~ Chapter 3

Principled Resistance: How Teachers Can Survive and Thrive in a Time of Standardization

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Abstract

In an era of scripted curriculum and high-stakes testing, the latitude teachers have for making curricular decisions in their classrooms has significantly declined. The authors report findings from a literature review of teachers' principled resistance to curricular control. Principled resistance occurs when teachers reject curricular mandates that violate their professional principles. When teachers believe instructional mandates do not meet students' academic and social needs, negatively impact ethnically diverse and low socio-economic students, and are not culturally responsive, they resist. Teachers resist through strategic compliance, strategic compromise, strategic redefinition, and overt and outright rejection. Specific examples of principled resistance are provided to give teachers the tools to responsively adapt required curriculum that does not meet their students' needs.

Keywords: principled resistance, curricular control, teacher decision-making

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Good teachers have always been adaptive and responsive to their students' needs (Vaughn et al., 2022). However, in an era of scripted curriculum and standardized testing, this has become much more difficult. In the past, teachers often had greater control over their curricular decisions. Using the state standards and district-provided materials, teachers made instructional decisions for their students. However, in the current age of accountability, this is no longer the case. Teachers find themselves in situations where they face increasingly rigid curricular control from people outside of their classrooms.

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In our work with pre-service teachers and the cooperating teachers who support them, we became interested in teachers who resist—in both large and small ways—the external curricular controls that do not align with what they believe to be true about teaching and learning. For one of the authors, this idea emerged in her dissertation. As a researcher, she studied a novice teacher in her first full year of teaching and coined the phrase "appropriately subversive" (Talley, 2014, p. 159). She defined it as the notion that teachers nod their heads, attend all the meetings, check all the boxes, and then work hard to figure out a way to do what is best for their students based on their needs and their professional judgment. Teachers work to both follow and subvert the system. The subversion is deemed appropriate by the teachers' commitment to effectively identify and meet their students' social and academic needs. While good teachers have always worked the system to do what is best for students, increasingly, teachers may find themselves at odds with scripted curricular mandates and an over-reliance on standardization. Exercising their professional judgment is more crucial than ever.

For the other author, his interest in teacher resistance emerged as he wrestled with numerous curricular restraints in the classroom that limited his capacity to exercise assessment-based instruction. Some of these restraints were related to required preparation for high-stakes reading tests. Others were connected to curricular mandates that emerged from the Reading First Grant of the early 2000s and will be discussed in more detail below. Both authors have clear memories of participating in this type of resistance during our time teaching in elementary schools. Thus, in our role now as teacher educators and researchers, we decided to investigate.

Principled Resistance

Principled resistance occurs when teachers reject curricular mandates, not because they are lazy or unopened to change but because such mandates violate their professional principles (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Teachers often have good reasons to resist inflexible instructional requirements (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995), especially when such mandates are deemed unhelpful and even harmful to their students' learning.

In our review of the literature, we searched for and documented examples of principled resistance in school settings. We identified 62 studies that we felt warranted further investigation. In addition to locating existing scholarship documenting teachers' principled resistance to curricular control, we determined which of the social resistance strategies identified by Lacey (1977) and Sikes et al. (1985) that teachers have used to reject instructional mandates that conflict with their teaching philosophies. We also identified additional resistance strategies teachers have used that do not fit these preexisting categories. Lacey (1977) identified two social strategies teachers use to resist institutional structures: strategic compliance and strategic redefinition. Sikes et al. (1985) added a third category to Lacey's (1977) models: strategic compromise. Although some of the existing research on teacher resistance has drawn upon the work of Lacey (1977) and Sikes et al. (1985), our review was the first to use their social strategies to analyze the resistance of a large number of teachers across multiple studies.

Teachers' reasons for principled resistance to curricular control, that emerged from the literature we reviewed, centered around three themes: they believed the mandated curriculum did not meet students' academic and social needs, the programs most negatively impacted ethnically diverse students and those from low-socio-economic backgrounds, and the programs were not culturally responsive. We hoped that by identifying and discussing these strategies with teachers, we could provide a pathway for them to examine ways to differentiate their classroom instruction in meaningful ways that align with their pedagogical beliefs. In this way, teachers can stay true to their professional identities while working within school systems and the policies that govern them.

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In this article, we describe in additional detail each of the social resistance strategies from Lacey (1977) and Sikes et al. (1985) that we used to categorize our findings. We also provide representative examples from the 62 studies we located in our review as well as our own experiences in the classroom. We then conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for classroom teachers.

Strategic Compliance

Strategic compliance occurs when individuals comply with institutional restraints but maintain private reservations about them or resist covertly in a strategic manner (Lacey, 1977). These teachers comply either because they cannot envision an alternative or because they feel powerless and lack the confidence to speak out openly. While they may not resist in public, they often find ways to resist privately, whether through their actions or mindset.

In our review, strategic compliance included the categories of compliance with frustration, compliance with complaint, and resisting covertly. For example, in a study by Eisenbach (2012), a middle school teacher used the scripted curriculum because she was the team leader and felt obliged to be an example. She stated, "Do I miss my own lessons? Absolutely!...but this curriculum is what we are supposed to do, so it's what I do…I'm miserable. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth staying in this job if this is what I'm forced to do" (p. 155). In this way, she complied but was clearly frustrated and complained that she was not happy about it. Strategic compliance also occurs when teachers quietly resist behind closed doors.

Strategic Compromise

Teachers strategically compromise when they openly draw upon their interests, knowledge, and expertise in addition to adhering in some way to a mandated curriculum (Sikes et al., 1985). We identified five different methods of strategic compromise in our review: adjusting pacing, rearranging, supplementing, omitting, and hybridizing. Using these methods, teachers compromise by finding ways of "adapting to the situation that allows room for their interests, while accepting some kind of modification of those interests" (Sikes et al., 1985, p. 238). For example, Karen, an elementary teacher, found herself with a scripted phonics curriculum that took large chunks of time and taught skills in isolation. Noticing that her students were struggling and disengaged, she adjusted the program's pacing. This change allowed her to supplement the required decodable readers with authentic literature. She also incorporated writing, something the required curriculum had omitted (Meyer, 2002). Karen was very open about these changes, separating her from those who covertly resisted through strategic compliance. She also continued to use the components of the required curriculum that she found beneficial for her students, something that separated her from the overt and outright resistance model we will discuss later. Karen was able to use the curriculum her district asked her to use and teach in ways that were responsive to the needs of her students. Using strategic compromise is a viable avenue for teachers to satisfy the requirements of their district while also staying true to their pedagogical beliefs and successfully differentiating instruction for their students.

Strategic compromise is the method of resistance one of the authors most often employed in her classroom. She viewed all curricular materials provided to her by the district as resources. However, the pace and order of instruction and the choice of which materials to use was a decision she made based on the needs of her students and her own beliefs about teaching and learning. As an early childhood literacy teacher, she always supplemented lessons with authentic children's literature. Moreover, movement and play were infused into lessons as often as possible. An example of a strategic compromise she made involved rejecting the use of workbook exercises and opting to either send them home for "homework" put them in workstations or give them to older students for the purpose of "playing school," or staple them together to

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make “Summer Fun Workbooks.” In this way, the workbooks were not wasted, but she was able to focus on more developmentally appropriate methods in her instruction.

Strategic Redefinition

Strategic redefinition occurs when teachers move beyond simply resisting instructional mandates in their classrooms to attempting to change those mandates on a larger scale (Lacey, 1977). Because teachers typically have limited power within their schools to promote change, strategic redefinition normally requires that teachers influence those holding power within their settings to bring about change. Three methods of strategic redefinition emerged in our review: change from within, going public, and collective action. Some of the teachers in the sources we located enacted strategic redefinition by working to bring about change within the school environments in which they worked. Others moved beyond their classrooms and sought to bring about change by reaching out to the general voting public via the Internet. Teachers also worked through teacher organizations and unions to collectively resist the rigid enforcement of mandated curricula.

In a study by Gumina (2022), three bilingual teachers worked within their districts to resist mandates and policies that did not serve their students. The teachers were asked to use a transitional bilingual program, but the assessments for the students were still high stakes and monolingual. The teachers felt that the curriculum still focused exclusively on monolingual instruction, which negatively impacted their bilingual learners. They worked to change the system from within by conducting professional development for their fellow teachers describing the benefits of bilingualism and also helping teachers identify the key differences between monolingual and bilingual instruction and advocate for a 50/50 biliteracy model. One of the teachers, Mikaela, modified the required literacy program to align with the bilingual Literacy Squared Framework. Another teacher, Alexis, employed assessments that were representative of all the students' languages in the class to provide choice. Advocating for their students’ needs professionally allowed them to impact change on a larger scale.

Strategic redefinition is a method one of the authors employed successfully. His experience with strategic redefinition occurred in the early 2000s during the Reading First grant. His district received a scripted reading program that was “scientifically research-based” and was to be used with the district’s Title I schools. At the time, his school was not Title I, but he was instructed to use the intervention component of the new reading program (that came in boxed kits) with his struggling readers. Neither he nor his students thought highly of the program. The students needed a good reason to read the contrived passages and focusing too much on speed and accuracy wasn’t the solution. They expressed their frustration by punching holes in the new boxes that arrived.

The author first reached out to his principal to make his case. She empathized with him and took him to meet with the assistant superintendent. With a stack of research articles from his M.Ed. program and position statements from the International Reading Association (e.g., https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/position-statements), he made a case for tutoring that involved authentic literature that was responsive to his students’ specific needs. The assistant superintendent then took him to meet with the associate superintendent, and through those meetings, he was able to gain permission to alter the program. Often, he altered it to the extent it was no longer recognizable. Although it was a win for him and his students, it did not help the other teachers and students in the district who were not granted this extra freedom.

Overt and Outright Rejection

One of the categories we found that did not fit the categories identified by Lacey (1977) and Sikes et al. (1985) was overt and outright rejection. Overt and outright rejection occurs when teachers openly refuse to participate in mandated curricular control. Although not

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extremely common, there were examples in the literature of teachers who openly refused to follow curricular mandates. This was often done by veteran teachers with high levels of support from school stakeholders. Mr. Morris, a middle school ELAR teacher, refused to use the packaged curriculum. He was allowed to be a rebel because of his high test scores. Most examples of overt and outright resistance were aligned with Mr. Morris' practice.

> I do what I want to do and what I know I need to do, and they leave me alone. My students learn and score well on standardized tests while I utilize my own lessons and ideas. That's the way it should be and that's the way I hope it remains. (Eisenbach, 2012, p. 156)

Teachers rejected commercial programs, rigid lesson planning models, and excessive test preparation. In the resistance literature we examined, very few teachers were asked to leave or resign. Many chose to find other schools to work in that are more closely aligned with their pedagogical beliefs (e.g., Datnow & Castellano, 2000). As the research suggests, many teachers have more curricular freedom than they realize.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers today are often caught between doing what they believe is best for students and implementing increasingly rigid standardized testing and scripted curriculum. This is a difficult position for a group of people who may pride themselves on being rule followers. Examining principled resistance provides a potential model that teachers can implement in their classrooms so that they may more closely align their practices with their pedagogical beliefs. Strategic compliance, strategic compromise, strategic redefinition, and overt and outright resistance may be helpful for teachers as they determine how best to respond within their given contexts.

In particular, strategic compromise and strategic redefinition allow teachers to differentiate instruction based on the needs of their students and maintain a level of professionalism by adhering in appropriate ways to curricular mandates and standardized testing (Lacey, 1977; Sikes et al., 1985). Strategic compromise calls on teachers to make decisions about the use of provided curricular materials (Sikes et al., 1985). Using their professional knowledge, they adjust, omit, and supplement the curriculum as they see fit. Strategic redefinition allows teachers to move from resisting in the solitude of their classroom to resisting on a larger scale. Teachers employing this strategy are attempting to affect change within the larger educational community (Lacey, 1977). Another important implication from this review is the reminder that change is possible. When even a few teachers successfully resist by strategically redefining practices, it empowers others to do the same, increasing the chances of broader, large-scale change.

Conclusion

Our examination of principled resistance closely aligns with what we believe to be true about good teaching. In our work with pre-service teachers and classroom teachers, principled resistance provides examples of ways to both navigate and subvert curricular mandates and testing policies that are frequently in opposition to best practices. Although our initial work in this area has largely been for research audiences, we believe classroom teachers must have the language to identify restrictive instructional mandates and engage in principled resistance to meet their students' needs. As we have started sharing this research with classroom teachers, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. They have been eager to listen, discuss, and share their experiences. At the end of one session, a teacher remarked, "Thank you for giving me the language to describe what I am doing. It's a relief." Being able to articulate her practices and realizing she wasn't alone in using resistance strategies reassured this teacher that she was applying her knowledge in meaningful ways.

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