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## When Policies Collide with Conviction

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## When Policies Collide with Conviction

**T**he concept of leaving no child behind is one with which most teachers, parents, and administrators would agree. In an education system where compulsory education is a right, it is admirable to have ideals, such that by 2014 all children will achieve grade level standards in reading and math. With the authorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) almost a decade ago (PL 107-110), there have been a number of changes in state education agencies, school districts, individual schools, and ultimately classrooms. According to Allington (2006), NCLB shifted the debates about teaching and learning from local classrooms and teachers' lounges to state capitols and federal offices. National reading legislation stemming from NCLB replaced teacher expertise with prescribed curricula (Thompson & Lehr, 2008). As a result of these shifts, state education agencies turned their attention to increasing accountability, teacher quality, and student achievement.

These changes are particularly evident as school districts adopt comprehensive literacy programs and assessments that emphasize a narrow perspective of reading and writing. Federal initiatives and reform efforts, such as Reading First, Striving Readers, Response to Intervention, and now Race to the Top all promise more than the last when it comes to student growth and achievement. Yet, with all the billions of dollars and years of program implementation and research, the achievement gap and, in many schools, low quality teaching remains. The restrictive set of options that teachers now have as they struggle to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms has impeded efforts to move children ahead. So the question becomes, how have national mandates and directives impacted teachers' experiences in classrooms and with colleagues, as they aim to make sense of policies that were created on the national stage?

This question was explored during a graduate class that focused on the social, cultural, and political contexts of early literacy development. Each week, new stories emerged as the teachers in the class reconciled, challenged, and negotiated their practices and beliefs with the course readings and discussions. The following narratives describe how individual teachers struggled to reconcile their ideas of best practices with district, state, and federal mandates.

The first two narratives focus on individual students who were directly affected by hurdles associated with Response to Intervention legislation and restrictive language policies. Linda, a second grade teacher, struggles with the overwhelming requirements of the Student Support Team (SST) process and the immediate needs of a child crying out for help. While teaching first grade, Sanjuana confronts the pervasive discourse in her school about the "right kind of English." Both teachers met resistance as they advocated for students who were in need of attention.

Next, are the narratives of two courageous teachers who opposed their administration and colleagues because they did

not support a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy and learning. Eliza, a third grade teacher describes the tensions faced when challenged by administration to make a different decision for a student. As a kindergarten teacher, Natasha finds herself questioning her own professional judgment about literacy development when her colleagues suggest that she isn't really teaching.

The last two narratives demonstrate the inner turmoil two teachers experienced when their administration selected prescriptive programs and curricula over professionalism. Danielle, a third grade teacher, recognizes that the direction her school was headed was not aligned with her own theoretical beliefs about literacy development. And the last narrative highlights the tensions faced by Tara, a seventh grade teacher, when she was required to implement a scripted literacy program.

The narratives bring to bear the challenges teachers face when politics collides with conviction. These narratives, followed by brief reflections on the practice of these six teachers as they apply to policy, shed light on the hurdles all teachers face as they wade through what Davenport and Jones (2005) describe as "a congested area filled with a multitude of organized interests and policymakers" (p. 49).

Woodside-Jiron and Gebsmann (2009) and Wood (2004) have noted that policy initiatives greatly impact the learning experiences, including different texts, tasks, and pedagogy for

different groups of students. The following stories are only a snapshot of the issues surrounding policy and literacy. They are intended to engage, challenge, and inspire all teachers attempting to overcome similar obstacles.

### **How have national mandates and directives impacted teachers' experiences in classrooms and with colleagues...?**

#### **Advocating for Individual Children**

On a daily basis, teachers make informed "in-the-moment" instructional decisions to support students' learning. These decisions reflect the convergence of policies, practices, resources and beliefs. As Linda and Sanjuana shared their experiences in class discussions, it became evident that trends for accountability and standardization were privileged and "counted" in ways that did not align with how the teachers viewed the children.

#### ***Linda's Story: How Many Graphs Does It Take?***

Since the first day of school, Lamar had been having difficulty in his classroom with both behavior and academics. He was very impulsive, often yelled out in class, rarely attempted class assignments, and struggled just to sit in a chair. He read eight words per minute as a second grader, and could barely write his name. Things continued this way for many weeks until the SST team decided to start proceedings to test Lamar for

a learning disability. It was soon discovered that Lamar qualified for speech services as he had a severe stuttering problem. After several weeks of testing, I was informed that the twelve weeks of data already taken would have to be extended an additional four weeks as I had not collected phonics data. I was very frustrated as I began to question the value of Lamar's ability to identify digraphs and/or blends when he clearly could barely write his own name.

Lamar continued not only to make very little academic progress, but his exhibition of major behavior issues escalated. During this time, he was suspended from school for extreme inappropriate school behaviors.

In the next SST meeting, a member of the special education team informed me that Lamar would not be eligible to be tested for any behavior disorders as I had not graphed an appropriate behavior intervention. For the first three months of school, I had been asking for help in regards to ways that I could deal with him. At no point did any of the suggestions do anything to help Lamar. Finally, Lamar committed an act that required him to be sent to alternative school for forty-five school days. Half of the school year passed, and still Lamar had no specific diagnosis or plan of action to help him with his academic or behavior struggles.

What Lamar and I experienced is the result of a bureaucratic system that failed not only Lamar, but the other students in his class. This is a clear case in which policy and its data frenzy prevented what is best for children from happening. In Lamar's case, policies that were written to protect the school system from admitting too many special education students has negatively affected his opportunity to receive services desperately needed. The impact that this policy will have on Lamar will be far and long lasting. The question to pose to ourselves is, what can we do to prevent students like Lamar from being seen simply as another SST folder, and more like a child in desperate need of help from the educators who have the power to give it to him?

### ***Reflection On Policy***

The policy context that Linda and Lamar encountered and the resulting decision for Lamar to be reassigned to another school suggest that these policies count, however intentionally or accidentally towards life pathways (Luke & Grieshaber, 2004). The message Linda received from the SST was one that did not value her judgment in light of the data that was to be collected. She was asked to make sense of and utilize a system that has been established to provide necessary interventions. Yet, in her case, graphs and data trumped classroom experiences.

### ***Sanjuana's Story: The "Right" Kind of English***

Building a strong classroom community where students value each other's strengths and are not afraid to take risks is one of the most important goals at the start of a new year with my first grade students. Conversations about rights and responsibilities continue throughout the year, and I find these discussions particularly important for children who feel like they need to belong. Marcus is one of these students. He is one of the youngest in my class, an African American little boy who is full of life and loves to learn, and loves to talk. My goal for him since the beginning of the year had been to build his confidence in reading and writing.

Marcus speaks African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and in the classroom he often switched between formal English and AAVE. In the middle of the school year a new teacher began working in our room as additional support for English Language Learners. One day I heard the teacher yelling at one my students. I turned and saw Marcus' face looking up at her. I overheard her saying that the English he spoke was not the "right" kind of English and that if he continued not paying attention, he was never going to learn how to speak English the right way. He looked defeated, and I saw him crying. Many of my students overheard this teacher tell one of their classmates that his language was not good enough, that it was improper, inadequate, unacceptable, and inferior to the type of language that she spoke.

I knew that her harsh words to this student were most likely the result of "English only" beliefs and policies instituted by our policymakers. I also knew that an instance like this could have a long lasting negative impact on Marcus. I was torn on whether I should confront her or ignore what I had just seen and heard. I called Marcus to come over to where I was sitting. How could I express to him that I understood that "our language is intimately connected to our identity" (Delpit, 2002, p. XIX). I looked Marcus in the eyes, and I told him how smart he was. I said it loud and clear for everyone to hear, including the teacher who was sitting close by.

### ***Reflection On Policy***

Sanjuana and Marcus were in a school context that privileged Standard English and thereby constrained opportunities to expand on the linguistic, social, and intellectual capabilities that children can demonstrate when navigating among dialects and languages. In many instances, and in this one in particular, students' language use is viewed as something to "fix" which often results in remedial approaches and curricula (Guitierrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Pacheco, 2010).

### ***Advocating for Instructional Decision Making***

Recent educational reforms and high-stakes testing policies have significantly impacted how literacy practices are taught. The narrow view of reading as promoted by the National Reading Panel's report and NCLB informs educators' and administrators' expectations for classroom practice. The experiences of Eliza and Natasha typify the constant seesaw of policy mandates, requirements, and teachers' own beliefs about scientifically-based reading research.

### ***Eliza's Story: This Is What I Was Hired to Do***

It was not until my first year of teaching public school that I was made aware that under the auspices of NCLB, schools and school districts have to separate out the test results of subgroups. The fundamental purpose of establishing subgroups was to make school districts focus their attention on traditionally underserved children. At the same time, the legislation placed unrealistic demands on principals to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and receive 100% proficiency. Subgroupings included racial groups, students with limited English proficiency, children from low-income households, and in this case, students receiving special education services. The tension of

making AYP became a reality when at one Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting, my principal refused to support the testing of one student.

Despite my efforts to build this child's skill and will to read in 2007, little progress was made. Although he received both accommodated services in the classroom setting and early intervention services, his other teachers and I began to become concerned about his lack of progress. It was during this student's IEP meeting that I expressed my concern about his lack of progress despite previous early intervention services. Those in the room agreed further testing would be the next step. This agreement would be short lived, however, when the school's principal encouraged me to change my mind by noting that I could be sued and that the school would now offer tutoring (which he was previously denied because his scores on the state test were too low).

Despite my principal's refusal to support those who observed and documented this student's lack of progress, I stood my ground and refused to change my stance on his testing. I reiterated that my goal as a teacher was to make sure every child received the best education and fair education. Additionally, I was hired to do a job, and if I was going to be sued over it, so be it.

#### **Reflection On Policy**

Eliza was in a school district and system where the requirements of NCLB failed to provide appropriate learning opportunities for students, including those that fell into an identified sub-group. Darling-Hammond (2007) notes that there have been a number of unintended negative consequences of the law and among them are a "narrowed curriculum, focused on the low-level skills generally reflected on high stakes tests; inappropriate assessment of English language learners and students with special needs; and strong incentives to exclude low-scoring students from school, so as to achieve test score targets" (p. 245). Eliza's administration and the teachers were pawns in a system that has abandoned thoughtful approaches to intervention and assessment.

#### **Natasha's Story: Sing-song Baby Stuff**

Dismayed with the amount of paperwork required by recent policy initiatives to refer students who struggled with literacy and math to the SST process, I was relieved as my kindergarten colleagues interrupted this process to begin our grade-level meeting. We began by discussing ways to help the students that we were referring. I explained how the two students I was concerned about had become more engaged in our weekly story because of the rhyming and predictive structure. I shared how their experience with a particular text led me to integrate a retelling with a flannel board and a role play activity, increasing their engagements with text, supporting their phonological awareness, and motivating them to read. One teacher agreed saying that she used similar activities, but another teacher chided, "You do that sing-song baby stuff with your students, but I teach—teach!"—emphasizing each "teach" with a clap of her hands.

Feeling disheartened, I wondered why she was so convinced that the phonics instruction that she implemented was "real teaching" and that my instructional choices did not foster appropriate reading development. To gain better perspective,

I talked with other teachers about their literacy instruction. In those conversations, our recently implemented state reading standards were often brought up. My colleagues talked about our newly adopted reading program and how the district provided us with *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001), a book which outlined the framework for using the findings of National Reading Panel in the classroom.

These materials became the primary sources for literacy development. I learned that many teachers believed meaningful experiences with texts were necessary for reading development, but they also valued the leveled phonics readers and weekly phonics assessments that accompanied the new reading program. They reasoned that these materials complemented the new benchmark assessments and data sheets for SST referrals. I was amazed at how teachers succumbed to the policies that trickled down and employed practices that were not aligned with their educational philosophies. The policies and resources instigated structural and instructional changes that did not meet the developmental needs of my students, or for that matter, students in my school.

**I reiterated that my goal as a teacher was to make sure every child received the best education and fair education.**

#### **Reflection On Policy**

It was evident in the conversations that Natasha had with her colleagues that NCLB forced teachers to abandon what they believed about teaching and learning. Although the policies confine and limit how teachers approach literacy development, some teachers embraced its principles because it was a solution to help their struggling readers.

Teachers' beliefs and ideas are shaped through the expectations of school districts and administrators, expectations that dictate teaching practices and begin to shape teachers' belief systems. In this matrix of a hand-me-down system of beliefs, teachers abandon the theories which have proven effective in their own classrooms, thus, actually leaving behind those students who may benefit from various instructional methods, such as the "sing-song baby stuff."

#### **Advocating for Professional Decisions**

The final two narratives demonstrate how administrators and school systems focus on fidelity of implementation and whole school reform efforts, rather than on teachers making informed decisions about what may support their students' learning trajectories. Danielle and Tara share their stories of how their own beliefs and understandings of literacy development are in effect discounted in light of wholesale adoptions of prescriptive reading programs that align with federal mandates.

#### **Danielle's Story: Packing Away The Book Room**

My first year of teaching concluded with the announcement of a new county-wide language arts adoption. This program based on "the research-proven formula" was designed to systematically teach decoding, comprehension, inquiry and investigation, and writing in a logical progression. All teach-

ers attended required trainings where we were explicitly instructed how to follow the scope and sequence in the teacher manuals. As I sat passively listening, I imagined how my classroom instruction would be transformed beyond recognition. Reading Workshop... gone. Writing Workshop... gone. Thematically-based literacy stations, daily read alouds and word wall activities would also disappear. I vowed this was not the teacher I would become. Consequently, this training was my last experience with the newly adopted program. I turned in my resignation shortly after the training. I believed just as Harrison (2006), "Although we are accountable to the state, we also have a moral responsibility toward those we teach" (p. 129). I knew the diverse needs of my students would not be met by using these prescribed whole group lessons.

As the rest of the staff attended additional trainings, I was charged with packing up the trade books from the book room. Sadly, I placed *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985), *Cricket of Times Square* (Selden, 1960), *Charlotte's Web* (White, 2004), and *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (Cleary, 1965) in boxes, reminiscing on the sparkle in my students' eyes when they received a new novel. As I packed away quality children's literature to be sold, my decision to leave the county was affirmed. I did not realize at the time, but this adoption was a direct effect of NCLB, and I had taken a political stand against it.

Returning the following year, the impacts of the "scientifically proven" instruction were devastating. Visiting a first grade classroom, I observed readers and non-readers alike, regurgitating in unison isolated letter sounds to blend into short /a/ words orchestrated by the teacher's pointer. The children's voices still ring through my head... /c/ - /a/ - /t/. Children were then instructed to, in unison, blend the segmented sounds to form a word. The monotonous routine droned on. Proficient readers shouted the sounds over their less-confident peers who were now playing in their desks or mumbling unidentifiable sounds.

### ***Reflection On Policy***

What Danielle's experience demonstrates is that school-wide, and in her case county-wide, adoption of a prescriptive reading program restricted or constrained meaningful literacy practices. Stripping teachers of their decision-making abilities, students received the same instruction despite the variability in their abilities. Sadly, teachers, who previously differentiated instruction, now appeared to think little about meeting their students' diverse needs. The scientifically proven instruction, one-size-fits-all program left children behind. The behaviors and activities that Danielle observed the following year mimic what other researchers have documented in terms of standardized learning experiences and scripted instructional materials (Wood, 2004; Woodside-Jiron & Gebmann, 2009) as a result of policy initiatives.

### ***Tara's Story: From Balanced Literacy to Chanting Script***

I was scheduled to be the full time seventh grade remedial reading teacher in the new environment of NCLB; buzz words like "research based practice," "best practice," and "every child can learn" dominated staff development and faculty meetings. Such rhetoric was too powerful to resist,

and we teachers began to question our knowledge and beliefs about how to best teach our students. As the remedial reading teacher, I would have to comply with the prescribed methods recommended by the state. The balanced approach to literacy that we had previously adopted and embraced (literature circles, word play, read-alouds and more) would be replaced by a more systematic, phonics-based approach, particularly for struggling readers like those I would be teaching.

I was dismayed when I opened up the teacher script for the program I was to use. I realized that "script" meant "script" literally and that the lessons were overwhelmingly phonics-based with no emphasis on comprehension. Furthermore, each lesson would take the whole reading period, leaving no time for all of the quality young adult fiction I had come to love. This seemed a big price to pay in return for becoming a full-time reading teacher, but I moved forward, willing to try, thinking perhaps the balanced approach I had enjoyed was not "proven" to work like the research-based methods I had agreed to try.

After reviewing the diagnostic assessment provided by the scripted program I would use, I was disturbed to discover that some of my students had already endured their prescribed text three years in a row. When I expressed my concern, it was suggested that this is what "those students" needed and that if they applied themselves they would not be repeating the same book again and again—after all, the program was research-based. The powerful new rhetoric had already taken hold. Yet, it seemed to me that if the students' reading instruction was more engaging, they would more likely apply themselves to the materials and the process.

I decided to give "those students" the best instruction possible within the limits of the mandates, using the program as a tool rather than a script by incorporating engagements with meaningful texts such as novel studies and student-selected independent reading. I hoped that my efforts to juggle mandates with my own theoretical perspective did not damage my students' attitude toward reading the way it damaged my own morale. While that year was not a landmark one for my students, what I learned was invaluable. I vowed that I would never again dismiss my own expertise, subjecting my students to a daily scripted regimen.

### ***Reflection On Policy***

The political rhetoric and rationales that find their way into literacy policies are powerful. The students in Tara's class were labeled and positioned as "those students" and as "struggling students" with assumptions that legitimized rather than challenged this construction. Policy-driven discourse that enforces notions of accountability, achievement, and performance provides little room or opportunity for something other than deficit-view perspectives of students.

### ***Make Sense of Policy***

The process by which these six teachers adopted, adapted, combined, negotiated, and ignored directives and mandates from policy makers, administrators, and fellow colleagues reveals the way in which policy is socially contrasted and contested. Research drawing on the sociological theory of sense-making takes into account the perspectives and concerns of the

people who are most affected by these policies: teachers and students (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Proctor & Demerath, 2008). Teachers are active negotiators of policy; how they come to understand and enact or challenge the various policy mandates (e.g., response to intervention, English only, prescriptive reading curricula) is influenced by pre-existing beliefs, practices and worldviews. Teachers select some messages while discounting others and negotiate the technical and practical details necessary to translate the abstract into concrete actions (Colburn, 2005). Moreover, as teachers made decisions about individual children, their pedagogical approaches, and their professional life trajectories, they came to appreciate the collective nature of sense making.

Coburn (2005) and others (Spillane, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) argue that sense-making is collective and situated. Similar to the teachers in the Coburn study, the profiled teachers in this article had to find ways to making meaning of the multiple messages and pressures they received in their local schools. The informal conversations they had with each other provided a venue for constructing and reconstructing their understandings in a professional community. These interactions were highly influential in the ways teachers made sense of the contexts in which they were teaching. In essence, the teachers' convictions for more thoughtful and meaningful literacy practices, assessment procedures, and curricular decision-making were essential as they overcame the hurdles and obstacles of policy implementation.

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