# SCHOOL REFORM ON THE INSIDE: TEACHER AGENCY AT ONE PHILADELPHIA MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Few educators would deny that school reform is complex business, especially in large urban districts like Philadelphia. On many levels, diverse voices compete to forward particular visions of improved schooling; true, in every wave of reform, some calls for change are heard louder than others. In the current political climate, calls for accountability and standards have received the lion's share of attention. Michael Apple (2000) writes, "The seemingly contradictory discourse of competition, markets, and choice on the one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing, and national curriculum on the other have created such a din that it is hard to hear anything else" (p. 231). Yet, moving beyond media accounts and political rhetoric into the world of classrooms, teachers, and students, alternative voices are sometimes heard. As schools and classrooms are intersections of political, institutional, and sociocultural histories and contexts, the practices therein reflect a diversity of visions of schooling. Moreover, schools are populated with educators with their own histories, cultural understandings and expectations, and personal-professional goals, many of which may run counter to institutional forces behind school practice. Thus, far more complicated than the debates around policy and practice in the formation and institutionalization of reform policy is the reform's life (and, often, eventual death) in the classroom. This classroom-life is also, I would argue, far more interesting and important for those concerned with school improvement.

Put simply, the classroom is at the heart of the often-mixed messages of school reform and school practice. Educators must make sense of these mixed messages in order to do the work of schooling. Viewing educators as social agents amid the complexity of educational discourse and practice provides a distinctly different lens on reform than those traditionally used by policymakers. In this article, I explore how teachers at one Philadelphia middle school engaged their agency in order to navigate the complicated terrain of school reform. Moreover, I examine how, in the midst of negotiating the demands of top-down reform, these educators attempt to find ways to teach in alignment with their professional and personal beliefs about schooling.

*The study and its historical context*

During the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years, I conducted an eighteen-month ethnographic research study at a middle school in North Philadelphia. This school, which I call Cavner Middle School1, serves approximately 900 fifth through eighth grade youth, almost all of whom are of color (99%)2 and most of whom are considered low-income (85%). At the beginning of my study, former superintendent David Hornbeck's reform plan, Children Achieving, was in full force. At the same time, the School District of Philadelphia was under threat of takeover by the state. Cavner itself had been deemed "low performing" a few years earlier and a committee had required a number of changes in the school. In addition, an energetic and knowledgeable principal had recently begun her tenure at Cavner with high expectations for improvement. Thus, at the time of my study, Cavner was a whirlwind of school reform activity. Reform stemming from District initiatives, school-wide change efforts, and independent outside agencies all combined in a vibrant-if complicated-local context of school improvement work.

Through participant observation throughout the school, interviews with youth and educators, and the collection of policy documents, student work, and other artifacts, I studied what was happening at Cavner during this particular historical moment. Throughout the study, I was struck by what reform did to educators and what educators did to reform. I was also struck by the alternative influences on school change and school practice-influences that sometimes aligned with, and sometimes ran counter to school reform plans.3 But above all, I became fascinated with teachers' agency and how their professional identities informed their work. In what follows, I write about teachers negotiating their professional lives and the education of their students at the center of myriad reform currents and broader educational discourses. First, however, I describe how I am theoretically conceptualizing teacher agency.

*Teacher Agency*

The study from which this paper is drawn is premised on the notion that while culture, social structure, and history have produced

particular kinds of urban schools, there is always potential for social change through human agency. In critical studies of schooling, the agency of marginalized youth is highlighted as having transformative potential despite being structurally and culturally constrained (Fine, 1991; Foley, 1990; Fordham, 1996; Willis, 1977). The discussion of agency in this literature has been limited in at least two ways. First, agency has been highlighted in terms of "resistance." The two terms are linked throughout much of this literature. However, as Hugh Mehan and colleagues (1996) argue, "social agency is more than resistance. People make sense of their lives in a myriad of expressive, assertive and goal-directed ways within the constraints imposed on them" (p. 19). Resistance is only one of many possible expressions of agency.

A second limitation of discussions of agency in critical educational studies is that they have been elaborated in terms of marginalized youth. Writing specifically about critical studies of schooling conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Laurie Olsen (1997) highlights the problem of viewing these youth as the only true agents of school contexts.

> [I]n that body of work, the structure of schools, the curricular content, the behaviors and beliefs of teachers, and the policies are viewed as fixed instruments of reproduction against which students react. The only potential for change is in the cultural production of the students themselves. There is little probing about the role of adult resistance in the system, or of the power of political movements to create change in social relations. (p. 18).

While critical ethnographers have admirably documented and analyzed how youth creatively produce culture that often resists a system that they partially critique, they have not recognized the parallel agency of educators. Perhaps because of the role schools are seen to play in political economic terms and the close association of educators with the schools, or perhaps because teachers, by definition, are middle class, they have been viewed simply as purveyors of a reproductive and mystifying school ideology.

This study explored the agency of educators (as well as of students) in the context of mixed messages regarding how schools can best serve urban youth. Recognizing that "social agency is more than resistance," this paper discusses the myriad ways educators made sense of reform and produced school practice. I highlight the role of educators' professional identities as significant in the relationships among teacher agency and school reform.

*Teachers' Professional Identities and the Mixed Messages of School Reform*

Philadelphia, like cities and towns throughout the nation, has been hit hard by high stakes strategies for school change. Political pressure for increased accountability-measured by numerous quantitative indicators and enforced by sanctions-has changed the climate of many classrooms, schools, and districts. A key element in the high-stakes model of reform is increased standardized testing for students. In the spring of 2000, images of test preparation and test taking abounded at Cavner. In most classrooms I entered, blackboards and butcher paper posters listed school-sanctioned strategies for test success, such as using graphic organizers prior to writing essays, beginning essays with topic sentences, using context cues to decipher unknown words, etc. Flustered roster room administrators came to Small Learning Community (SLC) meetings with myriad-and often conflicting-announcements about testing schedules, resources, and what materials teachers would have access to prior to the tests. Ms. Cruz, the ESOL coordinator and curriculum support teacher, enumerated some of the tests the students would be taking.

> And this year, we had a Title 1 test, we had days of SAT-9 testing, and then the Talent Development does a testing of sixth graders with abbreviated SAT-9. And then the PSSA tests just started now, and they won't be finished until the end of April. And then in the middle of May the proficiency tests. There's really not much teaching going on. It's the testing, you know (int.a.4.18.01)4

In addition to the amount of time devoted to testing itself, class-time preparation for the tests was also prioritized at Cavner that spring. Specific strategies, particularly with respect to writing, were expected to be taught in classes. During an SLC meeting, Cavner's principal, Dr. Cotton, told the teachers that from now until testing, students should have homework four nights a week that focused on "open-ended writing" (fn2.16.01). This referred to teaching the school's youth how to write essays based on open-ended questions and was a particular area of focus for Cavner that year, both due to an emphasis on this sort of writing in particular tests and to a perceived weakness in this area among Cavner students. Dr. Cotton also initiated a school-wide contest in which the writer of the best response to an open-ended question, similar to those from one of the standardized tests, would win a $25 gift certificate.

During my second school year at Cavner, test-taking seminars were developed in which teachers were teamed to work with students on test-taking strategies. These seminars were held twice a week, first thing in the morning, for a longer-than-usual first period. Dr. Cotton described the purpose of these seminars as "teaching children how to respond in writing to open-ended questions." Students would be taught to understand the grading rubric and use graphic organizers, among other topics.

Talk of testing, which occurred in a number of spaces in the school, was filled with tension with respect to the future of the school, teachers, and youth at Cavner. At an SLC meeting, Ms. Allen, the vice principal, said that, "The whole focus this month is preparation for the SAT-9 test… Our life depends on the SAT-9 results." She went on to tell the teachers in attendance that the SAT-9 results would be disaggregated by grade, SLC, and classroom (fn2.23.00). The largely unspoken undercurrent was that, with the recent history of being characterized as "low performance" and the state takeover looming, the future of the school was uncertain. Without improved scores on standardized tests, the school could be reconstituted or taken over by the state.5

*Reform-in-Conflict*

Despite the time and energy devoted to standardized testing, it was just one of many reforms to receive a great deal of support from the administration of both the school and the district. Another was a move to project based learning. Each of Cavner's academic teachers was expected to develop an interdisciplinary, student-centered project. As the district promoted a move to project based learning—an eighth grade project had even become a district graduation requirement6—Cavner made project based learning a central focus of its reform plans. The school had experimented with different schedules for "project days," full days in which homerooms would remain together with their advising teachers for sustained work on their class projects. During the time of my research, project days occurred monthly, although Dr. Cotton had advocated for having them more frequently. Despite the separate days for sustained work on projects, teachers were expected to make projects a core component of daily instruction. Through project-based learning, Cavner was attempting to reform its approach to teaching and learning in ways that might be considered more constructivist, authentic, and interdisciplanary.

The focus on engaging students in creative, holistic projects on one hand, and discrete, skill-based exercises for test preparation on the other hand, was viewed as an explicit contradiction by a number of teachers at Cavner. This contradiction-among others-created conflicts for teachers. These conflicts were approached in multiple ways, which were influenced by educators' identities. Educators' professional interests and commitments, their status in the school, their connection to other educators, their visions of best practice, etc. all had profound implications for how both the test preparation and project-based learning mandates were implemented in classrooms. To illustrate the range of ways educators engaged their agency with respect to this perceived contradiction, I describe the responses of three Cavner teachers, Ms. Stafanis, Ms. Reddin, and Ms. Berman.

*Ms. Stafanis*. One of the first teachers I met at Cavner Middle School was Ms. Stafanis, a fifth and sixth grade social studies teacher. Outgoing and friendly, Ms. Stafanis made me feel at home as we sat in cramped student desks in a small room that served as both office/disciplinary classroom, waiting for a meeting of teachers in her small learning community. As we chatted, Ms. Stafanis enthusiastically described a project on Latin America her class did the previous year. She described artwork, special trips, and how her entire classroom had been transformed. It sounded like it had been interesting and fulfilling-for both her and her students. What struck me in that first meeting was Ms. Stafanis' excitement about her work and the confidence she seemed to have in her teaching (fn1.19.00).

Two months later, in another SLC meeting, teachers were getting another of several updates on the upcoming SAT-9 testing. The teachers were told that, on the writing exam, students would get one point for inverting the question in their answer. This was not news to any of us, and several teachers piped in with "TTQA." TTQA, which is what teachers called this strategy when teaching it to their students, stands for "turn the question into an answer." Several times that particular day and on others, TTQA was a mantra I heard in classrooms and other contexts around the school. (In fact, when one student was critiqued in a classroom for a poor answer, he defensively responded to the teacher, "At least I got a point," referring to his use of TTQA (fn3.22.00).) When TTQA was brought up at this particular SLC meeting, Ms. Stafanis said, "It's my life. I have to live it every day" (fn3.22.00).

Two days later, I ran into Ms. Stafanis as she smoked a cigarette outside the front doors of the school. As we talked she lamented that she had to focus so much on "skills" these days. Almost constantly, she indicated, she had to have her students practice essay writing in the form acceptable for the SAT-9s. She commented on how bored she was getting with this type of teaching; she much preferred doing projects with her students. "I wish I could do all projects" (fn3.24.00).

*Ms. Berman*. Ms. Berman, an eighth grade Reading/Language Arts teacher, was someone I came to know quite well over the course of my study. Her classroom, which was animated by an innovative community service learning project, became a focus of my study. Ms. Berman, a veteran teacher nearing retirement, had been doing projects for many years and had recently become interested in community service learning and had attended a West Coast conference on the topic. The first year of my study, Ms. Berman's class' project was titled, *Do our voices count?* Students studied African American voices through history to learn when and how voices counted. The class focused on democracy, making change through government agencies, organizing and other forms of political resistance, artistic expression, and other themes related to "making a difference." They studied the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement extensively. In addition, they did their own organizing and artistic expression related to making positive change in their school and community. After surveying peers and community members of all ages, the class developed projects to respond to changes desired by their communities.

At the height of Ms. Berman's project, when there was plenty left to do before the end of the school year, Ms. Berman was dismayed by the lack of time left after testing: "The rest of the year is testing, testing, testing" (fn4.19.00). Ms. Berman's project encompassed most of her teaching in the homeroom that she advised. She felt very conflicted about test preparation. While she engaged her students in some, sometimes trying to integrate it with class themes such as the Harlem Renaissance (fn3.22.00), she increasingly resented the time it took and resisted doing any at all. As the tests approached, she expressed her anxiety about them over and over. Sometimes she was critical of how other teachers were spending so much time, in her words, "teaching the test" (fn3.29.00) and asserted that the work her students were doing was much too important to interrupt. Other times she worried about rejecting test prep, asking what I thought about this decision. Her ambivalence was clear over a year later when I asked her about it in an interview. She said,

> I notoriously do not teach to the test, which is probably wrong, well, because so many people do, and it's like, that's what we're told, not so much told, but, you know, all the [test preparation] seminars and…um I just did what I was doing. I did not do that [teach to the test] (int.a.8.10.01).

Even as she vowed not to use her time with students for this purpose back in the spring of 2000, this conflict continued to be the focus of many of our conversations. Fairly unconcerned about sanctions for herself, she was worried about the possible outcomes for her students, saying, "I hope they do okay" (fn3.29.00).

*Ms. Reddin*. Ms. Reddin, a teacher who had been at Cavner for approximately five years teaching English as a Second Language, was another whose classroom had become a focus of my study. Despite her relative youth, Ms. Reddin had a developed identity as a critical multicultural teacher. Student-centered pedagogy and social justice-themed learning activities animated her classes.

While Ms. Stafanis felt unable to teach the way she wanted to because of test preparation and Ms. Berman felt unable to teach to the test because of her project, I was most surprised by Ms. Reddin's response to the administration's test prep mandate. I walked into her classroom one day to find large *student written* posters with test taking strategies on them. Ms. Reddin had turned the top-down teaching of discrete, decontextualized skills, one that she was very critical of, on its head and transformed it through her student-centered pedagogy. Since students' lives were central to all that occurred in her classroom, she now had students teaching one another testing strategies (fn3.24.00). Later that spring she handed me her students' writing about the experience of standardized testing. She had had them write their "reflections about testing," a response to three questions: Why do you think we have to take these tests? How did it make you feel? And do you think it is a fair test? In response to the last question, several students wrote that it was unfair that they were to be compared to native English speakers.

When I asked Ms. Reddin what she thought the biggest obstacles for urban schools were, she was articulate about her opposition to the increased focus on standardized testing.

> Well, the first thing that comes to mind is, because of the current administration with George Bush, is with this testing that he's fanatic about, the standardized testing for both teachers and students is going to be…it's going to be terrible because he wants to now test so often… And, you know, the more projects I do with my kids the more I see you can't test them on a continuum, especially creativity, like the [inaudible] project. How could you test somebody, you know, what they learned from that? I have kids that never spoke out in class create and then write to me, "that was the best thing I've ever done." It was like a breakthrough. And ended up doing just a beautiful [inaudible] won an award for it. How do you say to that kid who, say doesn't do well on their SAT-9, is that it for that kid? I'm really concerned about all this testing that's taking place and the pressure it's putting on administration and teachers to obviously teach to the

test… (int.a.7.20.01).

In a conversation in her classroom in the second year of my study, Ms. Reddin articulated several of her problems with the extensive focus on test preparation. First there was the resource allocation: Dr. Cotton had spent "thousands of dollars" on preparation books for the PSSA tests. Then there was the effect on the students: after testing in the morning, they are exhausted and in no shape to learn in the afternoon. Next was the futility of the school's goals: research suggests that scores do not go up overnight unless they are manipulated, Ms. Reddin argued. Then there was the contradiction with what we know about learning: "Learning is social, bottom line," she said. Ms. Redding continued by commenting that this sort of test taking is the opposite of what happens in classrooms. You would never ask a simple decontextualized question and then move on to something else, she argued. "That would never be a part of my lesson," she added. Finally, she expressed her outrage about what immigrants must face with the standardized tests, telling me that they must take them after only one year of ESL. During this conversation, Ms. Reddin suggested a book to me about what teachers can do about standardized tests. She also told me that she was in the process of writing an editorial about high-stakes testing for ESOL students (fn3.14.01).

Each of these three teachers (Ms. Reddin, Ms. Berman, and Ms. Stafanis) saw herself as a professional and expressed her agency in myriad ways. Actively resisting top-down mandates to conduct test preparation, pedagogically recontextualizing test preparation, or acquiescing to the administration's demands (and ultimately opting out of the school, district, or teaching profession) are all expressions of the social agency. Each of these teachers was critical of the program of extensive teacher-directed test preparations for different, sometimes overlapping reasons. A number of factors contributed to the different responses to the critique; some of which were contextual and others of which were related to the educators' identities. First, the teachers were caught within competing political agendas and competing beliefs about the purposes of schooling, as the school mandated "project days" just as they mandated the discrete skills to be taught during test preparation. This legitimated differing responses to the test preparation mandates. A more important contextual factor, perhaps, was the teachers' statuses in the school. Ms. Reddin was in leadership positions that were linked to the administration's respect for her teaching expertise. Ms. Berman was certainly considered a maverick but had the respect of the administration. Ms. Stafanis, on the other hand, was growing increasingly disenchanted by the school and, by the end of the following school year, was rumored to be trying to transfer out. These three cases suggest the importance of educator identity in navigating the complicated school reform terrain. Not only do professional assessments of reform and particular pedagogical stances contribute to the choices educators make about how to engage with reform, the lack of a solid professional identity (among, for example, some new teachers) may make the complexity of the reform environment too overwhelming to navigate at all.

*"Putting your Foot Down" or Burning Out: Professional Identities and Oppressive Reform*

The spring of all-consuming standardized testing notwithstanding, the contemporary high-stakes environment meant more for Cavner than simply improving scores on these measures. Less often recognized than the push for higher standards and greater accountability in the current climate are the alternative signs of a "good school." The audiences for school change and improvement are multiple and diverse; they demand different things from schools. Cavner is one of many 21st century schools that worked to gain resources that the district could not afford and implement programs and reform initiatives to-in the terms of policymakers and reformers-build capacity at the school. Several researchers have documented this trend of abundance in school reform. Of an elementary school in Virginia, Jan Nespor (1997) writes,

> During my two years at Thurber Elementary School, the principal, Mr. Watts, embraced, with varying levels of passion, a host of innovations: portfolio assessment, outcomes-based education, cognitive coaching, performance assessment, business-school partnerships, business-in-the-school programs, computer simulation curricula, volunteer mentoring programs, site-based management, whole language and writing process pedagogies, cross-age grouping, the integration of special education students into the regular education classrooms, and nontraditional report cards (p. 1).

Jean Anyon (1997) found a similar trend at Marcy School, a K-8 school in Newark, New Jersey. She listed eight major reforms in a core sample of Newark schools that included Marcy. These included school based management, all-day kindergartens, Madeline Hunter teacher training programs, and a push for basic skills remediation. Marcy School took on at least eight smaller projects, which included cooperative learning, numerous community partnerships, extended day programs, and several curricular reforms (Anyon, 1997, p. 18-19).

Cavner experienced similar deluges of reforms, special programs, and local partnerships. In this case, the wealth of initiatives

went beyond mandates from the district (although these constituted a large part of the reform context) and came from within the school itself. Among the reform initiatives and special programs that made a large impact on the school or on certain classrooms, I counted seven district-mandated reforms, twelve school-initiated reforms and programs, and four Small Learning Community partnerships with outside organizations.7 The multitude of initiatives and special programs were viewed by many as symbols of a "good school". Significantly, in addition to the programs being numerous, they were also viewed as "cutting edge." As one SLC coordinator put it in a meeting, "We are at the cutting edge of what is going on in education." Referring specifically to project-based learning, he continued, "We are light years ahead of everybody else" (fn6.14.00).

Upon closer inspection, however, the excess of programs and reforms-despite their status as cutting edge-often belied Cavner's school improvement aims in practice. Teachers appeared to experience the school reform climate as oppressive. While some initiatives occasionally captured teachers' interests, generally teachers felt overwhelmed with all of the demands of the reforms and special programs. As we walked back to her classroom one day, Ms. Stafanis listed a number of the things she had to do with respect to all that was going on in the school. When I asked, "How do you keep track of it all?" she responded, "I don't. No one knows what's going on" (fn3.22.00). Other teachers expressed similar sentiments:

> **Ms. Reddin**: Well, weeks ago, we finished up our SLC meetings for the week of summer planning for the following year. I wish you had been there because we sat there at the end of the first day and said, okay, now, what are the seven things that we have to make sure…what are the seven themes we're following? We are following, like there's the theme of cultural diversity that's supposed to be school-wide. Within that there's this thing called the arts and humanities SLC has an acronym, IPAS, and it's a way of looking at things. And it stands for-and I have it all written down because there are so many themes that I have to keep track of. Then there's the theme of arts and humanities… And it's that whole idea of, you know, breadth over depth. That's why we're going crazy. There were a couple of us going crazy the whole week of the SLC meeting because there are so many things that the SLC leader was saying. But you have to tie it into this. Then there's this. Then there's this. And, you know, it's like what if we don't do it? What if we just whittled this down to two things we want to focus on? What's going to happen? That's the way I feel (int.a.7.20.01).
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> **Ms. Genovese**: I feel sometimes overwhelmed by all the things that are going on in this school. I understand our principal's objective and her goals and her dreams for the school. But sometimes you can't work thoroughly on one project without being pulled from that and put into another project or another meeting or another idea. And so, I don't know how fully developed each idea gets because, it's kind of, you're running from one thing to another thing to another thing (int.a.4.11.01).
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> **Mr. Taylor**: It seemed like everything was just thrown on, thrown on you. It wasn't a gradual thing, which you can really work up to (int.a.5.1.01).
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> **Curriculum Support Person, Ms. Cruz**: If it's too much you just can't handle it all. It's just too much. I mean, sometimes you can have too much of a thing. Sometimes you think, well, we don't have enough books, or we don't have enough curriculum ideas. And then when you really give [teachers] a whole lot you get complaints that it's too much. It really is because they want to do a good job. They want to do something well. But then they're getting spread too thin. You know, the depth versus breadth kind of issue. So, I'm finding that because I really try to provide the teachers with a lot of resources. I'm really always looking for that. And sometimes people say, "not another thing." So, you have to look- and they say that, not because they, they're lazy. It's just that they can't do everything and do it well. I mean, the smatterings of little things is not effective either. You know, so… You have to make choices, and you can't do everything. It's a lot of pressure. But there's always…the problem, it seems like people are making up ideas downtown. Say they come from downtown, wherever you want to pretend they're coming from, because they have nothing better to do. They're just shoveling it back here, and we're receiving all these things. And you just can't do

everything (int.a.4.18.01).

As several of these teachers suggested, involvement in myriad programs and initiatives with all of the related time demands often took them away from the work of teaching. When Ms. Reddin and I were talking about how much was going on one day in her classroom, she said that she and Ms. Genovese were just talking about that. "We were saying, 'How can it not cut into the time we have to prepare and our instruction?'" (fn3.14.01).

*Responding to Reform Demands*

Teachers' professional identities influenced how they responded to the deluge of reform demands. Some of the teachers with whom I spoke asserted their agency by closing their classroom door to the demands or just 'putting their foot down,' in the words of Ms. Genovese.

> As a teacher, you've got to decide what you want to be involved in and what works, and then stick with that. You've got to say no to things. And I've learned how to say, you know what, no, I can't use that, so I'm not going to do that, or I'm not going to go to this meeting. So, you've got to kind of put your foot down and say these are the only things that I'm going to get involved in; these are the only things I'm going to involve my kids in, and I'm not going to do anymore. It's got to be quality over quantity (int.a.4.11.01).

Ms. Reddin made a similar point:

> And, see, I don't like to be the kind of teacher that, okay, I'm going to close my door and not worry about it. But I will, obviously, make my own, as a teacher I'm going to make my own decisions and go with the common sense I have (int.a.7.20.01).

In these ways, Ms. Reddin, Ms. Genovese, and other teachers engaged their professionalism by making informed choices about their daily work lives despite what some saw as a school climate that stripped teachers of such decision making power.8 It is important to note that many of the teachers who "put their foot down" to some reform demands were engaged in alternative professional development communities and networks. Ms. Genovese, for example, was working very closely with a science education reformer. The two spent hours each month developing new curricula together. Other teachers who rejected some reform demands were engaged in networks that were more in line with their professional interests.

Once again, however, teachers were not equally empowered to assert their agency in the ways Ms. Reddin and Ms. Genovese did. This also seemed related to their status in the school. New teachers appeared especially daunted by the demands placed on them. Mr. Heller, a young social studies teacher who was new to the school, for example, clung tightly to the official mandates during his first year of teaching at Cavner. Ms. Berman, his mentor, strongly encouraged him-in some instances implored him-to work with her on community service-learning projects. On several occasions, I listened as Ms. Berman implored Mr. Heller to join her in this "community stuff." Usually he listened patiently for a short while before protesting and listing what "they," presumably the administration, expected him to do. To him, this meant following the official curriculum and the textbook. Ms. Berman told him not to worry about following the curriculum so closely. "Use the book as a resource," she suggested. She told him to find something that he was interested in. She even described the transformation she was seeing in her students as a result of her project. Still, Mr. Heller would not budge (fn3.15.00).9

Many Cavner teachers seemed to feel powerless in the face of the demands of the current reform climate of the school. Others viewed saying no or shutting their classroom door as the best responses for themselves or their students. Tyack and Cuban (1995) write about how teachers' professionalism pushes them to subvert or hybridize reforms so that they make sense. Looking historically at the cycles of policy and reform versus the relative stability of institutional practice in their book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, they write,

> Because teachers retained a fair degree of autonomy once the classroom door was closed, they could, if they chose, comply only symbolically or fitfully or not at all with the mandates for change pressed on them by platoons of outside reformers. Or teachers could respond to reforms by hybridizing them blending the old and the new by selecting those parts that made their job more efficient or satisfying (p. 9).

Far from condemning teachers for this resistance, the authors write about it as an expression of their professionalism. They argue, "Sometimes preserving good practices in the face of challenges is a major achievement, and sometimes teachers have been wise to resist reforms that violated their professional judgment" (1995, p. 5).

At Cavner, those who rejected reform-either literally or intellectually-often had quite confident and developed identities as educators. They were often excited to talk about their philosophies of teaching and learning. For example, in one my very few conversations with Ms. Bailey, an experienced African American teacher who had been at Cavner for a number of years, she appeared disgusted with school reform generally and said that it often made things worse. All of the standardized testing was a good example of this, she said. But then she visibly lit up when she started talking about her teaching and how much she loved it. She had an inquiry philosophy of teaching and delighted in giving me examples of what she and her students were doing in her classroom; she said, "That's what learning is," (fn4.19.00).

*Beyond Reform: Engaging Agency and Expressing Identity to Promote School Change*

At any given moment, the world of educational discourse is rife with myriad ideas and visions of school improvement, some of which make their way into cycles of school reform. Others remain marginal from the perspective of policy and institutional change, but garner interest in other forums, including schools of education and teacher preparation programs, networks of allied educators, and the lives of individual teachers. Through my experiences at Cavner, I became interested in how diverse ideas and educational discourses-even those marginalized in the current political context-come to influence the education of urban youth. I came to see the work of teachers like Ms. Reddin and Ms. Berman as grassroots school change, change inspired by the interests, identities, and agency of educators.

Ms. Reddin and Ms. Berman were very different in the way that they talked about education and their students, in the way that they taught, and in their personal characteristics and background. However, both thought and talked a lot about how schooling could be used as a tool to empower their students; both taught with social justice aims in mind. Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, both tried to influence policy and practice outside their own classrooms. Ms. Berman worked hard to find colleagues with whom to collaborate on meaningful service learning projects. She tried to educate her colleagues about the possibilities of alternative practice and get them to question the status quo of teaching and learning at urban schools. Ms. Reddin, too, offered her perspectives and critique at SLC meetings and attempted to engage her colleagues in critical discussion around practice. She especially worked to advocate for, and educate on behalf of, youth learning English as a second language. Both of these teachers were put in leadership positions reflective of their professional identities, and they tried to make change from these positions as well (e.g., in the second year of my study a position was developed to allow Ms. Berman to work with teachers on project based learning).

I began to see the work inside and outside Ms. Reddin's and Ms. Berman's classrooms as having the potential for grassroots school change. Both were involved in outside networks and organizations with particular visions of improved schooling, and both worked at the classroom, school, and community level to make change along the lines of these visions. American schools are not known for being very amenable to this type of change, and Cavner was no different.10 Yet these two teachers and many others did indeed effect school change, albeit in limited ways, that reflected their professional identities, interests, and beliefs about schooling.11

*Educational networks and professional identity*. Many teachers with whom I talked were connected to educational networks of some kind, through their interests and/or on-going professional development. Ms. Reddin participated in a number of educational networks around issues of diversity and social justice, and English language learners. She was connected to the school district's Office of Language Equity Issues, and was awarded grants and participated in special events through them:

> The Office of Language Equity Issues, OLEI, through Jennifer Gonzales, throughout the year she has gatherings. And for example, in the fall she has something called literacy day. And I presented strategies, I think, on reading and writing in the ESL classroom. And there were four other workshops there. One was on technology. Another one was on a jazz theme that somebody had put together. And it was on a Saturday. And I would say about 200 people showed up for it, ESOL teachers. There's a very strong network of ESOL teachers in the city. And like I said, on a Saturday they show up. That shows you the power of that group. So, whenever there's a function we always get a large turnout (int.a.5.22.01).

Ms. Reddin also participated in the Philadelphia's chapter of the National Writing project, which focused on literacy and social justice. This organization explicitly "values diversity" and sees its mission as related "equity." It is an organization that brings together many activist-oriented educators throughout the region. Through this network, Ms. Reddin facilitated a monthly group conversation on English Language Learners and writing instruction. In these ways, not only was Ms. Reddin a regular participant, but she had begun to take leadership roles in her organizations.
Ms. Reddin considered her ongoing coursework at Arlington University to be a network of sorts as well, saying,

> I think that in terms of the courses I've taken, too, like just the network of people that I had at Arlington, like, because we were all together as teachers in that program. At least when we'd come back in class the discussions were really important to me or just even…not even in class meeting up with people there. Just having that network of talking about it informally like that was helpful. Even my classes now when I go to, and talking about my experiences and what's going on in my classroom, when the class allows me to do that at Arlington, that, to me, is important because I don't do that on my own, or I don't have that kind of network here [at Cavner] as much as I do when I go to those classes (int.a.5.22.01).

The network that Ms. Reddin talked about most, however, was a local teacher research group, which I call the Diversity and Justice group, funded by a large educational foundation. In this group, eleven Philadelphia teachers, diverse by race and the grade level that they taught, working with three group leaders, chose a question about multicultural education to investigate in their classroom. The group would meet for three years; during the second and third years, they would take an even closer look at their questions.

Much of the curriculum Ms Reddin used during the 2000-2001 school year was intimately connected to her question around the "impact of using multicultural curriculum in my classroom and the effects of it linguistically on students" (int.5.22.01). Throughout that year, Ms. Reddin and her students studied oppression throughout the world, particularly in the 1930s.

> [I]n the beginning of the year when we started this theme of looking at oppression, the books that I chose were books that not only, you know, dealt with this issue, but also, I wanted to include, I wanted to include literature that reflected the demographics of my classroom. So, like, right now, we're reading *Felito*, which is the story about a Puerto Rican girl. And then we've read about the oppression in Cambodia in the '30's, and the whole decade of the '30's, and blacks being treated certain…in the North, the ways they were treated in the North, *Our of the Dust*. What was the other one? Oh, we started with the whole school novel, *Number the Stars*, which was about the Holocaust. So, yeah, I definitely, with that in mind, I also, you know, was thinking about the different cultures that we could look at through oppression (int.a.5.22.01).

Ms. Reddin felt as if her practice and her thinking were being pushed significantly by her participation in this group.

> For example, the [Diversity and Justice] group, that's a good example of something that's so valuable to me right now because what I'm doing in my classroom completely relates to my research. And by taking, for example, tomorrow I'm going to present some of my student work to the [Diversity and Justice] group. And I'm going to talk to them about some themes that I've seen come through with all the novels that I've used, the multicultural novels, and some things I've realized between my Spanish-speaking students, some of them, and my Asian students. And I think it's important. I want to bounce that off them and see what they think. We're going to look at writing. And that will help me look at my classroom, I think, in a different way, or see what I need to improve in terms of practice, or all those questions I have. So, that group has really given me a nice network of people to work with. And listening to their research and then thinking about it in my classroom (int.a.5.22.01)

Both her own research and, especially, dialogue with other teachers invested in critical multicultural education influenced Ms. Reddin's practice and her identity as a certain kind of teacher.

> What it's done for me is that it's just reinforced a lot of things that I've always believed in, but it's nice to hear other people feeling the same way I do about things because there's times at the school I feel very alone. And maybe, you know, I think that's why I was more apt to stand up for what I believe in, having that group and talking about it and then feeling a lot more confident when I come back to school… (Ms. Reddin, int.a.7.20.01).

*Personal commitments and professional identity*. Ms. Berman was also connected to educational networks that influenced her practice. Professional identities are not constructed wholly in response to educational networks and their associated movements, however. Ms. Berman's background and interests were particularly salient in her approach to education and its role in promoting social justice. First and foremost, Ms. Berman was an intellectual with a passion for learning, history, and literature. She told me that she loved the "creative" aspect of teaching (fn11.1.00), and indeed, she expressed a great deal of excitement around new ideas that she developed to implement in her classroom. More than once she said that her favorite thing to do in her role as an educator was to select and buy books (fn5.24.00). Indeed, she was a voracious reader. As an educator with many years of experience, she had a definite philosophy of teaching. While I do not know when and how Ms. Berman began doing project based learning, she told me on numerous occasions that she had been doing it for many years; she said, "I've been doing this so long… before the buzzword" (fn4.17.00) and often described other projects she had done in years past.

Ms. Berman's identity as a Jewish woman was also very salient in her classrooms. One day, early in my fieldwork, special events were dominating the day, and our time in Ms. Berman's class was more relaxed than usual; students worked on different projects and played games. After two students sang a song together in front of the class, Ms. Berman broke into song herself, telling her class she was singing the Hebrew National Anthem (fn2.26.00). In addition, Ms. Berman often compared the literature and history the students were learning about to that of Jews throughout history. What was particularly striking to me, however, were the connections she made between important class themes of oppression, resistance, voice, and social justice, which were usually discussed with respect to the African American experience, to the experiences of Jews in the U.S. and abroad. In this way she made connections among human experiences with respect to the themes of social justice/injustice. It appeared to me that Ms. Berman made these connections from a personal place in addition to her role as educator; for example, she explained how schooling became a tool against oppression when emphasizing education's importance for her African American, Asian American, and Latino students. "That's a complete part of my culture," she told the students (fn5.10.00).

*Reflections on Teacher Agency and School Reform*

The work of teachers including Ms. Reddin, Ms. Berman, and others who sought to change their classrooms and the broader school and district12, was not meant to explicitly subvert school reform, but was intended to improve schooling in ways that empowered Cavner's students. In some cases teachers were connected with networks that promoted the school's or the district's reform plans. Ms. Berman, for example, was the school's resident expert in community service learning (a focus of the district and school), having attended a national conference on the topic and having become connected with non-profits in the city that worked with youth on service learning projects. The story of these Cavner teachers is not a story of subversion but of agency in the complicated reform context of Philadelphia and Cavner at the turn of the 21st century.

Viewing educators as social agents has important implications for the practice and study of school reform. While reformers have certainly recognized teachers' ability to shut their classroom doors to reform, teacher agency means much more than that. Teachers navigate the mixed messages of school reform daily and work to preserve good practice when reform is perceived to threaten their visions of quality schooling. In this article, I have aimed to highlight the importance of educators' professional identities in the study of teacher agency and reform. At Cavner, as well as at other schools in Philadelphia and the nation, educators make sense of reform and produce new educational practice through the context of their professional identities. In some cases, educators are linked to movements that promote alternate visions of improved schooling. In all cases, educators must engage their agency within a context of mixed messages about school reform and about the education of their students.

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**Notes**

1 All names, with the exception of Superintendent Hornbeck's, are pseudonyms. back
2 Approximately 80% of students were classified as African American, 12% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% as Hispanic, and 1% as white (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2000). back
3 In this paper I conceptualize reform as institutionalized educational change. In this way I am drawing a distinction between school change that happens more organically-such as the grassroots change I write about later in the paper-and that which is planned and implemented at the level of schools, districts, communities, and governments. Thus, reform is viewed as but one avenue to school change. back
4 For the purposes of this paper, I use the abbreviation "int" followed by the date to refer to data gathered during interviews and "fn" followed by date for data gathered during participant observations. back
5 Sanctions for individual teachers and administrators were also viewed as a possibility, although, with the exception of the principal's salary, the specifics of this were not often discussed at Cavner. back
6 In addition, for eighth graders, community service learning-another requirement for eighth grade graduation-was a component of their larger projects. back
7 I have chosen to refrain from describing any of the specific reforms, programs, and partnerships in order to protect the anonymity of the school. back
8 Some would consider contemporary trends in school reform "deprofessionalizing" as they limit the authority of the teacher to make decisions about his or her areas of expertise, such as assessing students, designing curriculum and instruction, etc. At Cavner, for example, packaged curricula in subject areas such as Reading/Language Arts had been implemented as additional components of reform. Some Cavner teachers were critical of the prescriptive nature of these curriculum packages. back
9 There was quite a bit of turnover among new teachers at Cavner, as there is across the district and, indeed, the nation. However, "newness" to the profession should not always be seen as a barrier to a strong professional identity. Ms. Reddin had only been teaching five years and, as I argue, had a very developed professional identity. back
10 As I discuss elsewhere (Niesz 2003), despite the energy behind school change at Cavner, teachers were not given time to talk with each other and work together to develop collegial orientations toward change. Talk about practice was rare, not because teachers were not interested (they were), but because there was no sanctioned time or place for such talk. back
11 I write extensively elsewhere about the specific limitations to grassroots school change at Cavner (Niesz 2003). back
12 Both teachers had been involved in district level leadership at times during their careers. back

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