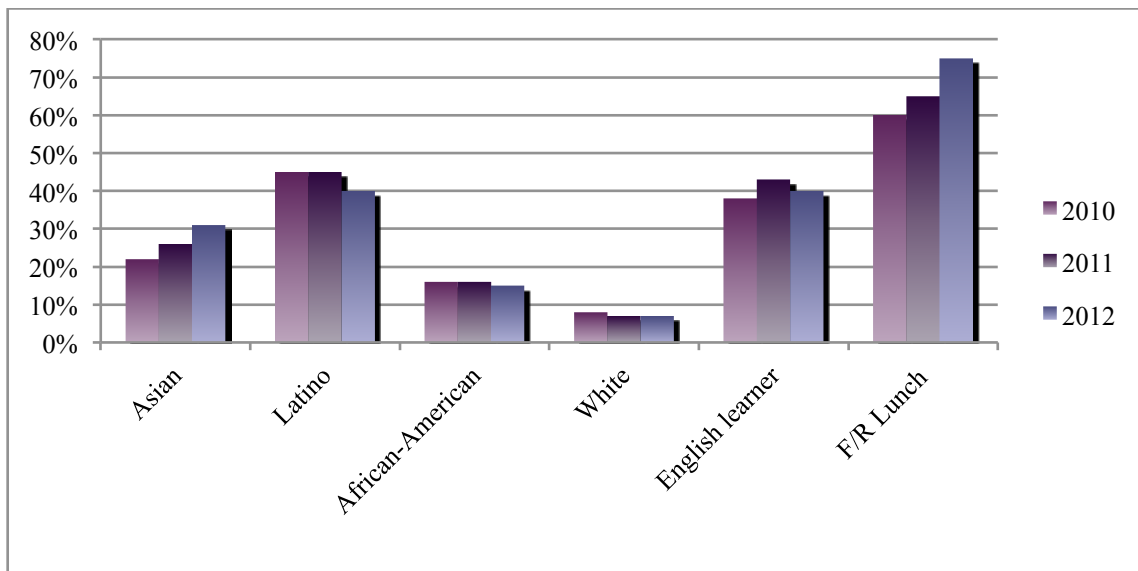
## Methods

### Site Selection, Access, and Sampling

The context of this research puzzle required me to find a school that had all the demographic markers of being hard-to-staff, but one that did not struggle to attract and retain teachers.<sup>20</sup> For purposive sampling, Patton (2002) suggests developing sampling criteria consistent with the purpose of the research. Because California does not collect data on teacher turnover, site selection for this study required me to use informal channels to select a school. I initially became aware of Landmark as a possible research site through a teacher I knew who had recently started teaching there, having left his former school of twenty years. Because I knew him to be a very dedicated teacher and was, in fact, surprised that he had left his former school, I decided to talk to him about Landmark to ascertain if the school would fit my sampling criteria. Through this teacher, I was introduced to the principal, who agreed to talk to me about the study. In that initial conversation, the principal confirmed that Landmark satisfied my sampling criteria. While Landmark was on a district list of schools identified as “hard-to-staff,” the principal confirmed that the school did *not* have trouble attracting or retaining teachers. Landmark also fit the demographic parameters of my sampling criteria with a high proportion of its students being non-white and low-income. In other words, Landmark provided a suitable setting to address a question posed by Ingersoll (1995) that undergirds this study: “What can we learn from schools serving large percentages of poor students that have lower turnover rates than other schools serving similar students?” (p. 4). The principal was

very interested in the study's research questions. During this meeting he granted me access to the school for data collection.

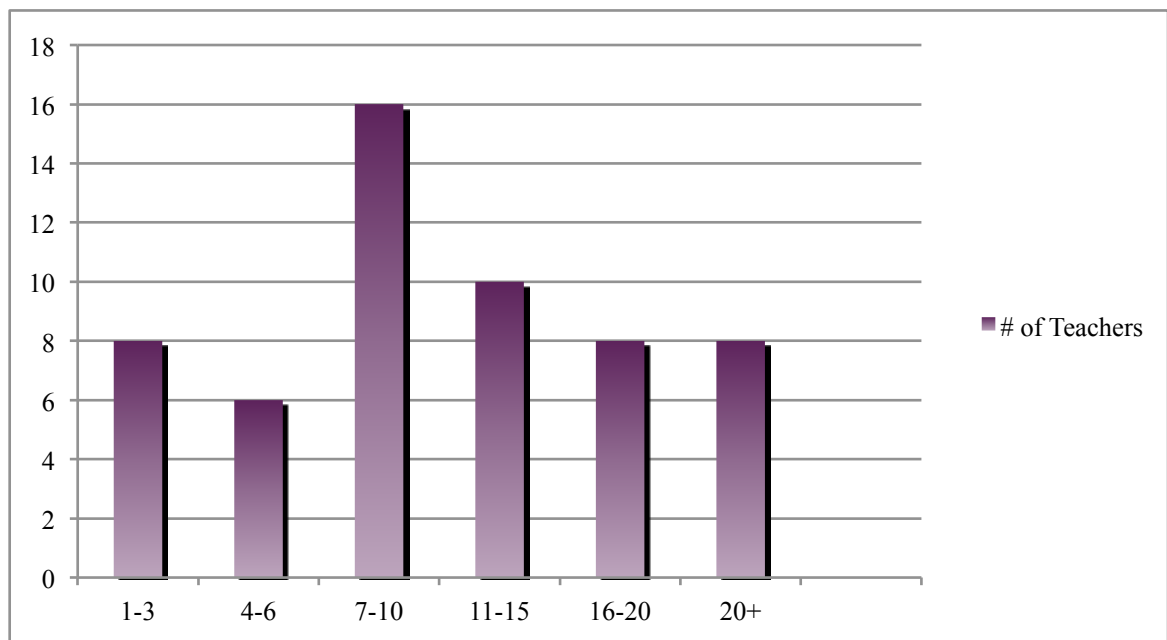
As will be more thoroughly addressed in Chapter Three, Landmark High has historically served a high-poverty, non-white population. In the last three years, more than 90% of the students have been students of color and more than 50% qualify for free or reduced lunch (a proxy for poverty, as California schools do not collect data on family income). Figure 1 summarizes the demographic data of the student population at Landmark High School over the last three years.



**Figure 1 Landmark Student Demographic Data**

Most importantly, the profile of Landmark's teaching staff (coupled with the demographic data) made it a fitting case for this study. While many schools serving low-income, non-white, student populations are disproportionately staffed by less experienced teachers, the teachers at Landmark High are, for the most part, highly experienced and well prepared. This was confirmed by the principal in the initial interview and corroborated by state data. Only five% of the teachers at Landmark

were beginning teachers with less than three years of teaching experience, and there were no teachers at Landmark with provisional credentials.<sup>19</sup> Figure 2 provides a profile of the teaching experience at Landmark High School.



**Figure 2 Landmark Teachers' Years of Experience<sup>20</sup>**

As demonstrated in Figure 2, Landmark’s staff has the greatest concentration of teachers who are in the middle of their career, with between 7 and 15 years of teaching experience.

This study follows Yin’s (1989) model of a single-case, embedded design.

Embedded designs utilize multiple units of analysis. For this study, the “case” was the

<sup>19</sup> Data on teacher experience was found at <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

<sup>20</sup> Data on school wide teacher experience was taken from a report that Landmark submitted for the school’s annual QEIA report. The Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA) was signed into statute in 2006 under Senate Bill 1133. The purpose of the legislation was to provide funding to the lowest ranking schools in California in order to improve conditions for teaching and learning. QEIA requires participating schools to report on teacher turnover and experience.

school itself. Career stages was selected as an imbedded unit of analysis based on the premise that attrition is heavily mediated by teaching experience, with experienced teachers leaving schools more rapidly than beginning teachers. Math and science departments were also selected as an embedded unit of analysis, as these subject areas represent shortage areas for teachers and also demonstrate less stability. Figure 3 reports the initial sampling categories that were used for data collection. Because this study uses grounded theory methods, it was understood that sampling categories might change over the course of the study.

<b>Career Stage</b>	<b>Departments</b>
1) New to teaching	1) Math department
2) Experienced/New to Landmark (within three years)	2) Science department
3) 7-10 years at Landmark	
4) More than 10 years at Landmark	

**Figure 3 Initial Sampling Categories**

In early interviews I learned that the school 1) had undergone reconstitution,<sup>21</sup> and 2) had experienced a pivotal change of leadership, which had resulted in the implementation of restructuring reforms. As a result, sampling categories shifted from career stage and departments to categories relating to the history of the school. New

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<sup>21</sup> Reconstitution is the term used when a large proportion of the teaching staff is fired for persistent low performance. It is a strategy commonly used in the context of high-stakes accountability.

sampling categories included teachers who were hired before, during and just after these pivotal events. Figure 4 summarizes the adjusted sampling categories and the corresponding interviews.

Year	Crucial Events	Teacher Interviews
1995 – 2000	Juan Ramirez is hired as principal (1995) School is reconstituted (1996)	7 teachers
2001-2003	Mark Johnson is hired as principal (2001) Johnson hiring begins (2002)	4 teachers
2004 – 2007	Common Planning Time is implemented (2004) Anti-racist Teaching Committee formed (2005)	9 teachers
2008-2012	Dennis Rubins is hired as principal. (2008)	11 teachers

**Figure 4 Revised Sampling Categories**

This sampling strategy enabled an analysis of the data that was historically situated. Seven teachers were interviewed who were hired during the five-year period before and after the reconstitution, under the administration of Juan Ramirez. Four teachers were interviewed who were hired at the time Mark Johnson became principal, and nine teachers were interviewed who came to the school during the intense period of restructuring that shaped the current organizational culture and identity of the school. Finally, eleven teachers were interviewed who came to the school within the last five years. This approach was consistent with the tenets of grounded theory and organizational analysis—the history of the school was not considered a static

trajectory of neutral events but a dynamic co-constructed understanding of the school's past and present. How teachers understood the school as a workplace and the construction of the school's organizational identity was shaped by the events and perceptions of the school at the time they were hired.

### **Data Collection**

Consistent with both the methodological and theoretical frameworks, data for the study came from a variety of sources (see Figure 5). Data collection occurred over the course of one academic year and included a staff survey, interviews with teachers and administrators, field notes of observations, and organizational documents. Taking the view that organizations are social systems comprised of both formal and informal structures and operating as open-systems that are fundamentally engaged with their environments, the objective was not to triangulate data or corroborate findings but to draw from diverse data to tell a rich and complex story.

<b>Survey</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Document Collection</b>
Faculty Survey	28 Teachers 3 Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Faculty Meetings (n=9)</li> <li>■ Leadership Meetings (n=7)</li> <li>■ Professional Development sessions (n=5)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ School and District recruitment and hiring materials</li> <li>■ State Achievement Data</li> <li>■ Demographic Data</li> <li>■ Newspaper articles</li> <li>■ Master Schedule</li> <li>■ Materials from Professional Development, Leadership and Faculty Meetings</li> </ul>

**Figure 5 Data Sources**



## **Faculty Survey**

A faculty survey was administered to profile the teaching staff. The survey was not mounted until March, after I had had a chance to establish myself at the school and had interviewed a number of teachers. The survey was mounted online, and access to the survey was made available via the school's listserv. To increase response rate after initial survey responses, I emailed department heads for help recruiting teachers to take the survey. Fifty of the seventy-two teachers took the survey, a 69% response rate. Questions on the survey focused on demographics, preparation, and professional history (see Appendix A: Survey). Survey data allowed me to consider the faculty as a whole and to compare this data to the data obtained from interviews.

## **Interviews**

I conducted 32 interviews with teachers and administrators at the school to understand their teaching histories, how they came to teach at the school, and how they experienced the school as a workplace. Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, and I used the same protocol for all of the interviews (see Appendix B & C). The goal was not to extract answers to questions but to get a full story from participants (Weiss, 1995). For example, one of the more open-ended questions asked teachers to address what was “important to know to understand Landmark High School.” An example of a less open-ended question was, “As you know, I am studying teacher retention. What keeps you here?” In many cases, teachers were encouraged to interpret questions in ways that were meaningful to them, and rich

detail always took precedence over uniformity.

As mentioned, early sampling categories were adjusted after initial data analysis. Career stages became less important, and teaching experience at the school became a more salient category. I oversampled from math and science departments because they are traditionally identified as persistent shortage areas and are most likely to have under-prepared or out-of-field teachers. I interviewed 6 of Landmark's 15 English teachers (40%), 4 of 9 History/Social Studies teachers (44%), 9 of 12 math teachers (75%), and 7 of 10 science teachers (70%). Above all, I sought theoretical saturation but also looked for opportunities to find deviant cases or outliers. I continued to interview teachers until existing themes were saturated and no new themes were emerging.

I had originally thought I would access teachers for interviewing by spending informal time at the school between interviews and before meetings. From my prior work in schools, I knew that the teacher's lounge and workroom were two areas that were usually very busy places. I quickly learned, however, that Landmark did not have a central location where teachers gathered informally. As a result, I utilized snowball sampling.<sup>22</sup> While I sought teachers to adhere to my sampling categories, I recruited teachers through referrals from other teachers during interviews. Because I attended most of the faculty and leadership meetings, I had a general presence at the school and the more interviews I did, the more well-known my project became with

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<sup>22</sup> This refers to the phenomenon of having subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. The limits of snowball sampling will be addressed in the last section of the chapter.

teachers. Also, because I interviewed all of the department heads, I was able to solicit participation via department meetings. Most teachers were very responsive, and all but four responded to emails requesting interviews.

### **Observations**

As mentioned, Landmark was not conducive to informal observations, as the campus did not have areas where teachers gathered informally. As a result, observations were limited to formal contexts. I conducted observations and took field notes during the following activities: faculty meetings (n=12), Leadership Meetings (n=7), and professional development sessions (n=5). All observations were captured in ethnographic field notes and thick description (Geertz, 1973). Emerson (2001) describes thick description in field notes as moving beyond writing down all of the “facts” of the setting or action. “The key to thick description lies not in reporting, collecting, and assembling ‘facts,’ but in *interpretively* understanding and representing the subtleties and complexities of meaning” (p. 33). Field notes were kept in a research journal and then transferred to an electronic record.

### **Documents**

A diverse set of documents was collected for analysis. First, any documents (such as agendas or handouts) that were used during meetings I observed were collected. Primary organizational documents, such as the school’s master schedule and relevant material from the school and district website, were also collected. Other important sources of documents were newspapers and other local media. Articles about events at the school (such as reconstitution or change of administration)

provided data on local perspectives of Landmark High School and the institutional environment.

As data was analyzed and patterns began to emerge, I looked for complementary documents to help tell a richer story. For example, while this was not a study of student achievement, a pattern in the data started to emerge that indicated tension in Landmark's history relative to the achievement of students. As a result of this, I tracked longitudinal achievement data so that I could better understand teachers' perspectives. In a similar vein, a common narrative emerged in the data about Landmark attracting a "different demographic of students" and a shared logic that the school was becoming more high-achieving because the student population was changing. This led me to investigate longitudinal zip code data on Landmark students, and will be described more fully in Chapter Three. In sum, documents were collected that helped place the school in social, political, and historical perspective.

Documents were not collected to triangulate, corroborate, or refute other forms of data. Instead, documents helped to enhance other data and make for a richer and more nuanced story. For example, when the longitudinal zip code data revealed that where Landmark students live had not changed significantly in the last seven years, I did not disregard teachers' perspectives or dismiss them as inaccurate. In fact, it was more interesting to me that teacher interviews and zip code data told a different story, as this signaled a more complex way to think about teachers' perceptions of students and how that influenced both their work, and Landmark as a workplace.

## Data Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory, data analysis occurred in three phases, summarized in Figure 6. As mentioned, data analysis and collection happened simultaneously throughout the study.

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Primary Analytic Process</b>	<b>Additional Analytical Tools</b>
One	Open Coding	Analytic memos (general; unfocused)
Two	Axial Coding; Constant Comparative Method	Analytic memos (specific; pattern-based) Theoretical sampling Data Displays
Three	Theoretical Coding; Constant Comparative Method	Analytic memos

**Figure 6 Data Analysis**

### Analytic Memos

Analytic memos were kept throughout the research and were the foundation of my analysis. Charmaz (2006) frames memoing as the first analytic step beyond coding and frames coding as the foundation of grounded theory as it prompts early analysis. In the early stages of data collection, memos were open as I made initial sense of the research context. Memos were kept after every visit to the research site and after sessions of open-coding. During phase two of analysis, as thematic categories started to emerge in the data, memos became more focused, and I chose to keep them organized by theme rather than chronology. For example, as soon as the theme of organizational culture emerged, it became an established memo. This strategy allowed me to track the development of my thinking and anchor shifts to

specific interviews and sessions of coding.

### **Phase One: Open Coding**

Phase one consisted of multiple readings of data, open-coding, and analytic memoing. Open coding is the process of breaking down the data into separate units of meaning in order to conceptualize and label data for later categorization. In the early stage of analysis, coding is unfocused and open. Open coding is described by Charmaz (2006) as an iterative process that requires multiple readings of the same data, in which the researcher intentionally inhibits opinions and conclusions to remain open to new directions in the data. She warns against the early imposition of theoretical framing and argues for coding that comes directly from data. I used open coding for early passes through the data until categories started to emerge. This involved using a combination of line-by-line coding and large inclusive codes such as “reasons for entry,” “why Landmark?,” or “hiring story.” I utilized Glaser’s questions (1978, p.57) as sign posts to guide the process of open-coding: (1) “What is this a study of?” (2) “What category does this incident indicate?” (3) “What is actually happening in the data?” My goal during this initial phase of data analysis was to stay close to the data and use it to ask more questions (to guide theoretical sampling) rather than to rush to form conclusions.

### **Phase Two: Axial Coding**

After I established initial analytic directions through open coding, I used axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to synthesize and explain larger segments of data and develop a coding scheme. As categories emerged, I compared data and refined

codes. This was an iterative process of looking at similarly coded data and establishing the common features and criteria for the code. Charmaz (2006) describes this phase of coding as a process of deciding which of the initial codes make the most “analytic sense” (p. 57) and developing more descriptive and inclusive codes. Another foundational activity during axial coding is the process of relating emergent categories to one another and paying attention to subcategories. Corbin and Strauss offer the paradigm of “conditions, context, and strategies” (p. 423) as a useful construct during axial coding. For example, during analysis I sought the conditions, context, and strategies for the category of organizational fit. It was in the process of exploring this that the subcategory—formal and informal networks—emerged. Conditions, context, and strategies, as an organizing schema, provided a systematic means of identifying subcategories and moving the analysis forward.

Using the constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I engaged in an on-going process of comparing similarly coded passages within and across data in order to refine codes, integrate categories, and develop new codes when passages diverged. I also developed and refined code descriptions for every code (see Appendix D: Codebook). The purpose of the constant comparative method is to continually check to see if the data continues to support the emerging categories and to substantiate those categories by defining their properties and dimensions. Boeije (2002) advances the constant comparative method as the “core of qualitative analysis in the grounded theory approach” (p. 391) and proposes a systemic way to use comparisons in a study to increase internal validity. As categories emerged, I

engaged in three processes of comparison. First, I compared coded passages within a single interview to make sure that codes were distinct and to establish what aspects of passages that were similarly coded had in common. Second, I made comparisons across interviews with people who shared a similar experience. Third, I formed comparisons across interviews with people who had differing experiences. For example, once the theme of “organizational commitment” began to emerge, I used the constant comparison method to establish it as a category in the dissertation. After comparing coded passages within interviews, I looked across interviews at people who seemed to be demonstrating high organizational commitment (i.e. across interviews of teachers with similar experience) as well as across interviews of people who seemed to be demonstrating low or strained organizational commitment, to see what themes might have appeared in one group but not in the other. In the above example, these comparisons resulted in my arriving at a better understanding of organizational goals and the extent to which teachers identified, or did not, with them. The following is an excerpt from one of my memos in which this distinction is newly identified and explored.

*Some of the teachers demonstrate low or strained organizational commitment because of tension between their professional commitment and the organizational goals of the school -- see McHenry, Meyers, and Frietas. On multiple occasions, it has been expressed that the "mission" of the school is to serve the lowest 1/3 students -- "the students that would fail anywhere else." There is concern/tension about what this means for higher achieving students. Teachers that discuss this are worried about their needs being ignored. In fact, in the case of McHenry, he stated that he would have "slipped through the cracks" if he had gone to a school like Landmark. Anyway -- what is interesting about this is that the tension isn't because of organizational conditions (i.e. high professional commitment that is strained by how*



*the school is organized, or the "working conditions" of the school) but because of tension between the organizational goals of the school and the professional commitment of the teachers. Some teachers are fine with these goals and helped shape them (see Davis, Olson, and Rich). When they talk about the same thing – prioritizing the needs of the students who have been historically underserved – they use terms like "access" and "equity." So. So what? Why is this important? It helps me get under the distinction between organizational and professional goals. Not as simple or as clear-cut. Nuanced*

(Research Memo 1/8/2013)

This example demonstrates the iterative nature of grounded theory. Through on-going and varied comparisons and memoing, distinctions were developed in order to refine codes and establish categories. I also compared data across data sources. For example, as the category of organizational image was coming into sharper focus and becoming more salient, I looked at media accounts of the school to develop and refine the category.

Developing data displays and maps were crucial activities during this phase of analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) propose that varied displays of data (i.e. tables, charts, other graphical formats) can inspire new insights about the data and help clarify and validate findings. While I was analyzing coded data, and themes began to emerge, I kept tables that could be sorted and re-sorted according to various features. For example, once the theme of hiring became prevalent, I created a spreadsheet that reflected various features of teachers' hiring stories, including whether they had heard about the school from a prior colleague, whether they mentioned being drawn to the school for pedagogical reasons, or whether they were recruited to the school by someone already teaching there. This allowed me to sort and re-sort the data

according to various other features (i.e. career stage, department) and look for more patterns.

Data displays were also helpful. I used a graphic display to depict pathways of teachers coming into the school in order to develop my thinking about the nature of these pathways: Were they formal or informal? What schools were teachers coming from? Were teachers transferring from other schools in the district or were they coming from schools outside the district? As the category of “information-rich hiring” began to emerge, I mapped channels of information about the school and the various networks that were involved in the sharing of information across organizational boundaries. Situational maps (Clark, 2005) were used to show positions and relationships between various aspects of the study and allowed me to move from micro to macro organizational levels of analysis. For example, I used a situational map to explore the relationship of teachers to dominant discourses of urban schools. In all of these cases, data displays and maps were employed to open new channels of inquiry and provide fresh ways to consider the data.

During axial coding, when themes began to emerge, I sought supportive literature to help make sense of what I was seeing in the data. While I began the research with a guiding body of literature, I assumed that I would draw from other literature as needed. As the theme of organizational culture became more and more prevalent, I began reading more on the topic. As the distinction between culture and identity began to emerge, my focus shifted to reading more on these topics. This process mirrored the simultaneous process of analysis and data collection; as I read

the literature on organizational culture and identity, I revisited and refined categories.

### **Phase Three: Theoretical Coding and Saturation**

Theoretical coding was the primary activity of the third phase of data analysis. In grounded theory, theoretical coding is the process of finalizing thematic categories and relating the categories to each other. Referencing Glaser and Strauss (2009), Charmaz (2005) describes this as a process of “weaving the story back together” after the axial coding, which focuses on noticing and attending to distinctions. Theoretical coding is integrative in that it seeks to reveal a narrative structure by establishing the “core category” and relating the other categories so that they tell a coherent story. The primary category that emerged in this study was the reciprocal relationship of fit that occurred at Landmark (the topic of Chapter Five), meaning the intentional and strategic manner in which teachers came to Landmark seeking a compatible work environment and the processes by which Landmark recruited and screened teachers who were likely to fit at the school. Once this category emerged as central, the other categories helped situate and provide context for the category of hiring and organizational fit. For example, the category of organizational culture and identity became salient in an effort to better understand the story of fit. During the final stage of analysis and theoretical coding, the connections between the categories became clear and the narrative of the dissertation was established.

### **Evidentiary Warrant**

*Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which*

*to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion,  
both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right.*  
Geertz (1973, p. 29)

While standards of evidence have been historically contested (Freeman, Preissle, Roulston & Pierre; 2007), the ability to demonstrate the trustworthiness of claims is a necessary component of qualitative research. As Geertz's statement demonstrates, in qualitative research the proposal to demonstrate evidentiary warrant is an epistemological as well as technical conundrum. Qualitative research has been said to be forever plagued by trying to conform to standards that are ill fitting and better suited to quantitative methods (Wolcott, 1990). Concerning this, Lincoln and Guba (2000) argue that while positivist notions of validity cannot be applied to qualitative research, it is possible (and preferable) to establish alternative options. For example, while this work cannot demonstrate internal *validity*, it does conform to standards of internal *consistency*. As mentioned, extensive memoing and the constant comparative method were used to ensure that all emergent findings fit with each other and that they explained the data. Efforts were also made to ensure that codes and categories came *from* the data and were not imposed *on* the data. This included attention to disconfirming data and an on-going process of questioning the origin and applicability of theoretical constructs such as organizational fit or organizational commitment. For example, while I did not consider a category sufficiently saturated based on a certain number of participants being associated with the category (i.e. because 2/3 of the participants talked about “fit,” then “fit” is a valid category), I did look to see that the category made sense with all of the data and that I could explain

variations in the overall narrative of the research.

In addition to the attempt to maintain consistency, significant efforts were made to ensure *confirmability*. Confirmability (Gasson, 2004) refers to the extent to which conclusions or findings represent the data and do not reflect researcher bias or far-reaching interpretations. While I interviewed most participants only once, I engaged in member checks during individual interviews. This became even more crucial in later interviews as categories were becoming more distinct and coding more focused. While my interview protocol shifted as a result of theoretical sampling, I was dedicated to asking open-ended questions and not leading participants. Member checking also occurred during informal follow-up conversations that I had with participants and in a formal follow-up interview I had with the principal. In all of these contexts my aim was to share my sensemaking with participants and to receive feedback on how closely my findings reflected their understandings of the school.

Finally, methodological rigor is recognized as a feature of *trustworthiness* in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). My methods were based on prescribed methods of grounded theory, and in this way this study is methodologically replicable. I used the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, and memoing, in large part as a way to substantiate and validate my claims. In grounded theory, creditability is established through strict adherence to methodological protocol.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The subjective nature of qualitative research requires investigators to attend to the ways in which their own involvement with a particular study influences and

informs the research. *Reflexivity* is understood as the introspective and analytical scrutiny of research methods, as well as ongoing consideration of the role and position of the researcher in relation to the subject under investigation (England, 1994; Pillow, 2003). My position as a former teacher is rich with the potential for bias. I came to graduate school from the field, with fifteen years of first-hand experience in schools very similar to Landmark High School. Teaching was not merely a job for me; it was an identity I wore proudly. I assumed when I came to graduate studies that I would do research in schools and be perceived as an insider. I would navigate research contexts by drawing on my prior knowledge and personal background. I would be able to nod sympathetically when teachers described their frustrations with standardized testing and laugh at jokes that only an insider would understand, about annual CBEDS reports, boring staff meetings, and clueless administrators. In reality, while my “insider” status did allow me a certain degree of access and credibility with the teachers at Landmark,<sup>23</sup> it was primarily a source of introspection and required me to enact strategies to notice and attend to my positionality.

It was not my contention that I could eliminate researcher bias. Paradigm shifts in social science research (i.e. postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist epistemologies) have brought attention to the fundamentally interpretive nature of what was once considered impartial observation and to the premise that what we see is fundamentally influenced by who we are. The researcher’s gaze is inherently

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<sup>23</sup> I was asked numerous times if I had been a classroom teacher, usually by teachers before I interviewed them. Teachers commented that they were more open to being interviewed knowing I had K-12 classroom experience.

situated and partial, and no amount of introspection or strategic attention can alter that completely. In fact, knowledge claims are not forged *in spite* of contingent locations and partial perspectives but *from* them (Harding, 2004; Haraway, 1988). Reflexive research requires the researcher to fully consider the historically contingent subject positions they occupy and utilize these social locations as resources, rather than as something to be denied or eliminated. Rather than observing and reporting “truth,” the reflexive researcher recognizes truth claims as partial and situated. This does not need to be viewed as a disadvantage. Haraway (1988) proposes “radical historical contingency” as “a critical practice for recognizing our own semiotic technologies for making meaning and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a real world, one that can be partially shared” (p.599). In this study, while I attended to blind spots I most certainly had due to my history as a teacher, I was also aware of, and sought to utilize, the ways in which that positionality *enabled* a deeper consideration of the data. For example, my direct experiences with accountability reform, and (perhaps more importantly) my professional experiences *before* the implementation of accountability reform, were not only a source of bias, but also enabled me to ask questions and engage in research more fully.

Reflexive strategies for this study began long before the onset of data collection. Grappling with my teacher identity had been an undercurrent of my work throughout my doctoral studies, beginning with an acknowledgement that my views of teachers and teaching were absolutely situated in the socio-historical world in which I had taught. As a result, I was well aware of my biases before I began

fieldwork. During data collection, I kept reflexive memos and interrogated my perspectives about who I was “seeing” among the teachers at Landmark. This included instances when I noticed “the union guy” or the “social justice teacher.” Through research memos, I paid attention to my assumptions and preconceptions about issues that arose that were potentially biased, such as, teacher “commitment” or “teachers of color.” Finally, I brought more critical attention to cases that were in tension with my beliefs, opinions, and understandings by comparing coded material to other interviews, memoing about themes that were disconfirming, and pursuing alternative explanations for what I was seeing in the data.

### **Rationale for the Single Case**

As mentioned, case study research seeks to understand a complex social phenomenon by investigating a particular case in which the phenomenon is exhibited. The phenomenon in this study is teacher retention and the case is Landmark High School. Yin (2003) defines case study research as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of data are used (p. 18). When designing a case study, an important initial decision is whether or not to use a single or multiple case designs. A single case design studies the phenomenon in one context and a multiple case design studies the phenomenon in multiple contexts. For example, a multiple case design for this study might have included an inner city charter school (for variation) or another comprehensive high school. A number of factors influenced my decision for single-



case design. First, I considered the parameters established by Yin (2003) to ensure that the study qualified. Yin argues that a single-case is used (1) to confirm or challenge a theory or (2) to represent a unique or extreme case. This study clearly aligns with the second premise—the unique case. As explained, the research aimed to explore a theoretical puzzle by studying a school that had all the demographic markers of being hard to staff but, in fact, did *not* struggle to attract and retain experienced teachers.

While the ability of case study research to offer valid and reliable findings is frequently questioned, the single-case is subject to even sharper criticism. The issue of generalizability is commonly raised and the method critiqued for not yielding findings that are applicable to real life. The premise that what is learned from an individual case cannot be applied to other contexts or situations is frequently the basis of criticism of single-case case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Yin (2003) addresses the issue of generalizability by making a distinction between analytic generalization and statistical generalization. Case study, Yin argues, conforms to the necessary criteria for *analytic generalizability* because it contributes to previously developed theory; our interest in a case is to help refine prior theorizing, not to apply it to other cases. Stake (2007) offers a different approach to the traditional critique. Rather than justifying when and how case study can or should be used to legitimately generalize, Stake draws attention to the tension between the value of the particular and the pressure to generalize. In fact, Stake argues *against* comparisons, proposing that the thrust for comparison is in competition with Geertz's theory of thick

description. "Comparison is a grand epistemological strategy; a powerful conceptual mechanism, focusing attention on one or two attributes ... With concentration on the basis of comparison, uniqueness and complexities will be glossed over. A research design featuring comparison substitutes (a) the comparison for (b) the case as the focus of the study" (p. 149). In other words, the advantage of a single-case design is the extent to which a researcher can keep the analytical lens open and be immersed in the unique and complex details being revealed.

My rationale for choosing a single-case design combines both Yin and Stake's perspectives. First, my intention with this study was descriptive. I began with a descriptive theory—the premise that organizational conditions were fundamental in understanding teacher retention. However, beyond this rudimentary theoretical framework, I did not have preconceived understandings of how, why, or which organizational conditions were important in attracting and retaining teachers. Had I been studying two schools, I believe it would have been more difficult to keep the theoretical lens opened quite so widely. Perhaps unintentionally, I would have been looking for points of convergence and divergence.

Another justification for using a single-case is the extent to which my topic has been undertheorized in the literature. As mentioned, most studies of teacher retention draw from studies on teacher *attrition* and assume that the reason teachers stay in schools is the opposite of why they leave them. Focusing my attention on one school allowed me to explore an insufficiently studied phenomenon in a context that invited the development of new theory, or at least theory that was not commonly used

in educational research. .

### **Limitations of the Study**

The single-case design did have its limitations, however. First, while Landmark represented a “typical” case in terms of student demographics, it was, as teachers so often pointed out, “not a typical urban school.” The school was situated in a historically and culturally rich, though heavily gentrified, neighborhood, and while only some of the teachers lived in close proximity to the school, many of them mentioned enjoying coming to work in the Landmark district. This is a distinction not shared by most urban schools. Most of the teachers at the school vocalized strong commitment to equity and social justice and embodied a non-deficit perspective on urban youth. In fact, I was somewhat disbelieving that there were virtually no teachers that represented a more common view of urban students as “disadvantaged.” While the uniqueness of Landmark did not cloud my findings, it did cause me some concern that Landmark’s claims of being exceptional were, in fact, true and this diminished the value of my research

Other limitations of the study were specific to data collection. As mentioned, the physical environment of Landmark did not lend itself to the ethnographic aim of acclimating to the local context, making it difficult to “get a sense of the school” outside of formal meetings. Also, snowball sampling for teacher interviews has inherent limitations resulting from the nature of similarity within social networks. Thus, lacking other means of accessing teachers, I relied extensively on recommendations from teachers I had interviewed, making it a challenge to find

potentially disconfirming cases. Also, because I framed my work as a study of retention and highlighted the fact that I wanted to know why teachers stayed at the school, it is possible that people who were *not* inclined to stay at Landmark were not likely to volunteer to be interviewed. Taken together, the limits of observing Landmark in an informal context and the challenge of accessing teachers who might represent a divergent view limited my exploration of themes other than the dominant narrative about the school.

## **Chapter Three: Landmark in Historical Perspective**

### **Institutional Memory, History, and a Note on Method**

The purpose of this chapter is to situate Landmark in a larger context of urban school reform and to document the history of the school through local media accounts, state published achievement data, and teacher interviews. Schools are not bounded organizations, buffered from their environments, and self-sustaining. They are situated in larger institutional contexts, and those contexts influence what they are and what they do. Being open systems, schools are in constant communication with their environments, ever adjusting to changes in political, social, and economic contexts and always working to maintain legitimacy. In order to survive, schools must conform to the rules and belief systems prevailing in the environment (Scott & Davis, 2007). As discussed in Chapter One, schools are, in fact, even more susceptible to the effects of institutional pressure than other open systems. Understanding Landmark High School requires a deep understanding of what it means to be an urban school; Landmark defines itself and its work in this larger context.

I did not set out to study the history of the school. While I planned on including historical information for context, I did not anticipate that Landmark's history would be particularly significant in understanding the school context and how it mattered for teachers. However, early rounds of data collection and analysis revealed that the school's history was profoundly meaningful for Landmark teachers. Even those who had only been at the school for a relatively short time, referenced the school's past—what the school had “gone through,” what it was like “before”, how

things “had turned around when Mark got here”—and it became clear that these stories combined to create a very particular narrative of Landmark High School. As teachers talked about different time periods of the school’s history, or a name was mentioned repeatedly, I sought other sources for these data. For example, when the past principal, Mark Johnson, was brought up repeatedly, generally in the context of a significant change in the school’s progress, I looked for news articles and data on student achievement or teacher turnover from that period. When stories were retold or there was a particular phrase or sentiment that reappeared, I paid close attention, as it signaled shared meaning. The result was a historical account of Landmark High School told by multiple storytellers—the topic of this chapter.

Organizations have histories that are collectively constructed. Members of an organization create and reiterate historical claims, usually through storytelling. History is therefore not a neutral series of events that is remembered (accurately or not) but a subjective process of remembering and reconstructing the past. Linde (2009) proposes that institutional memory and the parts of the past that are “reworked” by members of the organization (through the retelling of familiar stories) can shed light on foundational aspects of an organization’s identity. Historical claims that are recounted again and again, even by members who were not part of the organization at the time, make up the “core story—the parts of the past that are so important that they are always included—what anyone must know about us to know who We are” (p. 95). Rather than considering history as fixed and static, this perspective frames history as dynamic and situational. As members of an organization make sense of its history,

this sense-making becomes a vital part of the life of an organization. Events are remembered, narrated, and passed on to new members as means of preserving the past, maintaining the identity, and even inducting members into the culture of the organization. The goal of this chapter is not to validate or refute claims across sources. It will not attempt to narrate the true history of Landmark or even the predominant or agreed upon account of the school's past. Instead it aims to present an account of the school's history as represented from multiple perspectives. Landmark's history is relevant to this study inasmuch as it influences teachers' collective sense of the school and how they perceive Landmark as a workplace. The first section of the chapter gives demographic data about the school and introduces the grand narrative of Landmark High School—a “changed” school. After that, it explores Landmark's position in the context of Cyprus Unified School District and two competing school reform narratives. The last section explores multiple (and sometimes competing) “stories” about Landmark's students.

### **Landmark High School's Narrative of Change**

Landmark is a public, non-charter, high school located in an inner-city neighborhood in a mid-size city in central California. Ninety percent of the students are non-white, 40% are identified as English Language Learners and 68% qualify for free or reduced lunch, a proxy for poverty. Only 41% of Landmark parents graduated from high school and 20% attended college. In sum, Landmark High School serves a high-need student population.

The socio-economic status of the school is not reflected in the surrounding

neighborhood. While the Landmark neighborhood has historically been low-income, it has become increasingly gentrified in the last 20 years—more so than any other community in the Cyprus district. Low-income enclaves are dotted throughout the neighborhood, sharply contrasted with multi-million dollar condominiums and high-end boutiques and restaurants. For example, the median income for the neighborhood immediately surrounding the school is \$68, 000 but the adjacent neighborhoods have a median household income of \$39,000 and \$26,000. The ethnic composition is similarly varied. The Landmark community has historically been Latino with a high concentration of immigrants, but the area immediately surrounding the school now has an ethnic composition of 22% Latino and 64% White, while an adjacent neighborhood has the opposite distribution (63% Latino and 19% White). Furthermore, because Landmark is part of a district-wide school choice initiative, students do not only come from the surrounding neighborhood but from areas throughout the city. A number of teachers live in the Landmark community and reference the local history and the unique character of the neighborhood as a benefit of teaching at the school. There are various accounts of the changes in the Landmark neighborhood with some of the teachers critical of the gentrification. While Landmark is not considered a neighborhood school, it is part of the local community.

Many things have changed within the school, as well. Recently, the school demonstrated significant gains in standardized test results, with an API<sup>24</sup> increase of

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<sup>24</sup> The Academic Performance Index (API) is a measurement of academic performance and progress of individual schools in California. It is one of the main components of the Public Schools Accountability Act passed by the California



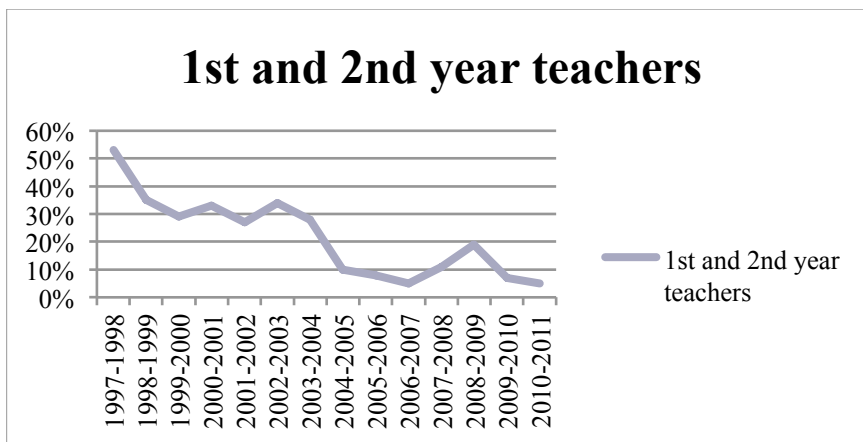
almost 100 points in the last 4 years. In the last 3 years, the school's graduation rates have increased from 60% to 82%, almost as high as the district's overall graduation rate of 85%. These improvements have been communicated to the community through numerous media accounts. A local newspaper ran multiple articles about Landmark meeting API targets, calling Landmark a school that had "turned itself around." One article reported on a famous rock musician and former Landmark student performing at the school and donating guitars to the school's music club to recognize its success. Another featured Landmark High as the recipient of a catered lunch provided by four local up-scale restaurants in honor of its 2011 seventy point API gain. In the same year, a nationally known magazine did a full year feature on Landmark, reporting on the school in monthly installments. One of the stated purposes of the series was to provide a "counter story to the documentary film *Waiting for Superman*." In other words, Landmark was being juxtaposed with the film's dire message about failing urban schools. Unlike the school depicted in the documentary, Landmark's image in the community is that of a successful and thriving urban school.

Landmark has a unique staffing profile for an urban school. Forty-two percent of the Landmark teachers have more than 10 years of teaching experience and only 15% are in their first three years of teaching, an anomaly when compared to many urban schools that struggle to attract and retain experienced teachers. This hasn't always been the case at Landmark. As figure 3.1 illustrates, the number of beginning

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legislature in 1999. API scores range from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. In order to demonstrate adequate progress, a school must meet progress targets annually.

teachers has steadily declined in the last 10 years. From 1998 to 2011, the percentage of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year teachers dropped from more than half of the teaching staff in 1998 to only 5% in 2011, with the biggest decline happening between 2000 and 2004 (dropping from 30% to 10%). This data indicates that the school relied less and less on new teachers because it had an increasing supply of experienced teachers being hired at the school. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Research has documented that teaching experience matters to student learning and that students taught by teachers in their first years of teaching demonstrate lower rates of achievement than students taught by more experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). It has also been documented that high rates of teacher-turnover are associated with lower student achievement and that students in schools with less turnover achieve at higher levels, even when controlling for other factors (Dolton & Newson, 2003). A compelling intersection is revealed when considering staffing data alongside achievement data—Landmark’s API spikes occurred between 2007 and 2011, when the percentages of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year teachers was at its lowest.



**Figure 7 Beginning Teachers at Landmark High School**

The narrative of change is pervasive at the school. At a faculty meeting, an assistant principal presented the faculty with the revised procedures for disciplinary referrals and, as a precursor, told a story about his first day on the job at Landmark.

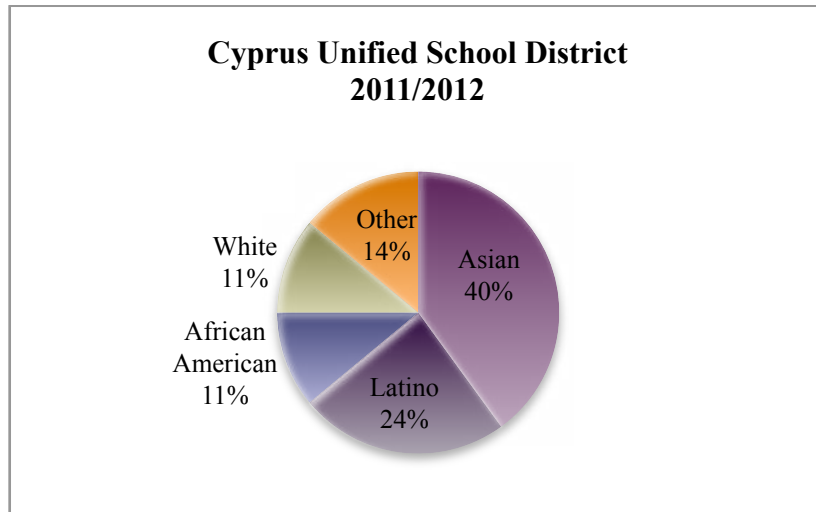
*I don't know how many of you were here, but on my first day at Landmark there were three fights and two broken noses and that was just before lunch. It's not like that here anymore. Anyone who is still here from those days can tell you that.*

Alan Brown (faculty meeting 11/2/2011)

Landmark isn't what it used to be—scores have gone up, the teaching staff is more stable, and student behavior has improved. This perception is widely shared across multiple sources. The remainder of the chapter will present various accounts of this transformation and will situate changes at Landmark within the context of the district's history of school reform.

**Cyprus Unified School District and School Reform**

Landmark is one of 114 schools in Cyprus Unified School District. The district is located in a mid-size city in Central California, and serves a diverse population of 55,500 students: 40% Asian, 24% Latino, 11%, White, 11% African-American, and 5% Filipino. Twenty-nine percent of the students are designated as English Language Learners, and in 2010/2011 (the last year that data was made publicly available), 60% of the students in the district qualified for free or reduced lunch.



**Figure 8 Cyprus Unified Student Population**

Cyprus Unified has a complex history of educational reform. In 1978 the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a group of black parents filed a class-action suit against the district, charging it with (a) racially discriminatory practices and (b) maintaining a segregated school system. The case resulted in a consent decree that prevented any racial group from exceeding 45% of any of the district’s schools. Immediately following the consent decree, the district implemented a desegregation plan based on bussing students to one of seven zones throughout the city to achieve the mandated ethnic balance. Parents, overwhelmingly, did not support the implemented desegregation. Numerous parent groups, particularly in neighborhood schools with the greatest ethnic concentrations, opposed the plan. The strongest voice of opposition came from Chinese parents who saw desegregation in tension with reforms parents were advocating for—bilingual education, incorporation of Asian and Asian American Studies into school curricula, and the hiring of more teachers and administrators from the Chinese community. The larger

subgroup of Asian parents opposed the consent decree because it did not reflect the ethnic make-up of the city and put Asian students at a disadvantage from attending the district's public non-charter college preparatory high school.<sup>25</sup> In 1991, the consent decree was challenged in court resulting in a "diversity index" for school assignment that did not use race as a factor.<sup>26</sup>

Following the suit, the district implemented a school-choice system that is still used for enrollment. The system allows parents to rank their top school choices and assigns students to schools based on space at the school and student's enrollment status (as defined by membership in priority groups). Students are assigned to their highest ranked request if there is space at the school. If there are more students applying than there are openings at a school, assignments are made based on priority groups (for example, students with siblings at the school are given top priority). One of the top priority groups for school choice is referred to in the district's enrollment materials as "NCLB/Low Test Score Area." If a student attends a school identified as "Program Improvement" or "living in an area of the city with the lowest average test scores," they are granted priority enrollment for their choice of schools. Because Landmark High School, and it's surrounding neighborhood both qualify, Landmark students and students living in the Landmark area are granted priority enrollment for

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<sup>25</sup> Whitman High School is CUSD's only college preparatory high school. It grants admission based on test scores and is ranked nationally. In 2010, Whitman ranked 2nd internationally in AP exam scores.

<sup>26</sup> The diversity index could not include race as a factor of school assignment so it instituted other social categories associated with access and academic achievement. This included free and reduced lunch status, mother's educational level, academic achievement, language spoken at home, and English Learner status.

*leaving* the school. Landmark High School exists simultaneously in competing discourses—because it has not met mandated achievement targets, the state labels Landmark a “failing school” and requires the district to offer transfer options, while local accounts present Landmark as an “urban success story.”

Cyprus Unified School District has experienced a range of leadership and policy in terms of school reform orientations. During the 1990s, school reconstitution<sup>27</sup> was adopted as a primary reform strategy, brought in by a new superintendent who local media referred to as a “no excuses” leader who came to the district ready to “turn around” failing schools. In the early 1990s, under the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan, the district placed Landmark on probation with the threat of reconstitution if achievement did not improve. During this period, 25 schools in the district engaged in CSIP reform with strict targets and program monitoring, and 10 schools were ultimately reconstituted. One of those schools was Landmark High School.

In 2000, the superintendent left the district and leadership in Cyprus Unified shifted dramatically. Rather than adopt the top-down leadership approach of her predecessor, the new superintendent, Gloria Reid, implemented a number of capacity-building reforms including increased autonomy for principals. Cyprus Unified thrived

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<sup>27</sup> School reconstitution is a reform strategy that seeks to increase efficiency by replacing all or most of the staff at a school deemed chronically failing. It was used more frequently after the California Accountability Act of 1999 as a “corrective action” for schools not achieving the mandated gain in the Academic Performance Index (API), or later, in the federal context of NCLB, for schools not demonstrating Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP). Cyprus Unified was one of the first districts in the United States to use school reconstitution (Rice & Malen, 2010).

under her leadership, boasting significant gains in student achievement. In 2005, Cyprus had the highest student achievement of any urban school district in California and was named one of five finalists for the 2005 Broad Prize for urban education. The superintendent left the post in 2006. Two superintendents have followed, one from outside the district who acted as superintendent for four years before resigning, and the current superintendent who was recruited internally. While the district has not received nearly the media coverage or local attention as in the preceding two periods, it is still locally framed as a once struggling, but now successful, urban district.

Just as schools operate within larger systems of district reform, districts are also open-systems and function in larger institutional environments. The story of urban reform in Cyprus Unified School district during the 25 years documented here is reflective of shifting discourses on school improvement. Cyprus reform efforts in the 1990s were reflective of accountability reforms that were prevalent in California the decade prior and, coincidentally, the current system of high-stakes accountability under No Child Left Behind. This reform orientation utilizes improvement via centralized leadership, the clear transmission of measurable goals, strict monitoring, and sanctions when goals are not met (such as reconstitution).

Cyprus reforms from 2000 to 2005, on the other hand, reflected a shift from external control and high-stakes accountability to a system of increased professionalization. This was the prevailing orientation in California in the 1990s and was reflected in such strategies as site-based management, investments in teacher leadership, and whole school reform. In sum, Cyprus Unified's shift in policy reflects

the shift from accountability to professionalism<sup>28</sup> in California. It could be argued that the district was incased in an institutional environment that legitimized some reform strategies over others. How Landmark adjusted to those shifts is captured in the historical narratives at the school.

### **How Reform is Storied at Landmark**

All organizations have a past that is frequently told through story, but Landmark's past is a particularly powerful determinant of Landmark's present. As will be dealt with more thoroughly in subsequent chapters, the school's organizational identity is based largely on what it was and how it has changed. This identity is largely shaped and transmitted via stories—first-hand accounts of the school from members of the school community and stories about the school told from the outside.

There are two distinct reform periods that are discussed in relation to Landmark's history. One began in 1996 when a new principal, Juan Ramirez, replaced a well-loved principal at the school, and the school was reconstituted one year later. The second period began in 2001 when Mark Johnson, the principal commonly associated with the restructuring reforms that transformed Landmark into its current state, replaced Ramirez. Both periods are marked by particular discourses on urban school reform—one paints a picture of failure and the other of success. For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will be on how school reform is represented through these discourses—how stories from various sources and perspectives paint a

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Rowan (1990b) characterizes this shift as moving from an orientation of control (with the effective schools movement) to an orientation of commitment (with whole school reform).



picture of what Landmark *was* and what Landmark *is*, and how this change took place.

### **“Things Were a Mess”: Landmark’s Reconstitution (1996-2000)**

Media accounts of Landmark’s reconstitution vaguely portray the school as being “failing” and present reconstitution as the superintendent’s bold move to “turn the school around.” In a newspaper article, the superintendent attributes low tests scores to “a dysfunctional organizational culture that becomes absolutely resistant to change” and critiques any opposition as wanting to “preserve the status quo.” While no specific data is presented, Landmark is deemed, “chronically low achieving.” It is presumed that a new start with a fresh staff will set the school on a course of improvement, however no other details about how the school will be reformed (other than a new teaching staff) are offered.

Teachers’ accounts of this period are similarly vague. While the story appears in multiple narratives, the reconstitution and the conditions at Landmark are spoken of in very general terms. This period of Landmark’s history is commonly referenced as, “before Mark got here.” According to teachers, Landmark had “a terrible reputation,” the school “was in chaos,” and was “a dumping ground” for students who were expelled from other schools. One teacher commented that it was “all the worst things you would expect in an urban school.” The period of reconstitution functions as a ghost period in Landmark’s narrative of change—it is always there but it lacks any real form. Seven teachers were interviewed who worked under Juan Alfaro, the principal during this period but he was only directly referenced in one interview. In sum, the reconstitution of Landmark High, and the four-year period immediately

following, function on a symbolic level in the history of Landmark to create a contrast to the period immediately following, in which Mark Johnson is hired and the improvement narrative begins.

### **“Righting the Ship”: Landmark’s Restructuring (2001-2007)**

In 2001, Mark Johnson was recruited to be the principal at Landmark High School. Johnson was strikingly present in the interviews. All but two teachers mentioned him, even those who were hired after he left the school in 2008. Without exception, teachers attributed Landmark’s current success to his leadership, describing Johnson as “righting the ship” and “making Landmark what it is today.” Teachers described Johnson as prompting a cultural shift toward professionalism and distributed leadership that are still the foundational cultural norms at the school. One teacher summarized the response of teachers to this change:

*We were totally shocked when Mark first came up and said, ‘here’s the budget, what are we going to spend the money on? Go back and meet with your departments and talk about what we should be doing and how are we going to hold ourselves accountable.’ People were like ‘Wait. What? We have money? You want to know what we want to do?’ We just weren’t used to being treated like that.*

Kate Duncan (teacher interview, 5/2/2012)

In 2003 Johnson (with the help of a leadership team that he pulled together) launched a small school redesign initiative and reorganized the school into grade-level teams. The master schedule was restructured so that teachers would share a group of students and be organized by grade-level teams, rather than the traditional structure of being vertically organized in departments. Teachers would meet weekly with their grade level team (in addition to meeting as departments) to discuss students. While it is not

clear what Johnson was hoping to accomplish with the restructure, the result was a heightened degree of collaboration among teachers and a non-academic focus on student needs. A teacher who was at the school during the restructure remarked, “There was just enough formal structure in place to allow (professional) relationships to grow organically. It really changed things.”<sup>29</sup> In 2005, Mark Johnson and recent hires, Monique Davis and Dennis Rubins (who would later become Landmark principal), launched the Anti-Racist Teaching Committee and the school’s staff began their efforts to attend closely to the achievement of African-American and Latino students. While it is mentioned less than the grade-level team restructure, Anti-Racist Teaching is part of the core story of what makes Landmark distinct. These two initiatives—one primarily structural and the other ideological—created the foundation for the work that continued.

Mark Johnson is the hero in Landmark’s core story. Teachers overwhelmingly credit Johnson (sometimes single-handedly) with “fixing” Landmark. He is described as “a people-person,” the “quintessential leader,” and someone whom “people just didn’t cross.” One teacher reported that, “everybody fell in love with Mark right from the beginning, he was just that kind of guy.” Some accounts mention his “savvy,” and he is called, “a smooth talker,” “a politician,” who knew how to “work the system.” The centrality of Johnson to Landmark’s transformation is reflected in media accounts of the school at the time. A newspaper article from the Spring of Johnson’s second year at the school reports that Johnson took a “troubled school” and “turned it

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<sup>29</sup> Steve Castanos (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

around.” It quotes Johnson, saying the first thing he did was “shred the school plan and start from scratch,” lending to the theme of cleaning up the mess that was Landmark and confirming that there was nothing at the school worth saving. In the same article, Reid, the acting superintendent, is credited for following a, “business-model solution” and recruiting a “mid-level manager” with leadership ability and giving him “freedom and responsibility.” While the article mentions important structural changes like the addition of counseling positions and significant additional funding Landmark received for professional development, it mostly amplifies the school’s organizational narrative attributing Landmark’s success to Johnson.

Interestingly, while most of the achievement gains were made under the leadership of Johnson’s successor, Dennis Rubens, he does not figure prominently in the teachers’ accounts of the core story. Instead, Rubens is primarily referenced as being successful in continuing the leadership style that Johnson started. Teachers describe Rubens’ role as “staying the course” and “maintaining the momentum.” One teacher who was hired by Rubens remarked that he, “rode the coat tails of Mark.” It’s not that teachers don’t like Rubens—there is a pronounced appreciation for Dennis Rubens among Landmark teachers. They do not, however, attribute the success of the school to his leadership.

It should be noted that some rare versions of the story, like the following quote, do capture more nuance and highlight the development of *capacity* at the school.

*We had a new principal ... a new vision ... pretty much, but not entirely, new teachers. Even though most had already been in the district they were new to*

*the school. Every thing was starting to be new in terms of Landmark itself. So I think it was able to work for that reason. We only had maybe, to be honest, one or two or a very small handful of teachers who were kind of resistant to it. I mean they were farther on in their careers so, yeah, but nobody blatantly stood in the way.*

Lisa Roberts (teacher interview, 4/19/2012)

Importantly, this quote includes something generally missing from the grand narrative—the influence of teachers and the development of infrastructure to support their work. Very little in Landmark’s restructuring story is attributed to teachers and their participation. Instead, the core story converges around three claims: (1) the school was a mess and Mark Johnson brought much needed leadership to the school and successfully changed the culture, (2) the restructuring of the school into grade-level teams and the creation of the Anti-Racist Teaching Committee were significant in this change and, (3) the momentum was continued by Johnson’s successor.

### **“Attracting a Different Demographic”: Landmark’s Recent History**

A shared narrative among Landmark teachers is the opinion that, as a result of the school’s improvement, there has been a shift in the students who attend the school, and Landmark is “attracting a different demographic.” While this isn’t necessarily presented as a historical fact, it is part of Landmark’s core story and is anchored to the past events. At a faculty meeting, discussing the up-coming Open House, the principal commented that, “Things have changed. There is definitely growing interest in coming to Landmark these days.” As mentioned, Cyprus Unified is a school-choice district and students can request any school in the district. Teachers’ perceptions are that since the school’s reputation has changed, students who are more academically

inclined have started choosing to come to Landmark. The prevailing depiction of Landmark before this was that it was a “dumping ground” for at-risk students, where “kids came when there was no where else to go.” A PE teacher who is also the athletics director articulates the collective understanding of Landmark students *now*, compared to Landmark students *then*:

*Kids are travelling more throughout the city to come here—there’s a larger Caucasian population coming into Landmark now, and a larger Asian population, I would say. It also seems to be less troubled kids are coming here now*

David Rogers (teacher interview, 5/17/2013)

A math teacher commented that she has friends who “are coming to tour the school and they never would have considered Landmark before.”<sup>30</sup> This perception—that the student population at Landmark is changing—has, in fact, caused teachers to question the purpose and the mission of the school (an issue that will be taken up in the next chapter more thoroughly), and generated some anxiety, particularly for teachers who came to the school with the expressed interest of working with “at-risk” youth. While teachers share a general excitement about how the school has changed and its new reputation as a successful urban school, there is also shared concern that the students the school serves well might be displaced or disadvantaged. One teacher commented that the influx of Caucasian and Asian students was fine, as long as it didn’t result in “losing our African-American and Latino students.” This part of the core story compliments the others parts—not only is Landmark a changed school, Landmark

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<sup>30</sup> Rose Kearney (teacher interview, 5/11/2012)

students have changed. Figure 3.3 presents demographic data over time for all of the significant ethnic groups and the subgroup of socio-economically disadvantaged students (SED).

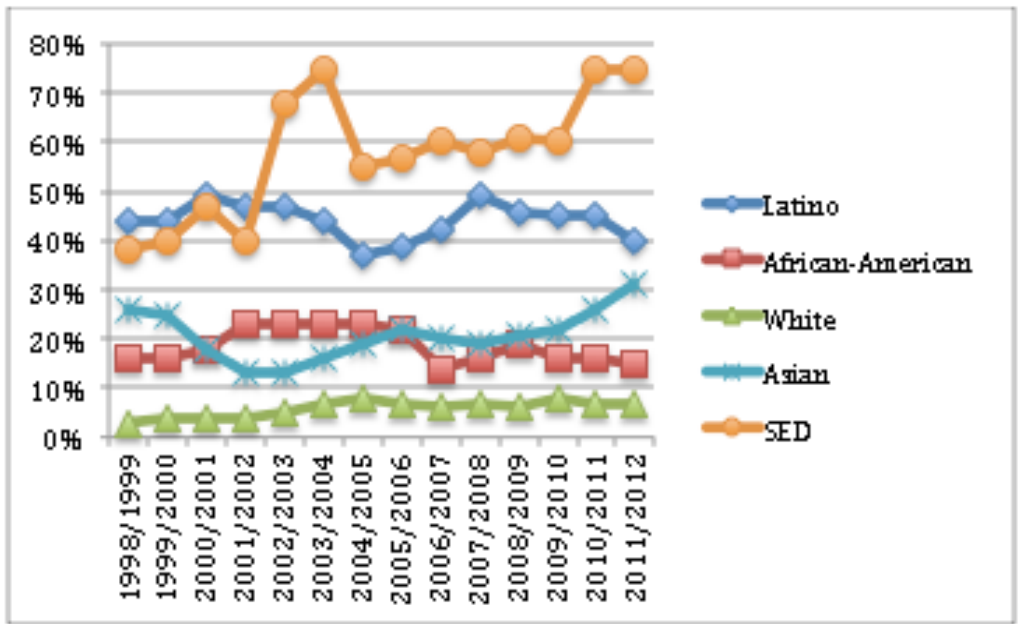


Figure 9 Landmark Demographic Data Over Time <sup>31</sup>

State published demographic data does not corroborate the story that the student population at Landmark is changing. As mentioned, the school has historically served a largely non-white and low-income student population. As illustrated in figure 3.3, longitudinal data demonstrates relative stability for the subgroup of White students. While the White subgroup almost doubled, going from 4% to 7% in 2000, it did so before the reforms at Landmark began and before the arrival of Johnson. The Asian subgroup demonstrates the most change over time,

<sup>31</sup> Demographic data was found at Ed-data: <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us>

going from 20% in 2006/2007 to 31% in 2011/2012. This change is distinct from district wide percentages that show a decline in the Asian subgroup from 44% in 2006/2007 to 40% in 2011/2012.

The account that students are coming from “all over the city” to attend Landmark is similarly complicated. Analysis of zip code data for the past five years revealed that little has changed in terms of where Landmark students live. Landmark students have consistently come from the same five zip code areas for the last five years. Furthermore, the zip code areas that account for more than half of Landmark students are in the closest vicinity to Landmark High and are among the poorest communities in the Cyprus district. In sum, the claim that Landmark is “attracting a different demographic” is only minimally supported by longitudinal data.

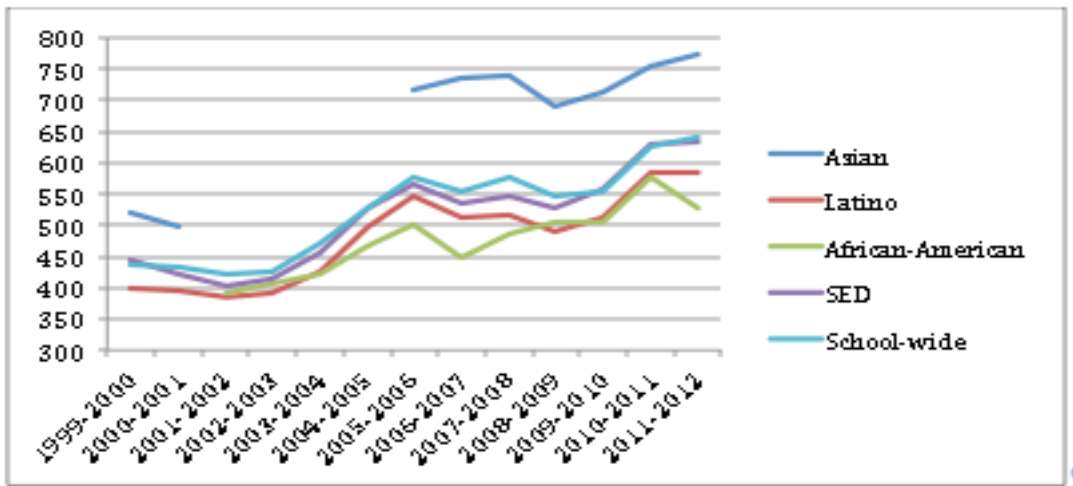


Figure 10 Landmark API <sup>32</sup>

State published achievement data offer an additional complicating narrative.

<sup>32</sup> The state only publishes API scores for “statistically significant subgroups,” which is why API data is missing for the subgroup of Asian students from 2000 to 2004



As can be seen in figure 3.4, The API spike that is referenced in regards to Landmark's success happened between 2008 and 2011 and mirrors the increase in Asian students at Landmark shown in Figure 3.3. This would suggest that rather than attracting more Asian students to the school, the increase in Asian students actually contributed to the achievement gains. It should be noted that while the Asian subgroup scored higher than the other groups, the subgroup of students living in poverty (i.e., SED) did not.

As mentioned in the introduction, the intent of this chapter is not to validate or verify claims made about the history of Landmark High School. While it reveals a compelling tension, the mismatch of demographic data and teachers' perceptions about the student population at Landmark seems more to reflect teachers' sense-making about how and why the student population was changing. In order to maintain coherence within the school's narrative of improvement, teachers assumed that "less needy" and "more academic" students were coming to Landmark.

### **Landmark Student Achievement**

Landmark's narrative of improvement frames it as a succeeding urban school. Analysis of state published achievement data, however, offers an opposing narrative. In the past 12 years, Landmark's API went from 435 in 1999/2000 to 642 in 2011/2012. However, while the school's API increased 207 points in 12 years, it only achieved its API school-wide target 6 times<sup>33</sup> and made "comparable improvement"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Landmark met its API target for three consecutive years in 2002/2003, 2003//2004, 2004/2005 and in 2006/2007, 2009/2010, and 2010/2011.

(one of the components of accountability mandates) for all subgroups only 3 times. The subgroups that were consistently underachieving were Latino and African-American, while the highest achieving subgroup was Asian. While there is an overall pattern of improvement for all subgroups, the Asian subgroup's API score is consistently much higher than Latino and African-American students. Furthermore, when compared to other schools with similar demographics, as shown in the API similar schools ranking,<sup>35</sup> Landmark is chronically low achieving. In nine of twelve years, Landmark was designated a 1 or a 2 on the similar school's ranking, meaning it was in the lowest two deciles when ranked with 100 other schools with similar demographic characteristics.

The school's progress on federal measures of achievement is similarly varied. Unlike California's system, in which accountability is based on a school's progress toward the goal of 800, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind is based on the school's ability to meet annual achievement targets. These targets are the same for all schools and must be met by all significant subgroups for the school to "meet AYP" and not be designated "Program Improvement." In the last 10 years, Landmark met the criteria once—in 2003/2004. While there were years in which the school showed improvement in one or more subgroups, it was only in 2003/2004 that the school met the targets for all subgroups.

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<sup>34</sup> Schools meet the Comparable Improvement target if all numerically significant subgroups at the school have met their API growth targets.

<sup>35</sup> The similar schools ranking is part of California's accountability system. Schools are ranked according to test scores statewide by ten deciles. They are also ranked with "similar schools" that have a similar demographic profile (i.e., ethnicity, school-type, poverty).

Because targets must be met for two consecutive years to not be designated “Program Improvement,” Landmark has been labeled a “PI” school every year.

In sum, state published achievement data do not present Landmark as being on a straightforward path of continuous improvement. While it has shown spikes of improvement, its most significant subgroups show minimal and unsustained growth as documented by standardized testing. In other words, the “story” of Landmark, as told by state published student achievement data, is in tension with the common perception of improvement and success experienced by teachers and expressed by the local community.

Landmark is locally recognized as an achieving urban school. It has received public accolades for rising test scores. Teachers comment that the school is the “district’s success story,” and it is presumed that this success has attracted students from across the city, a departure from the school’s history. While state published data present a stark portrait of failure, teachers continue to *experience* Landmark as an achieving school. What accounts for this? One possible explanation is Landmark’s success in adopting other markers of achievement, such as graduation rates and college acceptance. While they are not used as measures of success within the context of high-stakes accountability, they are used at the local level as a measure of achievement. At a faculty meeting in late winter the principal recognized teachers for the herculean effort they put forth to help students complete applications. Throughout the spring, as college acceptance letters are received, students’ names and the colleges they have been accepted to are announced over the intercom during assemblies. A

large bulletin board is prominently displayed in front of the counseling center with students' pictures and long strands of college acceptance letters. While only a handful of people see API and AYP scores, everyone sees this public tangible display of the difference Landmark is making.

What is the meaning of these diverging story lines? First, from an institutional perspective, it could be argued that Landmark appropriated measures of achievement by focusing on factors the school had direct control over—graduation and college acceptance. It gained legitimacy by reflecting achievement outside the state system of accountability. Secondly, this disparity highlights the failings of the current accountability system, suggesting that standardized tests scores as a single measure of achievement are an inaccurate way to evaluate schools and do not, in fact, predict or reflect post-secondary success.

### **Conclusion**

On the first day of his second year at Landmark, Mark Johnson hung a banner outside the school that read, “Don’t believe the hype.” Ten years after that, the same newspaper that called Landmark High a “troubled school” in need of “a miracle” published an article hailing the school’s achievement with photos of Landmark students being served a high-end lunch by four of the Cyprus District’s most acclaimed restaurants. Mark Johnson knew the power of a good story and the power of public opinion. Through its constructed history of improvement and success, Landmark developed an identity as a successful urban school—a school that had “turned around.” Landmark was no longer a “dumping ground” but a school where

teachers and students chose to be. Furthermore, that identity was projected as an image that resulted in sustained public recognition and support of the school and ultimately began attracting experienced teachers to the school. The role of identity and image in urban teacher recruitment are topics that are explored thoroughly in Chapters Four and Five.

The past plays a significant role in understanding Landmark's present. The school's current success relies on the context of the past to give it meaning. The difference between what Landmark *is* compared to what Landmark *was*, is the bedrock of its core narrative of improvement. Linde (1993) proposes that when telling a life story, an individual seeks events to retell that will help achieve coherence; rather than starting at the beginning, a person may tell their story from the beginning, but with the present in mind. In other words, we try to make sense of the present by drawing on particular stories from our past. The same can be said for the history of an organization. Members will recount events so that they tell a unified story; bits will be included and excluded to the extent that they hold together and help make the present "make sense." That Landmark teachers believe that the school is "attracting a different demographic" despite data that confirms the opposite reveals this drive for coherence. Their way of making sense of Landmark's improvement was to imagine that the school was, in fact, serving different students. In focusing on Landmark's historical narrative as a practice of sense making, rather than an account that can be verified as either fact or fiction, this chapter highlights the parts of the story that are most meaningful to the teachers. Landmark teachers co-constructed the account of

improvement that now shapes how the school is understood internally (i.e. its identity) and how the school appears from the outside (i.e. its image).

This chapter does not propose that achievement gains at Landmark are only “constructed” and success is merely imagined. While improvement has not kept pace with state accountability demands, and the school has been consistently labeled by the state as “failing,” Landmark has continued to make gains in both API and AYP, but more importantly, Landmark has made remarkable strides in reducing drop-out rates, specifically for African-American and Latino students, and is helping to get record numbers of first generation students into colleges<sup>36</sup>. In 2011, Landmark made the Washington Post's Challenge List<sup>37</sup> and was included in the top 7% of high schools in the United States. Unlike state and federal accountability rankings, the Post takes the total number of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and Advanced International Certificate of Education tests given at a school each year and divides by the number of graduating seniors. Coupled with Landmark's rising graduation rates, this means that not only are more students graduating from high school, but these graduates are taking rigorous classes and being prepared for college. That Landmark can, in the same year, be recognized as high-achieving on some indices and failing on others raises a number of questions about the extent to which accountability measures

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<sup>36</sup> Landmark graduation rates increased from 60% in 2007-08 to 82% in 2010-11, and the gap between Landmark's graduation rates and the district's graduates narrowed significantly. In 2007-08, Landmark lagged 24% behind the district in high school graduation but only 3% in 2010-11.

<sup>37</sup> The Post's Challenge list has staunch supporters and harsh critics. It is applauded for recognizing schools that usually go unrecognized despite improvement because it does not rely on standardized test scores. Critics, however, oppose using enrollment rates over actual achievement data.

paint an inaccurate picture of a school's achievement. The purpose of this chapter was not to call into question Landmark's success but to understand this success in the context of the institutional environment and accountability reform.

This chapter also draws attention to the importance of framing. The use of newspaper articles to understand the role of public perception in shaping Landmark's constructed history reveals the powerful role that institutional environment (and public opinion) plays in shaping school reform and how organizations draw from these messages to construct their identities. The reform rhetoric of "turn-around" and "clean slate" and getting the "right man for the job" is pervasive in Landmark's story and stands in contrast to the current accountability climate that frames urban high schools like Landmark as "drop-out factories,"<sup>38</sup> and teachers as largely responsible. How schools are perceived by the public influences how teachers feel about going to work everyday. The difference between working at a "drop-out factory" and a district's "success story" is an important one. The lived reality of teachers' work happens in these politicized and contested spaces.

It could be argued that Landmark is, in fact, a story of successful urban reform. Landmark's narrative of improvement certainly paints a straightforward account of school change—the school was reconstituted, the district assigned a strong leader who changed the culture and the school improved. Again, reform rhetoric in the institutional environment plays an important role in how schools take up social scripts.

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<sup>38</sup> US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan has used the term "drop-out factories," in a speech calling for greater investments in charter schools. The term has been taken up by accountability enthusiasts to describe the condition of urban schools and support reform measures such as reconstitution.

The American public loves hero stories. The Lone Ranger, riding into town to save the day is part of our collective psyche. However, appealing these sentiments are, they are an inaccurate, or incomplete, depiction of this school's change. Mark Johnson did not single-handedly "change the culture" at Landmark, because culture isn't something a principal *can* create or implement. As interviewee Kate Duncan expressed, the school developed a "new vision." Cultural shifts happened at Landmark because a number of forces came together—a combination of structural reform (i.e. the reorganization of teachers into grade-level teams), new leadership, and increased teacher autonomy and participation. Understanding school reform requires focused attention to how change really happens at schools.

The next chapter revisits a number of the historical claims that make up Landmark's core story, as these claims are central to the school's identity. Chapter four also unpacks aspects of Landmark's culture and explores how identity and culture are important to teacher experience.



## Chapter Four: “We’re Not Your Typical Urban School”

### Landmark’s Organizational Identity and Culture

*I: Can you tell me what drew you to teach here.*

*R: Because I like being the underdog. I love being the underdog. The odds are stacked against us every time and I like that. I thrive on that. That’s what keeps me here.*

David Rogers (teacher interview, 5/17/2012)

The teachers at Landmark High School share a common narrative—Landmark is special. As one teacher put it, “Landmark is not your typical urban school.” This collective understanding permeates the school and is expressed by people inside and outside the organization. As discussed in the last chapter, the narrative of Landmark is that it has defied the odds, overcome obstacles, and emerged as a school reborn—one that is not what one would expect of an “urban school.” A central finding in this dissertation is that Landmark High School has a strong organizational identity that includes a well-articulated understanding of its work. Teachers are drawn to the school because they see it as a place where they will fit pedagogically and the school hires teachers based on how well they think teachers will support the mission of the school. The next chapter presents how Landmark prioritizes fit in hiring, and the manner in which teachers learn about the school before intentionally pursuing a teaching position there. This chapter provides the context for that process. It discusses the manner in which Landmark defines what it is and what it does. It shows how Landmark’s identity and image are constructed, and the influence that both have on teachers’ experiences of their work. As mentioned in Chapter One, school “culture” is frequently invoked in the educational literature when trying to explain why and how a

school is either successful or unsuccessful (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hargreaves, 1995; Lieberman, 1988). A lot hinges on school culture: Is it collaborative or competitive? Is it achievement oriented or deficit-based? Does it reflect professionalism? However, while the importance of culture is widely acknowledged, very little is written about exactly how culture develops. Instead, the focus is primarily managerial, frequently addressing how to create or implement a particular kind of culture that is presumed to nurture success. This chapter presents how identity and culture develop and are sustained at Landmark. It also explores the consequences of culture by illuminating the mechanism of normative control and its effect on organizational behavior. Finally, it presents insights on the interplay of organizational and professional commitment and how teachers orient to their work.

### **Landmark's Organizational Identity**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, organizational identity and organizational culture are related, yet distinct, constructs. While culture describes the shared values, practices, and norms of the organization, an organization's identity is the shared understanding of what the organization is, what it does, and, most importantly, what makes it distinct. Culture can be seen as an internal expression of an organization's shared values and norms, while identity is the externalization of cultural elements. Boros (2002) calls organizational identity the "face" of the organizational while organizational culture is the "soul". Like culture, identity is a *relational* construct and develops in interaction with others.

The first signal that organizational identity was a theoretical tool for

understanding Landmark and its success in attracting and retaining teachers was remarkable coherence in response to a particular interview question. When asked, “What do I need to know to understand Landmark High School?” teachers overwhelmingly responded with very similar sentiments: that the school was different than other schools—that it was special. Most importantly, what they chose to describe about the school revolved around the school’s values and norms. Rather than describe the demographics of the student population, or give information about Landmark’s instructional program, or even cite high school graduation rates or college acceptance, teachers discussed what distinguished the school from other schools. One teacher described the school as having a unique “personality.”

*It’s such a crazy place, Landmark High School. Since I’ve been here, I actually see it as having its own personality. As the place where we will pour everything we have into taking kids that nobody else wants.*

Ross Meyers (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

This quote reveals a widely shared perception of Landmark that is central to its identity as a school. Teachers commonly describe Landmark as successfully serving a population of students that has been largely ignored and underserved in schools—students that no other schools want. Teachers use a range of descriptors to describe these students. Some refer to “low-income students.” Many use the term, “underserved.” Some specifically use racial categories and refer to the student population as “African-American and Latino students.” Undergirding all of these labels is the common understanding that the students at Landmark are being largely ignored in the American public school system, that is, they are students that other

schools don't want and can't help.

It is important to note that while teachers describe Landmark as having the students that other schools don't want and can't help, they also describe the population in an affirmative manner. Rather than draw from deficit views<sup>39</sup> of low-income students of color, teachers overwhelmingly extol the positive qualities of Landmark students. When asked what keeps them teaching at the school, a third of the teachers specifically talk about staying at the school because of the student population. One teacher talks about living in the neighborhood and running into her students outside of schools and described it as "delicious." Another describes the students as "amazing ... their life experiences give them so much humanity and compassion ... when we analyze literature they just have so much to draw from." Some speak more generally about Landmark students being the "kind of students I have always taught. They are why I am a teacher." In any case, when teachers discuss Landmark students as the ones nobody else wants, it is never viewed as the fault of the students. Instead, the locus of responsibility is on the schools and the teachers—unlike Landmark, *those* schools throw *these* students away.

This distinction—that Landmark *chooses* the students that no one else wants, is an important feature of the school's identity. Landmark sees itself as unique, as succeeding where other schools have failed. It is one of the things that distinguishes Landmark from typical urban schools. One teacher indicated that this sense of

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<sup>39</sup> Deficit thinking or deficit framing (Valencia, 1997) refers to the notion that students, particularly low-income minority students, fail in school because they and their families possess deficiencies that obstruct the learning process. It is commonly referred to as "blaming the victim" for the achievement gap.

specialness was a source of pride for teachers.

*I think there's a tendency at Landmark to feel different from other schools. And I don't like this, but it's an attitude like, "those teachers over there on the west side, they don't know how to teach, they don't have our sort of situation. And there's a little bit where you're looking over at other teachers, and thinking that they're not quite doing their*

*...*

*I: So, it is a kind of specialness?*

*R: Yeah. Specialness. 'Cause I do think we should think of ourselves as special. But I think it can develop into a kind of arrogance. And that's not good.*

Jason Monroe (teacher interview, 2/1/2012)

Student population is significant to Landmark's organizational identity because it defines the scope of Landmark's work. Rather than merely reflecting a demographic category, the Landmark student population is part of the school's informal mission. Because students are framed as being the students other schools "don't want and can't help," Landmark teachers are special because they *do* want them and they *can* help. This infuses the work with an elevated sense of purpose.

### **Identity and Image: "Not Your Typical Urban School"**

As reflected in the chapter title, Landmark's identity is relational and situated. It depends on contrast with other urban schools. When describing Landmark, teachers routinely compare it to other schools. Analysis revealed three patterns of comparison: (1) Landmark to other schools in the district or to a prototypical "urban school," (2) Landmark's reputation compared to the reality of Landmark, and (3) former Landmark to current Landmark. In all of these cases, Landmark is defined by associating it with a negative counterpart; teachers conveyed what Landmark *is* by invoking what it *is not*.

When comparing Landmark to other schools, both real and imagined, teachers draw from a set of assumptions or a shared discourse about urban schools. In some cases these are real schools where teachers had taught, but, for the most part, even real schools are somewhat used as proxies—as what they represent rather than what they are. For example, three teachers talked about Whitman High School, a local college-prep charter school with the reputation of having a very select student population. One teacher discussed how Landmark graduates are successfully attending prestigious universities, “places you would expect Whitman graduates to go or maybe private schools, but not Landmark students.” Another compared the dedication level of teachers at Landmark to those at Whitman, commenting that in order to be successful at Landmark, “it needs to be more than a job,” and implying that success for Whitman teachers came easy but at Landmark “you had to work for it.” In all cases, Whitman stood for a kind of school that Landmark was not and the comparison was used to bolster Landmark’s identity.

Another comparison teachers make to illuminate Landmark’s identity is to the stereotypical urban school. While teachers sometimes would begin talking about a school with which they had direct experience, they would transition in to making references to what they presume is a shared understanding of the term “urban school.” One teacher described a school she had taught at in a neighboring district saying it was, “just like one of those bad movies” and described a burned-out teaching faculty and disengaged administration. Describing the highly collaborative culture of Landmark, another teacher compared it to schools “with a closed-door environment.

You know, schools that look like Landmark but where everyone just wants to stay in their rooms and be left alone. It's just not like that here.<sup>2</sup>" In one comparison a teacher described Landmark as looking "like an urban school on the outside but not on the inside," meaning that while the school served primarily low-income students of color it did not behave like an urban school in its orientation to students and teaching. What was strikingly similar in all of these accounts was the designation of "urban" as sufficiently descriptive to convey meaning. "Urban school" took on mythic proportion, communicating a range of associations – violence, poverty, uncaring teachers and doomed students.

Landmark is also compared to itself or, Landmark present to Landmark past. As discussed in the last chapter, most of the teachers draw on the history of Landmark to help describe the present conditions of the school, including teachers who had been at the school a relatively short time. One teacher, who was only in his second year at the school but was familiar with the school before he took the position because he had substitute taught throughout the district, reported hearing lots of stories about, "what Landmark used to be like, you know, before Mark Johnson was principal. There are just like lots of stories about how bad it used to be." Unlike present Landmark, past Landmark *was* a typical urban school. The following quote illustrates the significance of Landmark's past to the present (and even future) of the school.

*One amazing thing I feel like about Landmark is like there, it has such, it had such a negative history. Right? And I wasn't here before, so I feel like I've been on this ... I don't know ... Like I came in at the beginning of 'the good times.' You know? Like we're just going forward and I feel like it will only get better. But, it will only get better*

*if we don't forget where we've been and that there is still work to be done.*

Dena Rich (teacher interview, 4/10/2012)

Landmark's identity is situated in a specific historical context and the comparison of past to present is used to construct its identity—not only is Landmark not a typical urban school, it is not the urban school that it used to be.

A final comparison that teachers make is between Landmark's public perception, frequently referred to as the school's "reputation," and what they experience as the reality of Landmark High School. Multiple teachers reference the responses that outsiders had when they heard that he or she taught at Landmark High—that teaching at the school must be "hard work" and "dangerous," and that all of the students "were in gangs." One teacher described being asked by other teachers in the district, why she "would want to teach at such a rough school." In all of the cases, the teachers commented that the public perception was ridiculously inaccurate and assumed that people were drawing from their perceptions of the school before it had changed. One teacher clearly described the inaccuracy of the people's perception of Landmark.

*Landmark has really been looked down upon in a way. People would tell me, "Oh, that school's tough and it's hard and it's full of gangs and it's this and it's that" and I'm like, "Okay. Believe what you want" but yet you know I'm signing these papers here with kids that are coming in and graduating and I see what colleges they are getting into and it's just not like that at all.*

David Rogers (teacher interview, 5/17/2012)



The discrepancy between what outsiders believed about the school and how insiders experienced the school was a resource teachers drew from to clarify the school's identity.

These identity claims portray Landmark in a very particular way. The school is special; it is not a typical urban school. Landmark is the underdog: maligned and misunderstood by the public but making a real difference for low-income students of color. These claims are not just about projecting a particular image. They allow teachers to *identify* with Landmark and this identification has meaning in terms of how they experience their work.

### **Other Identity Discourses**

Landmark teachers also make identity claims that are specific to the teachers at Landmark. Because these claims are mostly abstract and make use of commonly used rhetoric or tropes about teachers and teaching, they are referred to here as identity discourses. Two discourses emerge as central to the identity and culture of the school—a discourse of care and a discourse of dedication. While they are used to describe the teachers at Landmark, they fundamentally contribute to the identity of the school discussed in the preceding section. Part of what makes Landmark special is its teaching staff.

More than two thirds of the teachers specifically talked about the extent to which teachers “cared” about students as a distinguishing feature of Landmark. Interestingly, most of the teachers talked about care as a collective rather than an individual quality, saying “we care,” rather than “I care.” In fact, some teachers

identified care as the most important quality at Landmark and one of the “best things” about working at the school.

*I think one of the best things, if not **the** best thing, is you are working with people here who really really care about what they are doing. A lot of the things that I heard in my teacher prep was, ‘Don’t go to the teacher room. You’ll just hear teachers talking badly about the kids.’ You expect to be around all these people that are burned out or disillusioned and it just doesn’t feel like that here. It’s the opposite, actually.*

*I: Wow, yeah.*

*R: Yeah people are really passionate and I think they know very clearly why they do this work and they really love the kids and that’s really nice because sometimes when I feel my energy drain, I just look around and someone here inspires me.*

Liliana Freitas (teacher interview, 5/11/2012)

This teacher made sense of her experiences at Landmark in relation to other teachers—more accurately, what she *heard* about other teachers in her preparation program. Another teacher made a similar comparison and described the “lunchroom mentality” and described how teachers at Landmark did not draw from “the laundry list of excuses that you would hear at other schools.” Landmark teachers do not complain about their students like other teachers; Landmark teachers *care*. Another teacher said that developing personal relationships with students was, “the cornerstone of teaching” at Landmark. Consistent through the messages of care was a dedication to students. Multiple teachers discussed “not giving up on students” as an important feature of Landmark and evidence that the school cared.

Also evident was a professionalization discourse that focused on Landmark teachers and their willingness to “go above and beyond.” This discourse was as prominent as the discourse of care and was frequently invoked along with sentiments

about caring. Landmark teachers do not regard teaching as “just a job” and go “above and beyond” in their efforts. In fact, some teachers specifically stated that being successful at Landmark *depended* on going “above and beyond” and that people who did not have this work ethic coming in to the school were not likely to “fit” or be successful. The principal of the school talked specifically about how Landmark teachers were special in the degree of care they showed their students and the level of dedication.

*The first thing you need to know is that this is a school with heart ... and a soul. It really is like no other school I have ever known. Another thing you should know about Landmark, and this is a great thing but I worry about it, I think teachers work too hard here. I think this is a super hard working faculty and I'll just say that a common conversation with my colleagues at other high schools will say, “Teachers won't stay to do that unless you pay them” or “Teachers won't stay past 3:30” and I actually can't conceptualize that because that is just not the case here. I mean teachers are still all over the building and we're on vacation.*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/1/2012)

The discourse of “above and beyond” communicates a very particular view of what it means to be a teacher. While some teachers mention specific after school activities, most speak in general terms about the level of dedication teachers demonstrate at Landmark.

While this is mostly described as a positive attribute of the school, two of the newer teachers did share concerns of being overworked. A first year math teacher referred to, “the bar” at Landmark being set “higher than other schools” and wondered how she would manage. A second year chemistry teacher discussed a

general pressure to conform to the work ethic. When asked, “What is it like to be a new teacher here?” he said, “You have to have your heart and soul in it, because you are going to get worked to the bone. There are no breaks here.” He went on to talk about how it wasn’t *required* to work with students during his lunch period, but it was definitely *expected*. Another new teacher, who was actually still student teaching when she was interviewed, shared similar sentiments about the expectation to go above and beyond. She anticipated feeling overworked by, “balancing all the things that come with being a first year teacher with this emphasis on relationships and the expectation that you go above and beyond all the time.<sup>3</sup>” Thus, while the identity claim of “above and beyond” held symbolic importance for teachers, the logistics of what it took to adopt this ethic was keenly, and apprehensively, experienced by newer teachers.

Both the discourse of care and the discourse of “above and beyond” are features of Landmark’s identity. While they allude to particular teaching practices, they are more about the “type” of teacher at Landmark than the story of any individual teacher. They complement other aspects of Landmark’s identity by reinforcing the premise that Landmark is special because Landmark *teachers* are special. They also exert a normative force by communicating how Landmark teachers are expected to behave. This is most vividly seen through the experiences of the newer teachers that were interviewed, who struggled to adopt these identity claims while balancing the demands of early teaching.

### **Identity and Cultural Practices**

While closely related to identity, organizational culture encompasses the values, norms, and practices of the organization; culture can be seen as the manifestation of identity, or identity made visible through collective practice. As highlighted in Chapter One, culture is the normative glue that holds the organization together. Behaviors and activities are encouraged or discouraged based on their alignment to the culture. For example, the chemistry teacher understanding (without being explicitly told) that lunch tutorials were “expected” is a reflection of Landmark’s organizational identity (teachers go “above and beyond”). Because culture is dynamic, created through continuous cycles of action and reflection, it is constantly being made and remade. At Landmark, teachers draw from larger discourses of what it means to be an urban school, to construct an identity as being special, a place where teachers care and go above and beyond for their students. Cultural values like providing support to struggling students, and practices like lunch and afterschool tutorials reinforce that identity.

In addition to the expectation that teachers go “above and beyond” and consider their teaching at Landmark to be “more than a job,” teachers collectively reference reflective teaching practices and the desire to grow as professionals as an important value at Landmark. In fact, more than half of the teachers specifically referenced this when asked, “What is it like to be a teacher here?” They talked about taking classes and workshops and engaging in various professional development opportunities in order to hone their craft. Teaching was talked about in very elevated terms among the Landmark teachers. There is pressure to not, as one teacher put it,

“pull out the folder with last year’s lesson.” A mid-career teacher with more than 10 years of teaching experience attributed the importance of professional growth to the expertise and experience of the teaching staff at Landmark, which she characterized as “exceptional.”

*There are 20-year veterans, 25-year veterans at this school. That’s something. Not to say that everyone gets along or not to say that everyone is politically on the same page but the thing is that’s the biggest difference, something I’ve noticed from my last school and this school—it’s that there are people who’ve been doing this a lot longer than me and they can tell you something about good teaching and so... and so I’m being pushed and it’s a good push. But it’s also like pushing me to think “look, I’ve got to get better or I’ve got to get out.”*

Preetha Anand (teacher interview, 11/30/2011)

Other teachers also shared the premise that commitment to professional growth is *essential* for success at Landmark. A veteran teacher commented that teachers at Landmark needed to be, “committed to transforming themselves, you know, into a very skilled and very effective teacher, and that is a very difficult process.” Another said that you couldn’t find a staff “more dedicated to perfecting their skills as teachers.”<sup>4</sup> Teachers also talked about being “reflective” about their teaching and willing to accept critical feedback. One teacher thought that *not* being open to feedback was, “the most damaging characteristic” a teacher could have at Landmark, as it was so important to the culture of the school. A number of cultural practices were discussed as supporting this, such as coaching and mentoring from department heads and the Instructional Reform Coach, but the practice most often discussed by teachers was a process referred to as “courageous conversations,” a structure that was part of Landmark’s coaching model and an element of past professional development.

Teachers described “courageous conversations<sup>40</sup>” as being central to professional growth at the school. While teachers shared trepidations about them, they nonetheless referenced them as a shared practice at the school.

Looking closely at grades and being reflective about why African-American and Latino students were not doing well, is another practice that was frequently mentioned by teachers; in fact, grade analysis is one of the more contested cultural practices at Landmark. Some teachers talked about the practice as being the cornerstone of the focus on antiracist teaching at Landmark. A math teacher with more than 20 years of experience, who had been teaching at Landmark for two years, described the tension between feeling pressured by the grading practice but at the same time, seeing its value.

*It wasn't the semester grade but the progress report grade, yes—right after that, I had a large number of D's and F's and I was asked to account for them. While I don't think there was much follow through or support afterward, and, as embarrassing as it was to be asked to account for that, I was still thrilled that that was happening—that as a new teacher to the school that was the message that was being communicated to me, that this mattered*

Joaquin Castro (teacher interview, 1/11/2012)

Most of the teachers at Landmark discussed practices in a manner that demonstrated their full (if sometimes reserved) support. In some cases, teachers might grapple with practices such as grading analysis, difficult conversations, or the expectation to provide extra support to students during off-duty times, but there was never a sense

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<sup>40</sup> Courageous Conversation is a protocol for discussing issues of race, developed by Glenn Eric Singleton. It is commonly used by schools to engage in school-wide attention to race.

that teachers could simply not participate or opt out. This is the power of culture and the role of culture in normative control. The practices that were repeatedly brought up by teachers are central to the organizational culture and identity of the school and teachers understand the unwritten contract that to be a teacher at Landmark means to participate. The stronger and more pronounced the culture, the stronger the expectation to conform. The next section will look more closely at issues of conformity and how teachers orient to Landmark's goals.

### **Organizational Goals and Commitment**

Organizational goals are central to culture, and they serve multiple outcomes: They help to ensure that the organization survives by clarifying purpose, and on a practical level, they guide the common work that happens in an organization. Goals can be cathetic, serving to unify the members of an organization, or symbolic<sup>41</sup> with the aim of garnering public approval, and thus, helping the organization maintain legitimacy. For example, the NCLB goal of 100% student proficiency could be seen as primarily a symbolic goal. Finally, central to the discussion of culture, goals serve as a basis for evaluating and shaping organizational behavior.

It is generally expected that members will be committed to the goals of an organization; at the very least, it is presumed that no one in the organization will behave in a manner that *obstructs* work toward organizational goals. When an organization's goals are closely aligned with its culture and identity, as they are at Landmark, normative pressure will automatically encourage behavior in support of

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the cathetic and symbolic function of goals, see Scott (2008) chapter four.



these goals. Like its identity, Landmark has a well-articulated primary goal that is fully understood (and mostly embraced) by all of the teachers at the school. In fact, most of the Landmark teachers clearly articulated the primary goal of Landmark, in many cases using almost identical language.<sup>42</sup> Meeting the needs of historically underserved students has been intractably woven into the culture of the school. While most of the teachers conveyed strong identification with this goal on an ideological level (i.e. they believed in this as a worthwhile and noble cause and experienced it as a feature that made the school unique) some voiced concern about particular practices that were put in place to support it. The following section explores the complex interaction between the teachers and Landmark's organizational goals. It focuses on two areas in which teachers expressed the most ambivalence: focusing the school's attention and resources on a particular group of students and the norm of placing full responsibility for students' academic success and failure on teachers' instructional practices.

### **Landmark's "Mission"—Organizational Goals and Normative Control**

*We do not, I mean really to the best of our ability, we just don't give up on kids. We have catered our courses really for the mid- low range of students. So I think that we have put a lot of our focus as teachers on the kids that are in the 10th-50th percentile. In your class and it's relative, right. And you can even argue like the 1st to 50th. But really, that's where our energies are. In some ways, it's at the expense of the kids in the top half.*

Ross Meyers (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

The above quote captures the central goal, what came to be coded as the

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<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that teachers were not explicitly asked about the school's goals or even the primary work of the school. Most of the teachers discussed Landmark's goals in response to the question, "What do I need to know to understand Landmark?"

“mission” of Landmark High. Serving low-achieving students, primarily Latino and African-American youth who have been historically underserved, is the bedrock of Landmark’s identity and culture. Teachers at Landmark, for the most part, fully support this as the school’s primary purpose, as most of them came to Landmark because of the student population and their commitment to equity. Meeting the needs of historically underserved students is discussed regularly in faculty meetings and leadership meetings. Whether it be a discussion of how to increase the number of Latino and African-American students in higher-tracked classes, an algebra bridge program for in-coming freshman, or how to increase enrollment in after school intervention, some aspect of this goal is brought up in every faculty or leadership meeting. It is undeniably a unifying force at the school. However, as the above quote reveals, there exists concern among teachers about exactly what this means in practice. Four teachers voiced the explicit concern that the school’s focus on lower achieving students is to the detriment of other students in the school. One teacher illuminated ambiguity about the degree to which this is an explicit or implicit goal of the school: “Well this is just my take on it ... actually, it’s not just my take because I have heard people say this outright ... that the high achieving kids will be able to kind of ‘figure it out’ on their own and our job is to focus on the middle and low end.”<sup>6</sup> This causes turmoil for some teachers as it is in tension with their professional values. As the quote below reflects, focusing on some students means neglecting others.

*R: ...I feel bad about the other 70% of the students of this school.*

*I: Uh, huh.*

*R: Who get very, very limited attention? Especially the upper third, who...*

*I: Uh, huh.*

*R: ...year after year and try and transfer out to a high performing school. They won't get out -- my suspicion is that district will not let them leave. They have to keep the school flow as far as test scores numbers go.*

Ross Meyers (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

This quote represents an important departure from the assertion that Landmark does not “throw students away.” According to this teacher, while a particular population of students is being well-served at the school, it is at the expense of higher achieving students. It should be noted that there are no data to substantiate that high achieving students are fleeing the school. What is more relevant to this analysis is the teacher’s process of sense making; the accuracy of the account is less salient than the teacher’s attempt to accommodate Landmark’s work with his professional values.

In a similar vein, teachers voiced concerns about what they saw as a lack of academic rigor at the school and worried that in the effort to reach Landmark’s lowest achieving students, they were lowering their expectations. One first-year teacher described the quandary of not giving homework because so few students turned it in. The following quote illustrates a struggle similar to that of the prior teacher reflecting tension between the school’s vision and her values as an educator.

*I just feel myself lowering my expectations a lot and that makes me really uncomfortable because that was one of the main philosophical things I started out with. I said ‘I’m not going to lower my expectations’ but what does that mean?*

Liliana Frietas (teacher interview, 5/11/2012)

Another teacher shared that he “was never more embarrassed” than when he realized that half of the students in the school had made the honor roll. He described grappling with this information and then, “sticking his neck out” and sharing concerns about grade inflation and academic expectation at a faculty meeting, even though he was certain his colleagues would accuse him of “coming from a deficit-model.” This teacher’s interpretation that there was some risk in sharing this information (i.e. “sticking his neck out”) signals the centrality of this to Landmark’s culture and the pressure to conform. There is an unquestioned norm not to question practices that are central to the school’s stated mission.

Another area of tension is the prevailing norm that teachers assume full responsibility for the behavior and achievement of their students. There exists a shared vernacular for discussing Landmark students and a noticeable lack of deficit-oriented language.<sup>43</sup> Except in the rare case (two of the teachers interviewed used the term “disadvantaged” to describe Landmark students), teachers do not talk about the students or their communities as bearing the responsible for low achievement; in other words, they do not see the achievement gap as reflective of individual or community shortcomings. Instead, teachers commonly refer to students as “historically underserved,” and hold the belief that if something is “not working” it was a reflection of their teaching and meant that they needed to alter their instructional practices. There is a norm of accountability at the school—the school

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned, deficit framing views students and their respective communities as responsible for low achievement. Deficit language refers to terms that reflect this perspective.

does not look to forces outside it's control to understand student achievement; it looks at teacher practice. This is reflected in the quote below in discussing the practice of grade analysis and the norm of teacher reflection.

*So if teachers disaggregate their grades and I ask a teacher, "So what do you think? 40% of your class is failing" and I get the response, "Well, the kids aren't doing what they need to be doing." Then I have a problem. I am looking for one response, "Wow. I need to look at my teaching. Where was my curriculum? Was there not enough variety in my style? What am I doing to address this?" That's where I want people to start. Well, if teachers use this as a way of finding fault with kids and pathologizing them, that's a problem because for one, that's not taking any ownership and we don't have any control over that anyway. What can we control? We can control what we do—our curriculum and our pedagogy. So, those are some reasons I did not re-elect someone this year and in the past."<sup>44</sup>*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/1/2012)

This quote illuminates the significance of grade analysis at Landmark: the only alternative of the teachers taking full “ownership” for student achievement is blaming and “pathologizing” students. This is so central to the culture and identity at Landmark that not adhering to these values may result in a teacher not being rehired. Multiple teachers shared a similar sentiment—that if teachers were unwilling to be reflective and change their teaching practices, they would not “make it” or “be a good fit” at the school. The stakes for not sharing this orientation to teaching are high at Landmark.

A final tension demonstrated by teachers was resistance to the practice of analyzing grades and the assumption that low achievement was solely attributed to teacher practice. The issue of grade disaggregation was the most referenced (and contested) practice at Landmark. While teachers frequently cited it as the foundation for Landmark’s focus on “anti-racist teaching” and proof that Landmark was committed to equity practices, teachers also exhibited trepidation (and sometimes

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<sup>44</sup> This response was to a follow-up question about hiring practices, “Can you tell me about teachers that were not rehired?”

outright resentment) about the assumption that the teacher was primarily responsible for student achievement. One teacher recalled finding out grades would be analyzed at that day's department meeting and "praying that [her] African-American and Latino students didn't have more Ds and Fs than [her] Asian students." Another teacher expressed frustration that teachers are even held accountable for student attendance. "If students are missing your class you have to worry. People will ask what you are doing to *make them want to be there*. Everything comes back to the teacher here. Everything."<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that all of these examples represented sincere grappling with these issues by the teachers. No one felt outright disagreement with the work that is happening at Landmark. All of these teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the school, were happy that they had secured a teaching job at Landmark and most (all but one) did not plan on leaving the school.<sup>45</sup> It could be argued, in fact, that the tension they experienced relative to school-wide practices or orientations that clashed with their professional values resulted from their desire to remain teaching at Landmark and the pressure they felt to conform.

Tension between Landmark's mission, and the particular cultural practices that support that mission, and teachers who take issue with how that work is happening at the school illuminates some of the consequences of strong organizational culture. While culture and identity at Landmark provide teachers with

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<sup>45</sup> One of the teachers announced that she was leaving the school at the end of the year. While her reason for leaving was not job dissatisfaction (her husband was attending graduate school and they were moving), she did share that she was somewhat relieved to not need to make the decision to remain teaching at the school or to leave. She shared deep conflict about her belief that she was lowering her student performance expectations, and her feelings of commitment to Landmark.

experiences of belonging, feeling special, and identifying with a noble cause, they also bring a press for uniformity. When behavior in an organization is shaped by cultural pressure, it is said to be a result of normative control—indirectly governing the behavior of employees by appealing to their thoughts, values, and emotions, rather than explicitly regulating their behavior (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 2009). Although the principal linked dissent to job termination, it is highly unlikely that teachers are not complying because they fear losing their jobs (all but one of the teachers has tenure). More consistent with the data, and organizational theory, is the likelihood that teachers comply for cultural reasons. Feeling torn by their desire for cohesion, teachers accept practices that they question.

### **The Interplay of Organizational and Professional Commitment**

Organizational commitment implies identification with an organization's goals, practices, and values. As highlighted in the theoretical framework, organizational commitment has been found to fundamentally influence a number of behaviors and orientations toward the workplace, including the intent to remain in the organization and to act in ways that support and uphold the organization. While there were a few exceptions, most of the teachers at Landmark demonstrated high degrees of organizational commitment. As mentioned, even the teachers that took issue with some of the practices discussed in the preceding section reported their intention to remain teaching at the school. However, exploring areas of tension or weaknesses in the cultural fabric at Landmark highlights topics that are central to the issue of teacher retention.



This work finds that part of the reason that teachers demonstrate organizational commitment is because the school provides a context to satisfy deeply held professional commitments. Teaching at Landmark means satisfying one's need for efficacy, allowing them to be the kind of teacher they wish to be. This was even the case for most of the teachers discussed in the last section; despite the pressure to conform to practices they had serious reservations about, they remained committed to Landmark School. Organizational and professional commitment at Landmark can be viewed as reciprocal—teachers demonstrate commitment to the school because they are aware of what they personally gain from teaching there. This highlights the complex interplay of organizational and professional commitment—being committed to a particular workplace and being committed to a set of professional values.

Professional commitment at Landmark manifests in three distinct (yet sometimes overlapping) ways: ideological commitment to teaching as social justice and equity work, pedagogical commitment to a specific set of instructional practices, and commitment to particular standards of professional engagement.

Ideological commitment to social justice was demonstrated (to some degree) in most of the teachers at Landmark but was particularly strong for thirteen of the thirty-one (42%) teachers interviewed. These teachers shared an interest in working with underserved students and saw teaching as a means to promote social equity and justice. When asked why they came to Landmark, these teachers typically responded, “these are the students I have always wanted to teach.” The most pronounced case of this was a teacher with the deliberate goal of teaching African-American students.

While there were small charter schools in the district with a greater percentage of African-American students, she chose to work at Landmark because it had the highest number of any of the schools in the district. When asked what kept her at the school she responded, “Well, first Landmark has the population I want. That’s number one—the population. And, second, there is nothing that’s, well, like a wedge between me doing what I came here to do—the work I am doing with anti-racist teaching.” As captured in this quote, organizational commitment to Landmark is heavily mediated by the opportunity to fulfill ideological commitments of equity and social justice. In fact, when asked if Landmark “fully supported the work she came to do?” she replied, “Well. I wouldn’t say fully. But it’s enough support.<sup>46</sup>” This teacher illuminated commitment that is not entirely due to a strong identification with organizational goals. While she does feel committed to the work that is happening at Landmark and, in fact, was one of the founding members of the Anti-Racist Teaching committee, she also demonstrates the calculative dimension of commitment. This teacher came with a particular objective—to teach African-American students—and made clear that as long as she continues to be able to do what she came to Landmark to do, she would stay at the school. Commitment in this context is transactional; in exchange for a work environment that allows her to teach a particular student population, she demonstrates commitment to the organization.

Professional commitment that manifested as commitment to pedagogical practices was most strongly observed among the nine math teachers interviewed. The

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<sup>46</sup> Monique Davis (teacher interview, 1/11/2012)

math teachers at Landmark share a very particular orientation to math teaching, and the opportunity to fulfill their pedagogical commitments is, in fact, the primary reason they came to the school (an issue that will be explored in depth in the next chapter). One teacher remarked that he “chose” Landmark “because of the cohesiveness and the collaboration in the math department.” Another stated that being able to use “Complex Instruction strategies,” a pedagogical approach adopted by the math department at Landmark, was a “deal breaker” for him and that Landmark “allowed” him to teach math in ways that were consistent with his “beliefs.” All of the math teachers articulated a strikingly similar belief of how students learn math and how teachers should teach. This included prioritizing conceptual understanding over procedural knowledge, an emphasis on problem-solving, and using group work strategies. In sum, math teachers at Landmark demonstrate organizational commitment because Landmark affords them the professional autonomy to teach according to their deeply held pedagogical beliefs.

The last category that emerged as an expression of professional commitment was the experience of being committed to a specific orientation to teaching work. These teachers frequently invoked concepts associated with professionalization like “autonomy,” “freedom,” and “respect” to describe what it meant to be a teacher at Landmark. More than that, however, was the extent to which teachers talked about collaboration and professional growth—being challenged to learn and grow as a teacher—as core values. This orientation to professionalism also manifests as commitment to the school. Teachers are committed to Landmark because they are

treated as professionals. In most cases, teachers had transferred from schools that stood in sharp contrast to the professional climate at Landmark. For example, two of teachers came there from schools that were becoming more and more restrictive due to accountability reform, and where teacher autonomy was in noticeable decline. One teacher described realizing that she needed to “find another place to work” because she was “not about to follow a pacing guide.” Another teacher compared the freedom she had to create progressive curricula in her history class because she was not “forced to teach to the test” as she had been in her former school. This frame of reference provides a basis of comparison for how these commitments are in-sync with Landmark’s orientation to teaching.

Across all of these expressions of professional commitment, teachers expressed that Landmark allowed them to be the type of teacher they wanted to be and to engage in teaching work that was meaningful to them. Their commitment to Landmark was not expressed as blind loyalty to the school or even a straightforward case of being strongly identified with the goals and values of the school (i.e. the traditional definition of organizational commitment). Most of the teachers demonstrated a complex mix of commitment based on affinity with the school’s vision and goals along with a more calculative dimension—teachers remain at the school (sometimes even in spite of disagreements with particular practices) because the school offers a work environment that is well suited to their professional commitments.

### **Conclusion: Why Organizational Culture and Identity Matters to Teachers**

Bradley Farmer came to Landmark having been a substitute teacher at many schools throughout Cyprus Unified School District. In his interview he explained, “there was something about Landmark that was different. It’s hard to explain, but there was a kind of a buzz here.” He compared this to a nearby school where he had frequently substitute taught—another inner city school with a very similar student population. Bradley described this school as seeming “a little deflated. There was, I don’t know, this consciousness that ‘we’re on the B-team’ or something.” And, like the buzz at Landmark, “it permeated the staff.” The difference, Bradley recounted, was palpable. Dena Rich described a similar situation about a school in a near-by city—an urban comprehensive high school, also similar to Landmark demographically but much bigger. The school was a revolving door of new teachers with a few veteran teachers that “pretty much kept their door closed because they just couldn’t take the chaos.” She shuddered when she described the school and compared it to the worst “urban school film you can imagine.” It was, she said, “as far from Landmark as you could get.”

This chapter proposes that organizational culture and identity matter to teachers. Landmark has an identity and image as a “special” school with a noble mission—to close the achievement gap by ensuring academic success for historically underserved students. At Landmark, teachers get to take part in the larger project of equity and social justice. Being a member of the teaching faculty means working with like-minded colleagues who share a similar orientation and vision of social justice. The work is hard. No one denies that, and teachers need to be willing to “go above

and beyond.” Landmark teachers see themselves as the hardest working teachers in Cyprus Unified. The school’s culture of achievement and its identity as a school where teachers “care” and work tirelessly to ensure that their students succeed, are important features of the work environment at the school. Teachers feel it, and it gives their work additional meaning.

A number of the benefits of a strong organizational culture are clearly evident at Landmark. In addition to particular identity claims that frame the school as “special” and its teachers as dedicated and talented, Landmark’s culture provides unity and cohesion in other ways. Teachers share a similar orientation to teaching as highly professionalized; their dedication is rewarded with autonomy. Consensus cultivates clarity at Landmark, and clarity allows the school to pursue its mission with single-minded focus.

However, the experiences of teachers that struggle to accommodate practices that are in conflict with their professional values highlights some of the negative consequences of Landmark’s high consensus culture. These teachers lack a forum to discuss their concerns and feel pressure to comply. As one teacher described, raising questions about accepted practices means “sticking your neck out” and risking criticism from colleagues. While consensus breeds clarity, it also stifles democratic dialogue about policies and practices that may be controversial to some members. Perhaps this is the price a school like Landmark pays for such remarkable unity.

One of the teachers interviewed left the school shortly thereafter, and his experience sheds light on the strength of culture and the consequence for teacher

retention. I talked to him briefly towards the end of the year. He was an experienced and talented teacher who came to Landmark because the school he had taught at no longer supported his pedagogical orientation to teaching and was becoming increasingly rigid under accountability pressure. When asked to describe his decision to leave Landmark, he responded that he couldn't put his finger on it but that his new school, which he had visited a number of times before making the decision, just "felt right." He clarified that he didn't try to "pick it apart" because he knew it was important to "trust his gut." He shared that he had felt the same thing at his former school when he took the position there but that he had not felt that "same fit" at Landmark. While he had particular dissatisfactions about Landmark, none of them were about specific working conditions; all were about the culture of the school and the feeling he had working there. Had he not found a school that he considered a better fit, he would have stayed at Landmark. His commitment to the school was contingent on the availability of options and the potential to find a more satisfying work environment at another school. This experience highlights the importance of school culture and the complexity of organizational commitment.

## Chapter Five: Teacher Hiring at Landmark

### An Orientation to Fit

*And so I feel that Mark and then after him, Dennis, did a pretty good job of trying to staff the school with people who are like-minded. Yeah, so Dennis was very conscious about hiring particular teachers like Hahn, who I assume that you've talked to, and myself, Doris Min, people who came here already wanting to do the same sort of work.*

Dena Rich (teacher interview, 4/12/2012)

As the above quote illustrates, hiring plays an important role in Landmark's workforce stability. Through specific hiring practices and an orientation to fit the school draws together "like-minded" teachers who come to Landmark wanting "to do the same sort of work" that is happening at the school. Hiring is strategic and focused and it begins with making sure the right teachers make it to the interview process. This chapter uses the theory of information-rich hiring (Liu & Johnson, 2006) and the premise of organizational fit (Kristof, 1996) to explore the mechanisms that bring suitable teachers to Landmark: teachers who share an ideological orientation to urban teaching, teachers who hold common pedagogical or professional commitments, and thus, teachers who are likely to experience a high degree of satisfaction at the school and, as a result, will stay.

As noted, this chapter focuses on the details of how information-rich hiring happens at Landmark. It extends the model presented by Liu and Johnson (2006) by exploring various channels, frequently informal, that teachers utilize to learn about the school, as well as processes by which Landmark effectively hires the *right* teachers. It also documents what Landmark looks for in teachers and what teachers prioritize in finding a workplace. In both cases the emphasis is on fit; the school seeks



to hire teachers who will be a good cultural match and teachers are looking for a school that will provide a compatible work environment with like-minded colleagues who share their values and orientation toward teaching.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on what draws teachers to Landmark and how they come to learn about the school as a potential workplace. The second section looks at the use of decentralized hiring and information-rich interviewing at the school. Also, because this is a relatively new practice at Landmark, this section examines hiring in historical context. The chapter closes using the school's math department as an illustrative case for information-rich hiring and organizational fit.

### **Information-Rich Hiring**

Reporting on the hiring practices of urban schools, Liu and Johnson (2006) make a distinction between practices that are “information-poor” and “information-rich.” Teachers who came into schools with rich information about the school as a workplace demonstrated higher degrees of job satisfaction and, as a result, were less likely to leave. These teachers had visited the school and spoken with potential colleagues and had a good sense of what teaching at the school would be like. In information-poor hiring, on the other hand, teachers were frequently hired “on the spot,” sometimes being offered a teaching position at a district event, not even knowing the particular school in which they would teach. The premise of information-rich vs. information-poor hiring is a straightforward one: Teachers are likely to make an informed decision about where they should teach if they are

provided with more complete information about the school as a workplace. When teachers choose schools that they consider compatible with their skills and orientation to teaching, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction and, as a result, remain at the school. The ultimate goal of information-rich hiring is teacher retention.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Landmark presents a very coherent image of itself as a successful urban school. Its identity as an equity-focused school with a staff of dedicated and talented teachers is well known in the community, and this information is available to local teachers who might want to work at the school. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Three, Landmark has gone through crucial periods of culture and identity building in the past ten years, beginning with the restructuring that happened with Mark Johnson and continuing when Dennis Rubens became principal. Together these factors—the processes of culture building and the positive attention the school has received—have supported Landmark in attracting and retaining a very select group of teachers who share the school’s orientation.

### **Finding a Fit *at* Landmark: Teachers’ Information Pathways**

There were two general narratives of what drew teachers to Landmark. The first was expressed as teachers coming to teach at the school because they knew members of the Landmark faculty and, based on what they knew about their values and orientation to teaching, anticipated that the school would be a good fit for them. Teachers also expressed being drawn to the school based on the kind of teaching practices they expected to find at the school. These teachers were drawn to the school’s emphasis on progressive pedagogy, collaboration, and professional

development. Finding a fit at Landmark was grounded in the school's current practices and in the professional community already teaching there. Teachers seeking a position had a strong sense of what they were looking for in a school, and by the time they were interviewed were notably certain that they would find it at Landmark. The next section will shed light on *how* teachers learned about the school.

### **Informal Networks**

The most common channel of work related information was word-of-mouth. More than half of the teachers (18 of 32) reported hearing about an opening at the school either from a former colleague or through a sort of professional grapevine. Teachers talked about *groups* coming to Landmark from schools within the district, and one described what she called an “exodus” from a neighboring school. She recounted how first two of her colleagues were hired, then she followed a year later, and then she recruited another teacher from the same school because she “knew she would be happy here—with the teaching environment. We laugh about how we moved over half of the English department. We’re all much happier here.<sup>47</sup>” The statement that follows best characterizes the intersection of professional networks and the shared practice that teachers were seeking at Landmark. This teacher had taught with one particular colleague throughout his teaching career in Cyprus Unified. After teaching at one school for eleven years, the pair decided “to leave together” because they had grown weary of the school’s high administrative turnover. While they parted ways at that time because they could not find teaching positions at the same school,

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<sup>47</sup> Preetha Anand (teacher interview, 11/30/2011)

they were reunited at Landmark nine years later.

*Well, my friend Monique was here, and we've done work together forever. And there was a process that she had helped start, which was the Anti-Racist Teaching Committee. And I thought this was the chance to, you know, spend six or seven years here—finish up my career and work with her and work with others like her—you know, and really build up something different.*

James Mulligan (teacher interview, 11/30/2012)

This teacher joined the teaching staff at Landmark to work with a colleague (and others like her) in an environment of shared values. It should be noted that all of the experienced teachers came to Landmark not because they needed a job per se but because they were looking for a more satisfying workplace—a better professional fit—than their current school provided.

The data underscores how informal professional networks gave teachers access to information about the school as a potential workplace. Teachers drew from past collegial relationships to assess whether they were likely to experience the school as a compatible work environment. Their decisions were based on what they knew about the teachers working at the school and the extent to which they perceived a professional fit with them. This process illuminates teachers' agentic participation in selecting a workplace for themselves and in recruiting colleagues to build an intentional professional community.

### **Formal Networks**

In addition to using informal professional networks, some teachers reported learning about Landmark through more formal channels. By far, the most significant of these are two teacher preparation programs that bring a steady stream of student

teachers into the school. The principal described these relationships as an intentional strategy to bring innovative teaching practices to the school and, most importantly, to introduce (and vet) prospective hires. Furthermore, because both programs emphasize urban teacher preparation, the teachers who come to Landmark through these channels are specifically prepared for working in urban schools.

*We have a solid longevity rate with teachers, but people do leave and you want new teachers on your staff as well. You want a balance. That's why we've built a relationship with the Urban Teacher Residency Program. That's why I jumped right in there and said, "We can be your first high school residency," because then you can build a cadre—and they might not come here at first—they might go somewhere else and then come back here in a few years.*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/1/2012)

Rubens' explanation highlights an important aspect of information-rich hiring. He saw having student teachers as a way of showcasing Landmark, and even if some teachers were not hired initially, they might later return to the school. This strategy has been very successful, particularly in the math department. During the 2011/2012 school year, two thirds of the math department had student teachers, and they all came from one of these two preparation programs. Furthermore, five of the nine math teachers interviewed had student taught at Landmark, and many had specifically requested their student teaching placement to be at the school because they hoped to eventually secure a position there. Student teaching offered both a preview of Landmark as a workplace and, as one teacher put it, a chance to “get a foot in the door” for hiring. By student teaching at the school, teachers have a chance to experience the schools’ working conditions, and the school has an opportunity to evaluate whether they would be a good match for the school. This reciprocal vetting

process is the goal of information-rich hiring. Teachers who had student taught at Landmark described a familiarity with the school that enabled them to make a well-informed decision about taking a position there. One teacher commented that it eased the transition to first-year teaching because “I understood the culture of the math department and knew what to expect. I was prepared for the amount of collaborating and curriculum development that happens here. There were no surprises. First year teaching is hard enough. It was good to know what I was getting into.”<sup>48</sup> This underscores the vital role that student teaching (as a means of job preview) plays in Landmark’s information-rich hiring.

Another formal channel that brings math teachers into the school is professional development in Complex Instruction<sup>49</sup>, an instructional approach that is the foundation of the math program at Landmark. Two of the more experienced math teachers who came to teach at the school (one having taught for 13 years and the other for 22 years) had left their prior schools due to administrative pressure to change their instructional approach and stop using the progressive math strategies central to Complex Instruction. They knew about the pedagogical orientation of the Landmark math department because they had participated in professional development with Landmark teachers. It was through this connection that they inquired about and secured teaching positions at the school.

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<sup>48</sup> Lien Hahn (teacher interview, 4/20/2012)

<sup>49</sup> Complex Instruction (CI) is a form of classroom instruction that fosters collaborative interactions among students and focuses on problem-solving over mathematical computation.

Finally, teachers referenced professional conferences as a means of learning about the school. Teachers described attending a teacher conference held annually at Landmark and sponsored by an organization that focuses on issues of social justice and equity. The statement that follows, by a math teacher who had student taught at Landmark, highlights the benefits of this kind of exposure for the purpose of recruiting teachers. Years after she was informally introduced to Landmark by meeting some of the school's math teachers at a conference, she requested the school as her internship placement, drawn to Landmark for its pedagogical practices.

*I think I wanted a job at Landmark before I even got my placement here. I knew of the school. Just through various channels. I went to one in New York a couple of years ago—Teachers for Social Justice—and there were some Landmark teachers at the conference and I could just tell, even then, that it had a good environment for learning and trying and experimenting with new things.*

Shari Sobel (teacher interview, 5/17/2012)

These formal partnerships and affiliations build pathways into the school. While teachers might not come to the school directly, this exposure plants a seed about Landmark as a potential future workplace.

This analysis illuminates particular processes that support information-rich hiring. First, in order to choose a compatible workplace, teachers need to clarify what is important to them. Teachers balance the pros and cons of a work environment according to their professional commitments, seeking to find a school well suited to their values and orientation to teaching. One-third of the teachers interviewed came to Landmark from another school in Cyprus Unified, and half of the teachers had taught at one or more previous schools. Teachers regularly compared Landmark to their

prior school, generally contrasting a challenging work environment to what they experienced at Landmark. This illuminates the role that experience plays in teachers seeking a satisfying work environment. In addition, teachers made extensive use of professional networks to preview the school. Prior colleagues were a valuable source of workplace information, and the opportunity to work with a particular constellation of teachers ranked high in factors that drew teachers to the school.

### **Find a Fit *for* Landmark: School-Level Hiring Practices**

Information-rich hiring is a reciprocal process that requires an *exchange* of information between schools and teachers. Just as teachers sought information about Landmark in order to make an informed decision about teaching at the school, the school engaged in specific practices to find the *right* teachers. A rich discourse of fit is pronounced at Landmark. Teachers and administrators draw from it to explain and direct hiring choices, establishing who *belongs* at the school. The emphasis on fit also reinforces the value placed on cohesion and conformity that was discussed in Chapter Four. Fit matters at Landmark; it is a cultural value and the foundation of the school's information-rich hiring practices.

### **Decentralized Hiring**

As discussed in Chapter One, centralized hiring<sup>50</sup> is typical in large urban districts. Because teachers are employed at the district level, the practice of hiring teachers centrally and then distributing them to schools as needed is thought to be

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<sup>50</sup> Centralized hiring refers to practices that place control of hiring at the district's central office, outside of the discretion of principals. These practices include teachers being screened and hired by the district and then placed in schools with openings, and are routinely used in large urban districts (Levin & Quinn, 2003).



more efficient. Centralized hiring, however, runs counter to the information-rich hiring, which depends on teachers and schools being in close contact through the interviewing and hiring process.

While Cyprus Unified advertises a centralized hiring process, Landmark school hires teachers directly. Most of the teachers interviewed indicated that they had not conformed to the district's hiring protocol for new teachers entering the district or even for teacher transfers. New teachers have two choices if they want a job in Cyprus Unified School District: either upload an application on the district website and wait for an interview, or attend a spring hiring fair and be interviewed by principals of schools with open teaching positions. Two of the teachers interviewed specifically reference these strategies.

*R: So it's like this -- you go in and you just sit in a room all day until you hope that a principal comes in that is looking for ....*

*I: Like a hiring fair kind of thing?*

*R: Yeah and so I sat in one of those for like two days straight, two or three days and Social Studies teachers are like, we're like a dime a dozen.*

*I: Right.*

*R: And so there were no positions open, but I just hung out there and made myself known to the people in the district office. I just stayed put, and finally this woman was like "Okay you know what, there's a position open at Landmark High School. You should just go down there—I recommend just showing up."*

Dena Rich (teacher interview, 4/10/2012)

*So when I tried to find out about getting a job I was told the usual: log into the system, fill out the form, and absolutely DO NOT contact any schools directly. And I thought, seriously? That's it? So I went ahead and did all that but my real plan was trying to figure out who I knew here.*

Angela Thomas (teacher interview, 10/18/2012)

Two things are significant about the experiences of these two teachers. First,

they both highlight the typical bureaucratic hiring protocol adopted by large districts, in sharp contrast to a philosophy of fit. Teachers are expected to be ready and able to work in any school in the district, and while Cyprus Unified offers stipends to teachers who take a job at a “hard-to-staff” school, it does not provide any specific information about individual schools, or which teachers might be best suited to particular schools.

Perhaps more importantly, these teachers, both new to the profession, expressed frustration with the system and lacked faith that the standard protocol would result in a job. In fact, someone at the district office subtly counseled one of the teachers *around* the established protocol. A third teacher shared a similar sentiment, remarking that Landmark High School was her “dream job” but that she never saw postings on Edjoin,<sup>51</sup> so she assumed there were no positions at the school. Once she “got [her] foot in the door to get an interview,” through an alert from a friend who worked at the school, and was later hired at the school, she saw that positions did indeed occasionally open up. However, they were generally filled through internal channels, “usually by someone who heard about the spot like I did— from a teacher at the school.<sup>6</sup>” These examples bring to light how word-of-mouth internal recruiting brings a select group of teachers to Landmark.

While teacher transfers from schools within the district are common at Landmark (two-thirds of the teachers interviewed transferred to the school from another school in the district), the transfers do not generally follow the district’s

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<sup>51</sup> Edjoin is a public education job search web site.

normal transfer protocols. Instead, teachers learn about teaching positions informally and are able to navigate around normal bureaucratic protocols. When the teacher quoted above discussed her decision to leave Landmark at the end of the year, she commented, “When I told Dennis I was leaving he said, ‘Okay, well let me know if you know somebody’ because I guess they have this window when they can hire before they have to hire from the district.” Other teachers confirmed this, and while they didn’t know the exact process, they had a sense that they had been hired “under the radar” and they attributed this practice to the principal’s skill at maneuvering around bureaucracy. The principal confirmed this, attributing Landmark’s success in hiring to his skill at working within the system and to the backing he has received from the district. He described his style as “squeaky” :frequently calling the district office daily to find out when and if he could hire a particular teacher. He also mocked the informal teacher trading that occurs in large districts: “It sometimes comes down to, ‘Well, if I take this person, can I have these two?’ like I’m the owner of a football team or something. It’s ridiculous, really, what we have to go through.” Knowing how the system works and how to work the system are necessary components for Landmark’s hiring and orientation to fit.

### **Information-Rich Interviewing**

Landmark has adopted an unorthodox interview process that highlights both an orientation to fit and how the information exchange between school and teacher happens. A more open dialogue has replaced the traditional interview protocol, which asks the same questions of all candidates. The goal with this restructure was to

provide meaningful information about the school and glean specific information about potential hires.

*In the past, we used a uniform set of questions. That's been the traditional protocol but I am veering away from that, trying to have deeper conversations and looking for specific markers—things that matter here: collaboration, anti-racist teaching, personalization, relationships. What I am finding, in the last two or three years, is that we are getting a very different group of candidates because they know the school well and they want to be here.*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/1/2012)

This explanation reveals the pivotal role interviews play in helping discern fit. As mentioned, potential teachers arrive at the interview process already having been recruited for the school or having approached the school via past colleagues. In a sense, they have largely been prescreened to be good candidates for Landmark. Rather than ask a series of standard questions, Landmark interviews take the shape of a conversation about pedagogical practice and orientations to teaching. The principal and interview team listen for “markers” that will indicate whether or not the person is a strong candidate for Landmark’s culture. Teachers specifically referenced Landmark’s unique interview process. One teacher commented that the questions she was asked were not the “bullshit questions you expect at an interview. It was a real conversation and I loved it.”<sup>7</sup> Another teacher discussed the interview process as pivotal in his decision to take a position at the school.

*The story went like this: I was interviewing with a bunch of schools and the day that I interviewed at Landmark, I had just gotten a job offer at South Valley High. So I basically walked into the job interview pretty much thinking that I would take that job. But ... really, it was the way that Dennis talked about Landmark that brought me here. He talked about collaboration, he talked about how people worked with*

*each other and he talked about interdisciplinary planning and I thought, "Wait a minute. This is what I really love. This is what I want to be doing."*

Peter Chu (teacher interview, 5/31/2012)

Thus, interviews at Landmark are intentionally structured to give teachers a sense of the school and to elicit information so that the hiring committee can make an informed decision. All efforts are predicated on the importance of securing a good match, of finding a fit for the school. The interview process can be seen as the final gateway to the school. Landmark's selective recruiting, decentralized practices, and information-rich interviewing work together to create optimal conditions for teacher retention.

### **Landmark Staffing in Historical Perspective**

Landmark has not always maintained information-rich hiring practices and an orientation prioritizing fit. Analyzing teachers' accounts of hiring from a historical perspective revealed a significant shift in hiring practices. While teachers hired before the restructuring reforms of the 1980's also reported hearing about the school through informal channels, the focus on coming to the school for particular pedagogical reasons did not emerge until the last three to five years. Teachers hired before that time describe being hired "on-the-spot" or having only basic information about the school, frequently based on the school's general reputation. A teacher hired in 1998 described the hiring process:

*Teacher: The interview process was ... what was his name ... I can't even remember his name ... Ramirez?*

*Interviewer: Juan Ramirez was the principal? Okay. Go on. What kinds of questions did they ask you?*

*Teacher: Well it was like this. The teacher that told me about the position said, "Mr. Ramirez, this is Kate. Remember the woman I was telling you about? That I've been trying to get here?" and he said, "Oh. Right. Yes." That was it. I don't remember being interviewed or anything. That's how I was hired.*

Kate Duncan (teacher interview, 5/2/2012)

While the teacher was introduced to the school through a past colleague and was attracted to the student demographics at the school, information about the school as a workplace was nonexistent. And, while teaching at Landmark was consistent with this teacher's professional commitment to teach "needy" students, there was no information provided to suggest that the school might be compatible in any other way. Even the current principal, who was hired as an English teacher in 2001, the same year that Mark Johnson was appointed principal, described a rushed hiring process:

*I never was actually interviewed by an administrator, not even an informal interview. This actually worried me because there were some issues with my contract because there was no district intermediary between the teachers that hired me and the district. I remember being a little frustrated and worrying that maybe I had made a mistake.*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/1/2012)

These examples stand in sharp contrast to an account from a teacher hired in 2012. After student teaching, she applied, along with the five other current student teachers, for a position in the math department.

*Teacher: The co-department heads came and observed us all teaching and they encouraged the rest of the department to observe us all, too. It was a group interview—like a panel. Dennis was there, and Lien and people from the grade level team were there, too.*

*Interviewer: What kinds of questions did they ask you?*

*Teacher: What are your strengths as a teacher? Where are you trying to grow? And that was something they were very open about—that they were looking for a particular kind of teacher. The math department was doing a needs assessment and trying to figure out*

*where they had holes and looking for candidates that had strengths  
where they had holes or holes where they had strengths.*

Shari Sobel (teacher interview, 5/17/2012)

What accounts for such a remarkable change? How did the school transition from hiring practices typical of urban high-need schools to the information-rich hiring of the last five to seven years? The shift to information-rich hiring relied on a number of factors. First, the school's developing identity and culture has allowed Landmark to articulate a clear vision; a good teacher-school match requires both parties to know what it is they want in each other. Structural and pedagogical shifts like common planning time, teacher collaboration, and anti-racist teaching have made it possible for Landmark to clarify and communicate its core values and recruit teachers with similar orientations. Thus, hiring the right teachers for Landmark has depended on the school developing and honing its own sense of purpose. In addition to this, Landmark has had the benefit of a stable and savvy principal that understands how to navigate the bureaucratic processes inherent to urban school systems. Teacher accounts strongly suggest that the two most recent principals have found ways to maneuver around rigid district policies. It should be noted that Cyprus Unified School has made some changes to its general hiring process. While teachers are still required to apply through the district, the Cyprus human resources department has made a commitment to prioritize "hard-to-staff" schools. This was confirmed by the principal who referenced district support in bypassing certain policies as contributing to Landmark's success. It has, however, required Rubens to remain alert and to engage with the district in a way that he describes as being "squeaky."

Finally, hiring teachers who are likely to remain teaching at the school is part of a school-wide orientation to fit and commitment to cohesion. Teachers share in the responsibility of finding people to fill positions because cohesion and consensus are an integral part of the school's culture and viewed as central to the school's success. Making sure everyone "is on the same page" is a collective effort at Landmark, and it begins with hiring teachers who will fit.



## Landmark’s Math Department

The math department at Landmark provides an illustrative case for using information-rich hiring practices to support an orientation to fit. The math department was referred to frequently in interviews as the department that was the most cohesive. Teachers within and outside the department described it as being “the most aligned,” “having the clearest vision,” and “being on the same page.” When asked to describe the ideal hiring scenario, the principal used the math department as a model.

*I think .... ideally .... we put together a team, a hiring committee. It gets a little harder in the summer. The math department did a beautiful job of it. They had the most positions open this year. We’re hiring two math teachers. They laid out what they were looking for in a member of their department—in terms of Complex Instruction, in terms of standards-based report cards, in terms of collaboration and relationships. Lien took a lead on interviewing different math teachers at different times. I interviewed with them along with people who would be on their grade level team. He had met with the department beforehand and they had completed a rubric of the candidates and they made a decision—not really a voting decision but a collective decision of what they wanted.*

Dennis Rubens (principal interview, 6/1/2012)

This description illustrates the foundation of the math department’s approach to hiring: clarifying both the skills and dispositions that are valued by the department and then recruiting, and hiring based on those characteristics. “Fitting” in the Landmark math department is a matter of sharing a pedagogical approach to teaching math, having a particular orientation to teaching in general (i.e., collaboration), and providing attributes that the department might lack. The department is very active in the hiring process, with the department chair participating in all interviews for math positions. As described by the principal, before interviewing, the department initiated

an internal needs assessment to clarify the department's strengths and weaknesses in order to hire candidates that might fill the gap and compliment the department. The department head described vetting candidates during the interviewing process to assess their potential fit by asking questions that "alluded to their beliefs and underlying philosophies about what it means to teach math," and clarifying that a teacher who was not open to reflective practice, specifically as it pertained to grade analysis and Anti-Racist teaching practices, "would just not be a good fit for us because that's really foundational." Of the two teachers who were hired, one was just finishing her student teaching at Landmark. The other was a teacher who had been familiar with Landmark teachers through district wide professional development in Complex Instruction. Both came to Landmark with a clear understanding of the focus of the department and ready to be part of the work.

A unique feature of the math department is a tradition of strong leadership. In the past thirteen years, the department has had only two department heads—one for eleven years and the current one for two years. Jun Imai, the former department head, was one of the most mentioned figures at Landmark. Although he was no longer teaching at the school during the study, even teachers who had not worked with him discussed his role in the department. Imai was centrally involved in recruiting and hiring all but two of the nine math teachers interviewed; in essence, he built the math department at Landmark. Imai was crucial in fostering instructional cohesion in the math department by bringing Complex Instruction to the school, and more than half of the math teachers interviewed came to Landmark specifically to work with him.

Imai was unanimously credited with establishing the norms of collaboration and progressive teaching that currently characterize the math department at Landmark. In fact, the current math department head, Lien Hahn, was Imai's student teacher and mentee. The cohesion of the math department was fostered by the continuity and stability of the leadership as well as by the active role Imai (and later Hahn) took in recruiting teachers who would maintain the vision and practices of the department.

As mentioned, the Landmark math department has adopted Complex Instruction as the foundation of their pedagogical practice. All of the teachers receive training in CI and all teachers are expected to use its strategies in their approach to mathematics. Also central to the department is an emphasis on collaboration and curriculum development. Seven of the nine math teachers interviewed mentioned being drawn to Landmark because of the pedagogical practices of the math department; five of them came to the school specifically because of the central role Complex Instruction played in the school's math program. It should be noted that these teachers see Complex Instruction as a general orientation to math teaching rather than a specific set of strategies. Pedagogy and practice are foundationally entwined in CI, and Landmark math teachers refer to CI as a philosophy that guides their practice.

In addition to its use in attracting teachers to the school, the department's commitment to progressive pedagogy is used by the school to *screen* candidates for fit. Teachers commonly describe these attributes as being the most salient predictors of a math teacher's success at the school. The following statements represent the

collective perspective of the math department regarding departmental culture and fit.

*You could have someone that's a good math teacher but if they're not used to progressive pedagogy they're just not going to be a good fit here.*

Han Nguyen (teacher interview, 12/1/2012)

*I think the most damaging characteristic for a teacher here would be someone who is not open to feedback. One that is not open to change or to be willing to reflect on their practice. And by that I mean, you try something out, it doesn't work, you get feedback that it isn't working but you make no effort to change. I've seen it in teachers here and that's certainly not the only reason why someone would leave or not be a good fit but I think it has contributed. What we are trying to create in the math department is an open door policy.*

Lien Han (teacher interview, 4/20/2012)

The department views fit, and conformity to a shared orientation to teaching, as the basis of stability and the key to success.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed two of the primary questions of this dissertation: How do teachers come to teach at Landmark? How do hiring practices, and orientations to hiring, support teacher retention at the school? This research proposes that retention at Landmark begins before hiring, with the school's clear presentation of what makes it unique, what it has to offer in terms of a workplace, and most importantly, what it is looking for in a teacher. While exemplary workplace conditions contribute significantly to teacher retention at Landmark (an issue that will be taken up in Chapter Six), they are not the only contributing factor. Teachers come to Landmark seeking a compatible workplace for their pedagogical and professional orientations, and the school carefully screens teachers to ensure that the teachers who

are hired will fit with Landmark's culture. Furthermore, there is a shared belief that the school's work—meeting the needs of low-income students of color—*depends* on a high level of cohesion and “being on the same page,” a familiar refrain at the school. Finding teachers who fit is viewed as a key component of Landmark's success, with teacher retention and student achievement.

This research contributes to theories of information-rich hiring practices by documenting multiple ways that teachers come to learn about this particular school (and vice-a-versa). Prior work on job preview and information-rich hiring has been frequently framed as a formal process—information about the workplace is made available through brochures, school tours, or an interview panel that all provide diverse perspectives about the school. Hiring at Landmark illuminates the critical roles that informal channels and professional relationships play in introducing teacher and school and finding a good match.

It is important to note that the stability of Landmark's teaching staff positions it for an orientation to hiring that prioritizes fit. There is minimal teacher turnover at the school. The school doesn't scramble to fill positions year after year, as is the case in many urban schools. This stability contributes to Landmark's ability to hone its purpose. Landmark's culture—the combination of values, beliefs, and practices that make the school unique—did not happen overnight. It has relied on the continuity of administrators and teachers who have helped shape the purpose of the school and develop practices and structures that have supported that purpose. Culture, identity, and fit are dynamically engaged in Landmark's story: Strong culture breeds

conformity, which strengthens identity and cultivates an even greater desire for fit. Greater fit, in turn, strengthens culture.

While the focus of this chapter is on how teachers come to teach at the school and why they stay, the issue of teacher attrition, why they leave, is a shadowy presence; if there are “right” teachers for Landmark, there must also be “wrong” teachers. The principal delicately described “counseling teachers out” or his use of the “non-reelect” option if teachers who were hired were not in alignment with the school’s mission. This, as opposed to lack of teaching skills, was the primary reason when he did not rehire teachers after the preliminary two-year probationary period; he clearly stated that he saw this as crucial to maintaining the vision of the school. As mentioned in Chapter Four, teachers discussed the consequences of not sharing values or practices that are seen as central to the work of the school, values and practices that constitute fit. Commenting on the degree of cohesion at Landmark and its relationship to hiring and staffing, one teacher remarked:

*You know, if you hire more and more people that have the same vision. I mean, in a lot of ways, its a difficult place to teach—the work is hard, so if you don't have that deep desire, I'm not going to say you'll be bad-mouthed but you will kind of be weeded out just by the nature of the job here. So it means that those who stay, have probably started from a place with these convictions and so then it ends up being the majority of the staff.*

Ross Meyers (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

Meyers' statement also captures the sometimes-subtle distinction between cohesion and coercion and the power of normative control to influence who stays at Landmark. In the case of fit, attrition is not necessarily seen as a reflection of an unsatisfactory

workplace but of a cultural mismatch between the teacher and the school.

Finally, this work calls into question the ideology and practice of centralized hiring. While centralized hiring might make sense at the district level (because teachers typically contract with districts, not individual schools), it is antithetical to an orientation to fit. It presumes that schools are uniform workplaces and that a teacher who is successful and satisfied in one school will also be so in another. Landmark's success in staffing its school with teachers who share its dedication to serving urban students and its orientation to teaching that prioritizes collaboration and reflective methods, depends, in large part, on the principal's skill at maneuvering around bureaucratic hiring and transfer policies. Urban schools ideally should not have to contend with unnecessary obstacles to enact information-rich hiring. In addition, Landmark's story also raises a number of questions about the role of collective bargaining agreements in hindering principals from hiring whom they want. While prior research and conventional wisdom both conclude that collective bargaining agreements and transfer provisions tie up positions and severely restrict who can and can't be hired (Ballou, 2000; Hess & West, 2006; Moe, 2006), the examples at Landmark, suggest that this is not always the case, and that effective principals are being able to "work around" contract constraints. More research is certainly needed to examine how principals interpret, enact, and maneuver around hiring policies to benefit their schools.

## Chapter Six: How Working Conditions Matter

### Working Conditions in Context

Working conditions matter to teachers. As discussed in Chapter One, working conditions are a crucial factor of why teachers leave schools and, because poor working conditions are frequently concentrated in schools serving low-income students of color, this contributes to the maldistribution of well-prepared and experienced teachers. The link between poor working conditions and high rates of teacher attrition (and the influence this has on particular schools) has motivated researchers and policy-makers to question which conditions are the most important to teachers.<sup>52</sup> The prevailing logic that undergirds this work is straightforward: If research can better understand which conditions are most important to teachers or are most persuasively linked to higher rates of attrition, policy solutions can be targeted to addressing these issues in schools; in other words, we can retain teachers, particularly in schools that suffer the most from attrition, if we can “fix” the problems associated with why they leave. This premise raises a number of issues. First, the assumption that why teachers stay in schools is the reverse of why they leave lacks the necessary precision to drive effective policy. In order to understand why teachers remain in particular schools we must investigate *why* they stay , not extrapolate from studies of attrition. This study addresses the gap in the literature by investigating the conditions of teacher retention at the organizational level. Furthermore, while

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<sup>52</sup> For studies that ranked working conditions to find those with the most leverage for retention see Allensworth, Ponisciak and Mazzeo (2009); Boyd, Lankford, Loeb and Wyckoff (2005); Horng (2009); and Johnson, Kraft and Papay (2011).



quantitative analyses have established the link between working conditions and attrition, establishing that working conditions matter, they are unable to discern *how* they matter due to methodological constraints. For example, knowing that teachers leave schools due to lack of administrative support does not illuminate how teachers understand support nor what kinds of administrative actions they find supportive. Also, quantitative studies that identify leading reasons teachers report for leaving their schools are unable to illuminate how working conditions combine with other organizational conditions to influence job satisfaction. It is the premise of this chapter that supportive workplace conditions are not a universal set of narrowly defined organizational factors but part of the larger ecology of the school, interacting with, and contributing to, other organizational features (such as school identity or culture). This study found that working conditions mattered to teachers, but which conditions, and how they mattered, was fundamentally determined by the broader context of the school's organization and heavily mediated by teachers' professional commitment.

This chapter addresses what it is like to be a teacher at Landmark High and highlights the manner in which working conditions provide specific support for the school's culture. It also examines Landmark teachers' experiences of working conditions and how they directly interact with their professional commitments. The central premise of this chapter is that restructuring efforts at Landmark have focused on creating conditions that helped create and maintain the vision and culture of the school. The norms of support and collaboration (two of the most consistently referenced features of Landmark's culture) required structural changes to the way

teaching happened at the school, and these changes provided the infrastructure to support the school's cultural change. This study found that culture, commitment, and working conditions were intertwined and interdependent; without cultural support, workplace restructuring could not be sustained, and without structural support, culture could not be maintained.

### **Being a Teacher at Landmark High School**

When asked, "what is it like to be a teacher at Landmark?" all but two of the teachers interviewed had almost exclusively positive things to say about the school. Teachers reported that working at Landmark was "phenomenal," that they "looked forward to coming to work," and that they "couldn't imagine teaching anywhere else." Not surprising, when asked where they pictured themselves in five years, most teachers replied that they saw themselves remaining at Landmark. Two of the twenty-eight teachers interviewed reported considering leaving the school. The remaining twenty-six teachers could not foresee leaving unless it was to pursue a position outside of classroom teaching.

Many of the teachers described a certain "feel" about the school and often commented that they couldn't exactly name it but that it was distinct and it contributed to a positive workplace environment. One teacher, who began working at Landmark as a substitute teacher described a "general vibe" of the school and remarked that because he visited other schools in the district, he could sense "something different about Landmark—a kind of a buzz. I can't put my finger on what it was, but people just seemed generally happy to be here., and that made me

want to be here, too.<sup>53</sup>” A beginning teacher commented on the “mood” when she walked down the hall: “People are friendly. I don’t know how to describe it. They smile and say hello. In some schools people just put their head down and close their doors but it’s just not like that here. You can feel it when you walk down the halls.<sup>54</sup>” A number of teachers described Landmark as having a “caring” staff and the administration being “kind” and “not just caring about what we are doing but how we are.” These descriptions highlight the overall positive climate at Landmark. While most of these accolades were general, two specific features were consistently mentioned as constituting a positive workplace: support and autonomy.

**A “teacher-friendly school.”** Twenty-one of the twenty-eight teachers interviewed specifically indicated “support” as one of the most positive conditions at Landmark. The above quote came from a teacher who remarked, “I don’t really know how else to put it. All the supports and structure—it’s just a teacher-friendly school.<sup>55</sup>” Many teachers, in fact, had a hard time clearly explaining exactly what made Landmark such a great place to work. While most of the discussions conveyed a general sense of feeling supported, teachers also referred to formal structures. For example, they highlighted the mentoring and coaching they received from colleagues and how much a part of the culture of the school it was, supporting the school’s commitment to on-going and embedded professional growth. Landmark has a full-time Instructional Reform Facilitator who works in classrooms providing

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<sup>53</sup> Bradley Farmer (teacher interview, 4/12/2012)

<sup>54</sup> Liliana Frietas (teacher interview, 5/11/2012)

<sup>55</sup> Monique Davis (teacher interview, 1/11/2012)

instructional coaching. This position was added to its staff during the restructuring. The current facilitator is also a leading member of the Antiracist Teaching Committee and provides on-going professional development and coaching specific to Landmark’s equity practices. The IRF was brought up multiple times as supportive to the reflective teaching practices that are central to Landmark’s culture.

Support is also offered via colleagues. Teachers specifically addressed how many veteran teachers taught at Landmark and how the school benefitted from their expertise. One teacher with more than 15 years of teaching experience discussed being informally “coached” by the social studies department head, who he viewed “as a mentor ... helping me maintain rigor but in an equitable way and teaching through an anti-racist teaching lens.<sup>56</sup>” All but one of the math department teachers discussed the support they received via their colleagues in the department and how reflective teaching, the progressive pedagogy that was central to the math department, and mentoring and coaching were interdependent. Because the math department had more beginning teachers than other departments, they were in the process of modifying the “coaching model” so that new teachers could be released one period a day to observe other teachers. There is a strong tradition of coaching at Landmark—part of the “open door” environment that characterizes the school and is fully aligned to the norm of reflective teaching and the school’s highly professionalized concept of teaching in general. Teaching is not taken for granted at the school. It is seen as work that is constantly evolving and supported by professional expertise and ongoing feed-back.

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<sup>56</sup> Steven Stagnaro (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

However, coaching and mentoring is uneven across departments—an issue that was discussed as a weakness at Landmark. As mentioned, the math department and social studies department both spoke of support as a systemic feature of their departments. English teachers, however, did not share the same enthusiasm or experiences of support or departmental cohesion. One teacher described the English department as being “sort of disjointed” and while she talked about being coached by the Reform Facilitator, she did not experience her department as being especially collegial. The same sentiment was shared about the science department. The department head described on-going tensions among teachers in the department and even commented, “We have our problems. We are certainly not like the math department!”<sup>57</sup> The math department was consistently described across interviews as being especially, “tight” and “collaborative” and “having a strong coaching model.” Not surprisingly, the math department also demonstrated the highest degree of cultural cohesion as evidenced by shared language, practices, and orientations to teaching. This suggests that structural features like collaboration and coaching not only support the kinds of teaching that is expected at the school but also the organizational culture. It was not a coincidence that Landmark math teachers are “all on the same page;” culture and structure combined to create exemplary cohesion around purpose and practice.

**Teacher autonomy and professionalism.** The other widely noted workplace condition was teachers’ experiences with professional autonomy and professionalism

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<sup>57</sup> Pamela Dorset (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

at the school. More than a third of the teachers interviewed specifically cited “autonomy” as one of the fundamental benefits of teaching at Landmark. One teacher described teaching an elective ethnic studies class, and how it was her “dream course” because of the freedom she had to create the curriculum “so that it would be relevant to students and focus on equity and justice.”<sup>58</sup> Teachers described not “worrying that someone is looking over our shoulders” to monitor their curriculum or instructional practices. Another commented that she couldn’t imagine teaching at a school where she would have to “teach to the state test and to, you know, put the standards up on the board.”<sup>59</sup> While math teachers did not specifically reference autonomy or instructional freedom, they alluded to it when discussing how the math department creates its own curriculum and collaborates on units that are shared across the department. Also, as discussed in Chapter Five, two recently hired math teachers came to Landmark because their prior schools were becoming increasingly restrictive about instructional practices and they wanted the freedom to teach math according to the progressive pedagogies they believed in and had heard were in place at Landmark.

Throughout discussion of autonomy, teachers described a general climate of professionalism at Landmark. One teacher expressed this as “being trusted as a professional” and another as “freedom to make decisions as I see fit.” Trust came up in interviews multiple times, particularly in regards to the administration. There was a general sense among teachers that the administration operated on principles of autonomy and trust and that there was minimal separation between the administration

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<sup>58</sup> Dena Rich (teacher interview, 4/10/2012)

<sup>59</sup> Preetha Anand (teacher interview, 11/30/2011)

and teaching staff. One teacher described the role of the administration as being a “buffer” between the “powers that be—you know, up there—and what’s happening here, on the ground.<sup>60</sup>” Professionalism was discussed as shared governance and distributed leadership at Landmark. Both the former principal and the current principal were mentioned as being highly respectful of teachers’ expertise, listening to “what teachers have to say” when making school-wide decisions and being a “teacher ally” or “pro-teacher.” Multiple teachers compared the current principal to past principals they had worked with and commented that Dennis was not a “top-down” kind of principal. This shared understanding of leadership style was corroborated in one of the principal interviews; in a conversation about professional histories the principal talked about “coming of age as a teacher” during the 1990s and the general climate of professionalism that was operating at that time. He explained his orientation to teaching and leadership as being reflective of his personal commitment to honoring teacher professionalism. Particular cultural practices such as the strong work ethic and reflective practices also reflect and reinforce a high degree of professionalism. Teachers experience trust and autonomy as makers of professionalism and respond with increased dedication. As one teacher put it, “This is not a school where the parking lot is empty at 3:30. Go look.<sup>61</sup>” The shared understanding that their work is highly skilled and requires on-going feedback and professional attention helps create the “specialness” that marks Landmark.

**Beginning teachers at Landmark.** The experiences of beginning teachers in

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<sup>60</sup> Carissa Townson (teacher interview, 11/5/2011)

<sup>61</sup> Steven Castanos (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

particular offer a unique perspective on working conditions and what it's like to be a teacher at Landmark. Three of the teachers interviewed were at the end of their first or second year of teaching, and two of them talked specifically about being a beginning teacher in relation to Landmark's cultural values and practices.

Though all of the beginning teachers interviewed talked about getting ample support from colleagues and coaches, and did not have any complaints about specific *conditions*, per se, they did express feeling pressured by some of Landmark's cultural norms. In fact, they grappled with simultaneously feeling fortunate that they had secured a teaching post at the school but also feeling somewhat overwhelmed with what was expected of Landmark teachers. One of the teachers spoke specifically about the norm of relationship building with students. She described not being a “touchy-feely” kind of person and worried that she would not find it easy to build rapport with her students.

*I think something that's both a pro and a con about working here is going to be the accountability. You know... being new to teaching and really thinking about how I will build relationships with students. Don't get me wrong—it is absolutely worthwhile and important but it's hard. And, it **really** matters here. So how well I am able to do that could make a difference in terms of whether or not I get asked back.*

Shari Sobel (teacher interview, 5/17/2013)

The beginning science teacher specifically addressed the expectation of going “above and beyond” and shared concerns about pressure he felt to “live up to” Landmark's work ethic. He described the challenge of accommodating students with diverse needs, something that might come naturally to an experienced teacher, but would take significant effort and skill for someone new to teaching.



*There's just a lot of pressure. Pressure to put a lot of time and effort into accommodating every single student's situation, which are very real—I understand that—but it's still a lot of work. And time too ... illness, family problems, things around the community. They are legitimate, but my ability to teach and hold deadlines. I give a quiz and someone misses it. That's OK—can write another quiz and he can take it at lunch ... but it's a ton of work...*

Bradley Farmer (teacher interview, 4/12/2012)

For these new teachers at Landmark, cultural norms were being experienced as unsupportive working conditions. While neither of the teachers had pedagogical issues with the practices, they shared concern that they would be unable to maintain them, specifically as new teachers. Also, Landmark's expectation of conformity and the value it places on "everyone being on the same page" made it difficult for these new teachers to deviate from the norm. This raises important questions about the sustainability of Landmark's culture particularly as it relates to beginning teachers.

**Areas of tension.** Two themes emerged that shed light on areas of tension or shared dissatisfaction at Landmark. The first was regarding student behavior, and the second was the related issue of lack of direction from administration about school-wide policies. When asked about the pros and cons of teaching at Landmark or about what it was like to be a teacher at the school, twenty-nine percent of the teachers shared frustrations with the lack of agreement about student behavior. Teachers described not having standard "policies" or expectations for behavior and discipline, and the impression that every teacher was "on their own" to "figure it out." For example, multiple teachers talked about the lack of a campus-wide cell phone policy and how individual teachers had to enforce a rule. There was general agreement that

enforcing any rule “teacher by teacher” was ineffective and that students were not likely to follow rules about cell phones because there was not a standard expectation for behavior; “In one class you get a warning, and another it is taken away, so students don’t know what to expect.<sup>62</sup>” For one teacher, this took on deeper significance and she viewed the lack of behavioral expectations as “not being an academic environment. Like an environment where serious academic engagement is expected to happen<sup>63</sup>.” Teachers uniformly shared that they believed that the “lack of structure” contributed to a larger problem—it wasn’t just that the cell phones were annoying or disruptive but that the lack of a policy or uniformity contributed to a negative or “non-academic” environment. This is particularly interesting in light of the few written policies but the extraordinary cohesion around cultural norms. For example, while there is no policy or structure that governs how teachers talk about students (i.e. from a non-deficit perspective), there is extraordinary cohesion about the way students are described.

A second theme that was evident in teachers’ discussions of student behavior was the role that teachers believed administration should play in developing, mandating, and enforcing these policies. Teachers interpreted the absence of policy as “lacking clear direction” and not having necessary “administrative backup,” and believed that this hindered the school from being more cohesive with student discipline. This perspective was also demonstrated by a few teachers in regards to the Anti-racist Teaching work at Landmark. Teachers shared frustration that the work had

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<sup>62</sup> Carissa Townson (teacher interview, 11/5/2011)

<sup>63</sup> Liliana Frietas (teacher interview, 5/11/2012)

not “gone farther” and attributed that to “not having 100% buy in” or “not being on the same page school-wide.” One teacher articulated this perspective as the administration not doing enough “to mobilize *all* of the teachers on the anti-racist work. They [administrators] just aren’t always as strong as they need to be.<sup>64</sup>” This perspective appears to run counter to the discourse of teacher professionalism that is so predominant at Landmark. While teachers express total satisfaction with full autonomy to make curricular decisions, there are areas in which the lack of administrative involvement is interpreted as weakness and experienced as a negative working condition. One teacher described his account of how the administration should enact policies:

*So I think, they give all this freedom and allow teachers to have all this voice, but sometimes that ends up being a weakness in the leadership because they don't put their foot down and say, "I've taken everything into account and this is the final decision. End of conversation."*

Steven Castanos (teacher interview, 5/1/2012)

A number of issues are interesting about this perspective. First, teachers conceptualize school-wide cohesion in this context as a matter of compliance to policy that hinges on an authoritarian model of leadership. While not all teachers shared quite as despotic a view of the role of the administration, they all shared the opinion that the administration was not fulfilling its duties by *ensuring* compliance. This view follows the premise that organizational behavior should be influenced more by regulative mechanisms (i.e. control based on formal rules and policies) than normative control mechanisms (i.e. control based on adherence to cultural norms). In

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<sup>64</sup> Ross Meyers (teacher interview, 5/12/2012)

the case of Landmark, however, normative control seems to be the more common method of guiding organizational behavior. Teachers consistently communicate pressure to conform that is based on feelings of loyalty and identification with Landmark's mission, not because of external pressure from administration.

### **Working Conditions and Organizational Culture**

This research illuminates the symbiotic relationship between formal structure and culture; as structures changed at Landmark, culture developed, and as culture developed, structures stabilized. As highlighted in Chapter Three, Landmark High School underwent a restructuring process in 2000. Under the direction of then principal Mark Johnson, the school was restructured into grade-level teams, creating a horizontal grouping of teachers, adding to the already existing vertical grouping by departments. This change had a profound effect on social arrangements of teachers and prompted what is now understood as Landmark's collaborative culture. One teacher described how this structural change prompted a cultural shift.

*It totally transformed the way we [teachers] talked about our work. It was no longer just about content. Once we were in grade level teams, we started talking about our students. It was incredible. And **how** we talked about students changed too. Since we were across departments we started talking about student issues that were beyond academics.*

Lisa Roberts (teacher interview, 4/19/2012)

This quote represents how organizational culture and structure are related.

Reorganization not only changed the formal parameters of meetings (how often, when, and with whom) but some of the objectives of collaboration as well. The schedule was revised so that in addition to meeting weekly in departments, time was allocated

for meeting in grade level teams, a novelty for teachers who had not worked outside of their departmental, or subject, boundaries. As a result of this, opportunities for teacher collaboration increased and diversified; there were not only more professional conversations, there were different conversations. Teachers needed to establish new foci for working together to accommodate this new arrangement. In other words, they needed to find other issues to talk about given the lack of common subject matter, and what they settled on were the students themselves. In addition to contributing to a culture of collaboration, this also contributed to Landmark's ethic of personalization and relationships with students.

Teachers also discussed the significance of how these reforms were implemented. Teachers were not expected to find time for the additional meetings, adding on to their existing work-load. Instead, the school day was reconfigured to allocate time for collaboration: Over the course of the month time was structured for teachers to meet twice with their department and twice with their grade-level team. Also, the agenda for these meetings was determined by the teachers, not directed from administration. They mentioned the fact that teachers were provided time to meet, and that they were afforded the autonomy to decide how that time would be used, as fundamental reasons why the reform was widely accepted and overwhelmingly successful. Teachers discussed not being "micromanaged" during department or CPT meetings. One teacher said that there was "just enough structure to make it work but not so much that people felt resentful about another meeting."<sup>65</sup> It

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<sup>65</sup> Kate Duncan (teacher interview, 5/2/2012)

was also suggested by a teacher that had been at the school since 1999 (before Mark Johnson's administration and restructuring) that people who were not inclined to collaborate and work in teams left the school, which served to further strengthen the developing culture and reinforce cohesion.

Many teachers discussed the influence of the restructure on teachers' relationships with students and linked it to pastoral care.<sup>66</sup> Teachers interpreted Common Planning Time as an opportunity to "make sure that students don't fall through the cracks" and discuss students' needs apart from academics. Landmark also instituted an "advisory period" that meets four times a week. Rather than focusing on academics, the "content" of the advisory classes is driven by students' non-academic needs, with the emphasis on creating community, post secondary planning, and social and emotional well being. To keep class sizes small, most adults at Landmark have an advisory class. One teacher referred to the goal of advisory as "making sure every student has at least one adult ally."<sup>67</sup> These restructuring efforts had a profound influence on the quality of teacher-teacher and teacher-student relationships and contributed to the climate of "care" that was referenced throughout interviews. The structural change created the conditions for a cultural shift, which in turn supported and maintained the structure.

Collaboration and Common Planning Time (the grade-level teams described

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<sup>66</sup> The concept of pastoral care is not widely used in the United States but is a common feature of British schooling. It refers to teachers and other adults in the school looking after the personal and social well-being of students and showing concern outside the usual realm of academics.

<sup>67</sup> Dena Rich (teacher interview 4/10/2012)

above) were among the most commonly cited working condition advantages of teaching at Landmark. Teachers spoke about the importance of these specific conditions to support their work as well as the fact that many of them came to the school looking for an environment that valued collaboration (the topic of Chapter Five). It is precisely this mix of regulations and philosophy that illuminates *how* working conditions matter for teacher retention. CPT and additional collaborative planning time are game-changers for teachers who understand their work as collaborative; the presence (or absence) of structures to support this work can be the difference between a satisfying or dissatisfying workplace. This is certainly the case at Landmark. It is not just a fortunate coincidence that most of the teachers at the school value collaboration and are therefore satisfied with the conditions at Landmark. Collaboration is a core cultural value (supported by cultural practices) that attracts (and retains) a particular type of teacher. However, if Landmark were not so successful in 1) attracting teachers with a similar orientation or 2) screening out teachers that would not likely “fit” at the school, there would very likely be less satisfaction with the conditions and, as a result, more teacher turnover.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter explores the relationship of culture and working conditions. Though some conditions may be unanimously valued, all teachers will not experience all conditions as “supportive”. The extent to which working conditions are considered “satisfying,” and therefore contribute to teacher retention, is fundamentally influenced by how teachers conceptualize their work. A teacher who views this work

as enhanced by collaboration with colleagues, will understandably experience additional collaboration time as supportive and professionally sustaining, while a teacher who sees teaching as independent craft work, will experience an increase in meetings as burdensome—something that detracts from, rather than enhances, their work.

This is not to suggest, however, that there are not some conditions that would be beneficial to have at any school. Though none of the interviewees brought up the subject of suitable teaching assignments, analysis of the master schedule revealed some informative data about this issue. First, there were no out-of-field teachers<sup>68</sup> at Landmark. All teachers were working in the content area for which they were prepared. Second, there were no teachers that taught more than two different classes and many teachers had only one “prep,” meaning that they taught the same classes multiple times which reduces preparation time. It was also evident from school visits that Landmark provided sufficient resources and a well-maintained facility. Teachers were not only supported in their desire to work collaboratively, they also felt safe at the school and had adequate instructional materials. While this chapter argues for a consideration of working conditions in context, it also acknowledges that there are some foundational working conditions we should expect in any school. It stands to reason that without these basic structures, schools can not move beyond the most elemental level of effectiveness—it’s hard to think about trust and professional

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<sup>68</sup> Out of field teaching refers to assignments in subjects for which teachers have little education or training, thus outside their normal content area. Out-of-field teachers are not credentialed in the subject but allowed to teach it if it is a restricted portion of their teaching assignment.



autonomy when there are not enough desks or copy paper, or when one is teaching a class for which one has no preparation or experience.

Another issue not previously addressed in this chapter, but relevant, is the need for the financial resources that restructuring requires. Restructuring efforts at Landmark were not only dependent on cultural support to flourish, they required funding. Landmark was the recipient of a grant based on the Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA)<sup>69</sup> and it was this funding that financed the additional personnel hours for grade-level planning and other reforms made at Landmark. The year of data collection for this study was the year before funding was set to end from the QEIA grant and teachers and the principal mentioned this as a pressing concern. The logic of block grants such as those awarded in the QEIA program is that instructional reforms should ultimately be self-sustaining. The reality, however, is that historically under-resourced schools serving high-need (and historically underserved) student populations need on-going investment to sustain improvements. A worthwhile endeavor to understand how and under what conditions reforms are sustained after funding ends would be to study schools longitudinally with attention to organizational capacity.

These findings demonstrate a theoretical and methodological imperative. First, understanding why teachers remain in schools cannot be based on what we know about why teachers leave schools. Positive working conditions were certainly an aspect of the story at Landmark, but they differed from the conditions reported in

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<sup>69</sup> For more information about the QEIA program, go to:  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/qe/>.

studies of attrition. While teachers came to, and remained at, the school because they perceived it as offering a supportive work environment, they were also attracted by a full constellation of other variables. For example, teachers experienced the climate and culture of Landmark as an important part of the work environment. This work advocates for a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes working conditions and more qualitative studies of retention at the organizational level.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Implications**

### **An Organizational Analysis of Urban Teacher Hiring and Retention**

This study was inspired by a bold proposal: teacher turnover is most profoundly influenced by the organizational conditions of schools. It is premised on prior work that finds: (1) The difference in teacher turnover is more significant between schools classified “urban” than it is between schools classified “urban” and “suburban,” and (2) Teachers leave urban schools in high numbers, not because of student populations, but because these schools offer the least satisfying working conditions. Based on these findings, studies have concluded that teacher turnover is not related to school type (urban vs. suburban) but to the particular organizational conditions of schools as workplaces (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Horng, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; 2004; Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2011). This dissertation extends these findings by demonstrating how an urban school attracts and retains teachers. It answers the question

Landmark High School is situated in an inner-city neighborhood that serves a high-need student population: 40% of the students are Latino, 5% are African-American, and 75% qualify for free and reduced lunch, a proxy for poverty. Rather than demonstrating high turnover, as these characteristics might suggest, Landmark has a stable and experienced staff of teachers. In fact, most of the teachers came to Landmark from other urban schools with very similar demographic profiles and were attracted to Landmark because the school offered a compelling array of working conditions: opportunities to work with like-minded colleagues, a culture that

supported collaboration and teacher professionalism, and structural supports for progressive pedagogy. In sum, Landmark is a high-need urban school that retains its teachers. It does this by: (1) attracting teachers that share the school's orientation to teaching and serving urban youth, (2) enacting hiring practices that prioritize "fit," and (3) providing a work environment that supports and sustains teachers' professional commitments. Landmark's experience is evidence that we can decouple the erroneous association between urban demographics and teacher staffing, a

### **Teacher Preferences or Structural Processes?**

In the past two decades, research has sought to document where teachers teach, in order to better understand why some schools have an abundance of qualified teachers, while others do not. This interest has been driven by growing disparities in the distribution of highly qualified and experienced teachers for historically underserved students and findings that low-income students-of-color are less likely to be taught by experienced and well-prepared teachers than their more affluent peers. Prior work on teacher distribution can be conceptually divided into two groups: literature that attempts to explain where teachers teach based on their preferences, and literature that accounts for teacher distribution by focusing on structural forces such as hiring policies and practices. The teacher preference literature is diverse and ranges from focusing on geography and student populations of schools to explaining distribution based on the working conditions found in schools. The geography and school population literature presents findings that document teachers movements into and out of schools based on where schools are located such as urban vs. suburban or

the composition of the student population, such as high poverty vs. low poverty (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2005; Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2008; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 2004; Scafidi, Sjoquist & Stinebrickner, 2007). These studies commonly conclude that teachers generally prefer higher-achieving affluent suburban schools to high-poverty low-achieving urban schools.

The working conditions literature also proposes that teachers prefer some schools over others but that these preferences are based on working conditions, not geographical location or student population (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Horng, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2011). This work concludes that teachers leave schools because they are dissatisfied with school level organization and are seeking better working conditions. A significant limitation of both groups of work is that they typically draw from quantitative data; while these data illuminate a phenomenon, they do not account for how or why the phenomenon exists. For example, while there is mounting agreement that working conditions matter, these studies do not explain how they matter to teachers just as they do not determine why teachers prefer to teach in suburban schools, or move from lower to higher achieving schools.

Research that focuses on structural issues includes current studies on hiring policies and practices, frequently focused on large urban districts because this is where the maldistribution of well-prepared and experienced teachers is most intensely experienced. This work investigates how and when large urban districts hire teachers (Loeb, Kalogrides & Beteille, 2011; Levin & Quinn, 2003; Liu & Johnson, 2006),

and on issues that constrain teacher hiring such as transfer and seniority provisions in collective bargaining agreements (Ballou, 2000; Hess & West, 2006; Korski & Horng, 2007; Moe, 2006). For example, studies have found that large urban districts frequently hire late, after the most qualified teachers have taken positions, and are more likely to be restricted by collective bargaining agreements. Like the teacher preference literature, this body of work also argues that urban schools are less likely to employ experienced and well prepared teachers, not because of student populations, geography, or working conditions but because of structural processes that channel less qualified teachers to urban schools. Also, like work on teacher preferences, research on hiring policies and practices is restricted by the inherent limitations of quantitative data analysis that does not provide detail into *how* policies are interpreted and implemented to influence where teachers teach.

All told, the literature on teacher distribution is rich and diverse. It is, however, limited by being somewhat siloed—work on teacher preferences does not consider the significant role that structural forces play (and vice versa). This study addresses this gap on two distinct levels: (1) by examining the intersection of teachers' preferences for schools with the sustaining and supportive working conditions shown at Landmark High, as well as (2) looking at the school level hiring practices that bring particular teachers there—teachers that share the school's vision, will likely experience a high degree of job satisfaction, and will remain teaching at the school. The next sections will explore these factors in detail, beginning with why teachers choose Landmark as a workplace, followed by school-level structural forces that

attract, recruit, and hire teachers that have a high probability of remaining at the school. Taken together, these two considerations illuminate Landmark's success at maintaining a stable teacher work-force.

### **Teacher Preferences: Why Teachers Choose Landmark**

One of the most significant findings of this research is that teachers very intentionally sought their teaching positions at Landmark High School and they did so because of the working environment that Landmark offered. Twenty-five of the thirty-two interviewed (78%) chose Landmark as a workplace because they anticipated the school would be a good fit for their professional commitments.

Teachers have historically chosen their profession for intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, benefits (Lortie, 1975), and this study corroborates that finding: Seventy-three percent of the teachers in this study entered the profession because they wanted to be engaged in service oriented work, and many in this group reported becoming a teacher specifically to serve urban youth. This was also strongly reflected in their choice of Landmark. They came to the school because they anticipated that it would support their commitment to making a difference in the lives of students.

Three primary categories emerged as to why teachers were attracted to Landmark: (1) They were attracted to the teaching staff, (2) They were attracted to the school's pedagogical teaching practices, and (3) They had general commitments to social justice and wanted to work with urban youth. Figure 7.1 provides a historical account of the reasons teachers gave for coming to Landmark school. The following paragraphs will unpack how teachers explained these attractors.

Year & Principal	Attractors		
	Attracted to Landmark faculty	Attracted to specific pedagogical practices	Attracted to the student population and an “urban school”
2009 – 2013 Dennis Rubens	Preetha Anand Peter Hall Shari Sobel	Angela Thomas Denise McKinney Liliana Freitas Joaquin Castro Bradley Farmer Hanh Nguyen	
2001 – 2008 Mark Johnson	James Mulligan Ross Meyers Lien Han Steven Castanos		Monique Davis Dena Rich Dennis Rubens Jason Monroe
1996 – 2000 Juan Ramirez	Scott Richards		David Rogers Lisa Roberts Kate Duncan Megan Bruce Melissa Recio

**Figure 7.1 Teachers Reasons for Coming to Landmark**

Some teachers were drawn to the school because they were attracted to the Landmark faculty. Of these, nearly half came to the school because they wanted to teach with former colleagues. Others were drawn to the faculty in more general ways, anticipating shared conceptions of teaching because they had “heard about” Landmark teachers, had had interactions with them through professional networks, and believed they would “fit in.” Landmark’s strong identity and image included messages about the Landmark faculty and what it was like to be a teacher at the school. Landmark teachers had a reputation of being dedicated and committed to progressive, equity-minded teaching practices, and teachers drawn to the faculty wanted to be part of that work. They shared the perspective that the work they were



interested in doing was best done in a collaborative environment and viewed a professional learning community and collegial engagement with like-minded colleagues as an integral part of a supportive work environment.

Another reason teachers choose Landmark as a workplace was because they were attracted to specific pedagogical practices that were understood to be an important part of the school's culture. Similar to teachers who came to the school to work with like-minded colleagues, these teachers wanted to teach in an environment of shared practice. Most of the teachers in this category were in the math department and were drawn to teach at the school because Landmark's math department had a strong reputation in the district as being "progressive" and using a particular instructional approach. Teachers in this group viewed their work as inherently collaborative and social, and compared Landmark to schools they were leaving where the culture was "closed door" and people "did their own thing." They saw Landmark as a place where they could grow professionally and get on-going feedback and support regarding their teaching practices.

A final reason for choosing Landmark was a more general attraction to the school based on its student population; as one teacher put it, "These students are why I became a teacher." This group differed somewhat from the other two groups in terms of the level of specificity of what they were seeking in a workplace. Unlike the other two groups, they knew little about what Landmark offered in terms of working conditions. Their prior knowledge and experience of Landmark was that it was an "urban school" and that it served low-income students-of-color. In fact, the only

specific thing these teachers reported knowing or hearing about the school was that it “had a bad reputation.” Whereas the other two groups were attracted to specific workplace features that Landmark offered, this group was drawn to Landmark because they saw it as a typical urban school.

Understanding teacher preferences only illuminates part of the story, however, and this study explains both why teachers came to Landmark and how they came (i.e., the structural and organizational forces that created pathways into the school). By sorting teacher preferences chronologically in the above table, a compelling finding emerges: Landmark’s hiring practices (including how it attracted and recruited teachers to the school) developed over time. Teachers hired from 1996-2000, were attracted to the school for the general ideological reason to “work with urban youth,” whereas teachers hired more recently were attracted to the school because of the specific working conditions. For example, they came to the school because they had heard it supported progressive teaching methods or opportunities to collaborate. Teachers hired in the more recent group, by the current principal, shared a common narrative of hearing about Landmark and coming to the school looking for a “fit” for their professional orientations (the topic of Chapter 5). As Landmark developed and articulated its vision and clarified what it offered as a work environment, it attracted more teachers who shared a similar orientation to teaching. In other words, teacher hiring became more specific to the particular work environment that Landmark offered teachers. The next section will explore this further and illustrate how culture, hiring practices, and working conditions interact to influence teacher retention.

### **Toward an Interactive Model of Teacher Retention**

The model presented in Figure 11 illustrates the interplay of organizational culture and identity, hiring practices, and working conditions and how these elements work together to attract and retain teachers at Landmark High School. While the prior section of this chapter presented why teachers were drawn to the school, this section will offer a model for considering how hiring (including orientations to hiring and specific hiring practices) results in workforce stability and influences teacher retention at the school.



**Figure 11 Interactive Model of Teacher Retention**

In this model, information-rich hiring sits at the intersection between organizational culture and identity, hiring practices, and working conditions, illustrating how these organizational elements combine to account for the particular staffing success that Landmark demonstrates. As discussed in Chapter 5, information-

rich hiring involves teachers making informed decisions about where to teach and schools making informed decisions about who to hire. Liu and Johnson (2006) found that when teachers and schools had “rich information” they were more likely to make hiring decisions that resulted in compatibility: teachers chose schools that were a good fit pedagogically and schools chose teachers with skills and backgrounds that matched their staffing needs. This reciprocal process involved a simultaneous vetting process with the ultimate goal of matching teachers to schools and vice versa. Good teacher/school matches, or finding a fit between school practices and teacher qualifications and preferences, resulted in increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover. In other words, teachers remained teaching in schools when they were able to find a school compatible to their skills, background, and orientations to teaching. In this framework, information-rich hiring brings together four elements to facilitate this match: the ability of Landmark’s identity, culture, working conditions, and hiring practices to attract and recruit compatible teachers to the school.

Information-rich hiring depends on job preview. Before pursuing a teaching position, teachers preview the school considering various aspects of what it means to be a teacher there. What is the community like? How do teachers engage with each other? How do they engage with teaching work? How does the school view teaching and learning? At Landmark, teachers expressed multiple and varied ways that they knew about the school prior to coming to teach there. Teachers repeatedly shared the experience of coming to Landmark because they had “heard about the school” from a former colleague or someone they knew that was currently teaching at the school.

Some teachers reported hearing about Landmark informally in district-wide professional development contexts or at conferences, and getting a general sense of the teaching staff or the kind of work that was happening at the school, and being interested in finding out more about the school. These opportunities were not planned or orchestrated but emerged in the context of teachers' professional relationships and played a significant role in Landmark's information-rich hiring narrative.

Information rich hiring at Landmark (including job preview) depends on Landmark projecting a clear and consistent message about the school's *culture and identity*, and Landmark's presence in the community is a foundational component of this message. As discussed in Chapter Four, Landmark High School has a well-articulated and persuasively showcased mission. It presents itself as a succeeding urban school that is beating the odds and making a difference in the lives of urban youth. In addition, Landmark teachers are dedicated, collaborative, and highly reflective about their teaching practice. Teachers are attracted to Landmark because they have similar orientations to teaching and wish to be part of Landmark's equity project. In addition to collective vision and shared purpose, the school engages in cultural practices that are aligned to its values and beliefs. Grades are analyzed to ensure parity of grade distribution for African-American and Latino students. Teachers have autonomy to engage in progressive teaching practices and create their own curriculum, rather than teaching to standardized tests or using prescriptive methods common in low achieving schools. Because the school has such a strong presence in the district and the community, teachers who come to the school seeking

a teaching position are opting in to Landmark's culture. In other words, Landmark's cohesive culture facilitates the teacher/school match that is at the heart of information-rich hiring.

However, image alone is not enough to attract and retain teachers. In addition to a provocative message of equity and professionalism, Landmark offers supportive and sustaining *working conditions* that are specifically aligned to the school's culture. As discussed, most Landmark teachers have taught at other schools and have an understanding of what constitutes a sustaining work environment and what to look for in a school. In addition to the informal job previews in which teachers engage, the interview process gives specific information about what it is like to work at Landmark. Teachers seeking a professional community in which to work, learn about specific opportunities for teacher collaboration. Those who are drawn to the school because they see it as a place where they can engage in reflective teaching practice hear about coaching from the school's equity-focused Instructional Reform Facilitator and the frequent professional development focus on anti-racist teaching. In other words, the school's culture manifests as concrete working conditions that matter to teachers because they are specifically aligned to their professional commitments.

Finally, specific school level *hiring practices*, utilizing information rich methods, are an integral component of Landmark's success at staffing for retention. As discussed in Chapter Five, Landmark does not conform to centralized hiring procedures adopted by Cyprus Unified School District. Rather than following district protocols for new hires or teacher transfers, most of the teachers at Landmark are

hired directly by the school through a combination of internal network recruitment (i.e., current teachers bringing in potential hires through word-of-mouth recruitment) and administrative skill at maneuvering around district policies (including circumventing transfer provisions in the collective bargaining agreement). In fact, it could be argued that Landmark's success in accumulating a cohesive faculty of teachers with shared purpose who remain teaching at the school is largely due to these decentralized hiring practices. Landmark's use of internal network recruitment brings teachers to the school that are likely to fit with the school's equity-oriented vision and professionalized conception of teaching, and likely to experience a high degree of job satisfaction—a necessary context for teacher retention.

Landmark's success at attracting and retaining teachers has resulted from the precise mix of teacher preference and hiring practices. While it's true that teachers were attracted to the school's culture and working conditions, and they came to the school specifically because they perceived it to be a school where they would thrive professionally, it is also true that Landmark significantly contributed to that outcome. By honing its vision and creating cultural and organizational conditions to support that vision, and then being visible and showcasing what it offered teachers in terms of a workplace, Landmark attracted teachers with a similar orientation to teaching. This was complimented by hiring practices that facilitated an eased entry into the school. The importance of teachers intentionally choosing Landmark as a workplace cannot be overstated but neither can the pivotal role the school played in attracting, recruiting, and hiring teachers in a manner that supported these choices, and thus their retention

at the school.

## **Additional Findings**

### **Information-Rich Hiring**

While information-rich hiring and job preview are helpful theoretical tools for understanding Landmark's success in attracting, recruiting, and hiring teachers, findings from this study diverge from prior models in significant ways. The most significant departure involves the manner in which teachers gleaned information about Landmark as a potential workplace. In Liu and Johnson's work (2006) the job previews that were offered to teachers were part of the formal interview or hiring process. These included activities that were coordinated by the school, such as attending a faculty meeting, taking a tour of the school, observing classes in session, or talking with potential colleagues. Most of the teachers at Landmark, however, began the interview and hiring process already knowing a good deal about the school and anticipating that it would be a good fit for them professionally. As mentioned, teachers commonly reported hearing about Landmark through conversations with former colleagues or in district-wide professional development contexts or conferences. Thus, the information teachers sought and received about Landmark was imparted long before the formal interview and hiring process, emerging in the context of teachers' professional relationships. This sheds important light on the role of teacher agency in seeking a workplace and the importance teachers place on finding conditions that support their work. It also illuminates a broader context for teacher retention. This study determines that the conditions for teacher retention began before



hiring. Finding the right school—a place where teachers could be successful and teach in ways that were consistent with their professional preferences was the first step in creating the conditions for teacher retention.

Another notable departure was the quality of information offered to teachers and the importance of “fit” at Landmark. While Liu and Johnson’s study (2006) includes elements of pedagogy and orientations to teaching as elements of a good teacher/school match, their discussion primarily focuses on more technical aspects, such as having a teaching assignment that is appropriate to the candidate’s credential and expertise. “Fit” at Landmark was far more about cultural congruence than it was about technical compatibility. Teachers were attracted to the school because of the values, norms, and shared practices that constituted Landmark’s organizational culture, and Landmark recruited and hired teachers based on the perceived level of fit they anticipated between the teacher’s orientations to teaching and the school’s vision. Therefore, the information teachers sought about the school, and the school sought about teachers, during the preview stage, was aimed at achieving a cultural match—making sure that values and beliefs about teaching were compatible.

In addition to teacher agency and the active role teachers played in seeking out information about the school, this work also highlights *school agency* through the deliberate and strategic activities that Landmark engaged in to attract and hire compatible teachers. As is also the case in Liu and Johnson’s work, having student teachers at the school is a significant job preview and teacher vetting scenario. Landmark intentionally forged relationships with two teacher education programs

with the deliberate goal of finding teachers for the school. Because both of these credential programs were designed to prepare teachers for urban schools, the teachers that came through the programs were pre-selected for Landmark's student population. Another way the school offers preview is the annual social justice conference that Landmark offers to host. These strategies represent deliberate attempts on the part of the school to showcase the work it is doing and attract teachers who are interested in doing similar work. Again, teacher retention is supported by deliberate and strategic efforts to attract and recruit teachers that are a good match for the school, because a good match is fundamental to this outcome.

### **Organizational Culture and the School as a Workplace**

This study finds that teachers experience school culture and school identity as a key aspect of working conditions. How a school "feels" and the presence of colleagues that have similar values and beliefs about teaching are not structural conditions of work but they contribute significantly to the overall work environment. Being a teacher at Landmark means being part of an elite group of exceptionally dedicated and talented teachers who are committed to working with urban youth. Landmark not only offers teachers a workplace that is congruent with their professional commitments, it also offers teachers professional status by belonging to the Landmark community. The school's culture of professionalism and dedication and its identity as a succeeding urban school are important features of the work environment at the school. Teachers feel it, and it gives their work additional meaning.

This study contributes to theories of school culture by documenting precisely

how culture at Landmark has developed and has been sustained. As discussed in Chapter One, prior work on school culture has primarily treated it as a variable that was manipulated and managed to achieve a desired effect. It has been presented in mostly managerial terms with suggestions on how to “improve” school culture in order to increase student achievement. Culture at Landmark was not “implemented” by the former principal but developed over time through the collective participation of leadership *and* teachers at the school. Teachers did not “adopt” the culture of the school, they helped shaped it.

Most importantly, this study highlights the necessity of structural support—of concrete working conditions—to sustain culture. At Landmark, cultural values like collaboration and professional growth were fully supported by congruent *practices*. Teachers were not expected to find time to meet and collaborate with their grade-level teams; opportunities for coaching and collaboration were structured into their workday. Culture and working conditions are fundamentally linked: culture creates the necessity for a particular set of working conditions and working conditions provide the structural support to sustain and maintain culture. This work demonstrates that teachers may be attracted to a school’s strong identity and culture, but they are *retained* when the conditions of their work are in tight alignment with that identity and culture.

Finally, this work sheds light on the context in which working conditions matter to teachers. Unlike prior work that offered ranked lists of working conditions reported as influencing teacher’s decisions to leave their school, this study finds that

working conditions were important when they were specifically aligned to teachers' professional commitments and orientations to teaching. For example, Landmark teachers who saw teaching as collaborative work felt particularly supported by Landmark's restructured schedule that allowed for working with colleagues in both grade level and department teams. While it is true that certain foundational working conditions should be present in any school (for example, safe facilities or adequate resources), this study proposes that working conditions are better understood as part of a complex ecology of work in school, and the extent to which working conditions are considered "satisfying," and therefore contribute to teacher retention, is fundamentally influenced by how teachers conceptualize their work.

### **The Interplay of Organizational and Professional Commitment**

This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher commitment and the role it plays in teacher retention. Prior work on teacher commitment frames it as either a reflection of the relationship between teachers and their schools (i.e., organizational commitment) or the relationship between teachers and a set of professional values (such as student achievement, equity, or even teacher autonomy). This work casts organizational and professional commitment as fundamentally related to one another. Landmark teachers demonstrate strong organizational commitment (i.e., identification with Landmark's goals, practices, and values) because the school provides a context to satisfy deeply held professional commitments. In other words, teachers feel committed to Landmark and, as a result, remain teaching at the school, because the school offers an environment where they

can engage in teaching work in a manner that is consistent with their understanding of what it means to be a teacher. For example, teachers committed to social justice and equity, demonstrate high degrees of organizational commitment because of Landmark's focus on anti-racist teaching practices, whereas teachers who value teacher autonomy demonstrate commitment because the school affirms teacher professionalism and supports professional discretion. Teachers might vary in their orientations, but feel strongly committed because their specific professional needs are being met. This study proposes that organizational commitment is not merely affective, meaning that teachers feel committed to the organization when they strongly identify with the goals and values of the school, but also calculative, in that they demonstrate organizational commitment in exchange for a work environment that allows them to teach according to their professional values.

This work also adds nuance to the construct of professional commitment, which is frequently presented in the literature as one-dimensional. To better understand the relationship between organizational and professional commitment at Landmark, it distinguishes between ideological (commitment to teaching as social justice work), pedagogical (commitment to a set of instructional practices), and professional (commitment to teacher autonomy, collaboration, and teacher learning) dimensions. Understanding the various ways that professional commitment manifests in the experiences of teachers offers insights into why a school might engender organizational commitment from one teacher but not from another. Furthermore, understanding the dynamic relationship between various dimensions of professional

and organizational commitment can help direct policy that fosters teacher retention.

### **Implications for Policy and Research**

The maldistribution of teachers has become a major concern in the last two decades, driven, in large part, by mounting recognition that teachers are the most important school-level variable for student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Recent studies have sought to highlight the importance of this by quantifying the economic “value” a good teacher “adds” to a student (Chetty, Friedman & Rockoff, 2011). Furthermore, compelling links have been made between high teacher-turnover and student achievement (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2008; Dolton, & Newson, 2003; Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2013). To address the need for highly qualified teachers in hard-to-staff schools, most states are implementing policies to increase supply by expanding the pipeline of potential teachers, commonly achieved by creating alternative pathways or providing financial incentives to make high-need schools or shortage areas more attractive (Bland et al, 2011; Hirsch, Koppich & Knapp, 2001). This study argues for a shift in focus from the quality of teachers to the quality of schools as workplaces for teachers. Supply-oriented solutions to teacher maldistribution are bound to fall short if they are not partnered with policies that address the organizational conditions that attract and retain teachers in particular schools. For example, while NCLB mandates that all students be taught by a “highly-qualified teacher,<sup>70</sup>” it does not set policy for states to track teacher

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<sup>70</sup> The highly-qualified teacher mandate of No Child Left Behind includes the following requirements: Teachers must hold a bachelor's degree, have full state

turnover. A school could lose two-thirds of its teaching staff to turnover every year, and if all of the exiting teachers were replaced with “highly-qualified” teachers (i.e., teachers with valid teaching credentials), that school would be in full compliance with the policy. A robust policy agenda addressing teacher distribution must include teacher quality, teacher supply, and, most importantly, teacher retention.

This research also illuminates the importance of studying teachers’ preferences and hiring practices together, in context. As discussed, prior work on teacher distribution frequently investigates the topic from either the perspective of teacher preferences *or* structural forces such as district hiring practices or mechanisms of teacher sorting. Such studies on why teachers choose some schools over others without attention to hiring practices (or vice versa) paint an incomplete picture of the issue. Directing policy requires depth of knowledge about how teachers come to teach in high-need schools and the hiring practices that support (and impede) the equitable distribution of teachers.

Finally, more research is needed on the influence of school identity on teacher recruitment and retention. This study makes the provocative claim that schools can attract teachers by conveying the particular character of the school—what it values, its orientations to teaching and learning, the type of teacher that would likely be professionally satisfied and successful at the school. The success that Landmark has in retaining teachers is mediated by the school’s ability to attract teachers that are likely to “fit” and, as a result, remain teaching at the school. A fruitful extension of

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certification or licensure, and prove that they know each subject they teach (usually through a test of content mastery).

this research would be the investigation of recruitment and retention of teachers in a similar context. For example, The Promise Academy in the Harlem Children’s Zone also projects a strong organizational identity and, like other “no excuses” charter schools<sup>71</sup>, attributes its success at raising achievement for urban youth to pervasive values and a cohesive culture of achievement. Unlike Landmark, however, The Promise Academy struggles with high rates of teacher turnover. Though the school emphasizes the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers, 48% of its teaching faculty left the school between 2003-2004 and 2005-2005 (Dobbie, Fryer & Fryer, 2011). Replicating this study in schools that demonstrate a strong identity and cohesive culture but still struggle with high turnover, would add to theorizing on the interaction of school identity, teacher recruitment, and retention.

### **Policy Recommendations**

To conclude, I propose the following recommendations:

#### **For Human Resource Personnel**

- 1) Decentralize hiring practices so that hiring happens as close to the school as possible. Information-rich hiring depends on teachers making decisions about where to teach based on accurate information about the school as a workplace, and principals making decisions about who to hire based on the prospective

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<sup>71</sup> The phrase “no excuses” is used to describe charter schools with a similar structure and orientation. Originating with the KIPP (Knowledge is Power) program, “no excuses” schools are characterized by a strict behavioral and disciplinary code for students, and a focus on building and teaching a school culture that emphasizes effort and achievement.



applicant's fit with the needs of the school. Hiring on an open contract,<sup>72</sup> transfer provisions in collective bargaining agreements, and other policies that restrict a principal's ability to hire the candidate best suited to the specific school should be reconsidered and revised to prioritize school-level hiring. This will necessitate collaboration with teachers unions to revisit contract provisions in order to ensure that teacher protections are honored but do not take precedence over workforce stability through information-rich, site-based hiring.

- 2) **Prioritize information-rich practices.** Decentralizing hiring practices alone is not sufficient to ensure that hiring practices will increase the flow of information between the school and the candidate. Every effort should be made to increase opportunities for job preview, including school visits, observations of faculty and grade-level or departmental meetings, and interactions with members of the faculty and school community. This study illuminates the importance of teachers having access to diverse information about schools, including cultural and ideological dimensions. Teachers' decisions about where to work are hampered by limited information about individual schools. It would benefit schools to clarify what they value, what makes them distinct from other schools, and what they offer teachers in terms of a workplace. Creating an online database with school characteristics such as class size, induction policies, professional development plans, and even

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<sup>72</sup> Open contract hiring refers to the process of offering contracts and hiring teachers at the district level, without specifying the particular schools where they will teach.

descriptions of the school's philosophy pertaining to teachers' work, and professional profiles of teachers and administrators could provide a clearer picture of the school for teachers to gage their potential for "fit" and make informed decisions about where to teach.

### **For State and Federal Policy-Makers**

- 3) **Implement coherent human resource data systems.** Given the high-cost of teacher turnover, financially and in terms of student achievement, it is imperative that data on school-level teacher turnover is easily accessible and part of a coherent district data system. This data should be used to prioritize the hiring and staffing needs of high-turnover schools. For example, districts could implement remedies such as offering principals of high-turnover schools an early start at hiring or directing additional funds to these schools for expanded induction and mentoring. With reliable data on teacher turnover, efforts can be focused on building the capacity of schools to attract and retain teachers. Turnover data should be analyzed and reported on regularly with attention to specific trends according to school characteristics (i.e., what are the characteristics of schools teachers are leaving and not leaving) and teacher characteristics (i.e., what are the characteristics of teachers that are leaving particular schools? Are there trends according to career stage, professional preparation, or demographics?). Finally, every effort should be made to develop an overall picture of turnover and retention within a district to support a comprehensive plan that prioritizes addressing teacher retention systemically.

## **For Teacher Preparation Programs**

- 4) **Prepare Preservice Teachers for Schools as Workplaces.** This work argues that not all schools are suitable for all teachers. Preparing teachers to think about schools as workplaces and to reflect on the particular type of school environment that would sustain them professionally would be a fruitful endeavor for preparation programs and one that could significantly influence teacher retention. Understanding what makes schools unique, what to look for in a school, and how to recognize supportive and sustaining working conditions would enable teacher candidates to make informed decisions about where to teach. Data presented in this study suggests that in addition to preparing pre-service students for work in their particular classrooms, or specific communities where they might teach, teacher preparation programs can play an important role in preparing teachers for long and satisfying careers in the profession.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Faculty Survey**

What is your position at Landmark High School?

What is your gender?

What is your age?

What is your race/ethnicity?

Are you married or in a domestic partnership?

Do you have school-age children?

Which of the following most closely describes the type(s) of high school(s) that you attended.

Did you attend high school in California?

Did you attend high school in Cyprus?

Where did you complete your teacher preparation?

What is the type of credential you work under? (Check all that apply.)

How many years have you been a teacher (or in education)?

How many schools have you worked at?

How many years have you been at Landmark High School?

What is your department affiliation at Landmark High?

Is teaching your first career?

Please estimate the number of miles from your home to Landmark High School.

## **Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol**

### **Section One: Professional Background**

1. Tell me about your decision to enter teaching. What attracted/drew you to the teaching profession? What other careers did you consider?
2. What degrees and credentials do you hold? Where? When?
3. Where did you receive your teacher training?
4. I'd like to have sense of your history as a teacher. Could you walk me through your teaching experience starting with your first teaching position up to your current position.

### **Section Two: The School**

1. Tell me the story of how you came to teach here?
  - What attracted you to the school?
  - What did you know about the school?
  - How did you know about the position?
  - What was the hiring process?
2. Tell me what I need to know to understand XX High School.
3. Imagine there was an opening in your department and I was going to apply for it. What would you tell me were the pros and cons about working here?
4. (If s/he is new to the school) What is it like to be a new teacher at Landmark High School
5. Tell me about your department. How does it function? How do you interact with each other?

6. How would you describe the administration? What kind of principal is Dennis?
7. As you know, I am studying teacher retention in schools that are assumed to be “hard-to-staff” but aren’t. What keeps you here? Why do you stay?
8. Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years? 10 years?
9. Is there anything you would like to add that would help me understand Landmark as a school or as a work-place for teachers?

## **Appendix C: Principal interview Protocol**

### Section One: Professional Background

1. Tell me about your decision to become an administrator.
2. I'd like to have sense of your professional history in education. Could you walk me through your teaching/administrative experience starting with your first position up to your current position?

### Section Two: The School

1. Tell me the story of how you came to work at Landmark?
2. What attracted you to the school?
3. What did you know about the school?
4. How did you know about the position?
5. What was the hiring process?
6. Tell me what I need to know to understand Landmark High School.
7. What is important for me to understand about your priorities and interests as the principal?
8. Describe your best day as the principal at Landmark? What about your worst day?
9. Describe the ideal teacher for Landmark? What are the challenges to staffing the whole school with teachers like that?
10. Describe your ideal hiring scenario (i.e. how a teacher would come to be hired at Landmark)?

11. As you know, I am studying retention in schools that are assumed to be “hard-to-staff” but aren’t. What keeps you here? Why do you stay?
12. Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years? 10 years?
13. Is there anything you would like to add that would help me understand Mission as a school or as a work-place for teachers?



## **Appendix D: Final Codebook**

Anti-racist Teaching

Any responses that describe ART at Landmark

Changing Demographic of Landmark

Comparing Landmark to another urban school

Comparing Landmark Past to Landmark Present

Comparing Landmark Real to Landmark Reputation

Conformity vs. Nonconformity

Cons

Grading

Department Culture

Ethic of “above and beyond”

Ethic of Care

Ethic of Challenging Deficit Discourse

Ethic of Collaboration

Ethic of Dedication

Ethic of Professional Reflection and Growth

Ethic of Social Justice Teaching

Fit

Grading Practices

Hiring Story

History of Landmark

Information Rich Hiring

Leadership at Landmark

Image

Hiring policies

Organizational Commitment Affective (high)

Organizational Commitment Affective (low or strained)

Organizational Commitment Calculative

Organizational Conditions

Organizational Goals

Professional Commitment

Pros

Restructuring Story

Retention

Teacher Autonomy

Teacher Professionalism

Teacher Preparation

Teaching History

Understanding Landmark

Why Landmark?

Why stay?

Why Teach?

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