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ABSTRACT

Although bound by tradition and physical location to elementary schooling, the primary grades are also considered the capstone experience of early childhood education. Primary grade teachers are required to bridge these two disparate worlds, constantly mediating, negotiating, translating, and compromising. This paper describes the experience of one such teacher, discussing how the most complex and draining conflicts she encountered arose not from a clash between the school cultures of early childhood and elementary education, as expected, but from a mismatch between her enacted primary grade curriculum and the expectations and desires of her students' parents. The teacher's educational practices, characterized by learning center-based instruction; an emphasis on developing solutions to open-ended problems; many opportunities for children to be physically active; tolerance for productive noise; the prominent presence of clay, painting easels, blocks, dramatic play areas, and dress-up clothing; and appreciation for the value of free play, were very much in keeping with the alternative Bayview School's stated mission and guidelines for practice. Initially, however, parental response was characterized by such questions as, "When do you send home the real work?" The paper concludes that the families' high socioeconomic status and parents' own experience with schooling contribute to an achievement orientation that makes parents uncomfortable, at least initially, with developmentally appropriate practice. Contains 15 references. (EV)

Enacting the Primary Grade Curriculum: Contradiction, Conflict, and Compromise

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The primary grades are in a precarious position. Though bound by tradition and physical location to elementary schooling, the primary grades are also considered the capstone experience of early childhood education: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood education as the care and schooling of children from birth through age 8 (Bredekamp 1987), and thereby includes kindergarten, first and second grade in its purview. Like the area between the two overlapping circles of a Venn diagram, the primary grades can be seen as an essential piece of elementary school as well as an essential component of early childhood education. Early childhood education and elementary education have distinctly different histories, norms, and traditions, different perspectives, expectations, and values, different standards, practices, funding sources, and school cultures: primary grade teachers are required to bridge these two disparate worlds, constantly mediating, negotiating, translating, and compromising.

Martha George[1], whose teaching practices are the central focus of this inquiry, is a primary grade teacher who contends successfully with the

[1]Martha George is a pseudonym, as is the name of the principal, the school, the district, and the town described in this article. The names of the parents and children have also been changed to protect their privacy.

competing professional paradigms of early childhood education and elementary schooling. Though Martha's story is one of success, it is not a story without struggle. At the start of this research endeavor, I had anticipated that the tensions and contradictions facing Martha would be a result of the conflict between the school cultures of early childhood and elementary education: I expected to find her chafing against and wrestling with competing institutional norms and expectations. In Martha's case, however, the most complex and draining tensions arose from a mismatch between Martha's enacted primary grade curriculum and the expectations and desires of her students' parents.

Setting the scene

Bayview Elementary School, an alternative school in the Loma Prieta Unified School District, is located in an affluent Northern California suburb. As a district alternative school, Bayview enrolls students from throughout the entire district, rather than drawing its student population from the surrounding neighborhood, as most schools in the district do. Founded in 1971 in response to burgeoning interest in open education, Bayview remains an open school today: characterized by, in the words of principal Alexander Ganz, "open doors, open policies, and open relationships" (Darling 1994, 20). Ganz describes Bayview's mission in the *1993-4 Report to the Community*:

> We are committed to providing ongoing opportunities for all children to build strong self-concepts, develop positive and productive human relationships, and foster a lifelong love of learning. In order to meet the academic, emotional, physical, and social needs of our students, we continually strive to maintain a balance between the content and processes of learning, between intellectual and experiential education, and between the needs of the group and the needs of the individual.

> Because we believe equally in caring for each other and caring for our environment, teaching and learning at Bayview are characterized by activities that are developmentally-appropriate, child-centered, and designed— through collaboration and cooperation— to enhance children's perspectives and establish ties to the world in which we live. (p. 2)

Parents who are interested in helping their children obtain this type of education enter their names in a lottery and hope to be admitted: there were 2 applicants for each of the 33 kindergarten slots available for the 1997–1998 school year.

At the start of her tenth year of teaching, Martha George chose to transfer to Bayview School from another school in the district (at which she had been teaching kindergarten) in order to teach an ungraded primary class. For Martha, teaching this grade level configuration—a class in which kindergartners, first graders and second graders are taught in a mixed age-setting—had long been an aspiration. Though she works in an elementary school environment, and has done so for much of her teaching career, Martha has a strong child development background, and she thinks of herself as an early childhood educator. She approaches her teaching with an underlying commitment to creating a classroom aligned with the principles of developmentally appropriate practice, and she feels a mixed age primary classroom is the organizational structure most conducive to this vision of primary grade education.

Consternation, concern, and criticism

The National Association for the Education of Young Children defines early childhood as the period from birth through age 8, the end of second grade (Bredekamp 1987): Martha's ungraded primary class fits squarely within

those parameters. Her teaching practices and her classroom environment—characterized by learning center-based instruction, an emphasis on developing solutions to open-ended problems, many opportunities for children to be physically active, tolerance for productive noise, the prominent presence of clay, painting easels, blocks, dramatic play areas, and dress-up clothing, and appreciation for the value of free play—are very much in keeping with her image of herself as an early childhood educator, and are also very much in keeping with Bayview School's stated mission and guidelines for practice. (For more information on the specific details of Martha's teaching practices, see Goldstein 1997.)

Though all of the children at Bayview are there because their parents made the deliberate choice to send them there, some of the parents of Martha's students were concerned about what their children were experiencing. Some of them communicated their worries to Martha in backhanded ways. One mother laughed nervously and told Martha her child had said they never do any work at school. Another mentioned her child seemed only to bring home art projects in her work folder: she asked Martha, "When do you send home the *real* work?" Others were more direct. One mother told Martha that at the end of last year her son had been able to add with regrouping and now he couldn't. She had concluded it was because Martha's program didn't include any mathematics that he was losing all of his skills. Parents of kinders worried the work was too hard; parents of second graders worried the work was too easy. It seemed like no one was happy.

Martha was not sure how to respond. The parents' criticism made her feel insecure and angry. She was confident she was providing a safe, challenging, and engaging educational environment for the children. She

knew a great deal of research supported her program. She had been hired by Bayview to teach exactly as she was teaching. She hoped the comments were not meant to be personal attacks. But, nevertheless, she found herself getting up in the morning and thinking "Oh, God, I don't want to go to work! I don't want to go, I don't want to go!"

One evening Martha telephoned me at home, exasperated and upset. She had just gotten of the phone with Roseanne's mother. Martha told me, "If the parents want math worksheets, then fine, they can have them. That would be a million times easier for me to do than what I'm doing now anyway!" The strain of parent pressure made Martha doubt herself and her skills, and tempted her to throw her standards out the window.

I hung up the phone and tried to make sense of the parents' behavior. Many of the aspects of Martha's teaching practices and philosophy about which they were so critical are an explicit part of the Bayview School mission. These parents had deliberately elected to enroll their children in Bayview, a school with an overt and specific philosophy. Prior to enrollment, the parents were expected to read a document, called *The Bayview Code*, which articulates in detail the school's philosophy and favored practices. Parents were then required to sign a form stating that they had read and understood *The Code*. The form was designed to ensure that all incoming parents have a clear understanding of the ways that Bayview departs from the standard practices of the neighborhood schools. Despite these precautions, many of the parents were angry and frustrated by the operationalization of the very philosophy to which they had committed.

Perhaps these parents were eager to enroll their children at Bayview simply because, for much of the Loma Prieta community, getting into Bayview is considered the in thing to do, and is associated with a certain

amount of status and prestige. I suspect many parents enter the admissions lottery just because they have picked up on this buzz about Bayview through the grapevine, but have no real idea of what the school is all about. And once they win a highly coveted spot for their child, why give it up? If so many people want it, it must be worth having. Children can always be pulled out and sent back to their neighborhood school if things don't work out.

Perhaps the parents were putting Martha through some kind of hazing ritual, a trial by fire for a new teacher. None of the parents knew what to expect from Martha, for though she had been a teacher elsewhere in the district, she was new to Bayview. To further complicate Martha's situation, most of the parents had not deliberately requested that their children be placed in an ungraded primary class. Indeed, many had never even considered a classroom composed of kindergartners, first graders, and second graders to be an organizational possibility within a public school setting, and thus had no sense of what Martha's classroom environment could or would be like. Combination classes spanning two grade levels were the norm at Bayview, but a class spanning three grade levels seemed to cross some sort of line of acceptability: Martha spent a great deal of time, including almost all of her Back To School Night presentation, engaging in conversations in which she was asked, repeatedly, to defend the ungraded primary instructional grouping.

Whatever the reasons, the parents' expectations for curricular content, for pedagogy, for classroom organization and school structure, and for what constitutes "real work" for kindergartners, first, and second graders were not being met. The main challenges facing Martha in enacting her primary grade curriculum came not from the institutional constraints of elementary school, but, quite unexpectedly, from the parent community.

Were the parents' actions, responses, questions, and concerns acceptable? Understandable? Appropriate? What role should parents play in determining their children's classroom experience? The traditionally held view, that of the classroom door as the boundary of parental authority (see Ribbens 1993), has recently been called into question. In November 1996, voters in Colorado narrowly defeated an amendment to the state constitution that would have guaranteed the right of parents "to direct and control the upbringing, education, values, and discipline of their children"[2] (Sides 1996/97).

At Bayview parents are explicitly welcomed into classrooms and given a voice in virtually all school decisions. As a result, the question of parents' rights becomes difficult, complex, and highly charged. Bayview parents are expected to be active, involved participants in the life of the school; this is stated explicitly in *The Bayview Code*. However, there is no clear policy about which aspects of school life are open to critique and which are off-limits: many of Martha's students' parents may have thought that she was expecting feedback and input into her curriculum.

What is "successful" primary teaching?

Martha operates within the norms of her school site and meets nationally recognized standards for exemplary practice. Her style of teaching allows her to be keenly attentive to the particular experiences of each of the children in her class, an approach that, presumably, would be quite desirable and sought after by the affluent and demanding parents at Bayview. Yet

[2]Though pre-election polls showed the referendum leading by a 70% margin, it was defeated 57% to 43%. Parental rights is an issue that is currently under consideration by 28 state legislatures and the United States Congress (Sides 1996/97).

many of the parents were unhappy. This raises important questions about the expectations, aspirations, and desires of this type of community.

Research indicates that white, middle class parents have particular preferences regarding educational interactions and techniques. For example, Heath (1983) found that white, middle class parents prefer interactions in which adults talk *with* children rather than *at* children, and therefore tend to give their children the opportunity to ask and answer numerous questions in daily conversations. Along similar lines, Delpit (1995, 28) asserts that many white, middle class, liberal parents "hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them," and, as a result, favor progressive approaches to teaching and learning, such as process writing, for their children. The Bayview parent community fits well within this mold: classroom interactions at Bayview are generally characterized by the interactional styles and pedagogical practices indicated by Heath and Delpit.

Martha's experience, though, suggests there is a flip side to these upper middle class expectations that requires deeper exploration. That all Bayview parents are committed, on some level, to progressive, experiential, child-oriented education is a safe assumption, since they selected this particular school for their children. However, the parents' discomfort with Martha's curriculum reveals that these parents are simultaneously committed to an opposing set of values and practices: scholastic achievement, academic acceleration, and to the idea of seeing their young children engaged in "real work."

In order to understand this contradiction, it is necessary to look beyond Bayview and place this study in the broader context of the town of Loma

Prieta. A wealthy community populated by highly successful individuals—university professors, Silicon Valley engineers, high tech business people, doctors, lawyers, and the like— Loma Prieta is often characterized, even by its residents, as a town full of "yuppie overachievers." This socioeconomic factor plays a significant role in shaping parental expectations for their children's schools. Achievement and accomplishment matter deeply in this community, and schooling is seen as playing a crucial role in preparing children for future success.

In her work on kindergarten readiness, Graue (1993) studied a school in a community with a demographic profile similar to that of Loma Prieta. She found, in contrast to the parents in working class or mixed communities, the affluent parents expressed a marked interest in and attention to particular school content and skills, a belief in the value of delaying kindergarten entry in order to position children for academic and athletic superiority, and a willingness to argue with teachers over their children's grades on their kindergarten report cards. In this community, as in Loma Prieta, being a good parent included "working to get a leg up on the competition, to find the very best preschool, learning the expectations for performance," and ensuring that one's child could meet or exceed those expectations (Graue 1993, 248). Graue found that these affluent parents were accustomed to exerting influence, and even manipulating the system, to get the best for their children.

Graue's findings parallel the behavior and comments of the parents of Martha's students. To add to the examples discussed earlier, Martha found many of the parents caught up in measuring their children's progress against their own expectations for each grade level, and against the achievement of children in their home neighborhoods enrolled in Loma Prieta's more mainstream elementary schools. Addition and subtraction with regrouping

are taught in second grade, cursive handwriting and multiplication are taught in third grade; Loma Prieta parents are aware of these benchmarks, and most encouraged Martha to accelerate their children's exposure to these topics. In fact, this opportunity for acceleration was perceived by many as one of the benefits of placing a child in a multi-age setting. Martha also sat through several conferences with parents who were interested in holding their children back for a year or skipping them forward a grade, depending on their personal views about which strategy would guarantee their child's success. Parents requested these conferences despite the fact that retention and acceleration are unnecessary in a developmentally appropriate setting like Bayview.

Beneath this "yuppie overachiever" phenomenon is a more fundamental issue. Though Martha departs from elementary school's traditional ways in manners that enhance the experience of children—moving away from uniformity toward flexibility, allowing for idiosyncrasy, developing confidence, agency, and judgment—this departure threatens and unnerves parents because this sort of developmentally appropriate practice contradicts the traditional expectations and norms of elementary schooling. Martha believes that the parents' "own experience with school and teachers might dictate a lot of their thinking about what schooling should be." In other words, the parents are envisioning their children's educations by looking backward to their own past experiences; and it is likely that these classrooms were more mainstream and traditional than Martha's (along the lines of the classrooms described in Kidder 1989; Jackson 1968/1990; Anderson, Evertson and Brophy 1979; among others). The potential benefits of a developmentally appropriate primary grade experience, then, are obscured, constrained by the stranglehold of the past.

Despite the state of California's official policy of supporting and advocating developmentally appropriate practice (California State Department of Education 1988), despite the strong support of the school district (embodied in its 25 year commitment to the child-centered and experiential philosophy enacted at Bayview School), and despite the very fact that this group of parents elected to educate their children in this type of learning environment rather than send them to one of the more tradition-bound neighborhood schools, the parents of Martha's students seem to share a vision of what is possible in schooling which is controlled and shaped by their collective memory of the way things have always been done.

Even in the face of these seemingly insurmountable challenges, Martha never compromised her standards and passed out math worksheets. The uproar among the parent community faded out slowly as the year progressed. Part of this was the result of Bayview's commitment to open doors and open relationships: Bayview parents are welcome to visit and to volunteer in their children's classrooms at any time. Many parents take advantage of this unique opportunity. Martha, like most of her colleagues, has a roster of more than 13 regular parent volunteers who work in the classroom each week, and can expect other parents to volunteer on a more sporadic basis.

At the beginning of the school year, during the height of parent consternation, concern, and criticism about her curriculum, it seemed to Martha like some of the mothers masqueraded as well-meaning volunteers, but were actually coming into the classroom as spies who would check up on her teaching, examine the work being done, and then report back to the underground parent network. Even if this were true, many of the spies transformed into supporters as they gained a better and more grounded a

sense of perspective by spending time in Martha's classroom. Parent conferences also helped a great deal: many of the most skeptical parents were surprised to find out how much Martha knew about their children, how able she was to talk about their growth and their learning, how much she cared about them as individuals.

At Bayview, the tides shift rapidly. By the spring, when deliberations regarding class placements for the following year were in full swing, Principal Ganz received a number of ingratiating telephone calls from parents requesting that their children be placed in Martha's class.

Conclusion

The primary grades are a meeting ground for early childhood education and elementary education, a confluence of two great streams of thought and practice. Martha George, working in an atypical and unusually supportive school environment, successfully navigates these waters, plotting a course for herself and her students that artfully balances the occasionally contradictory demands of the two fields. All teachers who center their primary grade teaching around the principles of early childhood education can expect to face challenges as they attempt to lay these developmentally appropriate practices over the existing scripts for elementary school—coverage, accountability, uniformity of outcomes, and so on. The challenges can come from unexpected sources. In Martha's case, for example, it was not her school culture, or school district policy and politics, or the state requirements and mandates that were rigid and unbending, as might be the case in other elementary settings, but the parent community.

How can these conflicts be mediated? There are many possible strategies for addressing the kinds of problems discussed here. Fundamental

changes, such as reshaping teacher certification requirements, teacher evaluation procedures, or teacher education programs, provide one set of options. Incremental changes also offer interesting possibilities. For example, school districts could offer in-service workshops and parent education programs to increase awareness about the value of developmentally appropriate primary grade teaching, revise primary grade report cards, or eliminate standardized testing in the early grades. Teacher education programs could add coursework on negotiating difficult interactions with parents, or develop a specialization or concentration for students specifically interested in becoming primary grade teachers.

These are only a few possibilities, and we must work to develop more. Given elementary schooling's robust nature and resistance to fundamental reforms of any kind (Sarason 1991; Cuban 1993), it seems unlikely the challenges facing Martha, and all primary grade teachers committed to providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum and learning environment for their students, will resolve themselves without our direct attention and effort.

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