Chapter 1: “The charm’s wound up”:
Setting the Case for Studying Teacher Beliefs and Classroom Climate

As the witches await Macbeth and Banquo on barren land and boast about their mysterious powers, they sense the arrival of the victorious war heroes. Their encounter with these men sparks the unraveling of the plot and leads to assassination, suicide, and betrayal. “The charm’s wound up” (1.3.38) indicates that their charm is coiled and ready to spring into action. The following chapter sets the stage for studying the relationship among teacher beliefs, teacher behavior, and classroom climate.

The No Child Left Behind Act’s mandate of disaggregating student performance data by racial groups has yielded further data indicating test-score achievement gaps between minority and White students, as well as between English language learners and native English speakers (Ed-Data Partnership, 2010). An abundance of education research has concentrated on identifying and addressing the root causes of the achievement gap by examining the multitude of factors that impact student learning. Researchers point to organizational or institutional factors, such as lack of resources, high teacher turnover rate in minority-majority schools, and the uneven distribution of high-quality teachers in urban and suburban schools, as sources of discrepancies in performance (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Haycock, 1998).

The search for and discussions about the causes of the achievement gap have shed light on the importance of teacher quality. Researchers have studied external factors that affect and characterize teacher quality, but the close and daily interactions between teachers and students, which that are shaped by teacher quality, need to be examined too. Beyond looking at the experiences and skills that teachers contribute to the classroom, this dissertation reveals how teachers’ beliefs and ideologies impact the kinds of relationships that teachers form with students and the rigor of instruction that they offer. Because teacher-student relationships and teachers’ perceptions of those relationships are
related to student learning (Hughes & Kowk, 2007; McCarthey, 1997), this dissertation narrows its scope to the interactions between teachers and students in the classroom. It focuses specifically on the ways in which teacher beliefs about their students’ capacities as learners shape the classroom climate that teachers develop for their students, particularly regarding teacher caring and rigor of instruction.

The title of this dissertation is inspired by Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which I taught for many years as a sophomore English teacher in California public high schools. In the opening of the play, Macbeth and his comrade Banquo have victoriously defeated the Scottish rebels’ attempt to usurp King Duncan. They are approached by three witches who foretell Macbeth’s ascent to the throne. As Macbeth responds skeptically, Banquo solicits their predictions about his future:

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My noble partner
You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me… (Shakespeare, trans. 1992, 1.3.56-62)
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Banquo yearns to know the witches’ divination of his opportunity at greatness, and, ultimately, their pivotal role in this scene drives the actions and outcomes of several major characters. Though they are hardly the sinister witches who materialize in front of Macbeth and Banquo, teachers play a central role in the lives and academic outcomes of students. They are responsible for nurturing every student in their classroom and developing students’ personal and academic growth. They help students to progress toward mastering grade-level content standards and guide them in the practice of critical thinking and analysis of content, while taking into account students’ complex lives. But
teachers are also the gatekeepers to students’ journey through the educational institution, and many serve to establish “which grain grow and which will not” (Shakespeare, trans. 1992, 1.3.61). The role that teachers play in the classroom shapes students’ motivation, academic achievement, and overall schooling experience.

**Background of the Problem**

In the 2009-2010 school year, California’s teaching population was 69.2% White, 17.4% Latino/Hispanic, 5.2% Asian, and 4.2% Black. This teaching population served a student population that was 50.4% Latino, 27% White, 8.5% Asian, 6.9% Black, and 2.5% Filipino (Education Data Partnership, 2010). This racial and cultural demographic gap between teachers and students plays a role in teacher-student relationships, the ways that both teachers and students perceive those relationships, and teachers’ pedagogical and curricular decisions (Cooper, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2000; Johnson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McCarthey, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Some studies have explored the extent to which schools, and their teaching staff, perpetuate existing social inequities by tracking students into segregated groups and immersing them in curricula that deny the histories and voices of minority students and reinforce mainstream middle-class or Eurocentric values and ideologies (Howard, 2003; McCarthey, 1997; Rist, 1970). Other studies assert that the skills and knowledge that students bring to school conflict with those expected from schools and by teachers, which may lead to a schism between students’ home and school experiences (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Teachers are often not prepared to bridge this racial and cultural demographic gap (Garcia, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 2001; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Deficit thinking, a cognitive framework in which educators blame
minority students’ backgrounds and communities for students’ poor performance (Bensimon, 2005), exacerbates this schism (Valenzuela, 1999). Some teachers may turn to deficit thinking to rationalize poor student performance, which absolves them of responsibility when they encounter interpersonal or instructional challenges in the classroom. Howard (2001) suggested that racial incongruity between teachers and students impacts student learning by hindering the formation of healthy relationships and open communication between the two.

This schism between teachers and students has palpable effects on students’ learning experiences. As some minority students’ home and school worlds clash, they may struggle to find a community to which they belong and an identity that straddles both home and school cultures (Wong, 2011). In the meantime, teachers engage in fragile or incomplete relationships with students. In these challenging situations, teachers’ overtures and responses all too frequently leave students feeling that nobody in the schooling system cares about them (Kleinfeld, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2011). These teacher-student interactions and relationships are crucial factors that need to be considered as educators and researchers engage in an ongoing dialogue about improving teacher practice and strengthening school communities.

Some researchers follow successful teachers who are able to bridge the racial and cultural gap, and they find that these teachers not only hold different beliefs about students’ capacity to learn but that they also possess an asset-minded way of thinking about their students (Carmangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner, 2010). Ultimately, the studies about deficit-thinking and asset-minded teachers show that the beliefs that
teachers hold about their students’ capacity to learn influence teacher-student interactions and the ways in which they teach content. The quality of teacher-student relationships and the ways that teachers perceive those relationships have also been shown to influence student performance (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; McCarthey, 1997).

Controlling for socio-economic and other external factors, teacher practice and expertise have the greatest impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This research offers a clear challenge to arguments that position students’ cultural and linguistic background, family values, and community’s problems as the primary hindrances to student achievement. It also highlights a need to concentrate on teachers’ contributions to student learning. Also rebuking the tendency to blame minority students for their poor performance in urban schools, numerous studies have focused on the impact of teachers, particularly their attributes, skills, and backgrounds, on students’ learning experiences. Wenglinsky (2000) argued that while teacher inputs (e.g., salaries, qualifications, and certifications), professional development, and teaching practices all influence student learning, teaching practices play the greatest role in the high academic performance of students. Teachers – their expertise, their beliefs, and their behavior – have a critical effect on student learning.

Increasing concerns about preparing teachers for racially and culturally diverse student populations have led to a multitude of professional development programs for teachers and a restructuring of courses in teacher preparation programs to prepare them to reach across the cultural and racial divide (Johnson, 2002; MacAllister & Irvine, 2002; Niehuis, 2005; Roger, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006; Swartz, 2003; Walton, Baca, & Escamilla, 2002). These programs and courses have ranged from using teachers’
autobiographical narratives to analyze their views of race and minority students (Johnson, 2002), to practicing emancipatory pedagogies in order to identify and examine pre-service teachers’ dispositions toward working in culturally diverse settings (Swartz, 2003). Such experiences aim to offer opportunities for teachers to examine their own frames-of-reference and to incorporate the perspectives of others into their views of the world.

In attempting to prepare prospective and in-service teachers for culturally and racially diverse settings, professional development and teacher education programs are essentially assuming the mammoth task of shaping teacher beliefs and ideologies, which have been shaped by a lifetime of personal experiences. These teaching programs affect the way teachers view their students, the communities in which they work, their work, and themselves. This dissertation explores the complexities of teachers’ beliefs and ideologies as they are revealed in teacher-student interactions and as they impact classroom climate.

**Statement of the Problem**

There are numerous studies about teacher beliefs as reported by teachers, but few explore how these beliefs manifest in teachers’ practices and influence student learning. Ladson-Billings (1994) and Duncan-Andrade (2005, 2007) studied the ideologies and philosophies of successful teachers of minority students, while Rist (1970) and Winfield (1986) studied the ways in which teachers’ behaviors toward and treatments of students reflect their beliefs about students’ abilities. Studies that rely on self-report measures emphasize the impact of perceptions on teacher beliefs (Booker, Pringle, & Lyons, 2010; Brattesani, Weinstein, & Marshall, 1984; Ferguson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Winfield, 1986). This dissertation moves beyond a focus on beliefs themselves to make
connections among teacher beliefs about students’ capacity to learn, teacher-student interactions, and thus students’ learning experiences.

External manifestations of beliefs are difficult to capture in research (Kagan, 1992), and beliefs are also not often identified and discussed by teachers themselves, yet they play a significant factor in teachers’ expectations of student performance (Brophy & Good, 1970; Ferguson, 1998; Gill & Hoffman, 2009; Gollub & Sloan, 1978; Rist, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999). Teacher beliefs influence their expectations of and interactions with students; they drive important decisions that impact students’ immediate and long-term opportunities (Ferguson, 2003; Ready & Wright, 2011; Winfield, 1986). Teachers carry beliefs about their students’ capacities (Kagan, 1992; Song, 2006; Van der Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010), and these beliefs shape teachers’ behavior and the rigor by which they set classroom instruction (McCarthey, 1997; Rist, 1970).

Related to this, and often influencing teachers’ perceptions, are issues of what many have called cultural mismatch, cultural incongruity, or cultural incompatibility (Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The concept of cultural mismatch does not presume that teachers who have similar racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds as their students experience automatic and natural connections with them. Instead, it focuses on racial, cultural, and socio-economic differences between teachers and students. Because some teachers are unable to bridge the racial and cultural divide between their students and themselves, their expectations of students may clash with the viewpoints and beliefs that students bring into the classroom (Castagno, McKinley, & Brayboy, 2008; Kleinfeld, 1998; McCarthey, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). A disconnect
between students’ and teachers’ beliefs emerges and influences teachers’ positive or negative connections to students. These connections, along with teachers’ views about their students’ background and capacity to learn, shape teacher-student relationships as well as teachers’ verbal and nonverbal behavior, which in turn impact the ways in which teachers exhibit caring and interpret rigorous instruction as they build classroom climate.

**Purpose of the Study**

This dissertation examines the relationship among teacher beliefs, teacher behavior, and classroom climate. Specifically, it studies the ways in which teacher beliefs inform teacher behavior, which in turn shapes teacher caring and rigor of instruction, two significant components of classroom climate. Following the ideas in the previous two sections, this dissertation is especially interested in the beliefs and behaviors of White or middle class teachers towards minority or low-income students. These particular groups represent a prevalent demographic divide that can affect teacher-student relationships. This demographic difference between teachers and students does not presuppose that natural cohesion and understanding exist between teachers and students of the same racial, cultural, or socio-economic background. Rather, this dissertation delves into how these different groups behave and interact in relation to one another and the teachers beliefs that emerge and influence teacher behavior.

Interviews and classroom observations were conducted and artifacts collected to determine the extent to which teacher beliefs and perceptions of students influence teacher-student interactions in the classroom and teachers’ pedagogical practices and curricular decisions. The guiding research questions are as follows:
1. How do teacher beliefs impact classroom climate as they relate to rigor of instruction and teacher caring?

2. What are teacher beliefs about their students’ capacity to learn in relation to the English content area?

3. How do those beliefs influence their practice, pedagogical and curricular decisions, and responses to students?

Using interviews and observations, this dissertation explores the relationship between teacher beliefs and expectations and teachers’ actual instruction and interactions with students.

This dissertation consists of qualitative case studies of three high school English teachers. I observed each teacher with two classes of students and spent one week with each class. The study began with an introductory interview in which I asked questions regarding the following: background and teaching experience, beliefs about the students’ capacity as learners of the English content area, students’ strengths and weaknesses in the English content area, academic expectations, relationship with students, and teaching philosophy. I conducted a week’s worth of daily classroom observations with each set of students, and each day was preceded by a pre-observation interview, in which I asked teachers about their learning objectives of the day. At the end of two weeks of observation, after watching each teacher with two sets of students, I conducted a post-observation interview in which I provided the teachers with an opportunity to share immediate feedback about the lessons, explain their beliefs and expectations about the students’ ability, and respond to questions about particular pedagogical and curricular decisions. Artifacts consisted of teacher-made handouts and gave further evidence of the
level of rigor in the teachers’ instruction as well as their academic expectations. The post-observation interviews, which included the teachers’ perspective, added a layer of complexity to the classroom observations.

**Significance of the Study**

While some educators play Pontius Pilate, washing their hands of individual responsibility and blaming the students’ community or culture for poor student performance (Valenzuela, 1999; Winfield, 1986), Darling-Hammond and Ball (2000) found that, controlling for socio-economic factors, teacher expertise remains the primary determining factor in student achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994) and Tharp and Gallimore (1988) contend that teacher practice and teacher-student interactions strongly impact how students perceive curriculum content. Thus, there is a great demand to consider teacher practice – how teachers teach and how students receive or respond to instruction – in the discussion about student learning.

Cohen, Raudenbush, and Loewenberg Ball (2003) and Loewenberg Ball and Forzani (2007) press for a more intense examination of teacher practice, particularly of the dynamics among teachers, students, and content. Because education is a transactional occurrence that involves an exchange among these elements, these interactions shape student learning (Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2007). Cohen et al. (2003) call for a shift in dialogue from establishing the effects of conventional resources, such as computers and class size, on student learning to discussing the instructional interactions and ways in which resources are used in the classroom. The activation of the three most crucial resources in the classroom (teacher, student, and content) shape the extent of learning that
occurs for each student. Therefore, examining these dynamics reveals valuable insight into how teachers facilitate learning and how students interpret instruction.

Similarly, Ferguson (2003) articulates a pressing need to examine the intimate, daily occurrences between teachers and students, as well as how those interactions, which are shaped by teacher beliefs, impact students’ learning experience:

No matter what material resources are available, no matter what strategies districts use to allocate children to schools, and no matter how children are grouped for instruction, children spend their days in social interaction with teachers and other students. As students and teachers immerse themselves in the routines of schooling, both perceptions and expectations reflect and determine the goals that both students and teachers set for achievement, the strategies they use to pursue the goals, the skills, energy and other resources they use to implement the strategies, and the rewards they expect from making the effort. (p. 461)

Ferguson (2003) claims that systemic education problems are better served when researchers spend time scrutinizing student-teacher interactions. The strategies and resources suggested by researchers to teachers should be offered in tandem with insight into these daily, interpersonal occurrences that develop into teacher-student relationships.

This study contributes to educational research about effective teaching, classroom climate, teacher behavior, and teacher-student relationships. Because there is relatively little research that examines how teacher beliefs translate into teacher practice (Ferguson, 2003; Kagan, 1992), this dissertation highlights the importance of researchers’ presence in classrooms and of their observations of the social contexts where teaching and learning occur. The abundance of studies on teacher beliefs through interview and survey methods has yielded rich and complex literature on teacher perceptions (Ferguson, 2003), but, as Kagan (1992) pointed out, espoused beliefs may not always be reflected in teacher
behavior. This study aims to discover the intersection between teacher beliefs and
teacher behavior in the classroom and the impact of this connection on classroom climate.

Ultimately, the daily interactions between teachers and students are critical to
teaching and learning, so educational research requires increased scrutiny of classroom
occurrences, teacher instruction, and teacher-student interaction. If teachers are as
fundamental as Darling-Hammond (2000) claims, then the bodies of research about
teacher practice need to explore numerous factors, like beliefs, values, and attitudes, that
shape teachers’ identities and roles in the classroom. Also, educational research should
move away from relying exclusively on teachers’ or students’ perceptions about beliefs,
expectations, practices, and classroom climate because these forms of measuring teacher
practice are limited to the participants’ perspectives. Researchers with a trained
observational eye are also needed to observe teacher-student interactions. The research
base on teaching and learning is strengthened by triangulating interview and observation
data, so that researchers can see from the point-of-view of those participating and from an
etic, or outsider’s, perspective. Teachers’ self-reports shed light on their beliefs about
students’ abilities and their practice, but observations also lend an additional frame-of-
reference.

This dissertation addresses implications for teacher education, specifically in the
preparation of teachers for working with culturally and linguistically diverse youth.
Teacher education programs are currently charged with preparing pre-service teachers
Conceptual tools are teachers’ frameworks, principles, and ideas about teaching, while
practical tools are instructional strategies that can be used immediately in the classroom.
Teachers can be taught to use these tools without considering or incorporating their views, beliefs, or past experiences. Disregarding their positioning in and reasoning behind the utilization of these tools, teachers may unintentionally misunderstand students, hold low expectations of them, teach in ways that do not activate students’ prior knowledge, and inculcate students with their own views. Teacher education programs may be driven to change their pedagogical practices in order to integrate the identities, beliefs, and experiences of teachers into their courses. With this shift in teacher education pedagogy, these programs will change their approaches to teaching conceptual and practical tools. Results from this study support a change in teacher preparation programs away from the training of teachers, which involves arming teachers with skill-building curricula, to the teaching of teachers, or the intentional acts by teachers to support self-regulation and responsibility over their own learning (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000).

This dissertation extends the current literature by connecting three bodies of literature: teacher beliefs, teacher behavior, and classroom climate. These bodies are interrelated but rarely connected through qualitative means. Also, these bodies of literature cannot stand alone, for each one shapes and is shaped by the others. This dissertation uncovers how they are connected and the extent to which they relate to one another. Instead of focusing on an examination of teaching strategies, teaching outcomes, and teacher attributes, this dissertation focuses on teacher beliefs and Bartolomé and Trueba’s (2000) notion that these beliefs reflect ideology, which is formed by teachers’ experiences beyond the training they receive in their preparation programs.
Limitations

This dissertation is not designed to produce generalizable findings. Due to its small sample size, generalizability is impossible. But it is designed to focus on teacher practice and teacher-student interactions, so it offers an in-depth investigation of several teachers. It delves into individual practices and perspectives, as well as illustrates the context of each classroom and the students who populate it. It does not draw universal conclusions about teacher practice.

Besides the inability to generalize classroom interactions, the lack of students’ perspectives is also a limitation of this study. There are many studies that capture student perceptions of teacher beliefs and behaviors (Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1991; Babad & Taylor, 1992; Brattesani, Weinstein, & Marshall, 1984; Wayman, 2002; Weinstein, 1983; Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp, & Botkin, 1987). Despite substantial evidence that students are highly perceptive and accurate in their detection of teacher differential treatment (Babad et al., 1991; Brattesani et al., 1984), this dissertation takes a different approach and examines the aspects of classroom climate over which teacher have control, so that suggestions can be made about how teachers can foster learning and growth by developing a positive classroom climate.

Another limitation in this study is the absence of discussion about school culture, which may have a profound effect on shaping teacher beliefs. Changes occur in new teachers when they emerge from university teacher education programs and become acculturated into school settings, and these changes are due in large part to the socialization of teachers in particular school cultures and contexts (Zeichner &
Tabachnick, 1981). Although school culture may have a significant impact on teachers’ perceptions of their students and students’ capacity to learn, this study is not an examination of school culture. Instead, it places its focus exclusively on classrooms as the contexts for teacher practice and teacher-student interaction.

An additional limitation to this dissertation may be its focus on high school English teachers. This constraint prevents the drawing of findings about teachers across subject areas. On the other hand, limiting this dissertation’s scope to the English content area does not impact observations of classroom climate as it relates to rigor of instruction and teacher caring. These are all observable aspects of teacher practice regardless of their content area, and because the focus is on the teacher, not the content, this limitation does not raise significant concerns. In addition, having been an English teacher myself, I am familiar with the content presented to students, so my understanding and analysis of teacher behavior will not be confounded by any confusion or lack of knowledge of the teachers’ subject area.

Another limitation includes this dissertation’s inability to connect teacher beliefs and classroom climate to student performance. Given the small sample size and short duration of observation, its design prohibits me from drawing connections across teacher beliefs, classroom climate, and student performance. A larger, more complex study that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods for gathering student outcomes would be able to make these connections.

This present study does not connect teacher beliefs to student outcomes, but it does examine how teacher beliefs shape teacher-student relationships and teachers’ exhibitions of caring and presentation of rigor as they shape classroom climate. These
are aspects of teaching and learning that have been shown by research to affect the degree to which students feel connected to and invested in learning. Analyzing these intimate and subtle exchanges sheds light on the ways in which students relate to the school and classroom community, both of which affect their motivation and level of self-efficacy. This study yields greater insight into what teachers possess beyond their educational philosophies, principles, and skill sets. As their ideologies and beliefs about students, teaching, and learning are formed and established over time, teachers, whose identities and views are influenced by a host of life experiences, contribute values and attitudes that shape their classrooms and their students’ learning experiences.

**Organization of the Study**

Having established the background of the problem, research questions, and the purpose and limitations of this study, this dissertation reviews research literature in the following chapter. Specifically, Chapter Two’s review explores three bodies of literature: teacher beliefs, teacher behavior, and classroom climate. It also presents the conceptual framework integral to the foundation of this study. Chapter Three explains the research design, sample, population, methodology, data collection process, and method of data analysis. Chapter Four presents findings that emerge from the interview and observation data of three teachers and synthesizes particular patterns and themes across the cases as they relate to the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter Two. Lastly, Chapter Five concludes the dissertation with recommendations for pre-service and in-service teacher education.
Definition of Terms

No Child Left Behind: Federal legislation passed in 2001 that enacts standards-based education reform and measures schools’ performance by standards-based testing.