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Minding the Gap: Navigating Chasms of Confusion and Fogs of Frustration-- A Problems Court

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Introduction, Questions, and Objectives of the Study

Federal and state mandates have taken on a larger role in designing curriculum and assessment in the last two decades. Following a long tradition in American schools, today's policies designate the schools as both the origin and the solution for societal problems. Most policies in the last three decades have focused on curriculum and assessment with the belief that instruction improves as teachers know what to teach (curriculum) and know that what they teach will be measured on required, state tests (assessment). Teachers' voices are largely excluded from these policy decisions. Yet, teachers make hundreds of instructional decisions each day; their expertise would provide valuable perspectives that might narrow the gaps between policies and practice.

In the 1950's fear that the U.S. was falling behind the Soviet Union in science brought about numerous "teacher-proof" programs and guides. Over time these programs proved less successful because they ignored the role of classroom teachers in student learning. Research on approaches to literacy instruction shows that teachers are the major factor affecting student learning (Bond & Dykstra, 1997; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Commercial programs, curriculum guides, and standards must be interpreted and implemented in varied classroom settings, with vastly different resources, and for diverse groups of students. A gap often exists between what policymakers envision and what happens in classrooms (Standerford, 1997); yet, teachers' voices continued to be excluded from large-scale policy discussions and decisions. This study considered gaps between policy intentions and the realities of policy implementation from a variety of perspectives. How can teachers and teacher educators "mind these gaps" while providing the best instruction to individual students and improving student achievement for all students?

Recognizing the multiple layers of any term, we use the term "mind the gap" to indicate that each teacher, like each learner, comes to teaching with a certain set of beliefs and skills from which he/she operates. Teacher education, for both preservice and inservice teachers, provides varied opportunities to expand beliefs and develop additional skills. Some teachers have a seemingly natural ability to relate to learners; an understanding of how to structure the learning process; and an ability to reflect and further their own learning (Bereiter, 2002). Other teachers attempt to strictly follow scripted plans and commercial materials, and their teaching appears choppy and disconnected (Simon, 2002). In this paper, we explore this gap between the former teachers and the latter, between teaching as script and teaching as improvisational performance (Sawyer, 2004).

As a profession, we accept that learners begin with their own experiences and understandings and make sense of new ideas and experiences through those lenses. Knowledge is constructed both interpersonally and intrapersonally (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction and meet students' varied needs. However, teachers seldom have similar opportunities to grow and expand their professional knowledge and skill in differentiated, on-going ways. Instead, "experts" typically employ transmission models of teaching in which teachers are simply told what to change and provided with some "tricks" for making those changes. Teachers are expected to "jump the gaps." They are the recipients of others' visions about teaching and learning with few resources available to support them in learning about and making complex changes in practice (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). However, teachers seldom succeed when left to their own devices to recognize, learn, negotiate, and implement complex changes without additional support (Fullan, 2001; Gabriel, Day, & Allington, 2011; Guskey, 2002; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Richardson, 1990).

This paper presents data from the field on how policy changes and mandates have affected, continue to affect, and may affect teaching and learning in the K-12 schools and the teacher education programs across the nation in ways that fail to mind the "gaps" between policies and practice.

Our guiding questions are:

How has increasing policy guidance within varied teaching and learning contexts affected our work as teachers and teacher educators?

How can we better support ourselves, our colleagues, and our students to successfully negotiate the gaps and avoid the chasm of confusion and fog of frustration created by the mismatch of policies and practice?

In our work with K-12 schools and in university courses and institutes we frequently witness low morale and growing frustration among teachers in response to district and school practices that seem driven by questionable science (e.g., one-minute fluency assessments used to screen for ability grouping within schools) and scripted lessons (e.g., government approved and computer-based commercial materials designated as “THE” reading program). We sought to help teachers find their ways out of the fogs of frustration when they see such practices as limiting their abilities as learners who look within themselves for the artistry that makes their teaching truly outstanding (Afferbach, 2007; Altwerger, Jordan, & Shelton, 2007; Garan, 2002; Trelease, 2012). Alternately, many teachers believe these approaches produce strong student growth in reading skills and abilities, evidenced by strong scores on commercially prepared assessments and students’ abilities to read books selected by matching readability of texts with assessed reading levels of students (e.g., lexiles). Are the gains reliable and valid in creating readers who tackle multiple reading contexts successfully? Or, do such practices create students who learn a narrowed approach to reading and demonstrate that on limited assessments that align with that approach? Another more disturbing conundrum appears with teachers who lack the knowledge and skills to meet their students’ needs, but have little interest in improving what they do in their classrooms. We puzzle over such questions and wonder how to best “mind these gaps” as we teach future and current teachers.

The National Writing Project (NWP) offers an approach to education reform that begins with teachers as primary learners in their classrooms. Sites of the NWP follow three key principles: 1) to teach writing well, teachers must be writers themselves; 2) teachers are often the best teachers of other teachers; and 3) teachers must become and remain active members of a network of motivated, knowledgeable colleagues to continue their own learning. In our opinion, the key to success of the NWP programs is empowered teachers who look within themselves to learn and improve their instruction and who are supported across time in their learning by dedicated, knowledgeable colleagues. A limitation of the NWP approach is that it requires highly motivated teachers to commit the time and energy that such learning requires. A more recent limitation of the NWP approach is that the federal funding, dedicated in the federal budget with bi-partisan support since 1973, has now been removed from the federal budget leaving more than 200 local sites in danger of closing, another policy decision that ignored the voices of educators. If teachers are the key to improved instruction and teachers need continued learning opportunities to continue growing, how do we sustain high quality programs for teacher learning in a time of austerity for programs in education?

Politicians across the country see themselves as “education leaders” (e.g., Achieve, http://www.achieve.org/). Each has an agenda, whether backed by scientific evidence or political beliefs, and each attempts to lay that agenda on public schools. The results appear to be driving wonderful, creative teachers out of the classroom while tightening the types of education our children receive from the teachers who stay. As teacher educators, we worry about the optimistic young people entering the teaching profession and how the current reforms may push them from the profession before they have negotiated their own gaps in knowledge and skill with the support of a network of highly qualified professionals and multiple learning opportunities. As Jim Gray, founder of the National Writing Project, wrote in his memoir (2000), teachers are indeed at the center of education reform and only they hold the keys to meeting the goals of high quality and lasting education reform.

Methodology, Data Sources, and Analysis

We chose self-study methodology for two reasons:

1) each member chose a different policy-practice gap to study based on personal expertise, experience, and interest and

2) self-study is a process approach intended to challenge and broaden personal assumptions through social construction of knowledge among critical friends (LaBoskey, 2004).

Our self-study grew out of discussions among a group of faculty and K-12 colleagues as we attempted to understand and implement policies from the state and federal levels that often seemed at odds with "best practices" in classrooms. After two months of formal and informal exchanges and discussions, we formalized our study by conducting a book study of *Teaching and Its Predicaments* (2011) by David K. Cohen. As each member read the book we conducted both formal meetings of the whole group, informal conversations among various members, and email correspondences and discussions. As the study of the book progressed, each of us selected a passage or theme from the Cohen book to guide individual explorations of a gap based on his/her area of scholarship and experience. Members also attended public hearings on new policy initiatives in our state and shared news articles and public opinion essays on the various gaps. As our individual focus areas took shape, a collective theme emerged and became the focus of our group study for a Problems Court at the American Reading Forum Annual Meeting in December 2011. This paper details our individual gaps and the actions to bridge those gaps that grew from the Problems Court as well as presenting the overall theme that emerged from our study.

Theoretical Framework

Cohen (2011) situates teaching and its predicaments within a broader view of professions designed to improve the lives of others. He terms this group of professions as one of "human improvement" (p. 4). In particular, "teachers try to improve their students' minds, souls, and habits" (p. 4). Cohen outlines three predicaments that confront teachers in this work within public schools in the United States:

1. Teachers must have knowledge to do their work, but knowledge is not sufficient to be successful. Teachers also need to understand how to structure learning for inquiry and construction of knowledge (p. 6).

2. Teachers are dependent on their students for success in their work. This dependence requires mutual commitment from the teacher and the students to take the risks that deep learning requires despite the possibility of failure by both the learners and the teachers (p. 10).

3. The dependency on students pulls teachers in opposing directions about their work. Teachers who require construction of deep knowledge from students

> increase the uncertainties and risks of failure. Teachers who transmit what is known create less risk for students and themselves, but they also narrow the learning (p. 13).

The complex interactions of these three predicaments make teaching an "impossible" profession (p. 15) in that teachers and students must constantly find ways to manage these predicaments and often find no long-lasting or successful solutions in their quest to improve students' lives.

Cohen's predicaments of teaching helped our group consider why efforts to reform teaching and learning in U.S. schools have historically been less than successful and that reforming education is steady work (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Tyack & Cuban 1995). Cohen suggests that "the growth of formal education evidences expanding faith in the possibilities of human improvement and increasing doubt about teachers' capacity to deliver the goods" (p. 8). Current educational policy initiatives seem in agreement with Cohen's assertion. Asking teachers to change their paradigms of learning and teaching raises issues of "promoting learning in adults" (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988, p. 42) and of creating self-efficacy in teachers so they believe they have the power to make changes in their teaching practice (Freedman, Jackson, & Boles, 1983; Fullan, 2001; Reeves, 2009; Sarason, 1990; Standerford, 1992). Teachers require the will and the capacity to change their teaching (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010; McLaughlin, 1987; Parise & Spillane, 2010). The capacity to improve sometimes occurs through trial and error, learning as they go; the will to change depends on teachers having enough autonomy in their work and the individual personal characteristics that enable them to embrace the challenges of changing routines and approaches (Standerford, 1992). Teaching as a profession relies on the ability of teachers to make professional decisions (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010; Zumwalt, 1988), and professional teachers who hold the belief they can improve student learning continue trying new approaches, reflecting on results, and seeking professional relationships that support their efforts (Duffy 1982; Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza, 2010). Success with new approaches brings about feelings of self-efficacy, encourages teachers to continue learning across their careers, and develops confidence to take risks and reconceptualize their professional roles (Ashton, 1984; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010; Zumwalt, 1988).

Teachers committed to improving their teaching need also consider how they approach their work. Cohen (2011) asserts there is a difference between teaching and "teaching practice" with the latter requiring teachers 1) to be deliberate and attentive; 2) to attempt to connect teaching to student learning; and 3) to seek to understand students' thinking as they structure their instruction (p. 26). As the study progressed, our team found our discussions going deeper into the framework that Cohen and others have constructed about why educational reform has such a dismal past. New questions emerged from each discussion about why current reforms feel as if they are going in the wrong direction to many teachers across our region and the nation. The following sections of this paper summarize our individual "gaps and confusions" and how we are wrestling with bridging seemingly disparate paradigms. Despite our deliberations and introspections, however, we uncovered more questions than solutions.

Suzanne's Gap

Suzanne is a university teacher educator of 21 years who taught all grades in the elementary school for over 17 years, including working as a K-5 Reading and Math Specialist, before moving to the university role. She is concerned with proposed changes in certification requirements in the state.

The Michigan Legislature, the Michigan Board of Education, and the Michigan Department of Education have proposed retaining the requirement for on-going learning requirements for educators; however, the nature of these learning opportunities would change under the proposed Administrative Rules (p. 15 of Administrative Rules at www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/2011-018_ED_Teacher_Cert_Rules_10-11-11_366135_7.pdf). Prior to the proposed changes, teachers have been required to complete specific numbers of university credits within a planned graduate program every six years as well as a state approved course in reading instruction. The proposed changes in the certification rules would eliminate the requirement for any higher education or university courses, other than the reading course, and authorize teacher professional development to be entirely based on workshops and/or district provided inservice programs. In fact, some read the proposed changes as eliminating university education as an option. So, teachers could receive a Professional Teaching Certificate, the next step beyond a Provisional Certificate, with no further study at an institution of higher learning other than one course in reading instruction.

The gap Suzanne sees in the proposed changes is based on 38 years as a professional educator and having worked both sides of the district professional development programs, i.e., as an attendee and as a presenter, and having delivered numerous workshops and conference presentations for teachers. Suzanne sees a significant difference between the learning expected in university courses and in workshops. For instance, workshops are most often focused on one specific aspect of instruction and usually provide a prescribed set of approaches to "fix" or improve that aspect. Such workshops are enjoyable as teachers leave with something they can try the next day in their own classrooms, and they have time to chat with colleagues about their practice during such workshops. After the workshop, teachers often find that the ideas offered do not work as described and there is no follow up support for reflection or for understanding the problems in adapting the approaches to their unique classroom needs. In addition, workshops often offer "one-size-fits-all" suggestions, leading to teacher-centered instruction that is provided to all students rather than differentiated instruction to meet diverse student needs. Finally, many workshops are provided by commercial companies and are designed to showcase their particular materials rather than to give teachers opportunities to think carefully about their own teaching and their specific students' needs.

In contrast, university courses seldom offer prescriptive or commercially prepared materials for teachers to use in prescribed ways. University courses are developed around theories of teaching and learning based on research in the field. Participants in these courses study the issues of teaching and learning with a research-based lens and spend hours reflecting, discussing, and producing products that demonstrate their evolving understandings. As the theories are applied in practice, the university courses offer opportunities for the network of educators within courses to reflect, discuss, and problem-solve as a community of learners. The result is intended to create deeper understandings of why specific approaches work and when to use specific approaches with individual students. Removing the need for higher education courses at the graduate level leaves teachers with limited opportunities to develop their teaching as a teaching practice (Cohen, 2011, p. 26). Professional teachers, as life-long learners, need to continuously develop their knowledge and skills through study of theories, practice, and content knowledge. They also need support from a variety of sources to take the risks required to apply their learning in classrooms and to solve the dilemmas that changing their practice present.

> If teachers extend knowledge in [demanding ways], they increase uncertainty and difficulty for themselves and their students. They must have courage to manage uncertainty and the patience to work through complicated material. They must be daring enough to extend knowledge in ways that increase students' difficulty, even though that can increase the risk of failure or resistance. (Cohen, 2011, p. 123)

In the Problems Court, the consensus of the audience was that similar policies were being put in place in other states as well, much to the dismay of those who contributed to the discussion. For example, teachers from Indiana who enrolled in a master's degree program by July 1, 2011, could count those courses toward their professional development requirements. Those who were not in degree programs by that date get points for attending professional development opportunities; one teacher in the audience stated, "almost anything counts." The audience suggested there seems to be a general disconnect between the values of educators and those outside of education who may not understand the value of higher education for continued learning. A few suggestions for "minding this gap" were offered such as surveying parents to ascertain their support or concerns with policies and becoming better at articulating the value of teacher education programs for improving teaching and learning in schools. Overall, the group felt that policies which weaken expectations and opportunities for on-going and rigorous teacher learning widen the gap between increasingly rigorous teaching and learning for all students in the 21st Century.

Jan's Gap

Jan is a Title I Literacy Specialist in a K-4 school and was previously a Literacy Coach in a fourth and fifth grade building. Jan has nearly 30 years of experience in elementary schools. She also directs the local site of the National Writing Project and teaches university courses as an adjunct instructor. Her concern focuses on the requirement in Title I for constant documentation and reporting that reduce time to work as a Literacy Specialist with both students and teachers.

Currently, Title I federal programs are required to spend inordinate time and effort collecting data, documenting work on multiple cost objectives of the grants, and completing evaluation reports. The time specialists spend on this type of documentation limits the time available for work with teachers and students in the building. Approximately one third of Jan's day is devoted to these administrative tasks. Data is meant to drive teaching practice by better identifying student needs; yet, collecting, analyzing, and reporting data is not meant to limit time for teaching, learning, and collaborating with colleagues in support of higher achievement for all students. Jan's challenge each day is to provide resources, demonstration lessons, student assistance, and small group instruction while meeting all of the policy's administrative requirements. She believes that to grow learners and improve school achievement, student and staff relationships and actions must be developed, mentored, nurtured and maintained through extended face-to-face contact time. Children and educators, rather than paperwork, need to be front and center. Jan feels what is being done in the name of accountability is not true accountability in showing student learning through mostly numerical data. Numbers do not address the social and emotional state of the learners. Numbers tell only family income, but ignore the stories of students' home environments. A reading fluency score cannot share the brilliant ideas of an insightful fourth grader. Numbers at the end of computational problems do not give insight into the thought process and steps a student used to tackle the task. Working directly and intentionally with students in scaffolded lessons connected to real world applications creates engaged learners and builds functional knowledge and skills. Portfolios of student work share thinking, processes, and growth over time. These best practices fall to the wayside as data collection and reporting assume primary focus and reduce the story of teaching and learning to a single spreadsheet. Thus, this focus on documenting and reporting fails to reflect the complex and difficult work of literacy specialists or the specialized knowledge they might offer to their colleagues and students. Cohen (2011) suggests "[Accountability policies] assume that the causes of weak student learning lie chiefly in teachers' deficient sense of responsibility, determination, and hard work" (p. 196). Putting the focus of highly specialized professionals on paperwork rather than on instruction will fail to realize the goals of increased rigor and more authentic, problem-based learning opportunities for students.

The audience in the Problems Court discussed some of the ways Title I mandates are met in Florida. It was stated by a participant that one district provided 20 unpaid trainings for their teachers, mostly on Saturdays. The focus of the trainings was on test preparation for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) rather than on how to improve rigorous, authentic reading and writing instruction. Another educator spoke of the difficulty of forming professional learning teams due to a lack of trust when some administrators believe teachers would "slack off" and fail to identify and accomplish goals of instructional improvement. The group's attention turned to issues of trust, support, and time for teachers to learn and work in collaborative ways for the benefit of student learning. Literacy specialists are caught between the very real fear administrators have about the possibility of low state test scores and the need for teachers to trust that high quality instruction will produce high test scores. Three conclusions emerged from the discussion: 1) teachers need opportunities to develop their self-efficacy to believe in themselves and their professional decisions; 2) power relationships need to be balanced to enable teachers to make instructional decisions based on their specific students' needs; and 3) educators need time and commitment to become politically active and make their knowledge more visible and their voices more included in policy decisions.

Derek's Gap

Derek became a university teacher educator six years ago after teaching middle school social studies for ten years. He worries about the content of social studies, science, and the arts being marginalized because they are not tested by the state while elementary classroom instruction is heavily focused on test preparation under federal policies such as *No Child Left Behind* (*NCLB)* and *Race to the Top.* Within the busy day of a classroom, time is always at a premium. As some subjects are more heavily tested, decisions to spend less time on subjects not tested at that grade level can become standard practice.

Derek suggests that social studies cannot and should not be reduced to a fixed set of facts that students memorize. Social studies is a living discipline within which each subject area is connected to the past, present, and future as well as to each other. Social studies is about big ideas, social action, and civic involvement. Since *NCLB* was enacted, social studies has become marginalized, and some advocates push for social studies to be tested like reading and math in the elementary grades. In fact Michigan has long had state assessments in both social studies and science; however, these two subjects are tested less often across the grade levels. Under the new *Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*, the focus of English Language Arts in the secondary schools includes Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects" (*Common Core State Standards,* http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards), but it is yet unclear how these standards will be assessed when the new assessments are implemented in 2014-2015. If the assessments require specific factual information to succeed, the gap that Derek sees will become a major concern for teaching and learning in social studies, and since these standards do not begin until sixth grade, the effect of marginalizing social studies in the elementary school remains unclear. Cohen (2011) suggests that teaching a fixed set of knowledge limits rather than enhances student learning, "When teachers combine seatwork with a fixed conception of knowledge, they constrain instructional discourse" (p. 148).

The Problems Court discussion suggested that as teacher educators we ask our students to take a "leap of faith" and teach in ways we model for them with the belief that such teaching will indeed produce success on state-level assessments. The group consensus was teacher educators need ways to show candidates this is true. Finding data to support our contention that rigorous teaching leads to higher test scores could be a rich area for future research as social studies assessments become wide-spread. Another vein of conversation was the need to collect data that clearly shows the limits on teachers' time for teaching due to other duties their roles require that take away from their instructional focus and time. Most laypersons and policymakers have little knowledge about the many roles teachers fill each day in addition to teaching their students; making these limitations on teachers' time visible could provide support for either more resources for filling ancillary duties or less punitive types of policies toward teachers. It is clear that teachers' limited time for instruction requires decisions about what to teach each day. Derek's concern needs further exploration in classrooms and with elementary teachers to inform policymakers about the effects of large-scale testing on subjects beyond reading and math.

Christi's Gap

Christi worked as a graduate fellow, teacher consultant for secondary teachers, and doctoral student for five years before joining this team of educators. In addition, she taught high school English for eight years before leaving that role for full-time doctoral studies. Christi's concerns arise around issues of dual consciousness and helping preservice teacher candidates maintain their abilities to see learning through the eyes of students while seeing teaching through the eyes of a teacher.

Christi sees the gap through a lens that recognizes teachers' rich reservoir of knowledge and experiences as both an asset and a limitation. Most teachers were successful at school learning; their successes made their learning strategies somewhat invisible to them as students. Yet, as teachers, they will need to understand how students might interpret their instruction and where possible roadblocks to student learning are likely to occur. In other words, while they must use their knowledge to guide their teaching, teachers must also distance themselves from their own knowledge in order to consider how students are making sense and to connect their teaching to their students' learning needs (Cohen, 2011). Teacher education must help prospective and practicing teachers "rediscover" and "re-see" knowledge and processes for knowledge construction in ways that make the invisible processes of learning more visible to themselves and to their students.

Christi sees a gap in the policy initiatives in Florida and Michigan where recent policy changes for teacher certification, professional development, and evaluation ignore teachers' specialized knowledge and the need for time to reflect, refine, and develop their professional classroom literacy. In other words, teachers must learn to "textualize their experiences" to "read" those experiences and comprehend what they mean for teaching and learning their own students (Edge, 2011). Christi involves her secondary education preservice teacher candidates in multiple opportunities to practice the dual consciousness she believes they need to connect their teaching to student learning. She creates numerous opportunities for students to *textualize* their learning experiences by distancing themselves from the lived experience in order to reflect and examine it in a way similar to the way a reader might objectify a text's construction, their own reading experience, or the process of understanding a text. Preservice teachers reflect individually and collectively on their own teaching and connect it to their students' learning as they plan lessons to teach in a local high school and as they reconsider what happened during these teaching experiences for them and their students. Christi's earlier research documented specific teaching events during which participants described simultaneous attention to their own knowledge and the lesson as planned, while also attending to students' verbal and non-verbal communication as guides for instructional decisions. Durkin (1993) describes a reader attending to an external or printed text while simultaneously constructing an internal text as he/she continues to interpret the printed text. Christi's participants described how they attended to the happenings in the physical space of the classroom and to their own interpretations in the conceptual space of their own mind at the same time they adjusted their teaching in response to students' communicative responses. As a teacher educator Christi aims to support her students in moving beyond an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975, 2002) to the development of a teaching practice by helping them make decisions based on dual consciousness and enacting the knowledge they have constructed while maintaining dual consciousness in their teaching. Cohen (2011) addressed this issue:

> [Teachers] must cultivate a sort of dual consciousness: on the one hand intellectual selflessness as they seek to learn what sense students make of material and use that learning to inform teaching, but on the other deep knowledge of the material and a clear view of the nature of good work. (p. 185)

In the Problems Court, participants raised points about the contrast between tacit knowledge and knowledge that teachers recognize and articulate. As a group we assumed teachers who recognize why they make instructional decisions and who articulate their thinking process in such decisions are more intentional and successful at connecting their teaching with student learning, thus improving student achievement. However, this assumption was questioned by one participant who collected data in a *Reading First* school for six years. When these teachers reached the point where they could recognize and articulate their decisions based on research during the sixth year, student test scores actually declined from the previous five years' scores. The audience suggested possible reasons for this decline, but came to no clear conclusions. One explanation could be that the sixth year was a year when the school's participation in the federal program and their external funding were ending, thus ending the "Matthew Effect," i.e., those who are being observed and recognized perform differently than those who are not or the fact that getting special attention brings about higher levels of effort and success. The question of whether developing teachers' dual consciousness actually improves student learning is one for further research and better means of assessment that consider correlations between teacher decisions and student achievement.

Joe' Gap

Joe has been a teacher educator for eight years. He has served in the role of secondary education methods and literacy professor, Director of Field Services, and now as the Associate Dean for Teacher Education. He taught middle school social studies for thirteen years before coming to the university. Joe worries about the ways in which classroom discourse is limited by the current focus on standardized tests as the means of evaluating both student learning and teacher effectiveness.

Joe sees a gap between policies that push teachers to a one-way delivery of information rather than encouraging open discourse among students and between students and teachers. It is in such discourse communities that student thinking can be pushed beyond questions which have only one right answer. If we truly believe that learners must construct knowledge for themselves, discourse in a learning community cannot be limited to questions for which we already know the answers. Students who generate their own questions, investigate authentic issues, and connect new ideas to their background knowledge create deeper understandings. Teachers can capitalize on students' curiosity and need to understand their world by providing opportunities for discussions in which multiple perspectives are uncovered and explored (Rosenblatt, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). As students articulate their thinking for public exploration, their emerging ideas grow into grounded understandings of subject matter and of the metacognitive processes through which meaning is constructed (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1999). Yet, current policies focused on assessing teacher success and student learning wholly or predominantly on student test scores reduce discourse to a transmission model of teaching. In the transmission model, discussion is limited to short responses by each student speaking directly to the teacher; responses can usually be judged correct or incorrect. The gap between policy and reality limits the rigor and authenticity of students' learning opportunities. Cohen (2011) suggests, "[U]ncertainty becomes central to instruction, in part because the explanation and justification of ideas open up different ways to think about issues and make those differences central to the class's work" (p. 159). Under policies that limit the discourse, uncertainty is reduced, as are student learning and teacher effectiveness.

Problems Court participants discussed teaching experiences where students explored ideas and worked collaboratively to solve problems. The group shared their approaches for fostering substantive conversations about important issues with teacher candidates, thereby demonstrating for them the power of student discourse for learning. As a result of the discussion, we recognized a common need to communicate how this disparity between the complexity of learning and the limitations of evaluating achievement with standardized tests limits teachers' pedagogical options. How to best prepare students for our rapidly changing world is uncertain. Teaching and learning for such a world demands that students wrestle with questions that have no simple answers and which engage their creative and critical thinking skills. The time spent exploring Joe's gap made the chasm of confusion between policies and realities clearer to all.

Abby's Gap

Abby is a doctoral student, a middle school special education teacher with 12 years of experience, and currently, the Interim Director of Field Experiences at the university while on leave from her teaching position. In addition, she has taught university teacher education courses as an adjunct. Abby's concerns focus on the ways in which current policies tie student learning and teacher effectiveness to standardized test scores and marginalize an already "at-risk" population receiving special education services.

Abby sees the gap between policies that tout leaving no child behind and making sure all students are "college and career ready" (*Common Core State Standards*, http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards) with the reality of expecting students with special needs to reach the required scores on standardized assessments without appropriate accommodations in place. Students are identified for special education services because of learning needs that go beyond those that can be met only in the general education classroom. Students receiving special education services can be included in general classrooms when appropriate supports are in place, but the supports identified in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) must be considered in placement decisions. Inclusive educational opportunity for all is the law under which all students have the right to an education in the least restrictive environment possible (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004, http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1400). Abby sees the likelihood of a gap developing when teachers are evaluated on their students' test scores and the stakes are so high that low test scores can result in loss of job and benefits for teachers[1]. How will students with special needs receive an equitable education when the personal stakes for teachers are so high and the power to ensure suitable test scores are beyond what can potentially be controlled from the classroom? Within this environment, how will the risks to teachers be reduced so that they willingly accept and nurture all learners?

Additionally, Abby sees a gap in teachers' abilities to produce high test scores without students' commitment to learning and success. Public schools accept all students rather than selecting only students who meet admittance criteria or only the number of students that fit into identified class sizes, as is the case in many private and charter schools. When students must apply and be selected to be a part of a school, there is more commitment expected of the student and his/her family for learning. In some schools, if students do not commit and succeed at the levels required by the private or charter school, they can be dismissed from the school. Public schools have no such selection or retention processes. Thus, students lacking commitment to put in the effort and take the risks for learning to occur produce a serious threat to the teachers with whom they must learn. In public schools, we overstate the power of a teacher to produce student learning without the student's commitment. Cohen (2011) sums up the situation as follows:

> The assumption is that students' poor performance is due chiefly to teachers' weak effort, and that if teachers are made to take more responsibility for students' learning and work harder, students will do better (p. 74).

In the Problems Court, the final suggestion from the audience was to actively educate parents by asking, "Are you sure a multiple choice test is the way you want your child to be evaluated?" Another issue that surfaced was the movement from a "student achievement" to a "student growth" analysis of test scores. The change will continue to put students receiving special education services at higher risk as it assumes that all students can achieve a certain level of growth in test scores within a specified time frame and based on limited opportunities to show growth. Clearly, there are many issues of how to fairly include and evaluate students who have IEPs to meet their learning needs. Pitting the needs of students needing special services against the risks for teachers of successful test scores while striving to provide appropriate instruction for all students leaves both students and teachers wandering in the fogs of frustration.

Conclusion

The intent of the Problems Court was to raise important questions and to enlist audience participation in exploring current gaps between policies and realities in our nation's schools. The problems raised by our team are based in the state of Michigan; however, many states have recently implemented similar policies in their race to meet federal mandates and to qualify for state and federal funding opportunities. The lively participation of the audience affirmed that the gaps identified in our study are of equal concern to educators from numerous other states.

One especially important suggestion emerged from the discussion; teacher educators will need to carefully prepare teachers to understand and analyze assessments taken by their students. What is the instrument assessing? In what other ways might students demonstrate the same learning? How could we document learning in ways that would either support or call into question the validity and reliability of single test scores as true and adequate measures of student learning? Teachers need to become careful evaluators of assessments and collectively show parents and policymakers the ways in which standardized test scores fail to adequately demonstrate student learning.

Cohen (2011) offered some hope that encourages our continued efforts to improve teaching and learning in our public schools. He states the increased attention on education in the government and in communities is positive because it calls attention to problems that need addressing in our schools. The research and focus on education has encouraged both public and private agencies to work toward improvements and has shown the many inequalities that continue to exist in our nation's schools and our children's opportunities to learn. Yet, he also notes that current reforms fail to consider the predicaments of teaching in public schools (p. 197). Cohen's final words capture the essence of our Problems Court and book study well:

> Significant improvement in teaching is more likely to be a long march than the quick fix that most recent reforms envision…Education should be much more lively, thoughtful, and humane. Understanding what that kind of education will require from schools, government, and society can only help. (p. 205)

The largest gap that our study uncovered in current policy discussions and decisions is the exclusion of professionals' voices, those who could inform the discussions as to the complexity of reform in real classrooms and in the everyday lives of students and their teachers. How can educators regain their rightful place at the table when issues of importance and reform are discussed and decisions about the future of teaching and learning in our schools are made? This is the real problem to be solved if the U.S. hopes to bridge the gaps between policies and practice in our schools for the 21st Century.

Footnote:

In Michigan the current plan is to base 50% of teachers' evaluations on student test scores by the year 2015-2016. This plan is further complicated by a change in state assessments expected to occur in 2014-2015 when the new *CCSS* assessments are implemented. Hence, teachers will have one-half of their evaluations based on these new assessments of their students' learning and their jobs are at risk if student scores are deemed too low.

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