

## Dilemmas of a Middle School Teacher

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*This study documented curriculum decisions made by an eighth grade social studies teacher as he prepared students for their high-stakes test. When considering how to best meet students' needs, the teacher described tensions between the pressures of standards and testing and his commitment to cultural responsiveness. Perceptions about these different demands affected instructional decisions and teaching behaviors. Decisions were more strongly influenced by the accountability demands than by the cultural or development needs of students. The discussion considers how middle level teaching might address these dilemmas and challenges the primacy of accountability as defined by standards and test results over the needs of adolescent learners.*

### Introduction

This study documented a middle school teacher's curricular decisions in order to understand how those decisions were effected by the state content standards as well as the annual high stakes test. Findings offer a useful framework for teachers as they make their own decisions in the current climate of testing and accountability measures. Specifically, data included the decisions of a teacher working in a diverse school setting within the context of a high-stakes testing and accountability climate. Analysis and findings review these decisions within this larger context and alongside principles of middle school practice, particularly with respect to developmental and cultural competence. The lessons from the analysis of the findings offer teachers opportunities to reflect on their instructional decisions in order to ensure that what they teach as well as how meets the needs of **all** their middle school learners.

High-stakes testing and standards-based reform influence middle school curricula across the country. Likewise, teachers' instructional accountability is also associated with reform and connected to mandated assessments of district, state, and national standards for middle school students. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 established the goal of proficiency for all students in core content areas (reading, math, and science) by 2014. One of the principles of NCLB is accountability for student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Though the impact and effectiveness of NCLB are highly contested, this legislative act frames teachers' decisions through a policy mandate specifically requiring that proficiency be assessed, typically through standardized tests. Given the push for academic standards monitored by high stakes testing, middle level educators may express concerns that the added pressure for students to meet the mandated standards will negatively affect their ability to teach a developmentally responsive curriculum (Clark & Clark, 2003). In addition to the expectation of

teaching a developmentally responsive curriculum, teachers should also make sure the curriculum is multicultural or culturally relevant. Thus, curriculum development, a complex process from the outset, is further affected by the need to address standards and meet assessment goals. Therefore middle school teachers are urged to conscientiously take into account all sets of demands as they plan and teach.

The current work begins with a discussion about culturally responsive teaching and standards-based instruction in a high-stakes testing environment. Next, the description of the study hones in on specific issues emerging from the intersection of these demands in order to use it as a springboard for thought and discussion. Finally, the recommendations for middle school teachers offer support for their efforts in this complex and often contentious environment.

### Background

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical "paradigm" that "teaches to and through [sic] personal and cultural strengths, intellectual capabilities, and prior accomplishments" (Gay, 2000, p. 24). Positive results from culturally responsive teaching have been demonstrated across ethnic groups and using various measures of achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Sheets, 2005). Likewise, the core values of *Turning Points 2000*, a comprehensive analysis of how to improve middle grades education, include as "the heart of the definition of middle grades education" a "requirement for equity outcomes for all groups of students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, family income or linguistic background" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 11). Essentially, middle school curriculum must be both developmentally responsive to adolescents as well as culturally responsive to the diverse students who make up our classroom. Both requirements should be intentional as well as visible to teachers and middle schoolers.

For the designers of such a curriculum, there are several important tendencies to keep in mind. Previous research on teaching in high stakes testing and standards environments demonstrated that standards and high stakes tests can greatly shape the delivery of culturally and developmentally responsive curriculum by creating dichotomies and positioning the two as mutually exclusive (Banks, 2005; Sleeter, 2005). Given this possibility, the authors, who work routinely with teachers to enhance their cultural responsiveness, recommend that teachers consider all of the parameters surrounding their classroom, including the accountability and standards requirements (Sleeter, 2011). Likewise, they urge policymakers and instructional leaders to ensure standards and accountability measures include attention to middle level learners' developmental and cultural needs. In their recent article, Seed and Watts (2011) found that, in spite of the demands of standards and accountability, the principal and staff at the middle school they studied believed that the middle school concept best meets the needs of students at their rural middle school. The current study contributes to that point; cultural responsiveness must be included in those discussions among faculties. Thus, those engaged with middle level instruction and school leadership must ensure cultural responsiveness is an explicit part of the conversation.

Teachers and teacher educators encounter both challenges and opportunities in the current policy climate. Specifically, the focus on quality teaching as well as the preparation of highly qualified teachers affords educators the responsibility and the occasion to critically examine how the current climate shapes classroom decisions and ultimately, student performance.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Middle Grades**

The historical approach to middle level education centered on the goal of creating developmentally responsive schools for young adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Reformers from the middle school movement recognized that the middle school occupies a particular social and institutional context, and that context requires attention from educators. Reformers called for those teachers to "know about and be sensitive to the characteristics of young adolescents" (Beane & Brodhead, 2001, p. 1157). As a result of this expectation, middle school curriculum and pedagogy were designed to better respond to the unique developmental needs of 10-15 year-olds (National Middle School Association, 2003).

*This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010) calls for curriculum to be rigorous, relevant, and sensitive to young adolescents' developmental needs and cultural backgrounds. In a noteworthy example including explicit reference to the cultural needs of students, Katz (1999) describes the significance of cultural identity for middle school Latino students in a study examining the relationships and interactions between students, their teachers, and the structures of schooling. In the study, Katz (1999) found that the academic progress of these students was greatly influenced by their perceptions of how teachers viewed them as cultural beings. That is, these Latino middle school students' engagement with and success in school was linked to the willingness of teachers to respond to them as cultural beings, a strategy urged throughout research on both social identity and academic achievement (Banks, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Noguera, 2002).

Importantly, culturally responsive literature emphasizes cultural success alongside academic success. From Ladson-

Billings (1992) insistence on rigorous content as inherent to culturally responsive teaching, to Nieto and Bode's (2008) reiteration that there is nothing contradictory between high standards and multicultural education, the message that both content and process are important persists. However, given the pressures to teach to the test, teachers perceive a decline in their autonomy to make informed decisions about the academic content and instructional strategies appropriate to hold their students to high standards particularly in schools with higher percentages of poor or minority students (Frankenberg & Siege-Hawley, 2008).

Without embedding culturally responsive teaching within developmental responsiveness, middle school educators and researchers omit a crucial component of responsive middle level education. This study supports such a perspective while portraying the complexity inherent when a teacher works to meet multiple and often inconsistently articulated demands such as standards, high stakes tests, and cultural responsiveness.

### **Methods**

This study documented a middle school teacher's perceptions of his curricular decisions during the window of time he prepared students to take their state social studies test. Two research questions guided the study: "What are the perceptions of a middle school teacher as he intends to integrate culturally responsive teaching into a standards based curriculum in a high-stakes testing environment?" and "What are his perceptions about the interaction of demands for cultural responsiveness, standards-based instruction, and high-stakes testing on planning and instruction?" The first question was used to learn contextual information about how beliefs about standards and testing shape curricular decisions. The second question provided a richer, more nuanced sense of how one teacher's perceptions informed his subsequent actions and inactions.

"Tom" taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies at "Urban" Middle School, a Math, Science, and Technology magnet school. Roughly 45% of Tom's students were magnet students bussed voluntarily from surrounding areas while 55% resided in the local area, an extremely impoverished, inner-city environment. Thus, Tom's classroom reflected his school; it was very racially and economically diverse. Tom chose to teach at Urban because of its diversity, and he describes a teaching philosophy influenced by cultural competence.

### **Design**

The study employed case study methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998) to examine how a middle school social studies teacher negotiated the demands of cultural responsiveness and state standards while preparing students for their high-stakes test. The case study bounded by time gave us an opportunity to investigate multiple variables in order to understand the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

### **Data Sources**

Multiple data sources were used for this study. These include (a) four semi-structured interviews, (b) a journal (c) planning materials (i.e., a plan book and teaching tools), and (d) the transcript of the teacher participant's analysis. Table 1 aligns data sources with research questions.

**Table 1**

*Data sources alignment with research questions*

	Interviews	Teacher Journal	Planning Materials	Teacher participant analysis
<p><b>Research Question 1</b></p> <p>How does a middle school teacher integrate culturally responsive teaching into a standards-based curriculum in a high-stakes testing environment?</p>	X	X	X	X
<p><b>Research Question 2</b></p> <p>What are the teacher's perceptions about the interaction of demands for cultural responsiveness, standards-based instruction, and high-stakes testing on planning and instruction?</p>	X	X		X

**Data analysis**

Data were analyzed through reductive analysis, a methodology also suited to this cooperative inquiry. Reductive analysis involves the identifying, coding, and categorizing of data into meaningful units (Muller, 1994). Further, the technique of phenomenological reduction has two phases. First, there is a back-and-forth movement between a phase of thinking and analyzing and a phase of data gathering (Tesch, 1984). In the second phase of reduction analysis, categories are reduced to patterns or recurring themes. These themes provide the basis for the findings of the study. To establish credibility and ensure reliability, several strategies were used including triangulation of the data sources (interviews, journal, plan book, participant analysis), member and external checks, and explanations of researcher positions and hence biases (Creswell, 2006). Triangulation was built into the methodology to achieve trustworthiness. The member check involved independent coding of the data followed by collaborative coding, meaning that both teacher educators and the middle school teacher coded and critiqued the emerging codes. An external researcher also participated in critiquing codes. Discussions of the analyses became an additional source of data as these conversations documented the juxtaposition of cultural responsiveness and developmental responsiveness, along with the expectations of standards-based instruction within a high-stakes testing environment.

**Findings**

As part of his perceptions, Tom described how standards, high-stakes testing, and cultural responsiveness all figured into his content and instructional decisions. Further, he also explained how he weighted the demands of standards-based instruction

and high-stakes testing against one another. These perceptions affected Tom's decisions and actions in complex ways explored next.

**Curricular and Instructional Decisions**

Standards-based planning and preparation for the tests created opportunity costs and time constraints with respect to cultural responsiveness, and both resulted in unintended consequences for curricular and instructional decisions. That is, the teaching in this classroom, which included decisions about what was taught (curriculum) and how (instruction) were influenced by the need to plan according to the state-mandated standards and to prepare students to take the tests. The opportunity costs and time constraints described below frame the unintended consequences described later.

The data suggests that emphasis on test results contributed to a belief that test preparation was a priority and content to be tested took precedence over other content. Likewise, instruction and assessment, outlined in the planning materials, mirrored the tests. In other words, content identified for the test was taught and learned, removing opportunities to teach and learn content not specifically identified. The content was described in an interview as "...far more delineated, in some cases down to the day. I plan my instruction around the standards and my ultimate goal is to cover all that information before the (State Standardized) test is given." Because of the emphasis placed upon the test (by tying it to rewards, punishments, and public scrutiny), that content received priority, and other content not tested did not receive the same emphasis in the curriculum, as stated below:

The standards aren't necessarily contrary to culturally responsive teaching; however, due to the bulk of information that must be covered, it is often difficult to fit in material that falls outside of the standards. For example, if I have to cover the Revolutionary War in three days, I can't spend

a lot of time delving into the thoughts and actions of critical players such as Abigail Adams or Crispus Attucks. Not because they aren't valuable, but because time dictates that I must move on.

Additionally, opportunity costs limited instructional decisions by eliminating content that may be more inclusive, provide multiple perspectives, or be more effective with particular students.

Do I teach in as culturally responsive of a manner as I would like to, no. Unfortunately a lot of the tenets of culturally responsive teaching run contrary-require time, require depth, require analysis and student input, delving into real-life experiences and things like that.

Frequently, decisions about what was taught and how were tightly connected and opportunity costs affected both. Time constraints, earmarked by Tom's phrase "time crunch," reflected a dilemma between time needed to cover tested content and time used to deliver other content as well as engage in pedagogies that support diverse student learning. In addition to lamenting the reoccurring need to eliminate certain content or particular instructional strategies, such as connecting to students' lives, Tom identified time as a crucial, frustrating factor.

All of those things take time. It's the time factor. It crunches me in that. It's not that I don't do it, it's that I don't do it as much or in a way that I ideally would if the standards didn't exist.

This frustration was a common theme in journal entries, lesson planning, and interview sessions, and the teacher analysis. Time constraints affected perceptions about the ability to teach in a culturally responsive way, eliminated opportunities for in-depth investigations, and narrowed choices about what could be taught. As a result, lessons were "scrapped" because of the testing schedule, preparation for the test, or similar interruptions. In summary, "It's not that I don't do it (teach in a cultural responsive manner), it's that I don't do it as much or in a way that I ideally would if the standards didn't exist." Indeed, time constraints were a prevalent theme.

As described earlier, the lack of time and the opportunity costs had unintended consequences. In one interview, Tom discussed the extent to which the statements on a state Department of Education webpage about teaching diverse students directed decisions about how and what to teach. The implication from this discussion was that these directives were of less importance because they were not necessarily or explicitly linked to teachers' accountability and if measured at all in a teacher's job assessment, cultural responsiveness was not as "high-stakes" when compared against other measures of performance.

...ideally teachers meet these standards (to be culturally responsive) every day, but the reality is, they are going to meet it on the day they are observed. But core content is not something you can put a dog and pony show together once to meet.

This response indicated a significant, unintended consequence of testing. The dilemma initiated a cost-benefit analysis that resulted in decisions about curriculum and instruction. The implication was that because teachers have so many requirements to meet, they must choose those attributed with the highest level of accountability and with the highest stakes for non-compliance. Though cultural responsiveness was articulated as a requirement and written into policy at both the district and the state levels, decisions about culturally responsive curriculum and instruction were negatively affected by the lack of accountability around their inclusion. The cost-benefit analysis employed by the teacher followed this line of reasoning: Teachers are evaluated based on their ability to prepare students to perform well on the assessment measures. While teachers are also evaluated on their teaching performance along with their capacity to address the needs of their students, these measures do not carry the same stakes that test results do. In order to gain his perspective, Tom was asked a specific follow up question: Do teachers really prioritize test preparation over cultural responsiveness when they are faced with the dilemma?

It depends on the type of person, too. I mean, what's the payoff? There is only so much that comes out of doing the right thing [to some teachers]... [Teachers] have a huge heaping plate of stuff to do. What are they going to do--where are they going to give their energy?

Indeed, this dilemma situates accountability demands and cultural responsiveness as a dichotomy and questions the relative consequences for compliance versus non-compliance and where the accountability matters-- within demands to address the standards and to increase performance on tests and/or within the realm of students' needs, be those academic, developmental, or cultural.

### Perceptions

The findings about perceptions locate how viewpoints about standards, testing, and culturally responsive teaching shaped decisions. Each set of perceptions reveal complex tensions that challenge standards and test scores as neutral, egalitarian, and sufficient measures of achievement, as well as challenge the notion that good intentions are adequate to ensure cultural responsiveness that is truly linked to the academic success of diverse students. Likewise, none of these demands were consistently portrayed as negative or positive. Perceptions about the role of standards and high-stakes testing illustrate this point. As described earlier, standards and high-stakes tests affected Tom's curricular decisions in this study. On the one hand, the standards provided useful guidelines and structure, as described by Tom. Further, the "standards aren't necessarily contrary to culturally responsive teaching." On the other hand, however, the standards must be carefully considered, "particularly the



standards that overly delineate the content to be tested.” This perception implied that a great deal of very specific content must be taught in a limited amount of time, eliminating many opportunities for alternate content that includes diverse players and perspectives or for in-depth learning that allow students to examine issues and raise questions about many events in United States history. For example, when students studied the expansion of the United States westward, many events received what was described as a:

...Cursory look. I am hitting big points like Jackson’s war with the bank, his Indian removal policy and the Trail of Tears. I usually do a longer unit on the displacement of Native Americans...but the time crunch has limited that process.

Content perceived to be potentially more engaging to 8<sup>th</sup> graders became “brushed over” to spend time on tested material. Thus, perceptions about standards and testing raise questions about both opportunity costs and time constraints.

Perceptions about the necessity to learn test-taking skills, particularly the reading and writing skills used by students when they take the tests, included the belief that those skills should be taught. Importantly, students who performed well on the tests had social capital that led to future opportunities. In order to foster students’ comfort and familiarity with testing structures, classroom instruction also included practice with those structures accompanied by students’ analysis of responses. Tom’s decision was based on his view that inadequately preparing students hindered their success. Lack of success on the part of students was problematic because of the significance of test performance-not on teacher evaluation- but on future opportunities for students. Poor performance potentially had detrimental effects that extended beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The desire to prepare students as well as possible and the unwillingness to “shortchange” students, particularly students labeled at-risk, by not preparing them for tests that were inevitable, further complicated the dilemmas of meeting multiple demands.

In spite of the prevalence of data supporting the primacy of test preparation and standards-based instruction, there was strong evidence substantiating the inclusion of cultural responsiveness within the testing cycle timeframe. Curriculum and instruction were often driven by the contexts and experiences of students. Tom’s knowledge of his students was informed by regular opportunities to learn about students and to apply that information in order to engage them with the content (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Sheets, 2005). One instance connected students to history through the use of authentic situations that confirmed (rather than assumed) their experiences, as well as the extension of concepts into students’ lives and actions. Cause and effect, a concept studied within the context of the Civil War, was first learned using issues such as losing a job

or an eviction. Students then followed a chain of events analyzing the repercussions of human actions. It is important to note that these issues and experiences were not framed in a way to perpetuate deficit perspectives of these students, but rather raised as realities many faced in order to examine and question the complexities of cause and effect and appreciate the complicated circumstances under which decisions are made. Further, rather than simply learn a chronology of the Civil War or a synopsis of famous and infamous individuals, dates, and events, students investigated issues within the war. Thus, the teacher and students critiqued the historical narrative surrounding the Emancipation Proclamation. Together, they examined some tough questions about this important document, as described in the planning materials and an interview. “In Kentucky, enslaved people were not freed by the Proclamation, raising an interesting conundrum. Why did Lincoln write it? Was it to free enslaved people or to dissuade Europe from joining the conflict?” In addition to piquing students’ interests, these questions also engaged them in research and critique of interpretations of United States history (Banks, 2005).

## Discussion

As described in the findings, there were several competing demands that effected this middle school teacher’s curricular decisions. The teacher described dilemmas he encountered regarding where his focus, and importantly, his time should be. The needs of students as adolescents, the demands of standards and high-stakes testing, and the tenets of culturally responsive teaching were all present in these dilemmas.

With respect to Tom’s perspectives, he believed that the dilemmas described above were not always resolved in the best interest of students, and in general, teaching under a standards-based system assessed by a high-stakes test potentially limited the extent to which he could teach in a truly culturally responsive manner. Though Tom voiced the desire throughout the study and possessed an educational background that included attention to cultural responsiveness, those intentions were regularly mitigated by the demands of standards and testing. His individual concerns are largely confirmed by Sleeter (2012) who holds that, in fact, “Globally, over the last two decades, attention to culturally responsive, multicultural approaches to teaching have largely been supplanted by standardized curricula and pedagogy...” (p. 562). An in-depth look at Tom’s perspectives of how that occurred provides useful insight for middle level educators.

Specifically, time constraints pushed decisions to progress from one topic or unit to another in a relatively short period of time. Thus, there was little chance for students to conduct in-depth analyses, perceived by Tom

as necessary to teach certain concepts and content, given the breadth of curriculum required by the standards. Decisions regarding the content as well as topics also were driven by Tom's perception that time needed to teach mandated curriculum eliminated time for other "multicultural" content that may be more culturally responsive. Likewise, in their study of new urban educators, Crocco and Costigan (2007) describe what they refer to in their title as "The Narrowing Curriculum and Pedagogy in the Age of Accountability" as an effect of standards and testing. Further, these authors identify English, Language Arts, and Social Studies at the middle and high school levels as areas particularly affected by these policies. They conclude that a significant consequence of standards and testing is an effect on teachers' beliefs that their teaching and abilities to connect with students, among other beliefs, are undermined by the context in which they are teaching.

Another dilemma included Tom's concerns about the nature of assessment. He believed that the assessment practices he needed to use in order to align with the state tests were insufficient indicators of students' achievement. In particular, the design of high-stakes tests often influence the ways teachers assesses students in other instructional contexts (Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). From a framework of cultural responsiveness, assessments that only include one or two strategies are often problematic. Tests that are largely either multiple choice or short response give a limited picture of a student's understanding (Sirotnik & Kimball, 1999) and can negatively influence minority students' performance (Madaus & Clark, 2001; Natriello & Pallas, 2001). Because this is the typical format for high-stakes tests, teachers often construct similar in-class assessments, as did Tom, removing possibilities for more responsive and formative assessments that provide a more complete picture of student performance as well as serve to improve achievement by informing instructional practice. Consequently, planning, instruction, and assessment were perceived as limited by the high-stakes testing environment with respect to cultural responsiveness.

Tom's perceptions offer middle level educators the opportunities to reflect on his dilemmas and return to the core values that define middle level education in order to navigate the competing demands that create teachers' dilemmas. Recommendations push thinking and action through a return to these core values. Effective teaching in the middle grades means curriculum, instruction, and assessment are built around students and support the developmental spectrum of the early adolescent (Jackson and Davis, 2000). While the competing demands of systems of accountability influence school factors, it is still the responsibility of middle grades educa-

tors to advocate for components of the middle school concept that will lead to powerful learning experiences (NMSA, 2010).

The first recommendation addresses the opportunities lost in "time crunches" or constraints and how these might be realistically negotiated through collaborations across content areas. The team concept as well as the interdisciplinary focus that defines the middle school provides teachers opportunities to communicate across their disciplines and determine how best to "reinsert" content that is eliminated. For example, reading selections in language arts, and topics, such as economics in practical living, afford teachers places to include additional multicultural content.

The second implicates teachers and their instructional leaders to consider how instructional decisions are shaped by the developmental *and* cultural needs of middle school students. Conversations about responsiveness in middle level education should include explicit emphasis on *cultural* responsiveness.

Finally, in order to challenge existing structures and make informed curricular and instructional decisions, middle level educators need information about how teachers in other schools working in different testing contexts are coping with the combined pressures. In their study of the changing roles of teachers, Valli and Buese (2007) noted that policies instituted at the federal, state, and local levels greatly affect teachers' roles. Further, they point to the need for more research on the relationships among testing policies, school cultures, and teachers' roles. Have other teachers employed effective strategies that can be adapted to local contexts? To that end, Sleeter (2011) presents several noteworthy examples, including a curriculum for elementary mathematics, as well as several recommendations for how to frame standards within multicultural contexts. Are there ways that teachers can reduce other burdens placed upon their time and energy to place a greater emphasis upon teaching in a culturally responsive manner? How can teachers best assist students who under-perform on standard measures of achievement? Turner (2009) offers suggestions on how to structure high-stakes testing preparations to align with middle school philosophy. How can those same teachers also teach beyond the tests in ways that are developmental and culturally relevant? How might these lessons challenge the nature and primacy of standards and test scores above other measures of learning? By sharing experiences and lessons learned, middle level educators can continue to focus on the multifaceted needs of their students.

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