Islands unto Themselves: How Merit Pay Schemes may Undermine Positive Teacher Collaboration

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Abstract

Educational reforms have become the new policy mainstay in educational discourse and policy. Without doubt, "fixing" teachers and increasing student test scores have both been a large component of much of the reform rhetoric. Moreover, calls for implementing merit pay schemes have uniquely combined reformer's efforts to "fix" teachers while increasing test scores as teacher pay is linked directly to student academic achievement. This article traces the historical use of merit pay schemes, situates the current push for merit pay within the neoliberal education reform movement, while highlighting the overt and covert implications of injecting competition into teacher salaries. In addition to creating an environment that lends itself to narrowed pedagogical approaches and teaching to tests (and even cheating on them), this article suggests that merit pay schemes that require teachers to compete with one another may likely undermine positive collaboration.

Keywords**:** *merit pay, collaboration, neoliberalism*

Introduction, Purpose, and Questions

Money can be a powerful motivation. The prospect of making more money often encourages individuals and corporations to work harder, smarter, and more efficiently. In this way, monetary incentives can serve as the proverbial carrot to elicit a desired reaction out of oneself or others. Similarly, the threat of losing money can also be a powerful incentive. In the role of the proverbial stick, the threat of losing money often increases self-reflection and heightens intentionality. In this way, people typically respond to money out of self-interests. The economist Adam Smith (1776/1952) noted that "[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect out dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest" (p. 7).

In the context of schooling, teacher salaries have traditionally been linked to a teacher's level of postsecondary education and duration of service. However, in the present age of market-based educational reforms, merit pay schemes are becoming an oft cited silver bullet to fixing the "horrid state of public education" that was first exclaimed in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As a continued response to the perceived ill state of our schools, reformers have continued to offer reforms that purportedly provide the solu-

tions our schools so desperately need. Moreover, many reformers and educators have simply accepted the assertion that our schools are failing and often try to implement reforms before carrying out any systematic investigations on their effectiveness and without considering their many professional and personal implications. This failure to investigate reforms that rest on dubious grounds has and continues to leave education susceptible to neoliberal policies and policymaking. By neoliberal, we mean, as Ong (2007) offers, "big 'N,'" with neoliberal as a state-centric, economic strategy and also "small 'n'" neoliberalism, where "optimal gains and profit" are sought through strategies of self-governance. Individuals and groups (learn to) attune themselves to the market (p. 4) and market-based path dependence. Neoliberalism is the universalization of capitalistic logic, where "its social relations, its laws of motion, its contradictions—the logic of commodification, accumulation and profit maximization penetrating every aspect of our lives" (Wood 1997, p. 551). Neoliberalism's goal of commodification is, as we argue below, the disposition and ideology that reinforces beliefs that a teacher's individual lesson plans, content knowledge, etc., are ultimately seen as individualistic commoditized goods that are to be hoarded within neoliberal competition of "better" teachers and higher pay that may undermine collaboration. What follows is an analysis of how teacher merit pay facilitates neoliberal thought and practices within schools. First, we outline the history of merit pay and evaluate the evidence of the effectiveness of merit pay in educational contexts. Second, we explore the current state of merit pay schemes in our public schools as construed by policy makers. Finally, we explicate one important implication of merit pay schemes, i.e., the extent to which they might undermine one of the most valuable professional dispositions that teachers employ—collaboration.

With implications to current and future policy initiatives, our final focus is of particular importance. Might such individualistic and competitive systems of pay operate, for example, to incentivize teachers to hoard valuable information, lesson plans, and methods? As teachers are forced to teach to tests to ensure their ability to take care of their personal finances and that their jobs are secure from year to year, teachers might not be encouraged to work together towards educating students as insights, plans, and resources are seen as competitive commodities not to be shared. Will an increased adoption of neoliberal reforms in public education continue to shift teachers' focus on what is best for the collective good to what is best for the individual as education and teaching are treated as commodities (Walberg & Bast, 2003)? If this is the case, certain students' learning and achievement may be jeopardized. The benefits of teacher collaboration and the detriment to student learning when collaboration is undermined, then, need to be thoroughly examined.

The History of Merit Pay

Despite the prevailing portrayal of merit pay by its proponents as an original and ingenious way to improve our public schools, merit pay has a longer history than some may care to acknowledge. England and Canada, for example, both instituted merit pay systems as early as the 1800s. England's 30-year attempt, beginning in the 1860s, was unsuccessful largely due to cheating and other manifestations of teacher individualism (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2011). Canada's brief merit-pay stint from 1876 to 1883 was also unsuccessful because many teachers were avoiding helping struggling students (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2011).

In the United States, merit pay systems have more than a century's worth of history. Notable earlier examples include the first documented merit pay system implemented in 1908 in

Newton, Massachusetts, the first merit pay wave in the 1920s as a result of Taylor's theory of scientific management, performance contracting in the 1960s and 70s under President Nixon, and the Reagan administration's pay-for-performance programs in the 1980s based on the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk* (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2011; Johnson, 1986). These merit pay systems all failed to accomplish their purposes and were discontinued. In the 1990s, some academic and research developments led to a renewed interest in merit pay. Several neoliberal interest groups and politicians have since advocated for merit pay programs across the country despite unsuccessful results and a lack of evidence in favor of merit pay.

The historical implications of merit pay are important to consider because they suggest that it is hardly ever successful in educational contexts. In fact, a 1979 Educational Research Study suggested that most merit pay implementations are discontinued within six years (Protsik, 1995). They have historically been difficult to administer and fund, while opening doors to corruption and other forms of individualistic teacher behaviors. Perhaps most importantly, they have not been able to make the difference they are designed to make. The question then is: why has merit pay become a national trend today, with the government providing funding for such performance incentives, when their history for improving student achievement is discouraging? Before we address this question, however, we turn to some of the most recent research that assesses current merit pay programs.

The Research on Merit Pay

To date, the most comprehensive and scientific analysis of teacher merit pay was conducted in the Metro-Nashville Public Schools by the National Center on Performance Incentives (NCPI) (Springer et al., 2010). The study recruited teachers to voluntarily participate in a three-year study that provided a monetary incentive to raise student scores on a state standardized test. Teachers who performed at the highest levels were eligible for a bonus of $15,000. Other teachers who performed well were eligible for $5,000 or $10,000 in addition to their salaries. In order to qualify to participate, teachers had to teach mathematics within district middle schools. The study had a high participation rate among eligible teachers. This, according to the authors, indicated a general willingness on the part of teachers to engage with merit pay schemes despite the perceived resistance that is associated with merit pay within education. The authors note the purpose of the study was driven by the "notion that rewarding teachers for improved scores would cause scores to rise" (p. xi) while further noting that the perceived absence of such incentives is a leading cause of the underperformance of American schools.

Within this study, teachers did not report an increased sense of individualistic competition or decreased collaboration. However, this is mostly attributable to the fact that the merit pay scheme did not reward teachers for how they performed comparatively to other teachers, rather, a predetermined benchmark. Moreover, if teachers reached the predetermined benchmark of increased test scores, each were individually rewarded bonus money. That is, while the authors explain that the intention was to set high but achievable goals, setting too high of goals would render a sense of impossibility while setting the goals too low would exhaust financial resources. This point, while not examined by the report, may be a crucial aspect of merit pay schemes.

Despite questions of collaboration and competition, there still exists the question of impact that merit pay schemes have on student educational outputs. Here, we use the term outputs, rather than outcomes, given that the most relied upon indication of student learning in the United States are scores on standardized tests. Outcomes, in comparison, would be student college ac-

ceptance and completion, gainful employment, etc. while test scores, by this definition, are simply outputs measuring student and teacher inputs. This distinction was famously made in Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where Freire coined the term banking of education to explain the emptiness of teaching to tests and the subsequent tests themselves (1970/1992). Moreover, the increased focus of evaluating student learning and teacher worth via test scores raises into question the possibility that increased test scores that do not represent actual learning, but rather a result of teaching-to-the-test, indicate illusory gains that do not benefit students (Springer et al., 2010). Nevertheless, despite challenges to the validity of standardized tests to accurately measure student learning, merit pay schemes and teacher evaluations are vastly attached to such outputs (Berlak, 2011; Papay, 2011; Sacks, 1999; Sarrio, 2011; Schniedewind & Sapon-Shevin, 2012). Therefore, as pointed out by Springer et al., (2010), operating under such understandings, the NCPI sought to determine if merit pay schemes increase student test scores.

Accordingly, the NCPI report concluded that merit pay incentives alone are not sufficient in serving as a mechanism for raising student test scores. In fact, teachers who were randomly assigned to the control group who were not eligible for bonus money increased student test scores over the three-year period along with those who received bonus money for such outcomes. In fact, those teachers who did not volunteer to participate in the study also raised student test scores over the same period. The authors illustrate that the across-the-board increase of scores is most likely due to teachers increased understanding of the standardized test. The only group of teachers that produced exceedingly higher gains on student test scores were 5th grade teachers. However, the report suggests that this increase is likely due to students remaining with teachers who teach multiple contents and may spend more time on tested subjects while also furthering a relationship with students and not necessarily correlated with the monetary incentive program. In fact, the higher gains of 5th grade students regressed back to the mean by the end of their 6th grade year indicating contextual factors outside of the merit pay experiment.

As suggested by Chamberlin et al., (2002), merit pay schemes that seek to reward groups may often lead to unwanted actions on part of those being incentivized towards predetermined ends. That is, in the case of schools being incentivized to increase mathematics test scores, for example, teachers may subvert other academic subjects in favor of spending more instructional time teaching towards tested subjects. For example, between 1999 and 2010, Beverly Hall, the superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools established a school-wide merit pay scheme that incentivized and subsequently rewarded teachers with approximately $1,000 in bonuses if school-level targets, or benchmarks, were met on state standardized tests. What followed was not only the largest test cheating scandal in United States schooling history, but also, a concerted effort on the part of teachers to ignore non-tested subjects. Accordingly, many principals required teachers to incorporate math and reading instruction into each subject, at the expense of time spent on other subjects, to bolster test scores. While, the school-wide merit pay scheme did not deteriorate teacher collaboration, to the contrary, it created an environment of a collaborative effort to promote one subject over another while also promoting criminal collaboration that has since led to the suspension and criminal prosecution of many educators (Flock, 2011; Wilson, Bowers, & Hyde, 2011). What is more, many schools sought to classify underperforming students as behaviorally problematic in an effort to push them out and thus onto other schools. This behavior does not represent a manifestation of teachers acting as islands unto themselves who do not collaborate, rather as an archipelago of collaborative criminality.

The Politics Behind the Policy

In the push for universal preschool, President Obama stated that "The achievement gap starts off very young" (Associated Press, 2013). The Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Walton Foundation are the "Big 3" educational venture philanthropists who push nearly $4 billion into strategies hinged upon closing the achievement gap among poor, minority students. Teacher merit pay is a pillar among these reforms. Driven by the royalty of the wealthy, business models, and a faulty research frame, teacher merit pay (Barkan, 2011), despite historical and empirical evidence against it, is extremely popular with federal and state legislators.

There is a well-ingrained belief in our society that the rich are smarter (Parker, 2012), wiser, and better situated to solve problems. However, though there is evidence that wealth and intelligence are not positively correlated (Zagorsky, 2007), it is assumed that the wealthy, with their successful experience in making money, can also fix schools. Yet, questions of expertise and motive are not raised frequently enough when attempting to understand why the "Big 3" see merit pay as a well-vetted and worthwhile expenditure.

Consider also public managerialism, which represents an engagement of business practices into the governmental and public sphere. Sachs (2001) notes that a managerialist ideology assumes that all problems can be solved with proper management and calls for the usage of private sector models in the public sector. While seductive, this logic is overly reductive. Angus (2012) argues that a "managerial approach to policymaking…results in teaching and learning being regarded as technical processes that occur within the 'black box' of the school" (p. 46). This conception of teaching assumes sameness across all contexts, which is, at best, a poor characterization of public schools.

Furthermore, Marchant (2011) argues that the policy frame in education is flawed. Citing merit pay specifically, he argues that individuals who enter the classroom do not do so for a financial reward and that no financial reward will make a sub-par teacher into a better teacher. The failures of public education are often placed at blame for economic issues (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, counter to this reasoning, the research actually demonstrates most consistently that the economic issues in American communities are a leading *cause* of undesired student outcomes in public education. Noguera explains that "[P]overty does not cause academic failure, but it is a factor that profoundly influences the character of schools and student performance..." (Williams & Noguera, 2010, p. 45).

That the very economic inequality (i.e., low wages, exploitative employee practices, outsourcing, etc.) that allows for large multinational companies like Microsoft and Wal-Mart to thrive in America, and which essentially fund the Gates Foundation and the Walton Foundation, leads to the educational outcomes that these entities seek to "fix" is the most ironic of events. In this way, policy-making is not interested in evidence, but rather the regulatory frame for policy-making has been captured by those proposing ideas that inject the ideology of business into education in the most unreflective of ways.

Implications for Teacher Professionalism: Competition Over Collaboration

Merit pay is of particular concern to teacher professionalism. Under an individualized merit pay scheme, when teachers are pitted against each other in a race for a limited amount of "merit" money that is earned by producing higher test scores than their colleagues, teacher competition becomes the more likely outcome rather than teacher collaboration. It follows that teach-

ers might no longer see educating students as a collective process and goal; rather, valuable lesson plans, activities, and resources might be seen as proprietorial material that is to be kept a close secret. Teachers may begin to embody an ideology of "rugged individual[ism]" that is synonymous with the larger neoliberal, market-based reform movement (Thomas, 2011, p. 62).

We can learn more about the potential effects of individualized merit pay systems upon teacher collaboration by comparing them with the corporate model of organization on which they are based, i.e., sales commissions. According to Susan Johnson (1986), in order for merit pay in the form of sales commissions to be successful, several conditions emphasizing the individualistic nature of performance must be met. For example, salesmen/women must value the reward, i.e., pay, and the product that they sell is always, in some form or other, an instrument to obtain the reward. Salesmen/women ultimately must work independently, and often in competition with one another, for them and their organization to be successful. The teaching profession is starkly different, however, in that teacher collaboration rather than competition is more important because the product—student achievement and outcomes—is *naturally* an end in itself that all teachers are working toward, rather than a means to some individualistic end such as bonus money. If teachers compete against one another, some students would inevitably suffer. Instead, research suggests that the only type of merit pay that would work within the foundational educational model are those that support differentiated pay as "extra pay for extra work," or differentiated teaching roles (Cornett & Gaines, 2002).

Reflecting again on the results and implications of the NCPI report (Springer et al., 2010), the study illustrates that teachers did not report an increased sense of individualistic competition or decreased collaboration. However, teachers were not competing against one another—thus, no real person-to-person competition could exist—in addition to the fact that all teachers who hit predetermined non-competitive benchmarks would be eligible for a bonus. That is, while there was a hypothetical maximum amount that could be paid to teachers (assuming they all qualified for the maximum bonus), the teachers were not competing as individuals against one another for a portion of a limited amount of pooled money. That is, teachers may not reduce their level of collaboration if they do not feel there are limited resources (e.g., amount of merit money) for which they are vying. However, given the history of educational mandates, which are often underfunded, this draws into question the financial feasibility of larger scale merit pay schemes. If the pool of bonus monies is limited due to governmental budget constraints, this constitutes the possibility that teachers may engender competitive dispositions in the face of limited resources, which was not a characteristic of the NCPI experiment. Accordingly, it has been shown that when public employees, including teachers, are forced into merit pay schemes in which the available rewards are constrained by governmental budgets, individuals vastly limit the amount of collaboration in favor of individualistic competition (Chamberlin, Wragg, Haynes, & Wragg, 2002).

Given the rampant use of student test scores on state standardized tests as the predominate driving force behind teacher evaluations and merit pay schemes we argue that the research and literature suggest that while incentives can increase collaboration when targeted at groups rather than individuals, the types of collaboration that follow may undermine real and lasting educative experiences for students. Further, if merit pay schemes are underfunded and teachers are forced to compete with each other to clamor for limited resources, it may manifest as individualistic competition that will undermine teacher collaboration. Moreover, despite the increased effectiveness that large-group merit pay schemes have on collaboration, the types of collaboration are not only detrimental, they may incite a deterioration of school-to-school collabora-

tion. That is, if teachers and administrators work together in concert to remove problematic students who are perceived to inhibit efforts of raising school-wide test scores by placing them in other schools, this may undermine school-to-school or district-wide positive collaboration as problematic students are shifted back-and-forth between schools in what would resemble a game of "hot-potato." In this instance, school-to-school or district-wide collaboration on best practices become less of a concern than does the artificial shaping of the student population within a particular school in the effort to improve or maintain school-wide test scores that are tied to merit pay. Because educating children should be viewed as a public service for the public good, merit pay schemes—even as group incentives—may undermine the collective collaboration that is needed to ensure that students have equal access to quality teachers, instruction, and resources, that will lead to more than just standardized outputs; that will lead to meaningful educational outcomes.

Similar to the possibility that 5th grade teachers in the NCPI study could have spent more instructional time on tested subjects, Chamberlin, et al., (2002) suggests that this is yet another possible drawback to merit pay schemes. While Chamberlin, et al., note that teachers may limit collaboration in favor of individualistic competition, many merit pay schemes attempt to incentivize and reward groups (or in this case, entire schools) based on performance. However, merit pay schemes evaluating and rewarding group-based performance can be detrimental to non-tested academic subjects. Citing Protsik (1996), Chamberlin, et al., explain that,

> [w]hile group rewards are intended to promote a collaborative culture, they too have potential drawbacks. The extent to which merit pay can influence the content of lessons, for example, may be seen in reports of a school in North Carolina. A bonus of $1,500 was on offer for all teachers if students improved, but as one of the targets for improvement was Maths, teachers of all subjects focused on that subject. (p. 44)

Therefore, while merit pay schemes may not always undermine teacher collaboration, there may exist the possibility that such collaboration comes at the expense of a more fragmented education for students. This, we argue, may ultimately lead to a furthering of support and resources for teachers who teach to tested subjects, while undermining real teacher collaboration in favor of what constitutes collusion in an effort to increase specific subject scores, thus undermining a well-balanced education. In fact, the conservative Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, "I think it's completely natural that if you are going to be measured on something, you are going to put emphasis on it" (Glass, 2008, p. 223). Moreover, while teacher collaboration may devolve into putting more focus on tested content areas, what may also occur is criminal collaboration that is evidenced by way of cheating.

Conclusion

Here we have argued that merit pay schemes for teachers align with neoliberal education reforms that seek to commoditize and market teaching and learning while simultaneously creating a culture of individualistic competition among teachers. When teachers are forced to compete with one another for portions of merit-based bonuses or supplements to their salary, it follows that such competition may facilitate a lack of collaboration among teachers despite the benefits that collaboration has on teacher preparation and subsequently on student learning. As teachers

are increasingly forced to compete, it is entirely likely that lesson plans, best practices, etc., may not be shared in a spirit of collaboration as such artifacts and insights represent a necessary accumulation for profit that is required within the neoliberal reimagining of schools, teaching, and learning.

Finally, Marion Brady (2011) points out six reasons that merit pay schemes, among other neoliberal reforms, will ultimately not work in public education suggesting that, "(1) Every kid is different…; (2) Every class is different…; (3) Every subject is different...; (4) Every teacher is different…; (5) Every work environment is different…; and (6) Every resource base is different" (p. 210). Nevertheless, education reformers seek to convince policy makers and stakeholders that education is a level playing field where meritocracy rules and is equally just. Despite the unimpressive history of merit pay schemes and the limited empirical research on the impact of implementing merit pay, education reformers continue to press for merit pay in an attempt to incentivize teachers to increase standardized test scores.

The research leads us to conclude that merit pay schemes are not only ineffective in their present constitution, but they also have negative implications for teacher professionalism. The looming question is whether the neoliberal, individualistic, and competitive ideology behind merit pay policy is what will help American education the most. At this juncture, the evidence convinces us that the answer is "no." That is, as Adam Smith suggested, individuals seek first their own self-interests rather than the collective good. In the case of schooling, the collective good should be embodied in a culture of collaboration towards educating students, however, merit pay schemes may only further undermine any residual bastion of good teaching and learning as positive teacher collaboration suggests sharing information that could otherwise be monetized through competitive merit pay bonuses or by facilitating a new intentional collaboration that approaches teaching as test-prep or, as was the case in the Atlanta Public Schools, the facilitation of criminal collaboration that undermines the ethics of teaching and learning.

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