

Canaries in the Coal Mine: Urban Rookies Learning To Teach Language Arts in “High Priority” Schools

By Arthur T. Costigan

You know, we’re really just canaries in the coal mine for the whole No Child Left Behind experiment. (Rob, second-year teacher)

Negotiating Teaching

Rob, like many new teachers in urban settings, understands that the ways in which he is required to teach stem from local implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), entitled *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) (US Congress, 2001). Unfortunately, like many new teachers, he finds “the legislation confusing, the implementations baffling, and the effect on the practicing and pre-service teachers disheartening” (Fleischer & Fox, 2004, p. 99). Furthermore, Rob teaches in a poor urban district, in an underfunded, underresourced, overcrowded, and under-maintained school. It is located in a low-income community of predominately non-White, non-native speakers of English who are frequently disengaged from formal schooling. Researchers term such a school as “high priority” (Quantz, et al., 2004, p. 2), and New York City’s Department of Education

Arthur T. Costigan is a professor and co-director of English education programs in the Department of Secondary Education and Youth Services at Queens College of the City University of New York, Flushing, New York.

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(DOE) has labeled such schools as “hard to staff” and “Under Registration Review” (SURR). Like Rob, most of his colleagues are struggling novices, and they are likely to either migrate to better-funded districts or even leave the profession after only a few years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2003a, 2003b).

Rob, and the other participants in this study, experience what Hargreaves (2000) terms the “intensification” of teaching; reform is implemented by mandating externally imposed pedagogies and prepackaged curricula that neither addresses the inadequate conditions present nor assists new teachers in finding a personally meaningful teaching style (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 119). The participants in this study are mandated to use various forms of “systematic phonics instruction,” combined with student-centered approaches that are not only confusing, but are at odds with the theories and reading instruction practices learned in university coursework and advocated by The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (Altwerger, et al., 2004; Smith, 1988). Additionally, these participants’ job performance ratings and tenures are based not only on students’ test scores, but on the teacher’s ability to conform daily to standardized teaching practices that severely reduce a sense of autonomy and professionalism (Hargreaves, 2000). This study is based on prior research which has come to understand that these scripted lessons contain some best practices as defined by NCTE publications, but are implemented in highly varied and even idiosyncratic ways which differ from school to school and among different classrooms in the same school (Costigan, 2005a). The net result is that new Language Arts teachers are inhibited in developing their own professional and autobiographical understandings of best practices as these practices are imposed behaviors and not organically developed understandings (Costigan, 2005b).

This study is part of ongoing research that postulates that new urban teachers must negotiate their way among four primary, overlapping and frequently conflicting demands (Costigan, 2004; Costigan & Crocco, 2004). The first demand, contrary to negative stereotypes portrayed by the media, is that new teachers are not naïve. They enter urban teaching knowing the challenges, and, as one participant put it, are “empowered by knowing that I *don’t* know” (Costigan, 2004, 2005b). Having enough autonomy to grow in the teaching craft, to develop relationships with students, and to be in a supportive environment are the chief factors for whether or not these urban rookies thrive (Costigan & Crocco, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Levin, 2003). Second, because of an accountability- and testing-based educational reform movement, autonomy has been severely reduced. This may be a chief cause for teachers who move to better-funded districts or leave the profession entirely (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Third, the new teachers in this study are educated in NCTE-based programs which reflect student-centered constructivist theories and practices that conflict with the test- and accountability-driven “skills and drills” curriculum frequently found in local schools (Smagorinski, et al., 2004; McCracken, 2004). Fourth, the participants are overwhelmingly White, suburban, and middle class, and they frequently face discontinuities between their educational values and

those of the poor urban communities they serve, and they seek to develop a sense of personal vocation in effecting social justice.

An increasing criticism of NCLB is that reforms have been implemented *in spite of*, rather than *in dialogue with* teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders (Reville, 2006). As such, this study is an attempt to understand the human factors that have been missing in many conversations about educational reform (Johnson, 2005), a practice which neglects personal, autobiographical, and relational factors that allow teachers to thrive (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Fried, 1995; Liston & Garrison, 2004; Moor Johnson, et al., 2004; Nieto, 2003).

This study presents the thoughts, feelings, and understandings of new teachers in Language Arts (LA) classrooms “from the inside”; that is, from the perspective of second- and third-year teachers in poor urban districts. These teachers are emblematic of curricular reforms in two ways: First, because they have been impacted more dramatically and intensely than other disciplines (Altwerger, et al., 2004); second, because urban teachers in high priority schools experience more intense teaching situations than those teaching in wealthier districts. Although achievement gaps between White and minority students have been increasing for some time, the experiences of these LA teachers shed light on the growing evidence that NCLB reforms may be accelerating and exacerbating such gaps (Ravitch, 2005; Sanchez, 2005, p. 1). Since the implementation of NCLB, students in most nationwide urban districts make only modest progress in reading and math (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006), and half of New York City school districts in poor and minority areas have declining reading and math test scores (Ravitch, 2004).

This sheds light not only on the “separate and unequal” tracks for students, but also of preservice and beginning teachers (Achinstejn, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003b). Those who wish to teach in schools located in poor urban areas observe, student teach, and spend their early years teaching in poorly maintained schools, under high levels of supervision, and they typically interact with underprepared students and novice administrators. To be certified they must negotiate a vast and complicated bureaucracy. Frequently they are mandated to teach scripted “teacher proof” curricula which they have difficulty implementing (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). This experience frequently is radically different from those who teach in better funded suburban districts with better resources, smaller classes, better prepared students, and experienced administrators. Most importantly novice teachers in wealthier districts have more autonomy and support to develop personally meaningful practices (Costigan & Crocco, 2004).

Ultimately, however, the narratives of these new teachers suggest that educational reform is implemented ineffectively when the local realities of teachers and learners are ignored. An unanticipated outcome of this research is to garner insight into predominantly White, middle class teachers who are teaching in poor urban schools containing students who are poor, immigrant, non native speakers, or of color (Costigan, 2004).

Theoretical and Pedagogical Discontinuities

This study's participants attended a graduate program grounded in constructivist theory, which emphasizes that reading is a natural "act of meaning" that needs to be nurtured and enhanced by teachers (Bruner, 1990). This approach is markedly different from those who advocate a "commonsense" approach that values learning as the acquisition of facts and the development of discreet skills (Mayher, 1990; Smith, 1998). This latter, fact-based stance typically advocates direct instruction, memorization, reviews, drills, instruction standardization, and test-based assessment (Phelps, 2005, p.25). In contrast, the constructivist stance, which predominates in many teacher education programs, stresses that learners actively "build" knowledge based on past understandings (Bruner, 1966). Several key elements to the constructivist stance are that learning is a natural human act; authentic learning yields richer understandings than a mere accumulation of facts; learning is socially construed; teachers are guides rather than authorities; and that assessment should be "authentic," using student-generated portfolios, projects, presentations, and demonstrations instead of tests (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Kohn, 1993; Mayher, 1990).

Many see these two stances as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive (Smith, 1998; Phelps, 2005). However, others see constructivism as continuing to develop in more comprehensive ways which include both student-centered and more direct approaches to learning (Philips, 2000; Windschitl, 2002). The research presented here examines whether the experience of these participants allows them to engage in complex and multi-layered teaching strategies, or whether these experiences encourage them to see instructional theories and practices simply as a constructivist/transmissive or a good/bad dichotomy.

In this study, both balanced literacy and the Advance! program are attempts to combine transmissive, "direct instruction," focusing on discreet, decontextualized skills in spelling, phonics, and text interpretation, while fostering student-centered engagement with texts. An attempt to combine and formalize such radically different theories and practices is at best complicated and is frequently viewed as impossible (Smith, 1998). The constructivist stance that the human brain is "hardwired" to operate in rich linguistic, physiological, and psychological ways is highly critical of curricular standardization, skills- and fact-based instruction, and assessment through high-stakes tests (Kohn, 1993; McNeil, 2000; Smith, 1998). On the other hand, advocates of traditional, transmissive and test-based curricula devalue the constructivist approach as naïve, ineffective, and detrimental to student achievement (Phelps, 2005). As this study indicates, the mandated use of scripted curricula inhibits new teachers' emerging understandings of these two theoretical orientations.

The Advance! program is the disguised name this study gives to a published literacy instruction program used by "hard to staff" New York City school districts, a distinction given in the case of low exam grades on the 4th and 8th grade English Language Arts (ELA) exam.

**Nature and Prevalence of Mandated Curricula,
Balanced Literacy, and Scripted Programs**

Regardless of ongoing theoretical debates about Language Arts, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has adapted a “balanced literacy” approach.¹ Simply put, this is an attempt to combine student-centered reading and writing with elements of phonics, vocabulary, and other directive instruction. There are specific guidelines to accomplish this. Teachers must provide at least one half hour per day for independent reading; one half hour per day for writing; direct phonics, spelling, and word study instruction; several ten minute-long minilessons [sic] of explicit and direct reading and writing instruction; coaching in individual and small group conferences; a “read-aloud” time to students several times per day; and shared reading of a common text (Department of Education, 2004).

The DOE holds teachers accountable for the following elements of the program: A physical room arrangement involving grouped desks, workstations, theme-specific learning centers, and a library with books that are arranged and labeled in a mandated fashion; a bulletin board, blackboard, and wall used to illustrate tasks, rubrics, standards, daily agendas and schedules, samples of student work, and teachers’ comments; teacher- and student-generated displays, such as learning charts and problem-solving strategies; and the use of student journals and portfolios.

Methodology

The research presented here is part of an ongoing ethnographic study into the thoughts, feelings, and understandings present in participating second- and third-year teachers. Dialogic techniques such as interviews and group discussions engender powerful “acts of meaning” (Bruner, 1990) as participants move from mere survival to consolidation of teaching competencies (Sadker & Sadker, 2000, p. 493). The psycho-cognitive basis for interpreting narratives understands meaning-making as the formation of “mental constructs” (Kelly, 1963, p.5).

Similar to Bogdan & Bicklen’s “coding categories” (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992, p. 165), mental constructs are the means by which a person represents experiences and comes to personally meaningful understandings. These meanings can then be validated or challenged through sharing with others (Kelly, 1963, p. 12). The mental constructs present in teachers’ narratives can be a powerful way of understanding the complicated and recursive thinking processes of new teachers (Calderhead, 1987; Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Rust & Orland, 2001; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981, p. 42). These autobiographical “storied lives” assist the comprehension of contemporary education issues (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Huberman, 1993; Levin, 2003).

Increasingly, narrative research is seen to be not only a report *about* the thoughts and feelings of teachers, but also an active means of collaboration to improve both the researcher’s and the participants’ understandings. This process ultimately can be an important means of personal and professional empowerment, and is significant

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in understanding educational reform as being grounded in, and not divorced from, the realities of classroom life (Clandinin, Davies, Hogan, & Kennard, 1993).

Two hundred participants have participated in an ongoing research investigation over a period of five years (Costigan, 2002; Crocco & Costigan, 2006). This paper specifically presents three years of investigation into the overall quality of life for twelve new Language Arts teachers. This research is grounded in six individual interviews conducted per semester over six succeeding semesters. Additionally, at least one group discussion with a maximum of six participants was conducted in each of these semesters. All interviews and group discussions were voluntary, and most were taped, transcribed, and repeatedly reviewed with several co-researchers. Participants were given transcriptions to review for accuracy in representation. Although the principal investigator was an education instructor and his practice informed this paper, the participants had not been, or were no longer in the principal investigator's classes.

All participants were students in similar courses at a local college. No attempt was made to differentiate between alternatively (80%) and traditionally (20%) certified teachers. While a discussion of alternative routes to certification is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that alternative certification routes have proliferated to such a degree nationwide that they are now considered normative (Michelli, 2003; Imig, 2004; Liu, Johnson & Peske, 2004), and early teaching experiences of the alternatively certified increasingly resemble those of the traditionally-prepared (US Department of Education, 2004, pp. 29-31). Participants in this study shared the same coursework, though not the number of credits, at the same college.

Participants described themselves overwhelmingly as White and middle class. Despite the gender ratio of participants—sixty percent female and forty percent male—this research noted no significant gender differences. Prior research has indicated that these new teachers who value education frequently struggle teaching students whose backgrounds differ radically from their own (Costigan, 2004). Roughly half of the participants taught seventh and eighth grade Language Arts classes, and half taught ninth grade English. Their students had been identified as being deficient in reading, based on Language Arts exams given on one test each in the fourth and eighth grades. Seventy percent of participants described their schools as being in close proximity to housing projects with the attendant problems of poverty, gang violence, and drug abuse; thirty percent described their schools as being located in poor and working-class neighborhoods.

The home communities in which the participants taught were located in diverse areas. The average demographics for the area indicate that the residents were thirty-nine percent White, twenty-five percent Hispanic, nineteen percent African-American, and roughly seventeen percent Asian. Roughly forty-six percent of the communities were foreign born, and of these, about fifty percent came from Latin America. Fifty-three percent of the population spoke a language other than English at home, and fourteen percent of the population considered themselves

poor speakers of English. Nearly twenty percent of the population was under the poverty level.²

Trustworthiness of the participants was engendered by “prolonged and persistent research” (Ely, et al., 1991, p. 96), as well as using a layered research approach involving many personal interviews and group discussions, which were used not only to gather data, but to “participant check” that the research adequately reconstructed and presented the participants’ understanding (Ely et al., 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The encompassing and original question for this study was “How are you doing?”, and thematic foci present were: levels of personal and professional satisfaction, learning to teach, issues of curricular autonomy, and relationships with students. The participants talked openly and freely, giving voice to what Clandinin and Connelly (1996) call “secret stories,” the less-than-public knowledge of what teachers actually think about their profession, and what they put into practice.

Findings

Michael, who is in his third year of teaching ninth grade, is a success story. Teaching in a neighborhood, or “zone” high school, he is respected by administrators, his former college instructors, his students, and their parents. He is also planning to continue teaching in the city, distinguishing himself as one of the less than fifty percent who chose to do so (Ingersoll, 2003a). Putting aside Michael’s considerable talents as a teacher, he stated that his success is due to several factors.

First, as a newly-tenured teacher, he and other tenured teachers informed their administration that “there is no way in hell we’re doing the scripted curriculum!” Second, as a successful teacher with good test results, he has earned considerable trust from supervisors, undergoing routine surveillance in the form of daily “walk-throughs,” weekly classroom inspections, and frequent formal observations.

Contrary to his current status and autonomy, in his first two years of teaching he was mandated, without any training, to use a scripted curriculum. Resources were limited, and he had to make use of photocopied materials from the Advance! program. He reported high levels of confusion:

I was only given the first novel script [unit], and that was all the material we received because none of us received training. But the principal... without permission, photocopied the materials and gave us that first scripted unit and said, “Now just pick a whole bunch of books and just follow that format”.... And we were thrown into these classrooms with kids for 90 minutes *without any of the materials!* So we basically had to create two lessons every day for the first month [with] nobody telling us what we had to do.

In addition to this, Michael was confused and alienated by the nature of supervision:

There’s a woman in our school right now who is a supervisor of some sort—she just comes in for “support,” we don’t really know what she is—and she comes

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in, and I've already been observed twice by her.... Yet, we don't know anything about her. All we know is that she works with the region and she comes in quite a lot and says things like, "If I had a child, I would not be bringing my son and daughter to that class." Like, no one was telling us what they wanted, but they wanted us to do it.

Because Michael, now a third-year teacher, is free from the confusion of the Advance! program, he reported much satisfaction in designing his own lessons and teaching his particular population of students. Nevertheless, he still feared receiving an "Unsatisfactory" (U) rating, and reported that he must at least maintain properly-formatted bulletin boards containing "up-to-date and perfect" samples of student work. These samples must be primarily samples of essays found on state examinations. In addition, supervisors still enter his classrooms on a weekly basis and examine his students' notebooks, though he stated that neither he nor the other teachers have an idea of what the supervisors are looking for.

Unlike Michael, Joe is not tenured and is in his second year of teaching. Despite the fact that he was not told of available summer training sessions and that he has only been given scripted packets pertaining to two or three novels, he reported that he must maintain a classroom that reflects elements of balanced literacy and the Advance! program:

Two weeks ago, [the principal] stood in the corner observing silently for a few minutes, and then walked over to the area of my bulletin board called the "Parking Lot".... It is a section of the wall where students can post their questions or comments on sticky notes and every classroom is required to have one. After reading the comments already posted on the wall, he proceeded to borrow two sticky notes from one of my students and began writing on them.... It took him a few minutes to complete his comments, and once he did, he exited the classroom without so much as a sideways glance.... I walked over to see what it was he had written down. The first one said, "I want to see work stations. When will you make this happen?" The second one said, "Are you having conferences with your students?"

Michael's comments indicate one of the basic difference between the new teachers in poor urban districts and those in wealthier districts (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglmán, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003b), namely that the type of supervision offered beginning teachers is radically different in wealthy and poor districts. His experience confirms an unfortunate but emerging issue in educational research. Ravitch (2007) explains the relatively new reality of supervision in poor urban districts such as the participants in this study experience:

These days, many superintendents have no experience in education and many principals went through quickie training programs. These inexperienced leaders demand higher test scores because their jobs are on the line. Many of these inexperienced leaders think that testing is synonymous with instruction and they insist on constant testing. (Ravitch, 2007, p. 3)

In fact, supervision in urban schools has become so intense, that many new teacher avoid the move to supervisory positions (Howley, Andrianvio, & Perry, 2005). This supervisory reality touches upon this study because the Advance! program is a direct attempt to raise test scores. The narratives of the participants in this study touch upon the intensification (Hargreaves, 2000) which increasingly affects the whole school experience for teachers, students, and administrators in poor urban districts (Costigan, 2005a, 2005b).

For Michael and Joe, as well as all the participants in this study, high levels of autonomy were the key to professional satisfaction and willingness to see a future in teaching. Participants reported that lacking the ability to design personally meaningful, unsupervised lessons was not only personally distressful, but ineffective and useless for students.

Pauline is viewed as highly as Michael by her education professors, supervisors, and fellow teachers. However, even though she was tenured, she stated that she was given little autonomy, so much so that she has left the profession.

The supervisors don't like all this balanced literacy stuff and all the mandates about teaching and room set-up, but they say, "Well, we've just got to bite the bullet. Your job and my job are on the line."

Pauline expressed particular distress that a community research project she designed for her students, one which they found particularly engaging, had to be terminated because it did not meet the demands of balanced literacy and teaching formulas based on the Advance! program.

Besides lacking materials—each Advance! novel unit costs about \$45.00 per teacher—most participants reported dilapidated classrooms, lack of basic materials such as paper and pens, and severe overcrowding. Sandra explained:

What I find is really *annoying* about the whole situation is that you're supposed to set up workstations, where you have groups of four kids working on projects at their own pace—which I agree with. I think that kids *should* work at their own pace. It's really unrealistic to manage. I don't have a full-sized classroom, but I do have 28 kids. And they took two classrooms and divided them up into three. And so, to set up these sort of stations, well, you can't even move in there real well. So there's stupid things, like kids on top of each other, trying to move...[and] it just sets up a chaotic atmosphere in the class.

While lack of space, time, and resources are a recurring annoyance, the participants were aware that these were considered "normal" conditions in New York City schools. Those participants under the highest levels of supervision and mandated teaching styles reported the highest levels of irritation, disenfranchisement, and willingness to leave the city for the presumably better-funded and more autonomous schools in the suburbs. As Sandra explained, "In the few times I've tried to follow Advance!, the kids act up." Eddie explained his frustration:

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It's beyond absurd...I have ninety minutes to fill with students who have a range of different things that land them in the label of "Special Ed"...and when I followed the way they wanted me to teach, basically what it generated was chaos because it involved activities that kids in the class were not capable of doing and couldn't sit still for. So, they were bouncing off the walls.

Rich, a second-year middle school teacher, is mandated to teach Walter Dean Myer's *Monster*, a popular young adult novel. However, he finds the novel inappropriate for his special education class with students with a variety of disabilities:

This Advance! stuff was never intended for dyslexic kids, for acting-out kids, and kids with learning and emotional problems... It's an interesting book, but the problem is that it has a shifting point of view, and the kids have a real hard time with that. Part of it's a movie script and part of it's a diary, and the kids pretty much summarily refused to read out loud. Many of them can't. Yet the administration pushes us to explain these abstract connections to the kids, such as text-to-text and text-to-self [connections], and they simply can't!

Even teachers in "regular" seventh through ninth grade classrooms report great confusion at trying to figure out how they are supposed to teach. Steve explained:

It's supposed to be this "organic flow," that each part is supposed to sort of spill into the next. But it doesn't happen that way, and we've mentioned it at meetings and the answer they always give is: "Give it time. The more you do it, the more it sort of happens naturally." These connections, that is. But it doesn't! There'll be a "read aloud" where they ask you to read a story from a book, and they'll ask you to have the students make "text-to-self connections" in their journals. And then during the work period, they'll have you photocopying a poem, and they'll have you looking for how objects are used in memoirs. So, you know, I don't see the connections very often between the different pieces [of the lesson].

Maryanne explained how the way she is made to teach is harmful for her students:

So much of this material is very silly and very easy, and they get bored fast... So they get it, [saying,] "I got it, Mister, already!" And they've got another four lessons dealing with text-to-self connections. The lesson is driving the kids, not the kids driving the lesson.

Inconsistencies and Chaos

The central issue for the new teachers in this study was that the implementation of balanced literacy was idiosyncratic and irregular, not only from school to school, but within different classrooms in the same school. Some teachers were required to use step-by-step Advance! scripts, others were required to use various elements of the program. Different administrators in different schools required different levels of compliance in instruction, use of educational materials, and room arrangements. Roughly one or two teachers per school had any meaningful training in the program, and no participant had a full semester's worth of units or

lessons. In their first two years of teaching, roughly half of the participants had to use photocopies borrowed from colleagues, and the other half had no scripted materials whatsoever. Nevertheless, all the participants to some degree had to use mandated elements such as “whole group—small group—whole group,” silent reading and “text-to-text and text-to-self connections.”

The new teachers in this study found many absurdities in their first years of teaching. These included the “post-it wall,” rigorously formatted bulletin boards, work stations without supplies, lack of physical space, prescribed boardwork, and various “commandments of reading” notices placed around classrooms. Natalie gave the example of a “meaning cloud” that she was forced to hang from the ceiling in her classroom. During her mandated “read aloud” to students, she was required to stand under the cloud, point her finger to her forehead, and state, “This passage makes me think that...,” and then explain the meaning of the text to her students.

A particular annoyance for five of the participants was the “noise meter,” which could be a small electronic device or a chart drawn on the blackboard. Eddie explained:

A noise meter is a system for letting the class know when they are being too loud... So, when the class is getting too loud, the teacher is supposed to say something to the effect of, “You’re at a level two, class. Let’s bring it down to a level one before we get to a level three.” The principal walked into a teacher’s room and said that her noise meter was not the same as the other noise meters in the building. He told her that she needed to be on the same page as everyone else and that she should look into fixing her meter. She was furious. Here is a teacher who has done everything by the book; she has tried her best to conform to the new system and she was being reprimanded.

The participants felt that the noise meter was a particularly strong example of the absurdities they found along with mandated teaching styles, room arrangements, and the seemingly random elements of the Advance! program. In their first two untenured years, eighty percent of participants reported that their administrators’ attitudes ranged from benign indifference to actual conspiracy when the participants did not follow the scripted plan. Sandra explained how she was able to “pick and choose”:

My supervisor has come in and observed me, and has seen me not following the exact script of the program, and he’s never said anything... What I found, is that what he likes us to do is to follow the independent reading portion of the program and to use the books we’ve been sent, and also, he likes us to use the books that they sort of mandated as their sort of curriculum—the read-aloud... other than that I can do what I want.

Social Justice

In several group discussions, new teachers reported that curricular mandates, scripted lessons, and high levels of supervision were a matter of social justice. The ineffective and “boring” ways in which they were forced to teach were simply

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unfair to, and unethical towards their poor, immigrant, non-native speaking, African-American, and Latino/a students. Frequently, these teachers expressed that they did not understand the home communities of their students, which they saw as disengaged and alienated from schooling (Costigan, 2004), but they expressed a need to better understand these communities. Maryanne explained the unfairness:

They put ‘em into groups [based on the grades] on one examination test result. And I’ve looked at the work they’ve done in my room and I’ve looked at the score, and it doesn’t reflect where they are—I mean it’s *one* test! So many of our kids in Advance! don’t belong here. They just don’t. They just might be great test-takers, and it was all based on that one damn exam.

Dan gave voice to the ethical problems he saw with curricular mandates:

You don’t see these types of curriculums [sic] used in the suburbs or in private [local parochial] schools. Rich kids don’t get Advance! The poor kids do. Rich kids get Kaplan or tutors... You know, it’s ironic that I want to teach in the city. I like these kids, but I’ll probably end up in the suburbs teaching “better” kids in “better” schools, just because of what I have to do to them here. SURR schools are for immigrant and poor kids.”

A significant strand of this research is that these new teachers, coming as they do from communities who value schooling, have difficulty in understanding students and their families who seem disengaged from formal schooling. An important part of their professional development focuses on reaching students from radically different backgrounds. The Advance! curriculum, based as it is on depersonalized teaching behaviors and an impersonal fact- and skills-driven curriculum seems to these participants, at best, as a further complication in developing meaningful relationships with, and understandings of their students.

Understanding the Curriculum

During his first two years of teaching, Michael was afraid that “any sort of creative idea would be frowned upon.” However, he related how things changed in his third year:

Once I was given that freedom to own my own lessons and not be a part of Advance! anymore, then things instantly started changing in the classroom... My master’s coursework opened up a lot of doors for me, which I didn’t know was available... opened the floodgates of my creativity. I thought there were limitations as to what could be done, but there’s so many creative things that I can do, and there’s a network of people doing things, and I’ve learned that there won’t be a negative reaction to this type of (student-centered) teaching. [Before,] there was my fear that while I had all these creative things I wanted to do, I was afraid that there were these standards, and that someone is going to come in and say, “What are you *doing*?”

As Joe explained, “When you’re given the freedom to teach like you want, and when

administrators see great lessons, they leave you alone. You do better than the scripts.” The participants overwhelmingly reported that when they were forced to teach in mandated ways, their college education courses were not valuable, because they could not put any elements of them into effect. Only a handful of participants stated that required teaching elements—such as student-directed silent reading and small group discussions—were actually elements of the constructivist practices they had learned. The participants who defined themselves as relatively happy and successful in their schools reported that in their first two years, they occasionally made use of approaches learned in their college coursework, and by their third year, when given autonomy, they felt free to use various constructivist approaches.

This study is not clear on how much initial disengagement from college-based teaching practices is the result of curricular mandates, or is related to the fact that the first year of teaching is particularly traumatic and a chaotic struggle for survival (Rust, 1999). The daily realities of teaching and creating lessons, coupled with curricular mandates and a lack of autonomy, are seen to “wash out” the theories and practices learned in college coursework, causing new teachers to replicate traditional and commonsense modes of teaching. In short, curricular mandates, being a formalized, fear-based, and questionable mixture of contradictory practice and theory, muddy the waters for new teachers.

The handful of self-defined, successful, and happy teachers reflected upon their educational coursework once freed from curricular mandates. However, as over fifty percent of these teachers either leave teaching or migrate to the suburbs by their third year, this ongoing study has not yet investigated exactly how they appropriate their college coursework once they have left the city. Many “happy” participants suggested that college instructors be more upfront about the curricular realities of local schools and the ensuing fear related to experimentation in student-centered classrooms.

Educational Reform Seen “From the Inside”

Historically, educational reforms are not only hard to implement, but are relatively ineffective in changing teachers’ understandings and practices (Ravitch, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Research typically sees reform from a “top down” viewpoint. In this sense, teachers are viewed as passively resistant to, and actively negating reforms, either because of an essential lack of understanding of the nature of reforms, or because of the hectic and fragmented realities of daily teaching (Kennedy, 2005). Understanding reforms from a “bottom up,” or teacher, viewpoint suggests that rather than seeing teachers as barriers to reform, it may be the reforms themselves that are impractical, unattainable, and detrimental (Kennedy, 2005, p. 12). Rob’s “canary in the coal mine” metaphor, however, indicates that the questionable results of NCLB-based educational reform may best be understood by viewing it neither from the top nor bottom, but from the inside.

The detrimental effects of standardized curricula in Language Arts classrooms

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has recently been a research focus (Zancanella & Noll, 2004; Fliescher & Fox, 2004; Smagorinsky, et al., 2004). The deleterious effects of mandated curricula force new LA teachers into acquiescing, accommodating, resisting, and “just hanging on” as they attempt to learn how to teach (Smagorinski, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002). While LA teachers undergo the most rigorous regimentation, other teachers in the humanities and sciences experience similar effects of NCLB-based reforms (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). While this study focuses on Language Arts teachers, ongoing research with other researchers has indicated that other teachers of the humanities, such as Social Studies, Music, and Art, experience similar issues in learning to teach, though these teachers frequently speak of time and instruction being “squeezed out and watered down” rather than mandated and intensified (Crocco & Costigan, 2006).

In the largest sense, curricular mandates hindered the participants in this study in the four basic areas they needed to professionally thrive. First, they were hindered from developing any personally rewarding, autobiographically-based teaching practice that they saw as beneficial for their students. Second, they were unable to reflect upon, experiment with, use, or even accept or dismiss, the constructivist and student-centered theories and practices learned in schools of education. The curricular mandates seemed to them idiosyncratic, illogical, and to increase their confusion during an already perplexing first few years of teaching. Third, the participants’ accountability-driven experience confirmed an emerging understanding that there is not only a two-track educational system for students, but also for teachers learning how to teach (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglmán, 2004; Johnson, et al., 2004). Lastly, mandated curricula do nothing to enhance understandings of students, their lives, or their home communities, which, in turn, do a frank injustice to students from poor urban communities. The participants felt a strong need to develop a curriculum tailored to the realities and needs of their particular students, young people who came from different backgrounds than the teachers themselves. The standardized and homogenized nature of Advance! and other mandates actually inhibited the creation of a meaningfully negotiated curriculum (Flower, 1994). Until curricular restrictions were lifted, the participants were overwhelmed, asked to do “too much with too little” (Kennedy, 2006, pp. 17-18), leaving them feeling “lost at sea” (Kaufman, et al, 2002). As a new teacher, Steve, stated, “This Advance! sure throws the wrench in the gears to figuring out how to teach!”

This study brings up challenges and opportunities for educational researchers and teacher educators. The participants were more than willing to be interviewed and participate in group discussions, to give voice to, and to attempt to understand their experiences. They described talking about their experiences as therapeutic and beneficial, even if they did not walk away from these conversations with specific answers and strategies to their distressing situations. There is a clear and documented “praxis shock” (Smagorinski, et al., 2004) of new teachers encountering the contrasts between what they have learned in college educational coursework and what the realities of an urban classroom situation are (Lortie, 1975; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981).

This study documents that mandated curricula prohibits constructivist practices and only confuses new teachers. One reviewer of this article suggested that teacher education programs should be “upfront” about how to subvert and override mandated curricula. Yet the Wal Mart-like schooling now present in the United States, using interchangeable, poorly paid workers (teachers) and a cheap, standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum (product) operating on a standardized consumer (students, families, public), may simply be too powerful for new teachers to subvert (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). While educational researchers are documenting the frank abuses of local implementations of NCLB, the answer is not to give new teacher gimmicks and tricks to survive, but to open genuine conversations with them, in the hopes of creating a dialogue of awareness and hope.

Notes

¹ www.nycenet.edu/Offices/TeachLearn/OfficeCurriculumProfessionalDevelopment/DepartmentofLiteracy/BalancedLiteracy/default.htm

² <http://www.queenslibrary.org/pub/QuickFacts.asp>

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