After taking a deep breath, Principal Forte pulled back her shoulders, glanced around her crowded office, and pondered the question. What was her most important responsibility as the principal of Jefferson Elementary School? It was to serve as an instructional leader by championing quality teaching for all children. She was keenly aware of the multiple constituencies in her school’s students. And she worked tirelessly to make sure that English Learners, that is, students whose first language was not English, received the attention they were due:

My job is to be the broker between the populations and to ensure that the volume gets turned up on the families whose voices aren’t as loud… because it’s really easy at an immersion school to listen to the voices that are privileged.

This position is what drew us to Jefferson’s principal. In the eyes of the state, Jefferson’s reforms appeared to be working. Its standardized test scores consistently rose over the past three years, both for the overall school and when broken down for Latinos, English Learners, and poor students. Such steady gains were uncommon for a school with its demographic profile, but the real story of Jefferson was not about its test performance. It was about the broader notions of success that Jefferson’s principal promoted, and the paths she took to get there.

We came across this uncommon leader during our research study of a half dozen public elementary schools engaged in reform. Over the course of six months, we compared Principal Forte and her teachers’ instruction to that of other schools, all of which were located in some of California’s largest urban districts. Jefferson’s leadership – and its classrooms – stood out from
In education, we hear a great deal about what good principals do. They are strong administrators, well versed in management principles. They set ambitious goals for raising test scores. They organize every part of their school efficiently around the test—from textbooks to teacher training. They are relentless in their drive for teachers to use instructional strategies that will raise scores.

Less often, we hear about another style of principal. They are social justice leaders. They carve out space for teachers to discuss their beliefs about students of different races, languages, or income levels. They call our attention to the social and political inequities that persist in their school and community.

Principal Forte fit neither mold. For Jefferson’s leader of four years, successfully leading a diverse, urban elementary school required more than just raising test scores. It also required more than simply endorsing principles of social justice. It demanded a complex blend of both. She concentrated on fostering pedagogy that was keyed to students’ academic and cultural needs, while also working to amplify the voices of students who public schools have historically neglected. In her view, good teaching and equity went hand in glove:

My job is to help the teachers be the best… teachers they can be, and to especially help Latino families, and Chinese families to some degree, learn how to advocate for their children.

Her beliefs about leadership stemmed, in part, from her history. Principal Forte had almost fifteen years of experience in public schools. Fluent in both English and Spanish, she had taught bilingual elementary classes and high school Spanish. After California voters passed Proposition 227, an anti-immigration law that largely displaced bilingual education with English-only programs, she found herself teaching newly-arrived immigrants in English classrooms. At
the time, she had minimal professional knowledge of how students become bilingual and literate in English, as well as their home language. She deepened her expertise in language acquisition through graduate studies and her own work improving struggling schools before district supervisors tapped her to lead Jefferson.

When Principal Forte talked about the kinds of questions that motivated her work, she spoke not about the pressing issues for her district or state, but about the issues that most intrigued her as a bilingual educator with genuine curiosities about the cultural and cognitive dimensions of language. How do students transfer skills from Spanish to English? What are the most supportive instructional settings for students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds? Looking around Jefferson Elementary School, the answers to these questions became clear.

**Images of Jefferson Elementary School**

From the outside, Jefferson looked like an ordinary urban elementary school. An aged, but clean 1950s exterior consisted mainly of faded orange, concrete pods. One pod looked out onto a modest, grassy playground and a worn play structure. Another bordered a splintered blacktop, cloaked in two painted blue world hemispheres, each with bright yellow continents. Tile mosaics and a student mural of violet butterflies perched on red daisies lit up another corner of the campus.

Walking inside the school revealed much more about Jefferson’s character. Relics of faculty meetings in the teachers’ lounge hinted at the principal’s approach to reform – lists of strategies for teaching English Learners posted alongside posters about the state test. Community outreach flyers and announcements of parent-led workshops, printed in English, Spanish, and Cantonese, were common sites around the building. The uneven pitch of students singing drifted
out of open doors lining the hallways. Children and adults were warm and polite.

Because Jefferson was a neighborhood school, its student body represented the racial and linguistic diversity of its surrounding community. Latinos made up half of the enrollment. Chinese comprised almost a third. The rest were mostly white or African American. Over half were classified as English Learners, and two-thirds qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

Principal Forte designed an elaborate instructional system based on these demographics: three separate language tracks tailored to its biggest groups of students. Each track – English Language Development, Spanish immersion, and Chinese Bilingual – employed a distinct set of teaching strategies, many of which were designed to support students to speak, read, and write in two languages. This instructional program embodied several key dimensions of Jefferson’s leadership.

The conventional model of instructional leadership

When researchers and policymakers talk about effective instructional leadership, especially against the backdrop of today’s high-stakes accountability policies that trigger punitive consequences for schools with low scores, they often prop up a familiar model for leading schools. Settle on goals for standardized testing. Standardize what teachers teach by aligning instructional materials with the content that is tested. Make data-based decisions. Monitor students’ and teachers’ progress toward the test goals. The successful cases in the research on instructional leadership and school reform typically highlight principals whose schools have increased test scores or closed achievement gaps, presumably as a consequence of this model. Success is largely defined in terms of test performance.

These test-based definitions of success risk reducing teachers’, families’, and policymakers’ conceptions of learning to discrete, easily measurable, quantifiable tasks. Such
definitions are largely taken up in economic arguments as indicators of schools’ effectiveness in preparing students for the workplace. Relying on this singular proxy for success emphasizes primarily economic purposes of schools. Yet, as other chapters in this book show, this emphasis distracts attention from other purposes because it takes time and other resources away from more complex instructional activities that target social, moral, or civic goals.

**An equity-minded model of instructional leadership**

Principal Forte’s leadership differed from the conventional model in important ways. She eschewed the singular goal of raising test scores that has become ubiquitous for English Learners and other groups who have historically performed poorly on standardized tests. She resisted pressures to standardize instruction across her classrooms. And she steered clear of traditional classroom inspections to monitor teachers’ preparation for the state test. The result was an unconventional model for instructional leadership that promoted non-test based goals for teaching and learning; resources that were distributed equitably, not equally; and diverse, equity-minded teaching techniques.

*An institutional buffer: Tuning out the noise from the policy environment*

Today, most principals held up as exemplars recount how they heeded district, state, or federal calls for higher test scores. They tell stories about how they used the policies to set in motion dramatic reforms. Others recall their experiences in an unusually autonomous public school or one that was nurtured by an exceptionally enlightened district. Jefferson’s story was different. Principal Forte viewed herself as a buffer whose job it was to shield teachers from the onslaught of policies about state curriculum standards and testing that were intended to change what teachers do.

Jefferson’s principal, like many urban school leaders, lamented the requirements her
central office placed on teachers that did not directly foster conversations about the details of their practice. District mandates for record keeping, faculty meeting agendas, and instructional materials were common. Yet Principal Forte managed to meet district obligations without overwhelming her staff. She gathered information from teachers to complete their paperwork on her own. She set aside regular time for teachers to talk about instruction within the district’s parameters for teacher in-services, curriculum, and the like. She sought instructional support from central office administrators and school reform specialists who shared her instructional philosophy, while quietly dismissing the advice of supervisors that she found unconstructive. Her institutional savvy paid off; it minimized excessive district intervention in her classrooms and protected teachers’ time to tackle the complexities of teaching English Learners.

In faculty meetings, Jefferson’s principal also played down California’s heavy emphasis on standards-based test goals. In her view, state testing goals that measured students’ mastery of curriculum standards were too vague. They weren’t designed to encourage teachers to identify the specific instructional steps necessary for children to develop particular skills. She put it this way:

If standard 3.5 says that students will be able to use literary elements like metaphor, simile, et cetera, … then what do you want students to be able to say and do, write and produce? Do you want them just to be able to fill in a bubble test or do you want them to create their own similes and metaphors? Do you want them to be able to use them in narratives?

Teachers’ real goal, in her view, was to identify chains of instructional decisions like this one, so these were the types of questions Jefferson’s teachers routinely grappled with in meetings.

Principal Forte also mediated between her district and her teachers when the district called for teachers to spend significant time “aligning” lessons from their language arts textbooks with the state curriculum – the current trend in which teachers match the content of their
instruction to the content of their state test. Principal Forte’s main concern was for her teachers to talk about how to tailor their teaching to different students. In her words, alignment exercises “don’t help teachers really talk about the how of instruction,” so she discontinued the practice. In its place she set aside bi-weekly meetings for teachers to exchange ideas about daily instructional strategies and adapt them for English Learners.

*Redistributive instructional policies: Differentiating resources based on need*

There is another growing trend in today’s urban districts and schools that seek rapid gains on state tests. They homogenize. By standardizing teachers’ curriculum, instructional strategies, materials, and other parts of classrooms, leaders try to maximize students’ exposure to the content that will appear on the test. This behavior is particularly common in schools serving high numbers of English Learners and poor children of color.

Jefferson’s leader bucked this trend, too. In fact, she did the opposite. Principal Forte differentiated instructional staff and services based on the varying degrees of need among her three main groups of students.

In one case, rather than equally assigning the same number of reading specialists across all three instructional tracks in the school, she concentrated them chiefly among English Learners and Latinos, since these were the students with the greatest literacy needs. When faced with parent resistance, she explained that these were the children that required the most services; Chinese-speaking and English-only speaking children received less because they required less. Most of the time, she found that parents accepted this logic.

In another case, she creatively funded a collection of intervention services specifically aimed at poor, Latino students, for this was the population that her school was least successful in reaching. Part of the obstacle had nothing to do with classroom teaching. Long work shifts,
minimally educated parents, and impoverished households all set poor, Latino kids behind their middle class, English- and Chinese-speaking peers. Principal Forte accepted that the achievement gap existed before kids ever walked through her door. This fact was beyond her control, yet she worked doggedly on what her school could control: its response. One by one, she adapted every staff member’s role to focus on her most struggling students:

[M]y parent liaisons tutor, my secretaries tutor, everybody in this building does something to change the achievement levels of the kids in this building.

At Jefferson, extended school days for Spanish-speaking, Latino students; after-school enrichment programs; tutoring; and differentiated access to reading specialists all supplemented children’s experiences beyond the classroom walls.

*More equity-minded coaching, less monitoring*

Another oft-heard refrain about school improvement is a managerial one; effective principals talk about their close supervision of what happens inside classrooms. They monitor. They track teachers’ progress by regularly analyzing test data or inspecting classrooms to ensure teachers are doing what is expected. Here, too, Jefferson’s leader deviated from the norm.

Principal Forte spent time in classrooms, but not to check teachers’ compliance with rules or regulations. She studied the way her teachers’ taught. She routinely wrote down teachers’ questions for students of different races, languages, and gender. Then, she used the information as a basis for one-on-one conversations with teachers about what she observed. The purpose was to stretch teachers’ thinking about their questioning in order to identify when they asked more or less challenging questions of students from different backgrounds. She recalled how conversations unfolded:

[T]hey call on Juan and say, “What color is the horse in the story?” Then, they call on Mary and say, “How did the horse decide to leave the stable?” …I say, “Here are the questions you asked the… English speakers. Here are the questions you asked the English
learners.

In this way, Jefferson’s leader used not numbers from standardized tests or perfunctory classroom inspections, but rich information that came out of the daily work in classes. Her discussions with teachers got inside their classrooms’ core and revolved around the moment-to-moment decisions that were the essence of teaching. And she did it in a way that brought to the fore issues of race and language in teachers’ instruction. The effects of this coaching were evident inside of classrooms.

**Portraits of instruction for Jefferson’s English Learners**

*Differentiated, engaging teaching*

Visits to English Language Development (ELD) and bilingual classrooms revealed areas in which Principal Forte realized her goals. They also showed how instruction for Jefferson’s English Learners sometimes marched to two different beats.

Teachers repeatedly said that they heeded the principal’s call to provide exciting, engaging instruction. One fifth-grade teacher echoed many when he shared what went through his mind when planning a lesson: “All the standards aside, if they’re not interested, then it’s just a lot of standards.” Pedagogy at Jefferson also frequently differed according to students’ needs, and classrooms tended to center more on students than teachers. That is, on most days it was easy to find students eagerly solving problems together, debating with one another, or experimenting – not just sitting, watching their teacher. And, across every ELD room, students could be found reading a variety of texts that were keyed to their specific reading levels – from *Nelson the Baby Elephant* to *The Adventures of Thomas Edison*. In many classes, students participated in projects that blended academic standards with visual and performing arts.

In one fourth-grade ELD room, students performed theatrical renditions of *Little Red
Riding Hood and other fairy tales, using specially-designed books with scripts for developing reading fluency, oral speaking and presentation skills. Absorbed in small groups, students of varying ability levels weighed the pros and cons of each book, and ultimately agreed on one to read and perform. In a back corner, an energized foursome decided who would star as the wolf, the grandma, the hunter, and Red Riding Hood, herself. Smiling and giggling, they diligently rehearsed the script before acting out an eerie stroll through a forest, an ominous encounter with a duplicitous wolf, and a cheerful resolution of the wolf’s betrayal. In this room, students drove the particulars of the tasks and collaborative activities allowed stronger readers to support weaker ones. The result was a lively atmosphere in which ELD students actively engaged in learning that was fun and challenging, and that targeted several literacy skills at once.

Down the hall, an animated teacher presented many opportunities for bilingual second graders to read, speak, and actively listen. After gathering students on a checkered rug, she hooked the students with a colorful, oversized book about butterflies. Students shared what they already knew about butterflies and what they saw in the book before the teacher introduced the book’s vocabulary. As the teacher pointed to the word “metamorphosis” on a white board, she asked students to clap out its syllables before she defined the term. The youngsters sat motionless, engrossed in the text. The teacher walked through the illustrations and read their captions. Students wondered aloud about why caterpillars do the things that they do, and they eventually assembled in small groups to make a sentence with their new word—metamorphosis. The series of tasks supported English Learners’ literacy development with visual representations of the text and careful introductions to complex vocabulary – larva, chrysalis, and pupa. It melded literacy and science. It cultivated academic language by introducing students to the notion of captions in expository text. And it provided several chances for English Learners to
Educatio

Today’s zeal for testing demands that virtually every urban public school serving disadvantaged communities make hefty gains on standardized assessments. Measurable results are the bottom line for the district, state, and federal authorities that watch over these schools. Despite this reality, Principal Forte managed to infuse a broader set of aims for teaching and learning into her classrooms, even when teachers prepared students to take the state test.

In addition to teaching the conventional, standards-based content that was measured by the state assessment, several of Jefferson’s teachers explicitly taught their students test-taking strategies – from carefully reading directions to filling in computer-scanned circles. Interviews with teachers brought to light the ways in which teachers sensed pressures to boost students’ test scores, regardless of the principal’s intentions to buffer teachers from unnecessary district intervention or unconstructive testing messages.

Throughout testing season, Jefferson’s ELD teachers could be found leading a range of lessons to prepare for the test. Yet, the pedagogical features of their instruction varied widely. Large and small group activities took place, and many lessons contained a blend of lecture, practice, and music.

In one fourth-grade room, students diligently filled out test booklets for twenty-five minutes until an enthusiastic teacher interrupted the monotony with a spirited song about trying their best on the test. He strummed his guitar. Students sang and laughed. Some even danced. Afterward, the teacher reviewed answers to test questions with the whole class before coaching small groups in strategies for demonstrating their knowledge and skills on the test.

Thus, a delicate tension existed between test-centered and child-centered instruction in Jefferson’s classrooms. While teachers prioritized students’ needs and preserved diverse,
engaging forms of instruction, testing and accountability mandates never fell far from their radar.

**Complicating instructional leadership**

Texts on educational leadership tend to portray a fairly simple, managerial project. This portrayal trivializes the multiple, frequently conflicting realities in which school leaders live. Layered underneath the testing demands on urban schools are pedagogical considerations, social and political concerns, organizational anomalies, and many other forces.

This is why Principal Forte’s leadership is instructive. It offers a case of an urban leader who muddled through these realities and pushed an agenda for more than just test scores. Crafting multiple instructional programs, each tailored to her students’ unique needs, was of paramount importance. Creating access for less privileged families was another goal. Distributing resources based on linguistic, cultural and other needs represented another. Steady test gains were less central, but still present in her thinking, as classrooms showed. Jefferson’s principal maintained multiple goals for students – social, civic, and political – not just test-based ones.

And so, Jefferson’s leadership was complicated because our social world is complicated. Purely managerial models for improving schools fall short, as do models that narrowly conceive of educational equity or social justice. In this case, a principal tried to advance an equity-oriented model of leadership that emphasized high quality teaching and that increased resources for historically under-resourced groups, but that never completely dispensed with testing mandates.

In the end, Jefferson’s leader cultivated a set of classrooms that sometimes inspired, often showcased complex pedagogy for English Learners, and still revealed a strong sense of pragmatism about the broader policy environment in which the school was nested. But at Jefferson the connections between testing policies and classroom practice were not tightly
scripted. Improvisation occurred, and two distinct harmonies could be seen and heard throughout its classrooms. Teachers strove to prepare kids for the realities of high-stakes testing while also engaging them in ways that fostered deep literacy skills and strategies. The result was a school that embraced multiple notions of success for English Learners, and a principal who contributed a complicated model of equity-minded instructional leadership to the public school system and to the ways we can imagine urban school reform.