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## Teachers' Muted Voices

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### Introduction

Graduate students in education are typically classroom teachers. As such, they relate the content of their graduate education to their daily lives in schools. While recently teaching a graduate class that focussed on literacy instruction from a holistic perspective, the students/teachers continually talked about how their beliefs about teaching did not match what they were allowed and expected to teach.

Optimal reading instruction in this country has been perceived as implementing a basal reading program (what many of us knew as the "Dick and Jane" series). One consequence of this belief has been the "deskilling" of teachers (Shannon, 1989), treating teachers as technicians who implement curricula rather than as decision-making professionals (Apple, 1995; Spring, 1998). But this attitude of teachers as non-professionals goes beyond reading instruction and pervades most of the school day (McLaren, 1989). Curriculum is often defined by textbooks, with the expectation that teachers will follow them. Thus, my class's initial discussion of literacy instruction within the framework of teachers as decision-makers became a focal point for exploring the general issue of power relationships between teachers and administrators.

Teachers in this class began telling stories about their relationships with administrators, stories that portray administrators as oppressors and teachers as oppressed. As others (Garrison, 1997; Kesson, 1999) have described, we create stories to understand and share the meanings of our lives. These teachers' stories are admittedly one-sided; no administrators were part of the class. (They could have taken my class as an elective in their educational administration programs, but students in that program almost never enrolled in any teacher education course.) And, teachers were too intimidated by their fear of administrators' potential use of power to initiate a dialogue about their concerns.

The teachers had not politicized their teaching (Shannon, 1992) until administrators, through their actions, defined these teachers as technicians and as subordinates. As these teachers began sharing their experiences in our class, they became increasingly aware of the oppressive nature of the power arrangements [the beginning of conscientization (Freire, 1995)] between themselves and administrators.

Cherryholmes (1988) defines power as "relations among individuals or groups based on social, political, and material asymmetries by which some people are indulged and rewarded and others negatively sanctioned and deprived" (p. 5). There is no doubt that administrators have more power than teachers: they can hire them, fire them, assign them to classes that are more or less desirable. It is not uncommon for people within particular power arrangements, such as educational institutions, to follow the often implicit rules of that institution. The stories told here are examples of some of the ways these teachers chose to fit in the existing power structures of their schools or districts, as unpleasant as that choice may have been.

The teachers willingly told these stories within the confines of the class. Though they encouraged me to share their stories in presentations and journals, each was adamant in maintaining his or her anonymity. Thus, the teachers' names are pseudonyms.

## The Stories

### Teachers as Technicians

The first three stories illustrate ways in which administrators regard teachers as technicians whose job it is to manage instructional materials and methods (Apple, 1995; Carlson, 1987). Teachers and administrators seem to have different conceptions of teaching: Administrators in these examples see teaching as a set of isolated behaviors. These teachers, however, see teaching as complex (Davis & Sumara, 1997; Sirotnik & Ericson, 1996), something which they construct and reconstruct (Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich, & Anderson, 1994) as they simultaneously consider multiple issues such as individual children, curriculum, materials, and their knowledge of content.

*I didn't think that teaching kids to read meant making them cry.* Connie's school district was in its third year of implementing a new basal reading series. One of the district's expectations was that each teacher was to conduct whole class lessons revolving around the various entries (stories, poems, expository pieces) in the basal reader (graded textbooks for reading instruction). Instructional supervisors operating out of the district's central office had the responsibility of providing support to the classroom teacher in her reading instruction. Some supervisors interpreted this responsibility to mean holding teachers accountable for the implementation of the basal reader lessons.

In Connie's sixth grade class, some of the children could not read and comprehend the materials in their sixth grade basal. For these children, participating in whole class lessons meant that they were always frustrated and dependent on a classmate or the teacher to help them with their reading. Though teachers were supposed to accommodate these children with flexible groups aimed at teaching them the skills in which they were thought to be deficient (as determined by standardized and publisher's unit tests), Connie was concerned that these children were spending too much time struggling with frustrating materials rather than spending time reading challenging text. One student, James, found these reading lessons particularly onerous.

Connie decided to alter James' reading instruction. She brought in paperbacks that interested him and used these to help James develop strategies to use when reading these books as well as other texts. These books were challenging to James - not too difficult to frustrate him, and not too easy to preclude the need for instruction. James went from being a very disheartened, frustrated reader to a successful, motivated learner.

But Connie's instruction and use of materials were not acceptable to her district supervisor. The supervisor, upon observing Connie's lesson with James, told her that she was not allowed to use those "supplemental" materials as the basis of his reading instruction; she must return to the basal reader. When Connie put away the paperbacks and gently explained to James that he had to read from the same books as everyone else, James cried.

When Connie told this story to my graduate class that evening, she cried, too.

*Is teaching about helping children learn, or about watching the clock?* In Laura's initial teaching experiences, first as a student teacher and then as a beginning teacher, she learned that sometimes management was more important than student learning.

Laura was student teaching in a kindergarten classroom under the supervision of a cooperating teacher. While teaching a lesson about plant growth, the youngsters became involved in a discussion about the topic. She had brought seeds, soil, and paper cups to enable students to grow plants and observe this process. Because the children were engaged in their learning and activities, the lesson went beyond the designated time for science instruction. Realizing this, Laura decided to continue with the lesson rather than interrupt a learning opportunity.

The cooperating teacher obviously had different priorities. She stopped Laura in the midst of the lesson. This seasoned teacher, whose role was to mentor Laura, told her that she could not exceed the allotted time for science, and must wait until the following day to continue the lesson. Laura felt both humiliated at being reprimanded in front of the students, and angry at the emphasis on time management over learning. When Laura was hired the following year to teach first graders, she felt relieved that she would now be able to design her own classroom in ways that reflected her beliefs about teaching and learning.

One day her principal came into her classroom to observe and evaluate her teaching. The children were completing some work in social studies and were about to begin a math lesson. As Laura told the children to put away their social studies work and get out their materials for math, she looked over at the principal. Much to her surprise, he removed a stopwatch from his pocket and began to time - what? She was not sure.

When Laura met with the principal later that day to discuss his evaluation of her teaching, she found out what he was timing. His major focus of her teaching was the "long" time it took her first graders to make the transition between social studies and math. He insisted that an acceptable transition time between activities is thirty seconds. The transition he observed was one minute.

Now she knew the purpose of the stopwatch. What Laura did not know was what her principal thought about her teaching. She left their meeting wondering why the principal cared more about the "extra" thirty seconds students used to get ready for a different instructional focus than what they were learning. What was teaching about, anyway?

*This isn't really writing but I have to make them do it.* Fourth graders in a school district were required to accurately write a dictated paragraph. This task was assigned during the school year as a form of writing instruction. Later in the year, the same task was used as an assessment of students' writing abilities.

During our class discussion about teaching writing in ways that encouraged students to select and develop their own topics, to write for audiences that went beyond the teacher, and to use strategies that would enhance their writing, Todd, a fourth grade teacher, talked about the paragraph dictation exercise. He told our class that this dictation was not what "real" writing was about, and that it did not assess students' abilities to write. However, he felt that he had to give this assignment since it was expected of him. "But if you know it isn't about writing, why must you continue to have children spend their time on what you consider a pointless task?" I asked. Todd explained that his district supervisor sometimes came into his room to see what he was doing. "How often?" I asked. "Maybe once or twice a year," he replied. "Sometimes more if you're a new teacher." He got the point, but insisted that he had to adhere to the district's expectations "just in case" someone checked on him.

Stephanie provided a different twist to the same issue. "I agree with Todd about the paragraph dictation. And I stopped making my students do it. My students do lots of purposeful writing. But one day my principal called me into his office to tell me of a parent complaint. A mother of one of my students wanted to know why her daughter was not bringing home her paragraph dictations. It seems that the little girl has an older brother who had brought home dictations. The mother was concerned that her daughter was missing out on important instruction. Even though the principal agreed with me about the uselessness of this exercise, he told me that I would have to follow district policy. So now I make my kids take down dictation."

## **Management and Workers**

The management style prevalent in many schools has been borrowed from industry (Terry, 1995-96): Administrators (management) make major decisions which the teachers (workers) then implement (Apple, 1993; Shannon, 1989; Sirotnik & Ericson, 1996). This bureaucratic control creates a hierarchical social structure in schools that situates teachers at the bottom (Apple, 1995; Spring, 1998). The example of the cooperating teacher in the previous section demonstrates how, when teachers are placed in positions with administrative responsibility, they may buy into this power structure.

The following stories seem, on the surface, to be attempts to alter that hierarchy.

*Sharing power - perhaps:* The socially constructed hierarchy of schools pits, by its very nature, administrators and teachers against each other. With teachers at the bottom of the hierarchy, there is little reason, other than teacher unrest, union demands, or low student achievement, for

administrators to share their power with teachers (Spring, 1998). One systemic attempt to share power between these two groups is through site-based management. Other districts, such as the one described in the following stories, attempt to share power through open discussions about curriculum and assessment.

In the following stories, administrators appear to share power by seeming to value teachers' perspectives, but their actions reveal otherwise. In the first scenario, teachers are asked for input about newly developed benchmark tests which administrators seem to ignore. In the second scenario, teachers are asked for input about the new reading series, but are afraid to reveal their negative feelings.

*Do administrators really want my feedback?* Though this large school district still uses standardized tests to assess student achievement and teacher effectiveness, it has developed its own tests, benchmarks, to ostensibly better match its learning outcomes. These benchmarks have been lauded both locally and nationally. However, some teachers have a conflicting opinion.

During a conversation about the reading/language arts benchmarks, some of the fourth grade teachers told how they were to participate in the piloting of the new test. They were asked to provide feedback to the district administrators about the content of the test, the procedures, and the scoring. But plans changed. Soon before the scheduled pilot, administration decided that all fourth graders would be tested on the new benchmark. The teachers felt betrayed and angered. They saw many problems with the benchmark that needed to be corrected before it could be considered valid. They believed that several questions needed to be rewritten, and some of them needed to be deleted since they did not match the focus of instruction.

The sixth grade teachers saw problems with the scoring of the benchmarks. This was one example they gave. One task required students to read a passage, and write a character sketch and summary statement. If the students successfully completed the sketch but neglected to write a summary statement, they failed the entire task. Several teachers related this concern to the district administrators, but no changes in the scoring were made.

The third grade teachers described how the unfamiliar format of the benchmark frustrated their students, making them cry.

The teachers were not opposed to these tests. Initially, they saw themselves as co-developers. Yet as they implemented them, they found that the tests did not measure what they were supposed to, that the scoring was inconsistent across teachers, and that some teachers altered the exams.

At first, teachers made suggestions to address their concerns. But after their suggestions were ignored, their attitude changed. They saw the administration's disregard of their concerns and ideas as "typical," and something they "can't do anything about." The teachers stopped responding to administrators' requests for feedback. One teacher summed up their changed attitude this way: "They ask teachers' opinions to act as if they care about them, but they don't."

In another instance of asking teachers for feedback about the tests, the district held regularly scheduled meetings with representative teachers from the elementary schools to discuss the new reading series. Jennifer, one of these teachers, told me about several concerns of the teachers in her school. I was curious about the district administrator's response to these. "Oh, I don't tell him these things." I asked her to explain why not, considering the purpose of these meetings. She told me that her colleagues criticized the way that the district required teachers to implement the reading series, and she could not talk to administrators about that. "Why not?" I asked. Jennifer reminded me that her sister was about to graduate with a degree in education and would be looking for a job in the same school district. She refused to share the teachers' criticisms in this district format or with her building principal. She was afraid of being perceived as a troublemaker. Her imagined punishment for such behavior: No job for her sister. (Jennifer had tenure.)

Other building representatives who were in my class said, in contrast to Jennifer, that they shared teachers' questions about the reading program to these district meetings but were frustrated that no action was ever taken. They felt that the district administrators also showed their lack of respect for teachers when they failed to collect the lists of questions and issues these teachers brought from their schools.

These experiences left teachers wondering about the roles of administrators. They asked questions about them: "Why don't we see them in the schools?" "Don't they know about teaching?"

*Appearance of shared power.* On the surface, it appears that these meetings were intended to operate outside of the hierarchical power structure: Teachers and administrators could interact as equals to explore some issues about curriculum evaluation. A deeper examination reveals another possibility: These meetings were designed to increase the likelihood that teachers would buy into the administration's agenda (Blase & Anderson, 1995). There was no critical dialogue about using basal readers; rather the focus was on how to use this one. There was no critical dialogue about appropriate assessments, but about how to improve this assessment. An analogy might be made to textbook selection committees. There is the perception of choice, but the committee does not question the basic practice of using a textbook (written for states with state adoptions) to determine curriculum (Apple, 1995). But the charade quickly eroded. Even if teachers believed that the adopted basal reader and benchmarks were appropriate, the teachers who told these stories soon saw these meetings as further examples of administrators' use of power to keep teachers in their place at the bottom of the school hierarchy.

## Discussion

These teachers portray themselves as powerless, as if their fate is not in their control (Shor, 1993). When teachers do not question the basic premises upon which they are judged or their perceived place in the educational hierarchy, and thus maintain their oppressed roles, they seem

to be complicit in their own oppression. Aronowitz (1993) explains that "the oppressed have an investment in their oppression because it represents the already-known, however grim are the conditions of everyday existence" (pp. 14-15). Though this perspective may have impacted these teachers' reluctance to be assertive individually or collectively, it cannot be overlooked that they perceived the administrators as having the power to make their professional lives more oppressive if they questioned the authoritarianism they felt.

Ironically, the questioning of power structures must occur if changes in an oppressive system can take place (Freire & Faundez, 1989). "In Freirean pedagogy it is through the interrogation of their own experiences that the oppressed will come to an understanding of their own power as knowers and creators of the world; this knowledge will contribute to the transformation of their world" (Weiler, 1994, p. 27). The discussions with these teachers in our graduate class provided the opportunity for teachers to interrogate their experiences, and thus understand their oppression. However, the discussions failed at the time to complete the process of conscientization (Freire, 1995), since the teachers took no actions to address their oppression. As Weiler points out, the expression of teachers' emotions may end that process, resulting in a catharsis without action.

Cherryholmes (1988) adds to the discussion of power. Using his terminology, administrators and teachers in positions of power seemed to be exhibiting vulgar pragmatism. In contrast to critical pragmatism, which questions basic assumptions about the choices one makes, "[v]ulgar pragmatism results when efficiency is pursued in the absence of criticism ... [and] reinforces what is in place, including what counts as authoritative knowledge, methods of assessment, and educational excellence" (p. 152). Those with more power in these stories did not question the assumption that all students must learn to read from basal readers, or that thirty seconds is always the optimal transition time between lessons, for example. The standards for judging teacher effectiveness were not questioned by those employing those standards.

It is important to situate these stories within a gendered context. Apple (1993) argues that control over teachers "is related to a longer history of attempts to control the labor of occupations that historically have been seen as women's paid work" (p. 122). In fact, what pervades these stories is the teachers' tacit acceptance of a patriarchal system (Weiler, 1994). Though they lamented their disempowered status, they rarely examined possible avenues to institute change. When they did explore these avenues, they were easily thwarted by roadblocks. Though the story of the one male teacher in class is represented here, he adopted the same stance as the women, the typical elementary teacher, namely that women should not demonstrate agency. Conversely, even though many of the principals in these stories were women, they seem to have adopted the historically patriarchal stance of school administrators.

The administrators described in these stories participated in the marginalization of teachers in at least two ways. Some marginalized teachers through their overt disrespect for teachers' knowledge about education. Others gave the appearance of valuing teachers by asking for their advice and ideas, only to disregard them later.



## A Plan for Change

Giroux and McLaren (1986) discuss ways in which teacher education programs should be reconstituted so that they emphasize teaching for critical citizenship in a democratic society, rather than teaching as a technical endeavor. Rather than structure teacher education programs from a technical, mastery pedagogy, they believe it is essential to problematize preservice teachers' interactions with colleagues and students, with the curriculum, and with the community. Effective teacher education programs promote this problematization and provide support to examine, reflect, and research these issues.

Others take these ideas further. Some still use the business world as a model, describing how it is important to have the workers (teachers) who are closest to the products (students) make most of the decisions (Terry, 1995-96). Though this argument may be appealing, I believe that it is dangerous: It is still based on the belief that the major purpose of schools is to produce workers, and its model is still narrowly defined as a management model borrowed from industry. As such, it ignores the broader role of schools as places in which students learn to be participants in a democratic society.

Others (Heckman, 1996; Sirotnik & Ericson, 1996) provide alternatives that are based on an ideology that complements the teachers' stories portrayed here. They also reject the bureaucratic leadership model, but suggest replacing it with a model of both teacher and administrator preparation that promotes democratic leadership, which "include[s] the principles and practices of caring, trust, social justice, and collaborative inquiry" (Heckman, 1996, p. 144). To accomplish this goal, it is necessary to merge teacher and administrator preparation programs, helping both groups to be democratic leaders (Marlow, 1996).

In class discussions, these teachers believed that change would only occur if they, not their administrators, challenged and subverted existing power arrangements. Their fears, real or merely perceived, prevented them from taking action. This was unfortunate given the potential impact on their students. Building on Dewey, Garrison (1995) tells us that when teachers feel alienated, "it deprives public education of the products of creative intelligence" including teaching like "Mrs. Good, [his] twelfth grade history teacher, whose methods created in [him] an enduring love of her subject matter" (p. 59).

Henderson (1999) situates democracy in education within morality such that educators must constantly engage in critical inquiry into their practices. Within this framework, all educators, regardless of their power positions, work to scaffold each other in this endeavor so that students are supported in their own critical inquiries rather than in mechanized rituals of supposed learning. Henderson's model of curriculum leadership, in conjunction with teacher education programs based on critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 1999), offer hope for effective transformation.

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