

PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES OF COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE TO MANDATED REFORMS FOR TEACHERS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the experiences of two fifth grade teachers as they dealt with district mandates while trying to address their high-poverty urban children's learning needs. It reveals their personal struggles that led to both compliance and resistance. In this case, the act of finding the space to engage in the intellectual and creative act of redeveloping the curriculum was an act of political resistance and ultimately an act of caring. By examining the experiences of these two teachers we see again how the era of increased accountability and standardization has led to a narrowing of the curriculum and the marginalization of teachers. This increase in accountability disproportionately impacts teachers and students in urban schools.

Keywords: Urban teachers, District mandates, Compliance, and Resistance

Past recommendations for curricular and instructional improvements (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and NCLB demands for high stakes accountability and highly qualified teachers (H.R. 1--107th Congress, 2001) have placed teachers squarely in the crosshairs of reform efforts. In order to improve teacher quality, there has been an increasing emphasis on the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and commercial curricula (Au, 2011). Schools have developed policies and implemented practices to address teacher quality based on perceptions and fears of annual aggregated standardized test results (Elmore, Abelman, & Furhman, 1996; McDermott, 2007). Pressures to reform are embedded in increasingly hostile public rhetoric about the condition of public education suggesting the larger system is flawed beyond repair (Au, 2011; Berliner & Biddle, 1995). This study examines the experiences of two fifth grade teachers and the personal consequences of their acts of compliance and resistance to mandated reforms in a high poverty, low-performing urban school district.

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Theoretical Framework

We view the work of teachers through Noddings (1988; 2003) framework of care, where the teacher is identified as a caring professional whose students are central to curricular and instructional decisions and who engage in critical reflection to focus instruction with materials and tasks that matter most. Teachers foster analytical and critical problem solving skills (Burbules & Callister, 2000) and are deliberative about their actions within “setting[s] characterized by contradictory realities, negotiation, dependence, and struggle” (Britzman, 2003, p. 31). In this case, the teachers have redefined caring as a political act of resistance. This study is also grounded in the belief that children who reside in high poverty communities and depend on urban schools for academics require caring (Noddings, 2003), culturally appropriate (Ladson-Billings, 1998) teachers who utilize student-centered curriculum and pedagogy (Meier, 2002) and academically challenging content. Effective teachers recognize the dynamic nature of the classroom (Britzman, 2003; Noddings, 2003) and are prepared to re-orient their teaching to impact student learning through instruction that is fluid and changes over time. Effective teachers collaborate to provide optimal learning experiences within a community in which they are actively engaged (Epstein, 2001; Thayer-Bacon, 1998).

Negotiating power in urban schools

This case examines two teachers’ efforts to re-envision their curriculum and practice to validate their students’ lived experiences (Montgomery, 2000; Nieto, 1994, 1996; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and to promote cross-curricular connections (Beane, 1995; Erickson, 2002) through inquiry driven practice (Dewey, 1916, 1938; Postman & Weingartner, 1969) while attempting to adhere to standards and district mandates. The district had a history of low academic performance. Although there was a consensus that more effective teaching was needed to meet their predominantly high poverty students’ needs, there was not a consensus about how to achieve this goal.

Like other urban districts, Tanglewood⁴ was caught up in a perpetual state of reform (Lytle, 1992) long before NCLB became the cause *du jour*, with its focus on highly qualified teachers and adequate yearly progress at the school level (Lytle, 2007). In the years prior to this study, Tanglewood’s reform efforts had become increasingly driven by state and federal mandates. The perpetual reform cycle resulted in constant changing of teachers’ roles without any evidence of significant changes in student achievement; the top-down mandates challenged teacher autonomy and instituted prescriptive solutions.

Tanglewood’s efforts to improve achievement were hampered by a lack of instructional materials, reduced planning time, minimal support for professional

³ Tanglewood and the names of the teachers in the study are pseudonyms.

development, and outdated and/or dilapidated facilities – all environmental conditions, common among urban schools (Kozol, 2005). The lack of resources profoundly impacted teachers and situated their instructional planning within a paradigm of scarcity. The constant pressure of accountability marginalized the teachers, erasing their abilities to maintain professional boundaries and eliminating their own creative spaces (Burke & Burke, 2005).

Methodology

This case study (Stake, 1995) is part of a collaborative action research project (Noffke, 1997) and draws on ethnographic (Geertz, 1973) and critical feminist research methodologies (Maher & Tetreault, 1993). The experiences of two fifth grade teachers were documented as they navigated district-mandated reforms while attempting to implement the student-centered curriculum and instructional strategies developed as part of this collaboration.

Site and Participants

Tanglewood is a small urban district, with three elementary schools, one middle school and one high school, serving 2,357 students (73% African American, 24% Caucasian, 1.4% Hispanic, and 88% eligible for free or reduced lunch). The district, originally created to remedy local racial segregation, combined two working class communities--one predominantly African American, the other Caucasian. Over time, local economic decline and shifts in school demographics returned the district to its previous racially and socio-economically segregated state.

Data Collection

Throughout two years of collaboration, field notes of meetings and classroom observations were kept. These data were shared with Mrs. Morse and Mrs. Knight and key issues were raised at meetings for clarification and further discussion. The researchers were participant observers in both teachers' classrooms and periodically co-taught. This research process could be described as flexible and inclusive whereby teachers and researchers shared both their successes and frustrations during their attempts to implement a culturally relevant curriculum. Teachers wrote weekly reflections chronicling their experiences. Using phenomenological reduction (Van Manen, 1990), we analyzed the data for emergent themes while working to balance these themes with a sense of the whole project. The emergent themes were shared with the participating teachers for member checking.

Three episodes emerged as illustrative windows into the tensions between the two fifth grade teachers and their administrators. The first episode occurred during the fall following the summer of initial planning when the use of a test-prep curriculum, the "Toolkit," was mandated by administration to prepare students for the state's high-stakes standardized assessment. Episode One

highlights the teachers' lack of autonomy. Episode Two was initiated by the implementation of a rigid pacing guide and mandated common assessments. During this episode, the teachers found their professional identities threatened. In the second year, a third episode occurred that highlighted a shift. Unlike the first two that were triggered by district mandates, the third marked a return to the original plans that resulted in the development and implementation of a culturally responsive interdisciplinary unit. Episode Three reveals how the teachers found themselves engaging in "silent" acts of resistance.

The juxtaposition of these episodes illustrates the ways that district mandates that do not allow for teacher input serve to marginalize teachers and limit their efficacy. It also illustrates how collaboration and greater autonomy can lead to greater professionalism and richer instructional outcomes.

Episode One: The "Toolkit" and Teacher Loss of Autonomy

In 2005, the Tanglewood administration responded to the shift in the state's annual assessment from the spring to the fall by mandating a scripted test prep curriculum, the "Toolkit," purchased from another district. The administration considered test preparation essential to address the expected summer learning loss and the district's failure to achieve Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for several years. The "Toolkit" provided fifteen scripted full-day lessons focused on math, science, and language arts to be implemented prior to the October assessments.

The "Toolkit" proved to be problematic for three reasons. First, lessons contained non-culturally relevant examples; for example, writing prompts required prior knowledge about overnight summer camp. Second, content area mastery was assumed; for example, the math content assessed the composition and decomposition of numbers up to 1,000,000 using place value. The teachers knew that this was an unreasonable assumption for Tanglewood's fifth graders, who enter school with fewer academic opportunities than their suburban middle class peers for whom the "Toolkit" had been developed. Finally, the implementation came at the start of the school year, not allowing time for the establishment of classroom routines or the development of a trusting community of learners.

For Mrs. Morse, who likened herself to a creative artist, drawing on her skills, knowledge, and sense of craftsmanship to enact a vision of effective instruction that inspires students, the events early in the school year challenged her self-image. She wrote,

I brought to school each day a slice of "me" to impart on my students...Now [while using the "Toolkit"] I realize that my job is more and more determined by someone outside of my classroom, someone who does not observe the reality of his pronouncement on my day to day decisions.

Knowing their students would need instruction to build new knowledge and skills,

both Mrs. Morse and Mrs. Knight did not consider a review to be a viable option. In the past, both teachers routinely planned their instruction during the first few weeks of the school year to build community, set expectations for academic success, and assess students' prior knowledge. Mrs. Knight reported that she felt it was important to have the first two weeks to "get to know the students." The change in testing date and the mandated curriculum curtailed the practices they had developed over several years. She wrote,

The day before the students arrived, the administrators handed us the "quick fix"—the "Toolkit." This was going to "fix" our scores and help us to make AYP. We were told to take two days to get to know our students, which in my eyes is not enough time to gain trust and build a personal rapport with the children.

Mrs. Knight wrote that the first day of teaching proved to be a disaster; she realized that it was moving too fast. The "kids" had the "deer in the headlights" gaze. Essentially, the teachers' abilities to design lessons to meet student needs were stripped away with the required implementation of the "Toolkit." Teachers' instructions were specifically to follow the scripted lessons, which Mrs. Knight described as "teacher model, teacher direct, and kids do."

In addition, the "Toolkit" required resources that were not readily available; for example, reading lessons were based on trade books not previously used by the district. The teachers became overwhelmed with tasks like photocopying materials and searching local libraries for copies of texts. The time lost impaired their abilities to be reflective in re-crafting the scripted lessons to provide essential scaffolding, responsiveness to student needs, and engagement for effective learning. Instruction became defined by factors external to their classrooms and their relationships with the students. Their wealth of knowledge about and prior experiences with their students were marginalized by the district mandate to implement the "Toolkit" exclusively. Mrs. Knight, realizing what had worked in the past to engage her students to promote learning, summarized this episode in two words: "Road Block!!!!"

Tanglewood's response to the state's move of its high-stakes annual assessment to the fall revealed a lack of respect for its teachers, who were not involved in decisions regarding the purchase and implementation of the "Toolkit." Any sense of ownership over curriculum and instructional decision-making was compromised. Teachers' responses to the new policies were illustrative of how high stakes accountability and standards based curriculum remove teacher autonomy.

Episode 2: Tradebooks: Stripping of Professional Identity

A district wide mandate for common assessments in language arts, specifically reading and writing, led to a required rigid pacing guide soon after the "Toolkit" implementation. Both teachers reflected that the imposition of the pacing guide continued to limit their abilities to be responsive to students' needs.

Knight stated,

Every child learns differently and at her own pace. As teachers, we must acknowledge that difference and we must reach out in as many ways as we can to help each child learn in a way that she will understand. Every child can learn if we as teachers stick to what we know is “good teaching!

The common assessments and pacing guide relied on a commercial computer-based leveled reading program, with five core texts: *Freaky Friday* (Rodgers, 1972), *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1987), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1964), *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952), and *Bound for Oregon* (Van Leeuwen, 1994). The schedule for common assessments required that all students read the same text during the same two-week time frame. Cross text analysis, used in the state assessment, was chosen to be the focus of writing instruction.

Although the five core texts were identified by the publisher as age appropriate for interest and at a fifth grade reading level, both teachers shared that the books were inappropriate for their students’ reading levels and lacked cultural relevance. Most Tanglewood fifth graders were reading below grade level. All but two of Mrs. Morse’s students were reading at second and third grade levels as assessed on a qualitative reading inventory. Mrs. Morse and Mrs. Knight were experienced with designing instruction to bridge the reading level gaps; however, these strategies required time and flexibility that were no longer available. Mrs. Morse described her compliance with the pacing guide as “plod[ding] through” in a superficial manner. Lessons were only focused on getting the text read so that the children would have a sense of the overall plot and characters in order to respond to the common assessments. The language arts curriculum had become test-driven. Mrs. Morse regretted the fact that there were no longer opportunities for discussion or extension activities:

In order to be what I consider a “good” teacher, I must have some latitude to tailor lessons to meet the needs of the students sitting in the room with me. I want to be valued for my expertise, for my ability to individually know each student, and for my skill at relying on teachable moments to delve more deeply into topics.

In previous years when working with the same texts, the teachers were not constrained by the newly adopted pacing guide and common assessments. While they did not consider these texts ideal, they had learned to work with them over time, selecting those that would complement thematic units. For example, Mrs. Morse integrated *Bound for Oregon* (Van Leeuwen, 1994) with units in social studies and science. In previous years, students created persuasive arguments through advertising campaigns encouraging people to come to Oregon. They studied the river systems and geology of the Oregon Trail and explored components of the Core Democratic Values through a group survival simulation experience. Mrs. Knight developed science lessons examining food

webs and ecosystems in tandem with *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) that engaged children in a study of spiders.

The two-week time frame and common assessment eliminated these opportunities. Mrs. Knight reflected,

My world” is the one that is face-to-face every day with the individuals I call “my” kids. Guiding my thinking and learning are the emotions of the children I encounter eye-to-eye, hand-to-hand, and voice-to-voice every day. Stirring their minds, healing their hearts, and caring about the whole child are what good teachers consider every moment of every lesson. It is hard to put into words what guides my decisions when I make hundreds of them per hour. These decisions are personal because my students are personal! This is why I want and deserve more control over what happens in my classroom ... In the frenzy to meet AYP and increase ... [state assessment] scores, have we forgotten that students must be personally engaged in school first?

Without the integration and extension of the required texts into the larger curriculum and the experiences of their students, teachers were unable to extend lessons to allow for cultural and conceptual relevance.

Episode Three: Acts of Resistance

In the year following Episode One and Two, the team resumed their work with the design and implementation of a culturally responsive, integrated curriculum. The “Toolkit” curriculum and pacing guides were still in place, but both teachers were committed to trying out new ideas. The team chose the theme of exploration for a social studies unit and began with the development of the language arts component. This choice recognized each teacher’s areas of strength (Mrs. Knight in language arts and Mrs. Morse in social studies). After careful deliberation the team selected *Gulliver's Stories* (Dolch, Jackson, & Dolch, 2001) as the core trade book. The text included multiple iterations of fifth grade high frequency vocabulary, allowed for teaching and practicing comprehension skills, presented vocabulary used in the exploration unit, had an engaging storyline, introduced students to a classic in English literature, and allowed for culturally relevant themes to be developed. For example, the children were able to easily connect with issues that emerged from the text, such as physical difference and social conflict as experienced by Gulliver when he became stranded on an unfamiliar land. Text choice factors were essential for making a strong case to administration when requesting to add it to the existing curriculum. Ultimately, only Mrs. Morse’s principal agreed with the contingency that she take no more than two weeks to teach it and that no other text be omitted, keeping on pace with the other fifth grade teachers.

Once the go-ahead for the text was obtained, work commenced in earnest.

Both teachers commented on the collaboration being positive and their desires to continue working together. Mrs. Knight, who chose not to seek permission and, thus, not implement the co-developed curriculum, expressed interest in continuing working on the project. She wrote,

I would definitely like to finish our work on *Gulliver* for sure. Then I am quite flexible. Curriculum planning sounds right up my alley. I will enjoy working on any and all areas of education, so wherever the spirit takes us, I am definitely there.

During the implementation of the social studies exploration unit, both teachers described their work as important. Mrs. Knight brought new ideas to the team for activities to engage the children in the unit. In some sense, her self-image as a teacher was restored. Mrs. Morse wrote that her principal

. . . is fairly excited about our project. She reviewed the overview integrated curriculum work done so far and was very positive! This is the first positive feedback about our collaboration that I've gotten in a long time from her. I am very encouraged.

Implementation of the exploration unit was not without its challenges. As previously noted, Mrs. Knight participated in the planning but not the implementation and Mrs. Morse's was only allowed two weeks to teach the additional text. Both teachers knew that to teach for both content and literacy required more than two weeks. Furthermore, the social studies curriculum was designed to cover multiple weeks; lessons planned included connections to concepts that emerged from the text.

Mrs. Morse was confident in her decision to continue with the text beyond the two-week limit, particularly when she saw how her students were engaged. Conscious of the fact that her principal might appear unannounced in her classroom, she advised the children to put their books away if and when the principal came to the class once they were well beyond the two-week window. In addition, she got off schedule with her fifth grade colleagues within the district. During district-wide grade level meetings when curriculum matters were being discussed, she chose to be silent, atypical of her previous participation.

The teachers found themselves in an awkward position. They shared that the planning they were doing in our weekly meetings validated their sense of being highly qualified professional educators. Their lesson planning was guided by the collaboration, framed by their understandings of culturally relevant pedagogy and effective instruction, and informed by their insights into their students' academic needs. However, their work was constantly being monitored and they were reminded not to deviate from the required pacing guide. At the same time one key administrator explicitly told them that they were not good teachers or team players in district's centralization efforts. In their effort to

address the district's struggle to make AYP the administration responded by centralizing the curriculum and instructional decision-making process, believing this to be the best way to directly align instruction with the state assessment. Sadly, both teachers' efforts to adapt the curriculum to be engaging, culturally relevant, integrated and focused on students' needs were devalued by administrators.

The work on the social studies unit was a very trying experience for the teachers. While they felt empowered by the collaboration and were pleased with the positive responses of their students who showed increased interest in school and academic achievement, as documented anecdotally, they felt marginalized from their colleagues. At a meeting toward the end of the school year when the researchers described the teachers' responses to the state and district policy as subversive acts, their reactions were instant and strong. They verbalized discomfort with being characterized as subversive and did not view their actions as political; they saw their actions, such as instructing students to hide their books, as instructionally pragmatic. However, they also recognized that over the course of the two years of the collaboration, they had increasingly engaged in small acts of defiance, teaching behind closed doors, not sharing at grade level meetings what they were teaching, and making their "official" lesson plans less and less specific.

Conclusion and Significance

In this case study, we argue that well-intended mandates within the context of high stakes accountability can result in an adversarial climate that reduces the creative moments available to teachers, constrains their abilities to respond to emergent needs in the classroom, marginalizes and causes them to respond to district initiatives in resistant ways, while "acting" in compliance. The art of teaching takes place when teachers effectively work to balance the competing needs of diverse students, content standards, and available resources. As Ms. Morse stated, her ability to be creative and more importantly her self-perception as a creative teacher were undermined by the systematic removal of her ability to make instructional decisions. The current tiered model of compliance where national standards drive state assessments, forcing administrators to evaluate teacher performance can create a context where acting as caring professionals and implementing curriculum around their knowledge and insights into their students can lead teachers to acts of political resistance.

Our study adds to the body of work that demonstrates the need to take into account teacher knowledge, self-efficacy, and their abilities to develop and implement curriculum so as to address positive student (Brimijoin, 2005; Britzman, 2003; Burbules & Callister, 2000; Burke, Adler & Linker, 2008; Cimbricz, 2002; Mahiri, 2005). Mrs. Knight's and Mrs. Morse's responses to district mandates provide windows through which we can see how the artistic nature of teaching can be compromised, stripping away autonomy and a sense of professionalism, what Au (2011) identifies as the new Taylorism. We contend that teachers who have politicized the act of caring through small acts of resistance

reassert their creative authority (Noddings, 2003). It is through their responses to conflict and quiet resolution that the space and freedom in which the coherent flow and thoughtfulness of the art of teaching are reasserted. In this case, finding the space to engage in the intellectual and creative act of redeveloping the curriculum was an act of resistance and ultimately an act of caring.

By examining the experiences of these two teachers we see again how the era of increased accountability and standardization has led to a narrowing of the curriculum (Boote, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2007) and the marginalization of teachers (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). This increase in accountability disproportionately impacts teachers and students in urban schools. Efforts to improve educational achievement for students in high-poverty urban schools needs to go beyond accountability to include the voices and narratives of the individuals who work and learn in urban classrooms if they are going to address the “societal reasons for the continuing poor academic performance of most students attending urban public schools” (Lytle, 2007, p. 879). Teachers who work in schools where children are viewed within an “at risk” frame of reference experience challenges to reform in personal ways. This continued achievement gap can be damaging for low-income urban children who depend on their schools for academic opportunities and achievement.

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