

## TEACHERS AS DECISION MAKERS: NARRATIVES OF POWER IN AN ERA OF STANDARDS

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### Introduction

What important things can be taught and learned in schools that will endure? This question is one rarely asked in our schools today—or when answered it relates to testing. We hope to explore the idea of what happens when a teacher's curricular choices run counter to those ideas and habits put forth by schools and others involved in children's schooling. As John Dewey reminds us, renewing self and community best occurs in a democratic society—where justice and caring are central. These ideas only occur in schools where the central figures who are teachers shape, foster, and enrich those lives which they are entrusted with by parents. These teachers' success and promise is to expose children to a multitude of experiences that will help shape their life story and one day enact those democratic ideals in everyday practice when they chose to vote, raise a child, live within a neighborhood, attend or not religious services, and mostly, when they are asked to judge themselves as democratic citizens. Regardless of one's background, place, or economic reality, the successful attainment of skills and fundamentals only occurs when the intellectual and emotional growth of that individual is respected, cared for, and enhanced—this occurring only when the dedication, caring, talent, and intelligence of the teacher is allowed to flourish.

In this article, with parents' blessings, we meet teachers in the Pittsburgh area, who tired of losing precious learning opportunities to those peripherals of NCLB decided to provide their students learning experiences where curriculum became a living shape; created by children, teachers, and parents; rather than an static set of policies. In our chapter, we retell short narratives from teachers who decided to

subvert the autocratic school curriculum in Pennsylvania. We met these teachers through what seemed like an endless web of underground connections with unique and yet similar stories of resistance. After a short conversation with a teacher and our amazement at her dilemma, she introduced us to another, who was inspired by another, and who then opened her house to us and other teachers who for what seemed like hours told us stories about resistance. The teacher narratives criticize the appropriation of progressive language by the teacher education and the state that seek to de-legitimize teachers, students, and communities.

### A Background to NCLB

The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 spawned and emboldened newly enacted federal/state policy, which in turn unintentionally, legitimized and birthed reform movements that razed the core teachers created between community, school, and individuals. It is our responsibility to begin to revalue those educational meanings that are important to recover our sense of meaning in education. When we engage in human inquiry, we must seek to enhance meanings. When we engage in education we want to problematize meanings and values under which learning has occurred. Due to the pressure exerted by the state government, the 80 something school districts that surround the city of Pittsburgh have become embroiled in preparing standardized curriculum and assessment that does not value the richness and possibilities of diversity. Schools are being forced to make a choice between addressing learning diversity and raising test scores. As we begin to deal with the changing landscapes education, it is a

requisite that issues of sustained access to equitable education be opened for the thousands whose life experiences occur within our cities. In the last year alone, the state of Pennsylvania has proposed two new tests (one for promotion and one to exit high schools). Concurrently, the Pittsburgh Public Schools (the area's largest) have hired consultants to help raise their test scores at a cost of \$10 million annually. In fact, according to the Pennsylvania Treasury Department (which tracks public contracts) the Pittsburgh Area Schools have over 200 registered consultants with over \$30 million in contracts (<http://contracts.patreasury.org/>). This does not included the amount the state has invested into testing or testing related programs (double that amount in Western Pennsylvania).

The growth in the consulting industry has led school districts to no longer look to its community for help. In an area when the average school district has around 400 students and the tax rates (along with tax dollars) are intimately tied to community, it is ironic that the school districts are looking outward rather than inward. What we find in Pennsylvania is that students' and teachers' questions are ignored, dismissed, and perhaps not even given a space to form, in order to conform and perform unencumbered exchange and consumption in classrooms. In elementary schools, curriculum too often exists in forms wholly divorced from time, place, and people, as self-contained entities that can be captured and represented in pre-specified activities, competencies, and indicators. The particularities of individuals and teaching/learning situations are ignored so that "learning is to be somewhat mutated to learning how not to be" (SIDORKIN, 2001, p. 49).

In disregarding this identity, we ask students to relinquish their humanity inside their schools. We argue that *No Child Left Behind* and the new policies in schools have appropriated progressive language to delegitimize teachers, students, and communities. The narratives that follow emphasize the social aspect of education, see it as a force that shapes the space we call school, and the ability of that public space to represent the needs and desires of its constituents, tackling the essential foundations driving progressive education;

seeing and living in the intersections between democracy, freedom, learning, and ownership indispensable to a modern civil state.

### Narratives of Power

We hope to address a unique aspect of public education that has been "reformed" by policy and how the curriculum maker (teachers) has to respond. Schools must embrace the idea of how to include after-school and community outreach programs; helping integrate young learners into our community. Teachers should also understand that politics and economics drive schooling. Education has to be among the highest priority human needs for a number of reasons, including the empowerment of people to change their life situations, the enhancement of national economic growth, and the promotion of sustainable development. For these reasons, schools need to be seen as "communities" and not merely buildings where state standards are passed down. If we begin to treat our schools as communities, we need to adopt principles of early outreach to our communities and children; relationship between scholarship and communities' needs; and emphasizing teachers as community leaders. As Jackson (1969) and McLaren (1998) explore in their groundbreaking studies; school culture is the struggle for identity experienced not in classroom practice but in everyday moments of fragmented complexity, re-imagined and relived alongside the classroom experiences. The undergirding foundation of a democracy should lay in its democratic institutions, of which schools should be central (DEWEY, 1916).

### Organization of Narratives

Grumet (1988) has described narratives as "masks through which we can be seen," a potential fabrication. Personal interests always dominate re-telling. When we met with these four teachers, after endless meetings, stories, and connections, we decided to let them listen to the tapes of other and their narratives—to preserve their words, we used *italics*. When then asked them to tell us about what they were doing to address NCLB and state standards they felt did not help children. We

must remember that in narratives, human beings are limited by the boundaries of social and linguistic rules/practices. Also, we are victims of our own memories, whether we romanticized the memorable and repress the terrible, memory is how we deal with our reality. Memory plays a critical role in uniting our fractured identity and can build bridges to create common interpretations among groups of people. In providing this space to the voice and thoughts of real people who are living and dealing with real issues in a bad economy with the pervading threat of cutbacks and layoffs, we understand that the impact of their words are enhanced by our own desires to see those working within oppressive conditions to become as liberated as we are in our universities. Thus, narratives in this sense are a window into the world of teachers who attempt to do the moral part of their work in light of the amoral aspect of their schools. Thus, the retelling of these conversations is an attempt to recount the hours spent during one night discussing what it meant to teach.

#### Alfred: Diversity in the Test

Alfred, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who teaches World History, struggled everyday to teach diversity to his students. Although he is charged with opening their eyes to Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Pacific, Atlantic, and other worldly cultures that we hardly study in schools, he is also responsible for increasing the writing scores of his students. Although frustrated by his colleagues, who he believes have given up, Alfred, still struggles to increase cultural awareness of his almost 95% White students to the diversity that is around them. Alfred's school district is surrounded by three predominantly African-American school districts. Although, his district is well off financially, the reality surrounding his students is lost on them since they have "no need to go to those places." *It was interesting, very interesting . . . obviously that was quite a bit of solitude, didn't really have the regular exchange between the other teachers, I mean I was the only black there . . . so not a whole lot of conversation, a lot of time to think and listen and do whatever you were going to do . . . and just figure out what kind of games were going on next. Teachers, students . . . the whole nine yards . . . I remember when I first got to ask if I could coach*

*football . . . because I had done it in one school in the same district to this school . . . I wanted to teach World History but I was seen as the Coach. . . and I cannot imagine being reduced to just that. I decided to create historical autobiographies. I could use materials to enrich the curriculum, what those were, that the rule was not on the books . . . it was just verbally stated to me . . . and I cannot imagine that they would have looked ahead to even develop that type of rule unless it was just a state rule . . . because, you know, you only had one white school. I decided to go to the library one day, because since I always love biographies, I figured they would to, plus I could say they were writing and I was showing them different examples. I began with this one kid who was struggling with the test and just didn't look happy, I said 'think you may be interested in this' . . . and it was a book about the first black general in the modern military, Benjamin O. Davis...and it was his autobiography . . . and he read that of course he told about all of the hard times he faced going through the academy . . . and the military . . . and I guess that really, it helped . . . it definitely helped . . . and what he got from that was "Just hang in there." In North Wood, Whites perceived that race and class were one in the same when it came to Blacks. I had the duty to act as a leader for all the Blacks these kids will ever deal with (I'm more than a football coach). I had to do something, I did not attend protests, school board meetings because, "that's what I did . . . for them" I used my influence to teach not only about diversity but to fight against the terrible injustice that testing was doing. It was like those white kids were like the black kids I worked with before. I saw that this was not about race, it was about justice. How can these white kids understand justice if they can't—sorry aren't allowed to see it. I found no companionship at school—kids wanted this in other classes. In the school, teachers did not talk to me . . . you know I was just like an object . . . I would see them and the teachers would treat me as "totally isolated." Not only in the school but fellow coaches, . . . they would tell me that they didn't know what was wrong. They were like 'why are you down here' . . . stop it . . . so it was a real hard." All I was doing was letting kids read books.*

*Yeah, my thought was that . . . I didn't look at myself as a hero or anything, but I did look at myself as "Yeah, you're stepping out there," go ahead on . . . someday we'll . . . but it was like "they left us, they are not part of us any more". . . I really didn't understand that, and it was really disheartening . . . I really didn't understand that, and I still don't to this day . . .*

*Lydia: Early Childhood and the Test*

Lydia, is a reading specialist and thirty year teaching veteran at the same small suburban school west of Pittsburgh. She has taught almost every primary grade, served as classroom reading specialists, language arts department chair and now, in addition to working as a third grade reading specialists, she serves as a quasi administrator, taking on the responsibilities of coordinating the district's slew of reading specialists, federal programs and curriculum and development. In addition to her school based responsibilities, she also teaches as an adjunct professor at a large research university – teaching primary/elementary reading methods and leadership/coaching courses for their reading specialists program. She called us recently and asked *what do you guys know about starting up preschool programs?* Her superintendent is retiring at the end of the school year. As her final accomplishment, she wants a full service preschool program in place by the start of the next year. To accomplish the task she has asked Lydia to develop the curriculum, head up the committee for interviewing and hiring of the teachers and assistants, work with the business officer to order the required furniture and materials and prepare a full scale recruitment plan for the area parents (including day and evening presentations and some home visits).

*I see this as challenge and after chatting with the superintendent I'm enthusiastic about starting the new project here. You know, after so many years of working with children and families from this community, particularly the struggling readers, the promise of working with the 3 and 4 years old in the early education setting is kind of exciting.* She relates a strong vision of *"a nurturing print and language rich environment where students play, develop imagination and curiosity, take initiative for exploration and socialize with each other"* A place where we *"also place emphasis on students' access to books and authentic academically based literacy activities (e.g., discussion, drawing, prewriting, prereading) – That would be perfect.*

Lydia, a very compliant educator (almost to a fault), is ready to take on the challenge of the next ten months of work to help her superintendent realize this (somewhat unrealistic) goal. However, the plan hit a snag last week. *I was so excited, then I got to the meeting and guess what? 'It happened, and I knew it would*

*happen. . . .'* It turned into applying for an Early Reading First (ERF) grant to support the project's funding. *I'm the federal program coordinator, and I knew first hand from Reading First funding how specific the guidelines are for curriculum and assessment.* Lydia's superintendent provided her with a list of websites focusing on testing materials for preschool programs (that are ERF compliant). In addition to a prescreening, which she clearly advocates, *students will be assessed six times throughout the academic year. An additional caveat for the testing plan is to keep the cost under \$4 a student/per year!*

The superintendent would like Lydia to research each and set up instructional teaching modules (and teacher training sessions) to align the curriculum with the focus areas of ERF legislation. Although Lydia, along with some of the experienced primary teachers are completely capable of developing systematic teaching modules and lessons (in house), the plan is to instead research publishers and canned programs for a more systematic approach to intense academic instruction. Although a real team player, our impression of our conversation is that Lydia's enthusiasm for the preschool project is diminishing. At our last conversation, we wondered about the true intention of the program – is it really to help the incoming students, increase student enrollment numbers, satisfy the conservatives on the school board or provide the superintendent with a swan song exit?? Last week, Lydia decided to retire. *I gave up, I could not fight it. I knew that the only way to not let this happen was to quit. I was the only one in the district who had the knowledge, connections, and knew how to make this happen. I rather quit than let this happen.*

### Val: Research and Testing

Val, is a first grade teacher with nine years teaching experience who was involuntarily volunteered to participate in a University professional development project focusing on early reading. *The other first grade teacher at the school participated the previous year and therefore I was next in line to complete the yearlong project* (the school has also sent in K, 2 and 3 teachers to participate each year). The federally funded project used materials from the US Department of Education focusing on the big five areas of reading (phonemic awareness,

phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency) and used the Nationals Reading Panel's findings as a framework. *I was a strong supporter of using writing workshop in the primary grades.* With the schools focus on the big five areas, supported by the University federally funded project's huge focus on the big five (with "minimal" focus on writing), *there was no time within the scripted program to continue to implement her workshop.* She felt she *decision making was slowly being stripped away* – and began to feel resentful – and considered leaving teaching. However, *one year away from a sizable jump in salary and increasing expenses—mortgage and new car—I decided to continue her writing workshop.*

*I was a vocal cheerleader for writing workshops, I modified my approach to the workshops; they changed and they became more understated. First, I did not include these "teachable moments" in my lesson plans.* Her workshops were held at various times during the day (3x a week), for a shorter period of time. She spontaneously held workshop during time blocks when she was sure there were no other professionals present (reading specialists, TSS workers). As well, she stored the students' writing folders in a crate which she kept under her desk. *Finally, I stopped posting student writing in the hall, but instead created a very small area in the classroom for this topic.* Val completed the year with the professional development project and in fact had perfect attendance. During the project, she was awarded approximately \$400 materials budget - which she promptly spent on student and professional materials to support writing workshop!

### Tess: Poverty and Testing

Tess is a kindergarten teacher at the largest urban school district in Western Pennsylvania. After 33 years in the classroom, she applied to serve her district as a reading/literacy coach. This is a role this dynamic teacher was informally assuming for many of her years while teaching the 5 year olds. After a summer long training, Tess was assigned to a new elementary school—one of the district's lowest performing. This school had a high concentration on new teachers since those with seniority frequently "bid out" of the school when opportunities were presented. Tess devised a plan to schedule her day equally with

each grade level and wanted the "come in gently" by focusing on working in the classrooms with students.

*Within the first few weeks of school, I certainly was provided access to students – as I (along with one reading specialist) administered the DIBELS test to each student in the school! During this time, I developed positive relationships with the classroom teachers – a bond of trust was positively starting to develop—it was a great experience—I thought! The new and experienced teachers began to open up their classrooms my presence. As well, we shared lunch periods together and planned a before schools teacher study group with nearly a dozen of the schools' teachers. I said, you know, it is important that this group determine to topics and materials to be read and discussed.*

By October, the principal of the school instructed Tess to *take a more data driven approach to working with the teachers. He wanted me to "teach" the teachers how to understand the DIBELS data and the instructional implications of the students' test results. He requested that I meet with the teachers and (if needed) create a series of worksheets and graphs and charts for each classroom from the student reports. (These were technology skill she did not have, which extended her work day by almost 3 hours for the remainder of the fall/winter.) Additionally, I was required to make a series of bulletin boards throughout the school (with student identifiers removed) for the school data (over) and each classroom (specifically) to monitor their improvements. He felt this would encourage the teachers and students to improve performance.* Needless to say, this type of coaching was not what the teachers, especially the newer ones, needed or wanted. The heavy focus on the data driven approach continued throughout the school year. *At the end of the year, the school, as a whole showed some improvement in student's assessment results – but not much. I emptied my library, I gave them reading materials—I sinned you guys, I gave them literature books. I decided that the only thing I could do was to do all the work, take care of reports, write it up—and just let them teach—I shared as much as I could. However, I knew that the sadness of this BS is that if I finished the reports and showed growth he would not bother the teachers. So, I killed myself.* Tess, an experienced, knowledgeable primary grade teacher spent the year learning more about technology that reading! The following year, a celebration ensued and the principal was moved to a middle school assignment and Tess was moved

to another low performing school in the district to serve as a literacy coach for grade K-6!

### Conclusions

In the narratives above, we tried to flesh out the inconsistencies between the formal curriculum as seen through standards of learning in local school districts and the informal curriculum of public schools (UHRMACHER, 1997). The informal curriculum is twofold, one is the how race is situated within teaching, how it is disseminated, and the contextual discourse that accompanies the teaching of it. Secondly and more importantly are the hidden interpretations within the teachers and students, both of schools and universities, and how they imagine what is to be learned or taught. And what role does that have on their individual views curriculum and teaching, especially when intertwined with their own personal beliefs and actions.

Teachers' interpretations become standardized as they make decisions based on both their own personal lives and the weight of standard-based testing and its impact on what is taught. Another way to look at the situation is that the changes brought about by development, the overall structural context; accentuate some groups' expectations as opposed to others. An elite (professional researchers and policy makers) shape these expectations and reinterpret sovereignty based on the uniqueness of a particular group, which assumes the character of a collective individual possessed by a single will (public education). Some individuals, like Alfred, Lydia, Val, and Tess, emerge from the collectivity as reinterpreters of the single will. The reinterpretation of the idea of sovereignty within the structures leads a group transformed into a single mindset to try to transform the social and political structure. In this state of existence is where teaching should lie. Robbing students of a unique view that helps them construct an experiential aesthetic of what freedom is counterproductive. Teachers need to make choices beyond testing scores whereby, personal experiences becomes the driving force of whether to teach. As educators, we should be concerned with the

role of public schooling. We also need to understand our students, and "draw from their own personal biographies, struggles, and attempts to understand their own contradiction in the context of the contradictions of schooling and capitalism" (TORRES, 1998, p. 142). We also should strive to help reconsider the "two educational myths of liberalism...the notion that education is a neutral activity, and that education is an apolitical activity" (142). Schools should attempt to become actively engaged in promoting social change within the educational system and the school culture itself. Race and class pervade our educational systems in terms of our use of economic and political hegemony to control the oppressed classes through the magnification of their perceived and constructed shortcomings and failures. We should strive to present schooling as a social institution. We should also understand that politics and economics drive schooling, leading to a conflict between individuals who, through the hegemony of the state superstructure, oppress individuals who do not have access to the tools of agency, mainly language and historicity. One such issue is the prevalence of state standards. Due to the pressure exerted by federal and state governments, local districts have become embroiled in preparing standardized curriculum and assessment that does not value the richness and possibilities of diversity that the teachers live in their classrooms daily.

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