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Captive Leaders: The Paradoxical Relationship of Teachers' Classroom Authority and Institutional Power in the Reform of Literacy Education¹



ESSAY BY **SUSAN FLORIO-RUANE**

Whether we want to or not, we must become leaders beyond our classrooms and enable others to do so. Because until we, as a profession, accept a leadership role in the reform dialogue that is raging in this country, we will continue to be used as pawns in the game of education reform and we will never be totally successful in our primary mission of teaching. — Terry Dozier, high school history teacher and the first Special Advisor to the United States Secretary of Education²

Introduction

The remark, "When I close the door my classroom is my own," is not so much an assertion of the teacher's authority as it is testament to her³ paradoxical situation in the field of education. Teachers are authorities in their own classrooms. However, those classrooms are nested within institutions where teachers enjoy little power to shape the conditions of their work. Closing the door may reinforce the teacher's local classroom authority, but it has little effect on the institutional context of that classroom. Moreover, the closed door may intensify the teacher's voice among her students, but it isolates hers from the voices of other teachers. Finally, the isolated teacher does not participate in conversations with other stake holders in the educational enterprise. And to that extent, she is more acted upon than actor as reform movements seem to sweep in waves across the national landscape and the decades.

Pondering this situation, educational historian Larry Cuban observed, "The

current architecture of schooling produces classrooms where the teacher is both leader and captive" (1984a, p. 673). The teacher's private classroom authority and her institutional isolation are historically related and mutually reinforcing. They help to define the limits of what is possible within the classroom and shape the very nature of the language and learning that takes place there. For this reason, as Terry Dozier suggests, lack of participation in the wider conversation about education and its reform limits not only the teacher's influence on policies broadly affecting all teachers and students, but also limits her ability to transform the local and immediate conditions for teaching and learning within her own classroom.

Authority and Disempowerment in Teaching: Two Examples

In my dual role as a teacher educator and a researcher of education, I have worked with teachers striving to transform the conditions for literacy education both within and outside the classroom walls. These efforts typically involve teachers alternately trying to mitigate their considerable classroom authority — usually by adopting ways of teaching literacy stressing student self-expression and response — while also taking a greater role outside the classroom to influence school policies supportive of the values they hold for literacy education.

It is risky for a leader who has been captive in the classroom to transform her role. Risk is incurred both outside the classroom where there has hereto-

fore been little place for what she thinks or writes or says, and also inside the classroom where, no longer a *captive* leader, she may try to lead her students to learn in adventurous ways to which neither she nor they are accustomed. The two examples which follow consider some of the risks incurred and possibilities expanded when experienced and beginning teachers of literacy venture reform within and outside the classroom.

The first example comes from my collaborative research and staff development efforts in the Written Literacy Forum, a collective of teachers from elementary, middle, and secondary schools in East Lansing, Michigan, and several faculty members from Michigan State University. For eight years during the 1980s, with support from the Institute for Research on Teaching, we worked together to learn more about the teaching of writing. Our activities included studying our own practice, reviewing the research of others, and fostering dialogue about literacy education among teacher candidates, experienced teachers, and educational researchers (Florio-Ruane, 1990).

The Forum's teachers gradually grew more confident in their authority to communicate about their research to their colleagues as well as to audiences including parents, novice teachers, and academic researchers (Florio-Ruane & Dohanich, 1984). Yet despite their growing confidence and success, they consistently declined to share what they were learning with administrators.⁴ Their discomfort speaking to administrators was rooted both in the perceived awkwardness of their Forum activities in relation to their official classroom responsibilities and to the critical nature of what they were learning about the teaching of writing.

Crossing the threshold of their classrooms to meet and engage in dialogue

with other professionals, the teachers discovered that they did not hold ultimate or exclusive power and responsibility for effective literacy instruction. Instead, they noted powerful links between literacy instruction and such contextual factors as time allocation, class size, opportunities for in-service education, and frequency and nature of formal assessment. Of this I reported that the teachers

were particularly struck ... by the contextual constraints to teaching writing that arise from outside the classroom ... the multiple and conflicting forces that work on them as they teach children to read and write. Many people have a stake in literacy education — teachers, parents, children, administrators, politicians, textbook publishers, and the press. Teachers operate as mediators, making moment-to-moment decisions and long-range plans that aim to balance competing definitions of literacy, competing demands on their time, and limited and somewhat ad hoc resources against their own talents, values, and skills (1991, p. 252).

If this were the case, then what the teachers had discovered needed to be expressed not only to and among themselves, but to administrator audiences whom the teachers perceived as more powerful than themselves. The Forum teachers feared that this was, indeed, a very radical act and that powerful education stakeholders outside the classroom were unprepared to hear this story or the voices of teachers telling it. These fears were realized in our attempt to speak with administrators.

Sometime in the Forum's mid-life, we were invited to visit a suburban school district in the eastern part of the state. The district was beginning to think

about reforming the teaching of writing, and its curriculum specialists and building administrators were interested in hearing about our work. They offered not only to reimburse our meals and transportation for the day, but to give us a small honorarium — one just large enough to treat ourselves to a fine end-of-the-year celebration. And so, despite considerable trepidation, we ventured out of our home community and more familiar audiences to meet a group of building principals and curriculum specialists.

I learned on that occasion that the Forum teachers' misgivings about speaking with administrators about their research were warranted. The Forum teachers addressed the group first, offering observations about the challenge of teaching writing well. They discussed the need for changes both within and outside the classroom, addressing such topics as parent involvement, alternative assessment, and re-organizing instructional time, space, and materials so that teachers and students could have more authentic opportunities for writing and responding.

But the teachers' voices were clearly not the ones the audience had come to hear. As the teachers spoke, many in attendance whispered loudly among themselves, while others drifted out to the coffee urn. Only after the Forum teachers finished their presentation did the audience regroup, turning attentively to those of us who worked in the university to ask, "Well, what did you find?" It appears that just a few short years ago the idea that teachers might theorize or make recommendations for the reform of literacy education was sufficiently counter-cultural that even those who had formerly been teachers themselves would be ill-prepared to engage with teachers in a thoughtful dialogue.

My second example of teacher authority and powerlessness is of a quite

different sort and related to my work as a researcher and teacher educator. When researching classroom communication, I have been repeatedly struck by the incredible power teachers have to shape and direct educational talk. It is well-documented that teachers do most of the talking inside classrooms. They often instruct using a three-part turn exchange in which they both initiate and evaluate, while students merely respond to demonstrate that they are paying attention or have comprehended the teacher or the text (Cazden, 1988).

When I first began to study classroom discourse, I was stunned to discover how much talking teachers do in their classrooms. Even among good teachers who like and respect their students and are well-versed in both subject matter and teaching methods, it is difficult for teachers to shift the conversational balance so that youngsters have more opportunities to express their thoughts and listen to one another. I was frustrated by this pattern in my own teaching, as well as in the teaching of the novices I was helping learn to teach. While trying to support youngsters' expressing themselves, we inevitably monopolized the conversation, managing content and social relations by swiftly firing off questions and evaluations as students inserted brief responses but rarely initiated or expanded upon ideas.

I have looked both inside and outside the classroom to research this dynamic and find that teacher talk is deeply woven into the fabric of school culture. As such, it reflects an educational system that has historically operated under conditions of what Philip Jackson aptly dubbed, "crowds, praise, and power" (1968). These conditions exist so that school can socialize the young and also separate and stratify them. Much of the social and physical architecture of schooling in America is inherited from a time when these were believed to be the

primary democracy-maintaining functions of school. They continue to frame our work so completely that, like most other aspects of culture, they are taken for granted and literally invisible to those of us most expert in the educational process.

Anthropologists and linguists note that talk becomes more hierarchically organized in situations of crowding, time press, or stress to complete a fixed agenda of tasks (Scollon, 1988). Yet many of the reforms we are offered in the teaching of literacy enjoin us to speak and listen in more open and responsive ways inside our classrooms without otherwise altering the social context of our teaching. It should come therefore as no surprise to discover, when such reformed teaching is studied carefully, that while teachers succeed in changing some of the surface features of their communication, they and their pupils often remain unable to achieve authentic, sustained dialogue inside their classrooms (Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989).

Despite our good intentions and a solid rationale for reform of literacy education, there remain too many pupils, too much content to cover, too few helpful text resources, not enough time or staff support to make new initiatives, and too much testing. These conditions, of course, can only be reformed by work *outside* the classroom. Thus, ironically, it appears that to change our ways of speaking inside our own classrooms it may be useful, if not essential, also to change the wider purposes and conditions held for our work. Put another way, if the teacher would speak less inside the classroom in order to encourage student participation, she might need to speak more (and more often) outside the classroom in support of these same goals.

Teachers have historically been granted the authority to teach, but they are authorized to teach only in ways valued

by the society at large and mediated by the institution of public education. This is the "architecture" of which Cuban speaks when he describes the teacher as both leader and captive. Even, or perhaps especially, when teachers attempt to reform classroom practice, they find that this architecture greatly limits their movement and options. Thus they find themselves, in Cuban's words,

trapped in the clogged intersection between old blueprints for innovations and new reform impulses to achieve what may well be unachievable (1984a, p. 663).

Pushing Cuban's architecture analogy a bit further, anyone who has ever remodeled a home (or who is a loyal viewer of the PBS program, "This Old House") knows that in order to reform (or, in this case, to renovate), it is the homeowner who ultimately reconciles the contradictions between the existing architecture and her envisioned space. She must also assess the resources available to make the needed changes, trimming her own objectives as needed but retaining the vision to guide the changes that are possible. As those who have tackled home renovation know, the design process takes place in an incredibly stressful collaboration with architects, contractors, sub-contractors, governmental regulators, and even bankers. But the homeowner's vision and resources drive the renovation, and she is the ultimate client and decision-maker.

Even if this analogy is only modestly applied to education, the teacher ought to at least be present at the renovation site deliberating alongside other stakeholders and helping to shape the re-design of the educational environment — both its literal architecture of bricks and mortar as well as its figurative architecture of standards, methods, assessment practices, and the like. Without such par-

ticipation, the teacher is likely to occupy and work within an edifice inhospitable to her vision, goals, and needs. Yet researchers who study teacher thinking find that

the situations teachers face in schools today often put more weight on the role of the teacher as technician and manager rather than on the more pedagogical role of designer and professional (Clark & Yinger, 1980, p. 14).

As a teacher educator, I try to help beginning teachers to see that participating in the process of educational reform is an essential part of their role as educators. I do this by assigning them the painfully counter-cultural task of examining and attempting teaching not as a solo "performance" but as a contextualized process of framing and executing educational goals. This assignment is counter-cultural because it goes against the grain of my students' expectations (usually reinforced by the institutions into which they hope to enter as certified teachers) that teaching is a set of techniques uncritically plied in settings over which they have and can expect little control. Rather than reinforcing beginners' entering beliefs about teaching based on their many years inside schools, I ask them instead to think about how the teaching they observe (and think they already know how to deliver) might be "otherwise." I encourage them to wonder what it would take to transform the *means* of education so that they might more closely align to the *ends* my students profess to value, such as high pupil engagement and critical thinking.

Many of the "givens" that lead teaching to look as it does today have been a part of our educational landscape for so long that they look like "brute" facts rather than "institutional" ones (Searle, 1969) — they look more like trees than

tree houses. If brute facts are inevitable, so institutional facts are revisable. But it is necessary to sort them out beforehand. Consider just a few of the deeply sedimented institutional facts Cuban's historical research identified as having been with us for more than one hundred years:

Compulsory attendance, graded schools, self-contained classrooms ... 50-minute periods, required courses ... mandated achievement tests (1994a, p. 663).

Of these he observes that

all were once innovations that reformers pushed for all children, yet these reformers created over the decades a Rube Goldberg machine ill-designed to achieve a growing parade of goals (ibid).

Teaching should not be about merely surviving inside an institutional Rube Goldberg machine. It should be about exercising professional authority to foster growth and transformation among one's students as well as within the school itself. To do this, teachers must be supported not just to reflect upon but to ask out loud and act upon questions such as: "What do you think of this?" "Why is it done this way?" and "How else might we think about doing it?" Not coincidentally, these are the very sorts of questions we want our pupils to ask when learning to think critically about what they read and write.

History and Cultural Change in Teaching

When beginners learn to teach, it is very difficult for them to question the status quo. Some theorists argue that this is a feature of their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975), or the years they have spent learning to teach by observing from the other side of the desk. These theorists stress the self-

selection process for teaching, whereby good pupils who have succeeded in status quo schooling choose teaching in order to recreate that schooling for another generation.

Others point to the conservative nature of teacher education, both in university course work and field experiences where there is press for successful performance rather than critical examination of teacher thought and action in its social and institutional context (Tabachnick, Popkewitz, & Zeichner, 1979-80). Still others suggest that the school is an authoritarian culture which fosters in both teachers and pupils the traits of authoritarian personalities and the acceptance and reproduction of hierarchy rather than dialogue among people of different statuses and roles (Waller, 1932). Others assert that on those occasions when teachers have attempted to break the mold in their practice and institutions they have historically been silenced because they were female, their efforts were viewed as subversive to the true missions of schooling, or some combination of the two (Casey, 1993).

There are other historical images of teaching which help us to understand the low status the teacher occupies in the educational process. Thelen (1973) points out, for example, that since antiquity the teacher has carried the image of the servant. The roots of pedagogy are in Greece, where Thelen notes that affluent parents enlisted slaves, or "pedagogues," to escort their youngsters to sites of learning such as the school and the theater. Today, the teacher remains a civil servant empowered to execute for the community its learning goals for the young. Only in recent history has the teacher become a highly-educated civil servant who is publicly concerned with her own expertise and professional judgment.

In addition to the haunting image of

the teacher as servant of the state and its families is the idea that the school exists to maintain the existing social order.

The public school is a distinctly modern institution that came into its own in the United States in the nineteenth century. Mass public education was envisioned to respond to the country's perceived modern problems. Pressed by rapid change related to technology, immigration, post-Civil War dislocation, and urbanization, citizens worried that the fabric of American social life was coming unwoven and looked to schools to instill — particularly in the children of the poor, dislocated, and immigrants — a common core of shared cultural and political values.

Schools were testament to the American hope that well-managed public institutions could restore order and safety to a society that viewed itself to be in crisis. In that institution, teachers (often young, female, and less-than-well-educated themselves) were charged to provide some form of basic, universal education for diverse youth. According to education scholar David Cohen,

though most history books don't say so, one powerful motive for the establishment of public schools was concern about the decay of social order and the breakdown of collective social values (1976, p. 553).

Cohen maintains that this perceived breakdown of order and accompanying nostalgia for a simpler past are aspects of the modern condition, deeply felt but not always realistic. He argues that the institution created to sustain the decaying social order more than one hundred years ago remains with us despite other social changes because people continue to fear social decay. Yet, over time, Americans grew ambivalent about the proper functions of school. Cohen argues, for example, that since the time

of Dewey, Americans have been trying to frame a coherent (if perhaps unrealistic) vision of schools that could both insure the social order and enable adventurous learning and the growth of the child's intelligence (Cohen, 1988). We continue to wrestle with the essential tension between passing on *conventions* and nurturing *inventions* which together make up culture.

Teachers have been relatively invisible and inaudible in the public conversation about what the school's function ought to be. While there are notable exceptions where teacher involvement has been welcomed in school reform, historically there are few examples and even fewer records documenting what teachers actually did inside those Rube Goldberg-like places where reform upon reform was merged, somehow, with pre-existing structure. Teachers' influence in the education process was minor not only in the relative silence of teachers about reform, but in the paucity of records of what they actually did or believed. This problem is exemplified in the utter absence, until the last twenty years, of a systematic research program (and published literature) dealing with teacher thought, action, and learning (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Until then, it appears that to research learning was all that scholars thought was needed to understand teaching.

To study teaching in its own right brings teacher thinking to light and helps us discover how teachers work within, around, and against institutional norms and cultural traditions. When we study teaching, we find that teachers cope with constancy and change by making compromises and local adaptations of policy, such as in the 1950s when teachers were enjoined to make curriculum more child-centered while working within existing large enrollments, or currently, when they are confronted with reconciling portfolio assessment as both an

individualized and a standardized process of documenting student growth. How teachers "manage to teach" in the face of dilemmas largely created by the contents of their work has been an important area of recent inquiry among both academic researchers and teachers (Lampert, 1985).

In the last two decades we have begun to learn much more about teaching from research in which teachers serve as key informants as well as studies where they work as co-investigators with university-based researchers. In addition, there is a recent and growing body of research uniquely framed and executed by teachers to examine problems of practice and communicate about them with other teachers, academic researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Each of these kinds of research contributes to building a literature of teaching so that when another historian in another century asks about "how teachers taught" (Cuban, 1984b), he or she will find a compelling and thoughtful written record.

In addition, and of more immediate importance, these studies introduce the teacher's voice and point of view into the ongoing national conversation about reform. They offer rich representations of her thought and action within the classroom and wider school environment. Descriptive studies of teaching document teachers' efforts to adapt to externally-mandated changes in curriculum and instruction and offer a uniquely close-up view of learners' responses to those changes as well (Jacob, 1994). As teachers assume more authority and responsibility to speak and write about their work, they enter the public discourse and create an enduring record of their practice. In doing this they become more significant participants in the process of educational reform whose views are accessible when changes in practice are designed and new policies

debated.

Teacher empowerment of this sort is an instance of slow but significant cultural change. It challenges the time-worn and taken-for-granted imagery of the teacher as servant and the school as a site for the conserving of the social order, and offers instead a forward-looking image of education in which teachers and learners are not just receivers of culture but creators of it as well. The teacher who is not captive inside her classroom rejects a nostalgic and superficially neat system in which order is kept in isolated rooms by docile adults whose doors are closed to one another and whose voices are inaudible to those setting the conditions of their work. Opening the doors and the conversation promises to let fresh air in, not only on stuffy institutions and classrooms, but on the learning that takes place within them as well.

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²Remarks made at the second annual U.S. Department of Education Teachers' Forum on Goals 2000 and quoted in the New York Times on Wednesday, November 23, 1994 (p. B-11).
³When referring to "the teacher" in this essay, I use the feminine pronoun in deference to the large number of teachers in our field who are women and to stress the relative gender imbalance when the ranks of teachers are compared with those of school administrators and policy makers. However, the reader should take this pronoun to refer to both male and female teachers.
⁴It is worth noting that these teachers were writing and speaking in the early 1980s and were therefore in the vanguard of what has now become the "teacher research" movement (Mohr and MacLean, 1987). As such, they had few role models and very little public acknowledgment of the worth of their activities. The Forum was a voluntary activity, modestly supported by the university but not an official part of the participating teachers' responsibilities to the school district.

FOOTNOTES

¹An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Third Annual Forum of the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education's conference on "Professionalization and Teacher Empowerment: Implications for the Knowledge Base," Indianapolis, Indiana (1989).

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