

“Every Day I Spin These Plates”: A Case Study of Teachers amidst the Charter Phenomenon

By Jason Margolis

Introduction

Over the past decade, numerous shifts in education policy have been proposed and implemented in the attempt to improve educational opportunities for the diverse American population. Some of these changes have been initiated by the federal government’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) via its mix of standards, accountability, and punitive measures. Other changes have occurred at the state and local levels, by restructuring schools and administrative staff. These restructuring initiatives have included movements towards schools that are: small, themed, semi-privatized, and chartered. Both federal and local policy changes have led to intended and unintended consequences for educational stakeholders.

Of these state and local restructuring efforts, charter schools have arguably had the widest recent impact with rapidly increasing enrollments in several areas of

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the country. Charter schools, as opposed to vouchers, have had bipartisan supporters (and detractors) across racial and ideological lines, and are often particularly attractive to parents in urban areas who have become dissatisfied with the traditional public school system (Sarason, 1998). For example, Witte, Shoher, and Manna (2003) explain how Republicans might support charters because of their free-market roots and perceived capacity to “dent” the public education monopoly, while Democrats may support charters because they often funnel opportunities to the inner-city and can be seen as a means to forestall vouchers. Further blurring the issue of charter schools is that—because charters are intended to “fill gaps” not served by the existing educational system—they may run under a variety of educational philosophies depending on local politics and perceptions of need.

In addition to appealing to many parents and school reformers, charter schools—which in many states have been afforded increased local control and flexibility—have also been attractive to many educators looking to “teach outside the box” (Finn et al., 2000, p. 89). Entrepreneurial opportunities afforded to school founders are in many cases also held out to teachers who may be lured by the prospect to be more involved with school policymaking and planning (Finn et al, 2000, p. 232). Yet some also argue (see Miron & Nelson, 2002) that teaching within charter schools has a “darker side,” leading to ultimate dissatisfaction with working conditions and professional opportunities as well as high levels of teacher attrition. Thus, while it is increasingly apparent that retaining and supporting teachers is essential to any successful school reform effort (see LaGuardia, 2002; CSTP Report, 2005), it is still unclear whether charter schools are a positive place for teachers to participate in and shape education reform.

Rationale for Study

Much of the research on charter schools has been tainted by what Ascher (2003) calls biased “partisan scholarship,” pre-disposed to either argue for or against charter schools. Further, most attempts to understand charters have offered a comprehensive overview of the state of American charters (see Finn et al, 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002) relying primarily on statistical data, sprinkled with excerpts of interviews from short visits to many schools.

This study, in contrast, seeks to provide a detailed, insider account of a charter school. Further, by focusing on charter teachers, the research seeks to understand how charter policy is actually lived by those who work closest with charter school students. However, because “charter school laws vary considerably from state-to-state” (Witte, Shoher, & Manna, 2003, p. 2)—and within states run under a wide range of educational philosophies—it is impossible to speak of “charter policy” as a single entity to be experienced by teachers. Therefore, this study took a phenomenological stance (see Dilthey, in Makkreel & Rodi, 1985; Husserl, in Kockelmans, 1994), focusing first on the original and concrete experiences of teachers in a single

charter school, and then later examining these experiences in light of how the school's charter status impacted teacher meaning-making.

To better understand teacher lived experience of a particular charter school effort, I drew from Van Manen's (1990) framework for interpreting lived experience within educational contexts, which includes a focus on lived time, space, relationships, and body. The core of the inquiry is: *How do charter school development policies and individual teacher lived experiences interact?* An assumption is that charter policy impact on teachers will also impact the efficacy of the reform effort and its intended benefits for students.

Previous analysis (see Margolis, 2005) found that several aspects of charter schools significantly impact teacher work: teacher choice, teachers negotiating their own contract, and school marketing. These factors—many associated with the free-market economy as applied to schools—create complex work situations for educators replete with successes and shadows. This article will focus more deeply on the teachers themselves via a series of case studies, focusing on how the contradictory forces associated with charter schools are embodied by teachers.

Case Study

Two levels of case study were conducted in this research. First, the study site itself was approached as an “instrumental case study” (Stake, 1995), to provide insight into the main research question more generally as well as describe naturalistically how it played out within this particular charter school. Then, a series of teacher case studies were constructed to more fully understand individual teacher lived experience within charters, as well as how individual experiences connected to form a collective charter school staff experience.

Both the school-level case study and individual teacher case studies were checked with participants throughout, consistent with the hermeneutic tradition and study of lived experience. Case study analyses and interpretations were shared with teachers throughout the data collection and write-up stages, including the teachers' own interpretations of the phenomenon constructed in our “open hermeneutic conversations” (Gadamer, 1975). After my initial writing of the case study chapters, I contacted, and where possible, met with teachers and administrators to discuss and re-construct interpretations together. Case studies were written for seven teachers. Due to space limitations, four representative ones are included in this article.

The Study Site

College Prep Academy (CPA)—the case site for this research—is a County charter school within The City. Ultimately, adding one grade per year, the school will serve students grades 6 thru 12. CPA distinguishes itself from the rest of The City's public schools with a mission to graduate 90% of its students and have 90%

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of its graduates go on to attend and complete college (Only about one third of the entering freshman class in The City Public Schools graduate high school). The learning model is borrowed from Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, focusing on individualized and interest-based learning supported by internships in the community. CPA’s motto is “One Student at a Time.”

In the 2001-2002 school year when this study occurred, CPA had a 6th and 7th grade with approximately 220 total students and 14 teachers (or “advisers,” as the model describes their role), and several others who taught “specials” (e.g., Spanish, Physical Education, Art). The student population was 99% African-American; the teachers were approximately 50% European-American, 30% African-American, with two Latino Americans and one Asian Canadian on the staff.

Although there are many ways that CPA is like a conventional school—with teachers, administrators, and students continually negotiating time, subject matter, and space—several aspects of this charter school make it markedly different from the public school norm. Each student has an individual learning plan continually amended at learning team meetings, where a parent or guardian must be present. There are no grades; teachers write quarterly narratives describing student progress. Instead of studying discreet subjects and taking tests, students engage in interdisciplinary interest-based projects, and then exhibit their work and progress through public presentations before a panel. Class-size is no larger than 16 students.

Advisories are in 3-hour daily blocks for project work, and the rest of the day is for “specials.” Teachers are encouraged to individualize; whole class work and direct instruction are de-emphasized. Students often leave the school building for “Learning Through Internships (LTIs)” and “job shadows,” as well as trips to museums and libraries. Teachers are not unionized; they negotiate their own contract. They work 11 months out of the year.

CPA’s very existence as a school rests on the assumption that what has failed The City’s students is the public school system and not something within the students themselves. The mission of the school deems that all students can learn, given the right relationships with adults and the necessary learning space to pursue individual interests. However, complicating the mission in year two was a growing consensus amongst the staff that some parents chose to place their students at CPA to avoid the “special education” designation. This is consistent with the literature on charter schools which says that “some parents choose a charter school for their child because they want their child mainstreamed completely and not labeled” (Miron & Nelson, 2002, pp. 87) while other parents may choose a charter in order to “conceal their children’s learning disability in the hope of giving them a fresh start” (Finn et al, 2000, pp. 184). Specifically for CPA, this created a paradox: All students were mainstreamed under the “one student at a time” individualized learning theory; simultaneously, the model rested on the assumption that what the individual learner needs most is motivation, passion, and having individual interests sparked. As the staff experienced this tension, it created disputes over

whether students should receive special services or should be diagnosed, and whether discipline and classroom management should be behavioral or constructivist.

With an ambitious model for learning serving many high-needs students, CPA's organizational structure was also complex. In addition to being a charter school it: (a) had a Board of Directors; (b) was led by a co-principal who was also the founder (John); and (c) was linked to a non-profit Educational Management Organization ("The Big Picture Company") as well as a specific school model in Providence, Rhode Island.

Carving out a niche as an alternative to the City Public Schools was one of John's first and primary goals and, working within The City bureaucracy, he felt the charter school route was the best way to facilitate an opportunity to try something different. Being "different" was also a hallmark of The Big Picture network that CPA was aligned with, and the network's "Statement of Principles and Responsibilities" (artifact received 12/11/01) indicated charter status may be necessary:

Because of our philosophical commitment to interest-generated, real-world, personalized learning, Big Picture Schools have a markedly different structure than other high schools. . . . These differences necessitate waiver language, particularly around curriculum requirements and personnel regulations. Some circumstances may require charter status.

Within the context of local and state educational policies, Principal and Co-Founder John chose the charter route as the best way to facilitate his vision for reforming The City's schools which he felt had long stymied progress. He also worked to create a "profile" of the type of teacher who would work best within his educational vision.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection occurred from August 2001-August 2002, when I was on site for an average of two days per week when school was in session. My entrée' into the school was the facilitation of an action research group; however, as the year progressed, I ended up filling several other official and unofficial roles, including curriculum consultant (official) and negotiator of teacher-administrator conflicts (unofficial).

Data sources included formal and informal interviews with teachers and administrators, descriptive field notes, and school artifacts (including teacher creative and formal writings from action research meetings). Also, a "researcher's journal" (see Peshkin, 1988) was utilized to record my own biases and lived experience throughout the year.

The Action Research Group

The specific professional development process—which I have come to call "literary action research" (see Margolis, 2002)—was designed to validate teacher

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prior beliefs and experiences, communally explore the struggles of change, and help teachers take ownership over the school’s development. Also, elements were intentionally included to mirror what teachers were to do for students—for example, teachers received narrative feedback, pursued an area of interest, and exhibited their findings publicly. This was done to explicitly connect the school’s restructuring efforts to teacher learning (Ancess, 2000) as well as have the teachers serve as models of inquiry for their students (Moll & Gonzales, 1994). Meetings of teacher-participants were to occur once every two-three weeks, with individual support in between meetings. Seven teachers joined the group in September; three remained when teachers presented their work in June.

In the first stage of the literary action research process, teachers created “genre reflections” (Margolis, 2002), a form of narrative teacher inquiry. Genre reflections are written (or sometimes drawn or performed) encapsulations of teaching experiences through distinct and varied forms. These creative representations of teaching experience often surface the more personal and emotive aspects of teaching, as well as teacher beliefs and experiences that impact teaching in unplanned ways (Margolis, 2002). The creative and multi-representational nature of genre reflections allows teachers some distance from the literal reality of their teaching, so that ultimately they can come to understand that reality better. The public sharing of the pieces can be cathartic for the sharer, and create community amongst the teacher-audience. These reflections also became the texts for our hermeneutic-phenomenological reflection into CPA teacher lived experience.

In the second phase of the process, teachers built off these creative writings to develop an action research question, leading to investigation, implementation, and study of a shift in teaching practice. Action research here was defined as “systematic, intentional inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1994) into one’s teaching, to ground teacher learning in the daily lived realities of school life and goals for students. For this study, teachers were encouraged to choose a piece of the CPA’s overall project-based, individualized-learning mission, to explore via their own students and classroom practice. Teachers also were asked to consider how doing an interest-based project made them think differently about their students doing project work.

Findings

The following four teacher case studies illustrate how different aspects of policies typical of charter schools impact teacher work, and ultimately charter students. The first is of *June*, a first year CPA advisor, who previously had six months teaching experience working with ESL students in Toronto. The second is of *Julie*, a first year CPA advisor, who had 25 years working in public organizations and educational consulting. The third case study is the experience of *Colleen*, a first year CPA advisor who had previously taught for 20 years in the Catholic schools. The culminating teacher case study is of *Susan*, a second year CPA advisor who had done

her student teaching in a middle school in the same urban area. June is Asian-Canadian; Julie, Colleen, and Susan are Caucasian.

After the four case studies, I look across the cases to examine what individual and collective teacher lived experience at CPA tells us about teacher work in charter schools more generally.

June: Clashes in Culture, Control, and Home

It is November 1, and June has finally agreed to my visiting her classroom—something she has been reticent about since September. I see this as a sign that she is beginning to relax, settle in, and be more tolerant of imperfections in the school and in her own classroom. As I turn the corner and approach her room, she is in the hallway confronting one of her male students. Voices are rising as June demands that the student go down to Principal John’s office. At first he refuses, but then he acquiesces, storming down the stairs. Within a minute, the phone rings, and June asks if I can watch her class while she is down at the office. She returns 15 minutes later and declares that this was one of the more satisfying disciplinary experiences she has had with the administration—she was totally supported, and the student was suspended.

That afternoon at the action research meeting, June reads a work expressing her frustrations with her class. After finishing, she says that she realizes “control” has been at the root of her management problems. “I am not going to give up,” she announces.

It is November 20, days before Thanksgiving, and minutes before the next action research meeting scheduled in June’s room. Before the rest of the teachers arrive, June says, “I have something to tell you. I just gave one month’s notice.” When the last of the teachers trickle in, she makes it public—the job has been “destroying my emotional life” and it is time to leave. A particularly severe fight with her husband of three months convinced her: when loss of control carries over from your classroom into your home, and exhaustion and stress lead you to suddenly develop diabetes at age 26, it is time to give up.

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An Asian-Canadian, it was June’s upbringing in cosmopolitan Toronto that she felt prepared her for working at CPA. The city provided regular contact with people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, and heightened her interest in social justice issues. At the same time, June was also aware of the complexity of race, and how these issues manifest in education generally, and in her classroom specifically:

I’m very sensitive to race, and questions of race often come into my mind. For example, in this classroom in particular I’m very sensitive to the fact that these children have not been exposed to a lot of Asian people. To have an Asian teacher is a very new experience for a lot of them . . . and they’re probably dealing with some questions in their mind as well. But I think we’re both learning from each other as we interact and a lot of misconceptions or stereotypes are being broken down . . . [growing up in Toronto] doesn’t make me automatically tolerant of everyone in every situation.

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It just makes me aware that culture is a very complicated thing, especially in the classroom. It manifests itself in many different ways.

During this early-October interview, June shared that one of the ways she felt culture was persistently manifesting itself in her advisory was in perception of “the noise level.” She explained, “I come from a quieter culture where generally people don’t speak in really loud tones of voice on a consistent basis.” Although aware that prior experiences and identity were at play in her having difficulties adjusting to her students “speaking very loudly and joking around and really moving around a lot,” this cultural clash in communicative styles would become increasingly predominant in June’s snowballing pessimistic CPA outlook.

Her perceived culture clash with students was evident in two reflections June created before she left the school. In the first (10/11/01), she drew a picture—in the middle of the page is a mass of student words in an ominous and threatening shape: *Get out of my face! Your mama! Get out my chair! Shut up!* A very faint student comment is shaded into the corner—“Will y’ all be quiet”—but is overpowered by the rest of the class’ words. In the bottom right corner is a self-portrait of June, hands to her temples, eyes closed, looking down. There are words emanating from her figure as well—*Get to work, Please listen, Use your time wisely, That is disrespectful, I need your attention*. But these words are being pushed sideways—back at June—by the larger mass of student words that dominate the drawing.

In addition to the culture clash impacting June’s experiencing of her own students, it was also evident in how she experienced the administration. Although many of the teachers at different times lamented CPA’s structural issues, for June, the lack of organization and clarity was particularly stressful. She directly connected what she termed “a lack of governance” to her feeling:

anxious . . . it makes it more difficult for me to feel like there’s a sense of calm in the structuring of the program because a lot of things just happen very quickly and I really have to change gears very fast in order to keep up. So I find that a little anxiety-provoking and somewhat tiring.

As with her students, the erratic volume and pace of CPA as a school was something she was unfamiliar with, and thus, created discomfort on a daily basis. Suddenly, June was driving without directions on an unknown road with someone periodically knocking her foot off the clutch, and her students simultaneously trying their hands at the wheel. “Changing gears” to keep pace and move forward down the road of educational change did not only provoke anxiety—it seemed impossible.

In early October, June also emphasized how time and space—to be calm and reflect—would be essential for her to learn how to become an expert at the CPA model, and develop as a professional. These elements, however, seemed largely absent at CPA, which June attributed to the excessive “freedom” teachers had to create curriculum and structure the school:

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... the irony of that is those extra responsibilities are adding to the stress and adding to the load that does not allow us the space to pursue what we would really like to do. . . . I want a space where I could reflect and get some feedback . . . I really want to be part of a group where we are really doing some thinking and sharing about our teaching. Right now our team meetings are very items-oriented.

Despite difficulties with her students and the administration, one month into the school year June summed up her CPA life as “fascinating” and “an invaluable experience,” though also so tiring that she often felt “in over her head.”

At the end of November, after she had handed in notice but was still teaching, I again interviewed June. As before, she again spoke of the culture clash between her and her students: “. . . disrespecting and being insubordinate [to the teacher] goes on on a daily basis and to me I don’t feel safe with that kind of behavior being allowed and continuing in my class.” She again focused on how “informal decision making” and “no clear division of responsibilities” caused her stress and led to over-competitiveness amongst the staff.

At the same time, June said she was sad to leave her students whom she was “attached to despite the daily reprimands.” And she praised her colleagues for doing “amazingly well considering how little we had,” singling out the three returning teachers from the school’s first year whom she called “phenomenal” and filled with “a lot of stamina.”

Perhaps most surprisingly, June said that more than anything else she was leaving with the notion that the charter school’s model works and that “It’s good to see that theory—that everyone wants to and can learn—kind of proven in my classroom.” She added that she believes in the model so strongly that when she goes back into teaching, it would need to be in a school with similar progressive learning ideals. The problem, she said, was in lack of preparation to implement the model—not the model itself.

June: Analysis

June’s story represents several common features of the collective CPA teacher experience. She entered with a strong vision of educating for social justice, but encountered a series of impediments to that vision—cultural dissonance, emotional exhaustion, and lack of support structures. Further, because CPA meetings were predominantly “items-oriented” rather than a space to “reflect and get feedback,” June’s stresses accumulated and negatively impacted her teaching, health, and even her marriage. Although June was conceptually aligned with the mission of the charter school, she left before the Winter Break.

Julie: Testing Faith, Body, Careers

In August 2001, I had heard that someone named Julie was transitioning from being a CPA board member to being a CPA advisor. I was introduced to Julie shortly

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before I spoke to the staff about participation in the action research group. Later that day, Julie showed interest, and that night, wrote the following e-mail (08/20/01):

Jay—Thanks for your ideas and presence. It helps both calm and enrich the chaotic CPA experience to think that there could be reflection time in there. I’m pretty tempted, even though I’m assuming that as a first-yr advisor I’ll be already in over my head. But I’ve spent years helping consulting clients envision reflective action research as the professional development they want/need. I think it may be like parenting—stop trying to be rational and leap on in; you’ll figure out “HOW” on the job, so to speak.

Julie considered “leaping in” to join the group as part of an overall life effort to be less rational, which included her decision to become a teacher at the 2nd year charter school. Despite misgivings about limited time and energy, two days later Julie officially joined the action research group, hoping it would be a vehicle to collaborate with colleagues, as well as get one-on-one coaching. Putting her rational side aside—temporarily—she leapt.

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It was January 22, and I hadn’t heard anything from Julie since late November when I saw her outside her classroom on her last day. Her words were sparse that afternoon: “I don’t know if you’ve heard.” I told her I had, and then she added, “Best of luck with your project,” shaking my hand, then heading in to her classroom for one of the last times. Now nearly two months later, Julie was rarely mentioned by the other teachers—and when she was, it was always in the past tense. In months she had gone from being a board member to being an advisor to disappearing.

Around mid-day, Principal John asked me to attend a meeting later that afternoon—a committee called The Projects Group was forming to help develop CPA’s local assessments, and he thought I could be of some help. Minutes before the meeting, I saw a familiar figure in the halls. It was a woman, with large glasses, and notable grayish-white hair. When she came closer, I was surprised to see Julie.

Back in November, Julie had quit CPA in deep despair. She had given early and dramatic warnings during her two months teaching: “If I don’t have a structured reflection group like the one you’re offering I will get buried.” But as a teacher she could not be saved. Now, like Lazarus, she had risen, summoned to offer support to those she had just left behind. For the next several months, she would lead The Projects Group as an educational consultant—with more than 10 years of consulting experience, a more familiar position to her than teacher—working to bring together intellectual rigor and individual engagement. What she could not do as teacher, she was determined to do through more familiar means.

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Despite years leading others in education, and a deep belief in the CPA model, Julie ultimately decided that “I just didn’t have the classroom management skills to get the social dynamics under control, so, I could get less and less attention on

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learning.” Further, she realized later that she “couldn’t tolerate my own failure” as a teacher after years of “making systems sing around me” in so many other leadership roles. The feelings of failure, she said, often made her stomach hurt and gave her continual pain “in my bones.” About half way through her CPA teaching, Julie developed additional health complications, including numb fingers, curling of the toes, temporary paralysis in both arms, and the auto-immune disease rheumatoid arthritis. Julie later explained that it was as if her body was rejecting her chosen path, leading her elsewhere.

Moving back into the consulting role she was more familiar with and unable to incorporate into her teaching, Julie returned to CPA to lead a successful charge vitalizing the school’s assessment system. It was her way to complete the mission she had begun years earlier, to better assure that learning was taking place within CPA’s progressive learning model. Though with a far more grounded perspective, Julie still believed strongly that the model would work—with the right resources and systems in place for teachers.

Julie: Analysis

Like June, Julie also entered CPA with strong ties to social justice movements—and very high standards for herself. Also similarly, Julie longed for “structured reflection” to help her process the difficulties associated with realizing such visions at the classroom level working with students at a new school. Without such structures in place at the start-up charter, her health deteriorated as well and she quit as a teacher. Julie’s story also represents how “faith” was important to the teachers at CPA. At times, believing in the charter school took on a spiritual dimension as often the reality of daily school life was so different from the school mission that continuing on required “a leap of faith.” The importance of faith (religious and secular) was mentioned by several CPA teachers as a significant part of their experience, and will be further explored in the next case study.

Colleen: Daffodil Dreams & Earthly Pains

Colleen has some words of wisdom at the end of the second action research meeting. Susan, a younger teacher, is distraught and admits to Colleen that she doubts whether her visions of social justice can be achieved through her work at CPA. Colleen tells her it is good to hold on to the “grand passion” but that working in schools like CPA is “where the rubber hits the road.” Colleen adds that the kids at CPA are better than in many of the Catholic schools she has worked in, and as if to punctuate the point, quotes her “favorite line of biblical text” in service of the CPA argument.

Two months later, it is Colleen herself who needs the “inside reach” of spiritual inspiration and faith to continue her belief in CPA. In a written piece she shares with the group, Colleen explores her struggle to stay hopeful:

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My dear friend *told* me (she’s not very subtle) to go to my core, which is my relationship with God. This is where I would find the answers and directions. And of course she was right. . . . As I calm myself down, find my “still point,” I am able to see more clearly. I am not as frenetic and I can sort out what I really value and want to pass on to my students. So I begin each morning at home with very gentle, quieting music . . . I pray and do my own personal Reiki.

In this state of growing calm, I am able to see the “small picture.” I am able to see the needs of individual students. . . . Almost all Biblical and Spiritual writing deals with what we claim as our philosophy: One Child At A Time . . . *God rejoices not because all the hungry are fed* nor because all the homeless have found shelter. No, God rejoices because one who was lost was found, one who had wandered away has come home.

It is not an easy task that we face. We must look at big pictures and little pictures, rules and reasons. But I firmly believe if we work together, using each other’s strengths, we can fulfill the mission and philosophy of this school.

Drawing from her spiritual base, Colleen reinterprets the CPA model through multiple stained-glass lenses, aligning the principles of the school with spiritual texts. By going to her core (faith) and referencing more time-tested statements of philosophy (The Bible), Colleen transcends the CPA “one student at a time” model in order to come back to a point of insight where she can see her own students “one child at a time.” In order to truly help these students, Colleen knows that she must be disciplined, still, and calm enough to find her own way home when feeling “frenetic” and lost amidst “all the chaos and lack of discipline.”

In mid January—just before Colleen’s body would, for two months, undercut her spirit—she sent an email, a forwarded spiritual allegory, called “The Daffodil Principle.” In it, weary travelers come upon a garden of 50,000 daffodils cared for by just one woman, who planted them:

one at a time . . . just planting one bulb at a time, year after year, had changed the world. . . . The principle her daffodil garden taught is one of the greatest principles of celebration. That is, learning to move toward our goals and desires one step at a time—often one baby-step at a time—and learning to love the doing, learning to use the accumulation of time. When we multiply tiny pieces of time with small increments of daily effort, we too will find we can accomplish magnificent things. We can change the world.

Colleen had prefaced the allegory with the question, “Isn’t this what we are trying to do?” For Colleen, the fable re-taught a lesson she needed to be reminded of amidst CPA’s attempts to make large-scale changes with few immediate tangible signs of success. That, like the daffodil woman’s literal 40-year changing of the earth, she needed to embrace the small, slow blessings of education reform. That patience was the key to change, and that time and effort not only add up to progress, but multiply its magnificence. That although success may not appear in the immediate test score, essay, or exhibition, “learning to love the doing” of teaching in a dynamic and chaotic atmosphere was the bulb of change itself.

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Yet even as Colleen’s consciousness rose to transcend many of the stresses of her CPA work, her body, worn from prior ailments and current exhaustion, began to give out. With arthritis, screws in her back, and increasing nerve pain in her back and legs (also causing a lack of sleep), mid-year she said she felt like a “creature who walks around in a perpetual fog.” More than anything, she was frustrated by the ways her condition hindered her ability to be the teacher-learner-gardener-change agent she visualized.

At the end of the year, she wrote, “I think I want a new body” and commented “I did not know how much stress, strain, and pressure working here was going to take.” But, notably, Colleen’s spirit was still willing, and she did not want a new school—making her one of the few teachers to return to CPA for another year.

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Even while at home recovering from her knee operation, Colleen tried to stay motivated about her action research. In late March, she wrote from home to update the group, “I’m having such fun! In searching project-based education I’ve found over 52,000 sites listed. I’ve explored 2 of them and have found some very useful information. I’m going to continue to search and formulate my survey/discussion with the students from this.” However, although in early June she presented several tentative conclusions to her colleagues about balancing individualized project learning and whole-class instruction, due to her health and a lack of time, the work was not completed to her satisfaction. She explained, “If I hadn’t felt so overwhelmed by all I had to do I could have made this more valuable for me. Because I love to read and I love to read professional stuff, but the time I had to read—I’m in bed by eight o’clock every night.”

Late in the year, Colleen had an additional setback—an explosive confrontation with her colleague Laura. According to Laura (04/30/02), after a discussion at our action research meeting about negotiating salaries, Colleen went up to her and said, “If you’re getting more money than me, we’re going to have a problem.” Colleen then asked Laura how much she asked for, and when Laura told her, and it was significantly more than Colleen had asked for, Laura said “[Colleen] went nuts. . . . She had a look in her eye. It was scary.” The next day, Laura said that the two made their peace. Laura said she had asked Colleen, “What’s happening to us here? What’s becoming of us? What is this place doing to us? Where is the love? Where is the peace?”

* * * *

Running
Faster
Spinning
how do I gain control
running
will I gain control
spinning

“Every Day I Spin These Plates”

will I gain control
spinning
when do we learn sentences
running
or paragraphs
faster
how do I get a grip on them
spinning
on me
spinning
so much creativity
so little time
so little creating
so little time
...
so much I want to give
slow down
no structure in which to give it
slow down
no time in which to provide it
slow down
become myself
slow down
retain my own integrity
...
s l o w d o w n
s l o w d o w n
REST

As indicated in her poem, for Colleen, getting “a grip” on her students ran concurrently with getting a grip on herself. This would require working to make the fast slow, to give structure to the spinning creativity in order to create. And it would begin very concretely—because Colleen had faith that if you could structure a sentence, then perhaps you could structure a paragraph, a mind, a life, a school.

Colleen: Analysis

Colleen was one of only 7 of the 18 educators (39%) that began at CPA for year two and returned for year three. Like many others at the charter school, she fought hard to maintain her deep passion amidst physical and mental exhaustion. Colleen was troubled by the pace of CPA’s changes without tangible signs of success for the school or for herself. She continually looked for places to “rest” and to count the small successes in order to gain the strength to move forward with her teaching. Her blow-up with Laura symbolized the in-fighting that occurred when CPA teachers heard what others were offered for salaries, or found themselves competing for administrative positions and other forms of validation. This “over-competitive-

ness,” as June had described it, reduced a sense of collegiality during transitional times when collegial support was most needed.

Susan: The Philosophy of Time Well Spent

Susan, one of only three returning advisors from CPA’s first year, thought that this year might be better. With one year’s experience, many new colleagues to bond with, and additional administrators to diffuse Principal John (often her perceived nemesis, although they were both dedicated to the school’s success), she had hoped that she might be able to maintain a positive outlook and achieve her visions of equity through her CPA work. Instead, she is conflicted—between educational idealism and the reality of schools, as well as family obligations and her intense and demanding relationships with each of her students. Instead of feeling more effective in year two—increasingly physically sick and emotionally despondent—she can’t seem to spin all the plates.

It is early June, and Susan stands in front of her colleagues for one of the last times to present her action research findings. Before detailing her more formal analysis of how group work can fit within CPA’s individualized learning model—she begins with the poem “Plates” (excerpts below):

Every day I spin these plates,
16 of them total,
VB to CW,
Alphabetically speaking.
...
For five minutes today you were interested in time travel, but at the time I was all at once
finding a book for P, proofreading N’s paper, warning J not to call
V “burnt biscuit,” eliminating the use of internet porn sights, and answering a phone call.
...
Today I am exhausted with my resolve to push at the heaviest plate and set it, if not
spinning, then at least into a hiccup of motion
...
Every day I spin these plates,
Every day my fingers brush the china surfaces of time travel, genetics, music history,
dance, basketball, the justice system, and western biographies.
...
I breathe out all of my breath in a gust of wind, in hopes that belief and spirit alone can
keep them going.
I skim three, maybe six, and while I do so, five more clatter.
I repair every crack like new,
And wonder how the glue will hold.

The poem illustrates that for Susan (the teacher) imperfect realities of classroom life dictate an environment where she cannot effectively reach and teach all her students—their individualized needs are too great, their interests too diverse, and

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CPA’s supports are too sparse. For Susan (the revolutionary) this is unacceptable—these are exactly the kids she should be reaching, teaching, and whose lives she must transform. It frustrates Susan to engage in work so “exhausting” only to “skim” and “brush the china surfaces”—her efforts adding up to far less than an organized movement for change. “Belief” and “spirit” come up against the “clatter” of failure, and doubt sets in. Susan is the “glue” that often repairs her students’ lives when the plates fall—and she is beginning to wonder if she will hold.

On the surface, Susan’s story looks like one that has been written repeatedly in schools—particularly urban schools: Young, creative, idealistic college student, wants to change the world upon graduation, becomes a teacher, expectations don’t meet reality, becomes jaded, worn down, and quits in less than 3 years. But the failures of the Susan-CPA relationship also speak to larger questions—How can individuals and organizations with the same global goals become a bad fit? How can talented, well-intentioned people with the same visions become adversaries? And why does the future of school change so often become snuffed out before it even has had a chance to begin?

Feeling more thwarted than inspired by CPA in her second year, Susan turned her visions of social justice—originally intended to be used in service of CPA—to challenge CPA. She became the agitator, the thorn in the administration’s side, the questioner of school policy, and personally, very dissatisfied.

* * * *

Susan remembers her Spring 2000 CPA interview clearly. The charter school was exactly the kind she was looking for—a place where teaching and community would go hand in hand—and she let the interviewing committee know this:

I was like, “I just want to thank you guys for starting this school because I really believe in it. And I want tell you guys good luck, and if you don’t hire me I’m going to do this somewhere else. So, you know, good luck.”

Thinking she had found the right place to work, Susan began her CPA career in July 2000 with enthusiasm. However, quickly, Susan’s visions were tempered by the reality that in the milieu of organizing a school, it was difficult for even seven people to agree upon a common manifestation of a model for learning:

. . . and the first year that I worked here I was expecting to be working with people that were so excited about social change . . . and not that people aren’t. But it was like there was no time that we were ever together in a way that wasn’t like working or meeting . . . and we always just headed our separate ways . . . I really wanted an opportunity to talk with people about things I was really passionate about.

Longing for community within and beyond CPA, Susan returned for a second year with both cynicism and hope. The question of whether to continue her CPA work was not just one she asked herself, but also one her family and peers asked of her. While many of Susan’s friends taught in more affluent city suburbs like Apple Park

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where she grew up, Susan rejected the lack of “diversity” in her hometown, at different times volunteering for hunger and homeless organizations to be connected to people she saw as more “real.” She would frequently explain to others how she was needed at CPA:

I just feel like anybody could teach kids in Apple Park. Like, you walk in the room and everybody’s quiet and everybody’s already set up. So I’m not really needed there.

The excitement in starting something new—a charter school dedicated to uplifting disenfranchised youth—brought Susan to CPA. And enough hope remained so that Susan returned for another year. Yet by October of year two, Susan’s discontent was already growing as she was torn between fighting for social justice and fighting for her students—battles being fought on two fields much further apart than she had anticipated. In a poem she shares with the action group, her growing despair and disappointment in the roles she is embodying is evident (10/11/01, excerpts below):

When I grew up, I didn’t want to be a doctor or a lawyer,
I wanted to be a revolutionary
And watch the world change with my handiwork.
I wanted to fight for social justice,
Leading the campfires and gatherers in “We Shall Overcome,”
And knowing the music to be true.
My clumsy childhood visions were crayoned with people in soup lines
Reaching out for me,
Or a hundred rough and tumble children sharing my home.

When I did grow up, I thought I’d found the means to this end,
And I dressed each morning with careless loss of sleep,
Too hurried to pause to eat, although frantic with hunger.
I watched myself trying to catch up to myself,
Knowing I am never satisfied,
That I always knew I’d be this way.

When I grew up, I didn’t dream that I would sift through pencil ends and loose-leaf fringe,
Looking, always looking,
And force-feed a backpack that seemed to outweigh me . . .

Now that I’m grown up, I struggle to be home on time tomorrow.
But today there is a piece I might fix,
So the next day I won’t go home crying.
Now that I’m grown up I stare out on the Saturdays
Unable to divorce my thoughts from my weekday mission,
My hands always too empty on Monday . . .

Stomach aching as I raise my voice . . .
Now and then, I am delighted by the child who no longer smashes fists into tables,
But instead smiles after my every attention . . .

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I count off those who aren't learning, and run out of fingers. . .

Now I am grown, and I wonder if it is written for me
To march in these walls, my voice muffled in these hallways,
If my battle for a broken computer, more dry erase markers, or silence during reading time
Will ever be the fight I prepared for
When I grew up

In this piece, Susan traces the fall from youthful dreams written in crayon for a future time “when I grew up” to doubtful current dreams that may not be written at all “now that I’m grown.” The poem shows how Susan’s spirit is repeatedly beaten down by material conditions—being hungry, tired, and achy; feeling bombarded with educational appendages like pencil dust and paper fringe; lacking the needed supplies to succeed, like computers and markers. As perceived failures mount, Susan feels increasingly inadequate—“running out of fingers” to count the students she is not reaching, her voice “muffled” and impotent within CPA’s hallways. Where once she thought she would sing “We Shall Overcome” and change the world, now she can barely be heard in her own classroom and is often too tired to even make it to school.

* * * *

Susan is having a hard time telling her students she is leaving. They keep talking to her about what they will do together next year, and Susan is not correcting them. She is being ambiguous because she feels ambiguous. Working at CPA, and being so connected to students, has hardened mixed emotions:

. . . I always tell people that it’s more hours, but it’s more rewarding because you have 16 kids as opposed to 100 kids, like if you were teaching in another school. But you’re more accountable to those 16 kids. And you really get to know your kids and that’s like a double-edged thing because you really get to know them, but that means that it really hurts you when, you know, someone gets shot up in their neighborhood . . .

As Susan has been continually conflicted in working at CPA, she is just as conflicted in leaving, adding, “I feel like I’m not just leaving a job. I’m feeling like I’m leaving a relationship with a family I have.”

Even after deciding in April to stay for the rest of the year but to not return for year three, she still questioned her decision to leave those she had grown so close to and therefore both cared and worried about. In early May, she e-mailed “Sometimes I really wish that I was going to be an advisor again next year, but I know I want to do something else.” In June, she said she was both “sad” and “at peace” about her decision to leave. Although there were times where she was tempted to “go tell John that I want to come back,” she added, “God keeps just sending me these signs about why I shouldn’t be here next year.”

Ultimately, she saw her conflicted-ness as a good thing—a sign that she still cared about her revolution up until the day she would take it elsewhere. Before she

left, Susan stopped to count her successes—that she had formed and strengthened several CPA-community organization relationships, recruited successful current staff members, and intervened on behalf of several students' academic careers and lives—students others had given up on.

“So it is possible to make a difference,” Susan realized, and then, left to find another site for her handiwork.

Susan: Analysis

On paper, there is no reason why Susan should not have had a long and satisfying career working at CPA. Philosophically, she was aligned with the charter school; and she had the desire and passion to be part of creating something fundamentally different and positive for The City's students. But this “revolutionary” teacher in a revolutionary school could not avoid the pitfalls that befell her colleagues—deteriorating health, feelings of inadequacy, an increasingly pessimistic outlook, and perceived lack of validation from the administration for her hard work. Gradually, Susan's “belief” and “spirit” became worn down, and she decided that CPA was not the place to be part of a change effort—and she left after only two years.

Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion:

What Does CPA Teacher Lived Experience Tell Us About Charter Schools?

CPA was a school initiated with high ideals driven by intense ambition. In order to survive, the school needed to market itself to several constituencies: (1) parents (for enrollment and residual dollars); (2) the county (for charter renewal); (3) the state (for exemptions from some state exams in lieu of local assessments); (4) foundations and funders (for additional resources); and (5) teachers (in order to actualize the ideals for students on a daily basis). This type of marketing is often embraced by charter school founders who initiate new schools under the free-market principles of choice and competition.

However, as this study illustrates, while choice and competition may lure teachers to a charter school – these business-world facets of school life are often not enough to sustain teachers long-term. At CPA, teachers were enticed to work at the school with promises of being part of creating a new school focused on correcting social inequities in The City. Because CPA administrators were so focused on marketing the school's vision, they did not pay close enough attention to what made actualizing that vision difficult during the first two years: lack of curriculum, materials, time, and relational support structures.

Driven by high ideals, CPA teachers also held very high standards for themselves. For many, what was most important was not the school's image at the county or state level but how well things were going in their own classrooms. This is typical of how perceptions of instructional competence impact teacher self-worth (Evans, 1996). CPA teachers faced increasing difficulties—with students, parents, and each

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other – and needed a space to talk about, process, and problem-solve related to the struggles inherent in bridging educational ideals and reality.

Yet two charter-related features of the school hindered teachers in their attempts to articulate concerns in constructive ways. First, because salary and administrative positions were negotiable rather than scheduled, most teachers did not want to risk the loss of status and opportunity associated with admitting that they were not always successful. While the literary action research group provided some space for teachers to vocalize their concerns, only a subset of the staff was part of the group; and even for these teachers, the group was only a (relatively small) part of their overall CPA experience. Secondly, because of the pervasive marketing of and within the school, CPA administrators either ignored teacher concerns or associated teacher problems with deficiencies in the teacher. While teacher resistance could have been seen as an opportunity for learning about what was and was not working (see Silin & Schwartz, 2003), instead teachers felt like such talk was taboo.

But not talking about the difficulties did not make them disappear. June longed for “a sense of calm” and “thinking and sharing about our teaching,” and would have likely benefited from a sanctioned space to talk about cultural dissonance. Julie as well wanted “a structured reflection group” to help her deal with the social dynamics of classroom life, and might have had some of her anxieties alleviated by hearing other teachers talk about perceived failures. Colleen longed for time to think about and learn from her UPA experiences, but because she was “overwhelmed” could only “have fun” with such learning when she was at home recuperating from an operation. Susan, as well, wanted “an opportunity to talk with people about things I was passionate about,” but instead gradually became worn down by a perceived lack of collegial and administrative support, losing her passion and ultimately leaving her students.

With the stresses these teachers faced being internalized, the “freedoms” associated with CPA as a charter school—opportunities to create curriculum and assessments, take on administrative roles, and negotiate salary—became burdens. Visions of social justice turned to deeply pessimistic outlooks. High standards for one’s own teaching went unfulfilled. And, most notably, with few places to share and work through these concerns, stresses accumulated and teachers became emotionally and physically despondent. An illustrative example of this is a teacher who had the letters “I W N Q B J” taped to the top of her desk, reminding herself that “I Will Not Quit Before June.” Some teachers, however, did leave CPA mid-year; others left at the end of the year. And the few who returned for the following year did so with trepidation and skepticism. Recent research suggests that such high levels of teacher attrition may significantly impact the long-term success of reforms within educational organizations (see Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Harrell et al, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). At CPA, Susan called this debilitating phenomenon “a constant re-learning of kids.”

The health issues that the case study teachers faced—which they said devel-

oped or were exacerbated during their time at CPA—were notable and also representative of the larger staff experience. As the year progressed, teachers were increasingly absent (perhaps explaining why parents were often used as substitutes). I was told several times that teachers who were frequently out of the building were “being tested” for ailments. Some of these illnesses, like diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis, have been identified by the National Institute for Health as being caused by chronic stress. Thus, in developing theories of teachers and charter schools, it may be important to look at what might have a negative impact on teacher physical health. While this phenomenon is pervasive in schools more generally, it may be exacerbated for charter teachers for whom there are often fewer support structures in place, greater demands out of one’s comfort zone, and additional pressures to succeed quickly.

Another lesson learned from this study is that some aspects of the free-market economy—like competition and marketing—may not seamlessly map on to charter schools and teachers to whom community, cooperation, and competence are professionally and personally vital. An implication for organizational practice is that charter schools may need to balance the drives to innovate and promote positive images with the needs of educators who work most closely with students. Charter schools may benefit from initiating structures that include re-envisioning missions based on teacher concerns, providing time for teachers to integrate and learn from changes at a measured pace, and sanctioning regular spaces for teachers to share concerns, anxieties, and difficulties.

Conclusions

Through paying close attention to teacher lived experience of charter school work via a series of case studies, this research found that teachers do not always benefit from charter policies, even when they are the intended beneficiaries. Without the proper support structures in place to discuss the difficulties of starting a new school, teachers may feel more anxious than free, and more tired than inspired. In this study, many teachers chose to exit the charter school enterprise which had once seemed like a professional opportunity of a lifetime. Such high rates of attrition inevitably weaken school reform efforts, with teachers needing to constantly re-learn the school, staff, and the students they ultimately seek to serve.

If charter schools are to actualize their intended benefits for students—many of whom are disenfranchised youth in urban areas—teacher supports will need to be part of school plans. And, sometimes, these plans will need to plan for the worst in order to charter a course through the challenges of school change. This more tempered approach may seem somewhat contradictory to charter founders, who often create new schools in an effort to “break the mold” (see Hatch, 2000) of traditional public schooling. But, as this study illustrates, because teacher lived experience is often incongruent with policy ideals, sharing, discussing, and

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collaborating around the challenges of educational change may be the best way to further school reforms in the long run.

Meanwhile, while the market ideology embedded in charter schools offers teachers significant opportunities—the choice to become a charter teacher also comes with great professional and personal risk.

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