

Leave No Teacher Behind:
A Classroom-Based Study of School Reform and Teacher Agency

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ABSTRACT

During a time of increased public discourse on schooling amidst national and local education reforms, this research examines the effects of such changes on the role of teachers and pedagogy. With a qualitative foundation, this study examines how the national legislation of No Child Left Behind and changes implemented by the Philadelphia School Reform Commission have affected teacher agency, or one's ability to make choices and act upon those within a given environment. Through the lens of teachers and an administrator, this classroom-based study examines how teachers are both constrained and enabled by recent reforms, and discusses the implications of such on the effectiveness of current, and development of future, reforms.

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INTRODUCTION

“Change becomes significant of new possibilities and ends to be attained; it becomes prophetic of a better future. Change is associated with progress rather than with lapse or fall.” –John Dewey

With the introduction of massive educational reforms during the current presidential administration, the issue of schooling has faced increased exposure as well as increased criticism. The changes brought about by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation have further highlighted the issue of school reform and increased the public discourse on related issues of schooling and accountability. While policy-makers, administrators, and politicians debate the merits of new reforms and develop suggestions for future reforms, teachers’ and students’ voices are largely absent from these conversations.

This research addresses this absence through the exploration of both a school environment as well as through dialogue with teachers themselves. In this context, it examines how the current trends in national educational reform impact the agency and autonomy of one group of people at the center of education, teachers themselves. This research examines how the interplay of factors within the environment, including recent reforms, contributes to the deconstruction of the space available for teachers to actively exhibit their autonomy and to make influential decisions as agents in the school environment. This research views teachers’ agency as invariably connected to the role and power of students, as teachers are the ones who can most readily create such spaces for students.

The goal of this research is to understand how the complex relationships among teachers, students, curriculum, and educational reform function together to create the

current environment on schooling as it relates to power, authority, and agency with an emphasis on teachers' experiences of these. This research particularly focuses on how recent education reforms have changed the structure of the classroom and larger school environment and explores how these changes correspond to a teacher's ability to exert agency within these environments. Within this variety of contexts, this research will pay particular attention to the classroom environment and the interaction between curricular reform and pedagogy, the art and style of teaching itself. Through an examination of teaching and the classroom environment, it examines ways in which teachers both lose and exert their individual sense of agency in relation to larger school and district mandates.

Additionally, this research explores the personal meaning of such dynamics. In other words, what does it mean to teachers to feel a sense of agency or a lack of it within these contexts? Such an understanding will also allow further speculation on the implications of such topics on future school reform efforts and the success of these in varying contexts.

Research Questions

This research involves both an exploration of schooling as a social institution as well as inquiry into the experiences of individuals on a more personal level. The questions guiding this research explore both larger issues of agency and participation, as well as more localized aspects of such topics. Questions that examine the relevance of these topics to individuals (largely through their experiences) are necessary in order to inform larger leading questions. Additionally, understandings of how these experiences

are played out in the classroom and school environment elicit insight into the larger social and cultural aspects of schooling.

I developed the following questions which guided my research:

- How do teachers (including their relationship to students and curriculum) and the classroom and school setting construct the environment surrounding the dialogue on schooling? Who has agency within schools environments? How is this agency demonstrated or acknowledged?
- How have recent education reforms impacted pedagogy? How have such changes in pedagogy affected teacher agency?
- In what ways do teachers' voices and perspectives inform decisions on a classroom, school-wide, and district level?
- What does it mean to teachers, as individuals, to have their voices involved in the ongoing dialogue surrounding schooling and its reform, as well in more localized contexts within the classroom?

Methodology

This research focuses on the construction of teacher agency within the increasingly standardized environment of public schools within the District of Philadelphia and the resulting opportunities for teacher agency. Through an examination of both of these themes, it examines the implications of agency and voice on reform efforts and their success.

Schools are social institutions, intimately tied to larger social beliefs and trends. As Amy Stambach states in her ethnography of schooling in rural Tanzania, "Schools and society reflect and act upon one another" (2000: 4), a fact that inevitably weaves a study of schooling into the larger fabric of society. Schools and their reforms must be studied within the intersection of a variety of factors, including teachers, students, and administrators, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and the influence of reforms, which

themselves carry underlying notions of what education is or should be. Each of these factors, as seen later in this research, can support or contradict others. As Stambach notes in her conclusion, schools are “institutional forms that reveal a web of contingent and often contradictory understandings about how to structure and organize society” (2000: 165). This point underlines the value of a holistic ethnographic study, which examines a variety of interacting factors.

Following the model of applied anthropology, this research examines the relationship between policy and practice as it is lived in a school environment. Anthropology provides a useful framework for approaching such an inquiry, as noted by Alexander Ervin. “The anthropology of education has been significant for curriculum design and the evaluation of programs, especially in the United States...Ethnographic evaluation in classroom settings has become a major field within educational anthropology” (Covey-Brandt 2001: 10).

Daily participant observation in classes at County West*, an urban, public middle school, served as the foundation of this research. These contextualized observations provided a basis on which to examine how student, administrator, and teacher roles, curriculum (and district, teacher, and student influences on it), and pedagogy interact in a school environment. Daily field notes served as the tool through which to examine each of these, and particularly to explore how curriculum and pedagogy interact with one another as well as aid and/or conflict with the construction of teacher agency and a teacher’s own sense of autonomy and power.

* Pseudonyms are used for the school building, as well as for all individuals within it.

I also took field notes during three days of professional development at County West. Such days were rare occasions when teachers had time, as a cohort, to share their thoughts on and often their frustrations about teaching, schooling, and reform.

My own position as a pre-service teacher also enabled me to attend three days of professional development through an urban reform organization trying to recruit teachers for the District of Philadelphia. Field notes taken during these sessions—occasions during which recent reforms in the district were common themes of conversation—also serve to illuminate the themes of this research.

The strong qualitative grounding of this research places high value in individuals' voices and what they have to say about their experiences. Interviews with five teachers and the principal at County West Middle School facilitate the exploration of how teachers themselves view their own roles, in relation both to reform and their own pedagogy and position within the school. These interviews focused on the experiences of each teacher in relation to his or her students and school environment, as well as gave these individuals an opportunity to discuss their own feelings, opinions, and perspectives about their power and autonomy with the classroom and school environment. For veteran teachers, these interviews also focused on changes they may have experienced over time as connected to reform efforts, both locally and nationally.

Fieldwork Site and Participants

An urban public middle school served as the primary site for the fieldwork component of this research. A relatively small school, serving just over 200 students in grades six through eight, County West existed for many years as an “alternative” school, a topic which I will discuss in greater detail later in this research. In the past several

years, most notably with the implementation of No Child Left Behind and subsequent city-wide reform efforts in Philadelphia, the school has taken a more traditional approach to education.

Unlike neighborhood schools which serve local students, County West selects students via a lottery system (a characteristic which will change next school year, when prospective students will be interviewed for admission). While the school buses students from all parts of Philadelphia, the student body is relatively homogeneous. During the year of this research, nearly 89% of the students were African-American. White and Latino students comprised the remaining 11%. According the School District of Philadelphia, nearly half of these students come from low-income families

The school is located on a former college campus in a residential area of Philadelphia, surrounded predominantly by row homes. While the property offers abundant outdoor space, the school itself lacks a common area where the entire student body and staff can congregate.

All of my research informants work at County West. Four are teachers and the fifth serves as the principal of the school. Brief descriptions of these individuals will allow them to be better situated within their own experience, the school context, and their particular role within the school.

Mr. Santoro worked as an ELL (English Language Learner) teacher before making the transition to administration. He has worked as a principal for eleven years, all of which were for the District of Philadelphia. This is his first year at County West, a situation which places high expectations on him as well as makes him especially vulnerable to critique.

Ms. O’Leary is in her fourth year of teaching (all in Philadelphia) and her second at County West. She currently teaches seventh grade science and social studies.

Ms. Patterson has taught within the District of Philadelphia for several decades and is in her fifth year of teaching at County West. She currently teaches seventh grade reading and writing.

Mr. Radimer is one of several staff who has remained at County West through nearly its entire history. He arrived in the early 1980s, several years after it opened, and has both taught and been an administrator in the school over the past two decades. He currently teaches 6th and 8th grade math as well as serves as the building’s math coach.

Ms. Williams has taught in Boston and Philadelphia over two decades of teaching. She came to County West within the past several years, a decision which she made based on County West’s then-progressive model and reputation. While she has taught elementary and middle school grades, she now teaches sixth grade reading.

My own position as researcher

While conducting this fieldwork at County West I simultaneously completed twelve weeks of full-time student teaching in sixth and seventh grade social studies. This position allowed me to develop strong relationships both with my students and with the relatively small teaching staff and principal of the school. Much of this research is based on my observations as a participant in this environment and should be seen not only within the context of my role as a researcher, but also within my role as a member of the environment itself. This position allowed me a unique insider and outsider perspective, one that I believe contributed to the openness of other teachers in dialogue during my three months in this environment. As a result of my unique position, I believe they

viewed me at times as one of them and also as a temporary member with whom they could share their feelings and frustrations.

Literature Review

Over the past century, topics of schooling and its reform have been written about extensively, as these topics continually experience change as they evolve within a developing society and world. Education literature exists which approaches topics of reform historically, socio-culturally, and theoretically. More recently, the discipline of anthropology has taken an increased interest in the research of education, as situated in cultural contexts. As noted by Evelyn Jacob during the annual Council on Anthropology and Education Presidential Address, the qualitative and methodological framework used in the anthropological approach to ethnography has proved valuable to the field of education, a link between disciplines that is evident in the emerging literature in this area. She places a particular emphasis on the value of integrating both theory- and practice-oriented research to develop our understandings of both disciplines (2000).

Within education literature, a body of work exists exploring how teachers themselves cope with the implementation of a new curriculum (Apple and Jungck 1990; Paris 1993; Hargreaves 2001b). While these studies explore the meaning of such practices to teachers, most of them do not examine how these reforms construct or reposition teacher agency within the classroom, school, and dialogues on reform. The increasing standardization of education under new reforms has brought this issue into increasing visibility, as evident in emerging research on teacher agency amidst standardization (Sloan 2000). My own research extends beyond existing examinations of teacher agency to explore the ways in which the construction of teacher agency

influences teacher practice and reform viability and success. As noted by Sloan, “In the present rush toward high-stakes testing schemes as a way to reform education, there has been little discussion about how these tests represent a threat to more dynamic, open-ended, and personalized forms of teaching practice” (2000: 27). Additionally, there is a dearth of focused case-studies on how standardization—under the pressure of high-stakes testing—works to deconstruct teacher autonomy and agency.

A small, but emerging body of literature exploring student participation in reform efforts has also brought increased attention to the impacts of reform on teachers themselves. Several of these studies examine the way in which student participation in reform efforts can contribute to the development of agency, a topic which connects closely with teachers’ own participation in these dialogues (Rudduck 2000; Rudduck 2002; Mitra 2004). Rudduck examines the prospects and implications of cooperative agency in her work. While these studies do bring attention to the construction of agency for those who Hargreaves refers to as “the ones in the middle—both young adolescents and their teachers”, these studies do not deeply explore the construction of agency itself within these or broader contexts.

Similar to the recent work of student agency by Dana Mitra (2004), my research will approach the study of agency from a sociocultural perspective, examining the way in which people make meaning through social contexts. In this framework, it is necessary to examine the ways in which a variety of factors, including teachers, the classroom environment, and students themselves, contribute to the construction of student agency. This line of thinking, in connection with themes of agency, follows the thought that

agency does not lie in the domain of the individual, but rather is mediated through cultural construction (Wertsch 1993).

Theories of Agency

Agency can broadly be understood as the ability of an individual to make choices and carry forth action (or inaction) in response to these choices within a given context. As sociologist Anthony Giddens explains, agency is dependent on the possibility that an individual “could have acted otherwise” (1979: 56). Choice thus becomes an essential element of the presence of agency, which can then be asserted through one’s ability to act. As Giddens elaborates, “Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (Cassell 1993: 96). A theory of agency implies a sense of autonomy and power, which can then be asserted through action (which may include the decision not to act). These characteristics of agency will be especially relevant in the examination of teacher agency within the institutional structures of schooling and reform.

Rather than a more straightforward psychological theory of agency, which places agency entirely within the domain of the individual, this research views agency as intricately imbedded in social and cultural structures and environments. Rather than isolated incidents, Giddens believes acts must be understood “within a continuous flow of conduct that is firmly situated in a time-space relationship inherent in any social interaction” (Sloan 2000: 4). Following this thinking and his idea that, “All social practices are *situated* activities” (Giddens 1979: 54), this research examines agency as embedded within the multiple contexts of classrooms, schools, and institutional reforms and the larger social and cultural contexts of each involved individual or agent. Other

theorists place a similar emphasis on agency as imbedded in a social and cultural context, as “specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed ‘worlds’...” (Holland 1998: 7).

Within his exploration of agency, Giddens defines his theory of structuration, in which he proposes a duality of structure. This concept presumes that structures both enable and constrain one’s agency. “The likelihood that the agent is enabled into an action or constrained from an action is constituted by the configuration of the structural elements—rules and resources—within a given context” (Sloan 2000: 17). An awareness of this duality will be beneficial in the study of schooling, a structure which, as will be evident through this research, acts both to restrict and reinforce action.

Finally, within the theoretical grounding of this research, agents are viewed as having an understanding of their environment and circumstances. Rather than a deficit view, which sees agents as ignorant of the meaning of their actions, Giddens proposes that actors have an awareness of social structures and of their own roles and actions within these. He warns that, “If actors are regarded as cultural dopes or mere ‘bearers of a mode of production,’ with no worthwhile understanding of their surroundings or the circumstances of their action, the way is immediately laid open for the supposition that their own views can be disregarded in any practical programmes that might be inaugurated” (Giddens 1979: 72). Such a view would ignore the influence of intentional reaction on the part of the agent.

Within the qualitative foundation of this research, the views and action of the individual hold particular importance. Following Giddens’ theoretical approach to agency, teachers’ and administrators’ own awareness of and actions within the context of

schooling and its reform will facilitate an understanding of the implications of recent reforms on teacher agency. A view otherwise would ignore the implications of such reforms on the agency of those most closely connected to the changes. An exploration of these reforms and their creation, followed by an exploration of these reforms in practice will provide the foundation on which to explore the changing agency of teachers within the socio-cultural context of a Philadelphia public school.

Organization of chapters

The first chapter examines recent trends in education reform, both nationally under the No Child Left Behind legislation and locally under the Philadelphia School Reform Commission. This exploration provides a necessary understanding of the way in which these reforms have affected both the practice and ideology of schools, in both intended and unintended ways. Additionally, it looks at the creation of these reforms through the eyes of teachers and situates their own relative positions within the dialogues on and enactment of reforms.

The second chapter examines these reforms in practice through my own fieldwork at County West, a public Philadelphia middle school. Through this qualitative study, I explore the ways in which these reforms have influenced the school environment and instruction, redirected energy, and both changed and challenged ideology and practice. This chapter places particular emphasis on the voices of teachers and their own reactions to their evolving roles within the district.

In the third chapter, I extend teachers' own understandings of their relation to curriculum and reform into a discussion of the social, historical, and cultural contexts of curriculum itself, exploring the ways in which the very concept of curriculum—both

from teachers and from the district—creates the foundation for which reforms are created and lived in schools. Within this framework, I examine the ways in which teachers are constrained by recent reforms and the ways in which teachers have found ways to reassert their autonomy under increasing standardization. This discussion informs an analysis of teacher agency and the ways in which current reforms alter the space for teachers to maintain their ability to “act otherwise.”

Finally, the conclusion extends this discussion, exploring the implications of teacher agency both on teachers as professionals, but also on the ways such topics may influence the success of future reform efforts. Together, these chapters and conclusion examine the policy, theory, and practice of reform, or the ways in which reforms are lived by the very people at the heart of education: administrators, teachers, and students.

CHAPTER 1: The Reform Process

“All schools for miles and miles around
Must take a special test,
To see who’s learning such an such—
To see which school’s the best.”

-Dr. Seuss, *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!*

The year 2001 brought with it massive educational reform under the legislation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The mandates of NCLB addressed the apparent shortcomings—if not failures—of American public education by calling for increased accountability. While this legislation brought promises of increased funding¹, it also carried with it a detailed outline of targets which schools should reach. These requirements themselves have forced districts and states to reallocate funds to meet the needs of education as legislated under NCLB.

Beyond the changes in funding, No Child Left Behind has redefined the practice of education in many places, especially those schools and districts which were considered failing and thus seen as most in need of this relatively new legislation. Due to its focus

¹ While the current Administration did increase education spending, it has failed to provide the adequate—and promised—funding for implementing requirements of NCLB (Weaver 2005).

on accountability, districts are under increasing watch and pressure to demonstrate—through standardized assessments—the achievement and proficiency of their students. This increased focus on assessment and its accompanying standardization has brought along an accompanying change in instruction, a topic which will be explored later in this research. An understanding of the requirements of No Child Left Behind is necessary to understand the accompanying reform within the School District of Philadelphia and the later implications of these changes on teachers, students, and classroom practice.

Following the signing of No Child Left Behind, states were required to adopt both content and performance standards in reading and math. These two sets of standards are strongly linked, as they reflect the deep relationship between instruction and assessment. States outlined standards for each grade and also chose—if an existing assessment was not already in place—a standardized test to act as the performance assessment. In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Standard of Student Achievement (PSSA) serves as the performance standard in both reading and math.

The adoption of these standards set the basis for what has become the central focus of this legislation: meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Under No Child Left Behind, making AYP has become the benchmark of successful schools and the primary indicator of success or failure in the eyes of the federal government. The standards outlined for Adequate Yearly Progress include performance standards intimately connected with a state's own chosen standardized test. A graduated system of performance targets are outlined through NCLB, culminating at 100% proficiency by 2013, an ambitious—if not entirely unrealistic—goal. During the 2004-2005 school year, 45% of a school's population needs to achieve proficiency or above in math content

areas; 54% of students must do the same in reading. Schools that do not meet these numbers, but which decreased the number of students scoring below proficient by at least 10% from the previous year receive what is referred to as “Safe Harbor” status, a designation which temporarily prevents further action which failing schools would otherwise receive. Schools which fail to make AYP targets face a series of repercussions, terminating (after five consecutive years of defined poor performance) with a restructuring of the school. This may include changing the staff, turning the school into a charter, or hiring a private company to manage the school.

While the whole population of a school must meet or exceed each of these targets, disaggregate groups within the school—low-income, minority, ELL (English Language Learners) and special education students—each totaling a group of 40 or more students must also meet these proficiency requirements. Districts otherwise considered some of the best in various states are experiencing tremendous challenges making AYP as a result of these subgroups.

Additionally, participation on these tests must be 95% or above, a challenge for small schools, where just a few absences result in a fall below this percentage. Urban schools, which deal with relatively high percentages of mobility and drop-outs, deal with the challenges of students who may be on their roster, but have since been incarcerated or who have never stepped in the building to attend classes. During my recent visit to a large Philadelphia middle school, school administrators were in a process of going to students’ homes to have them fill out the first five bubbles on the PSSA in order for the test to count towards the school participation percentage. These students had never

officially attended classes at the building. Another student had been tracked down at a juvenile detention facility and had filled in the first five bubbles while handcuffed.

Schools must also reach other academic indicators. Elementary and middle schools must have an average of 90% attendance (lowered five points from last year). High schools must meet the same standard or have at least 80% of their graduating class complete the school year or show growth in this statistic from the previous year.

Together, these various components create between five and 41 targets which any given school must meet to make Adequate Yearly Progress, a process which has placed incredible pressure on many schools, especially schools—often urban—with a high number of disaggregate groups. Standardized tests scores form such a significant piece of the designated success of schools that such assessments have harnessed widespread attention and energy, as well as have influenced practice, a topic that will be illustrated in more detail later in this research. Annual testing has become the norm in grades three through eight, as well as in high school, as schools (and students) demonstrate proficiency to meet AYP.

In addition to an increased emphasis on standardized testing—more appropriately referred to as high-stakes testing—the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress place an increased emphasis on measurable data. It is in this manner that No Child Left Behind has dramatically changed the focus of education, as what is defined as successful teaching and learning becomes something increasingly standardized and measurable.

These changes have brought along with them an accompanying growth in the data-driven culture of schools and schooling. The changes in practices have created an

accompanying change in philosophy, as expressed by Mr. Santoro, the principal of County West.

I will be very honest with you and I will tell you my most intimate, coming to Jesus epiphany that I've had, alright? And that is this: four years ago, I didn't take data seriously. I really didn't. I mean I started to look at—every principal looks at data to some extent, you know? You know from the day I became an administrator, you always look at it, but in a very cursory way I would look at it. I would look at attendance data. I would try to make sense of some of the weaknesses and strengths in my school...Now, it's so obvious that data is a part of life and I think it's been heightened by the No Child Left Behind law...So anyway, that is a real honest confession about me. And that is that over the last four years, I've really, really, really started taking data more seriously. You have to because *everything is driven by it*. (my emphasis)

The changes brought about—both in practice and ideology—by No Child Left Behind extended far beyond the federal level. The national education reform encouraged a reevaluation of educational practices on local levels, particularly in poorly performing areas. In response to years of criticism regarding the failure of Philadelphia public schools, the state of Pennsylvania partnered with the District of Philadelphia, led by Mayor John Street to replace the city's Department of Education with a newly formed five-member Philadelphia School Reform Commission (SRC) in December of 2001. This change extended control of Philadelphia's schools beyond the city itself and brought in Paul Vallas, the current Chief Executive Officer of the school district.

Several major changes developed under the newly formed School Reform Commission. Amidst deep controversy among the city's students, teachers, and parents, the Commission contracted seven education management organizations, including two local universities, to manage 45 of the district's lowest performing schools. Edison Schools Inc. and several others of the contracted parties work for profit, a fact that fueled the debate over this issue.

The School Reform Commission increased spending on reducing class size and placing instructional assistants in larger classes. They also increased spending and energy on teacher recruitment and retention, an issue plaguing the underserved district.

While these reforms had far-reaching effects on the classrooms of Philadelphia schools, the changes in the curriculum itself had perhaps the greatest impact on teachers and students. In addition to extending math and literacy instruction from 45 to 90 minutes daily (a decision easily connected to the areas tested through No Child Left Behind), the School Reform Commission implemented a core curriculum, a multi-million dollar package of books, materials, assessments and professional development.

The Commission hired the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF), a non-profit organization to create the math and literacy curriculum for kindergarten through the ninth grades. Teams of teachers working for PEF researched and wrote these materials.

To create the high school curricula in math, reading, social studies, and science, the Commission hired Kaplan Inc., a for-profit company specializing in test-preparation materials and services. Kaplan also created the Benchmark tests, given to Philadelphia students every six weeks to measure progress and to use in preparation of the state test, the PSSA. Kaplan aligned these Benchmark tests with the curriculum.

Rather than following more open-ended standards which states adopted, the Philadelphia core curriculum standardizes teaching to the day, mandating topics covered, and providing suggestions for instructional methods used. Each school in the city received the new materials, accompanied by a timeline outlining instruction.

Parallel to the changes brought about by No Child Left Behind, these materials emphasized proficiency, as connected to state standards and standardized tests. The

SRC, with the new core curriculum, also highlighted that such standardization addresses the high mobility rate within the district, noting that as many as 37% of students change schools within the course of a school year (Oliff 2004).

However, these reforms came alongside criticism. Their prescription of content and instruction seemed to highlight a lack of trust in teachers' own abilities to develop and teach appropriate content. While trying to highlight the advantages of the new curriculum, Celcilia Cannon, Officer of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development for the school district, touched on the district's lack of faith in the ability of teachers. "We cannot leave to each individual teacher the decision about the body of knowledge that students need to know. If we want to have equity in education and we want to close the achievement gap, we have to have clear public standards...and a rigorous curriculum" (Oliff 2004).

The concept of a "rigorous curriculum" also raised concerns from both teachers and parents as the pace of instruction increased dramatically under the new system. As noted by a 11th grade Philadelphia student in an article originally composed for her school paper, "Do teachers seem to be moving at a quicker pace?...The curriculum is accompanied by a strict timeline, which leaves no room for the students who require extra assistance. Teachers are bound to follow this timeline, whether students comprehend the material or not" (Curry 2005: 26).

While the School Reform Commission and Philadelphia Education Fund maintained that teachers were involved in the creation of the core curriculum, others viewed it differently. "Some teachers and community members have expressed concern about the lack of opportunity for stakeholders to participate in the creation of the high

school curriculum. They asserted that the teachers, university professors, and selected community representatives who were involved had an insufficient opportunity to comment on the curriculum because they saw only general outlines of the documents during the writing process” (Oliff 2004). Rather than active, engaged and ongoing participation in the creation of the core curriculum, it seems that teachers were referred to as reviewers, rather than creators. This parallels much of the existing research on teachers’ involvement in school reform. Teachers are given consultant roles as token participants, rather than given valid space to create and/or change reforms.

As Cynthia Paris describes in her own work on teacher agency, teachers are often invited to participate in curriculum matters, but often in restricted ways. While teachers may serve on committees or have their voices heard in a literal sense, they are still expected to implement the curriculum given to them. “From the perspective of the classroom teacher, teacher representation on curriculum committees does not necessarily professionalize or alter individual teachers’ relationships to curriculum” (Paris 1993:10). From her own research she concludes, “Furthermore, it privileges curriculum decisions made outside the classroom while failing to acknowledge, and thereby devaluing, the myriad curriculum choices and critiques in which teachers engage in their day-to-day work in classrooms” (Paris 1993: 11).

Both critical and supportive voices from all angles participated in the dialogues surrounding the creation and implementation of the core curriculum. Teachers, most intimately connected with these changes, critiqued the pace and instructional styles the new curriculum mandated. Many veteran teachers disliked the scripting of the core curriculum, preferring instructional methods they found most useful for their population

of students through years of teaching experience (Travers 2005). As Ms. Williams, a teacher at County West states, “Now the curriculum...it really isn’t that bad in terms of the goals, the objectives. What I disagree with is the method and the presentation. I think that should be left up to the teacher.”

Despite the existing criticism about the lack of teacher involvement in the massive reform of the Philadelphia curricula, some changes have resulted from teacher input. In the past year, the core curriculum has allotted time for school vacations and periods of state testing. While these changes suggest that the district is open to the suggestions of teachers, those most closely connected to the curricula in practice, these changes still leave teachers’ voices and experiences largely out of the reform process. As the editors of the *Philadelphia Notebook*, a publication dedicated to the movement for educational change in the city, point out, “Feedback and adjustment after implementation cannot take the place of including more voices in the ongoing creation and revision of curricular materials. The District’s efforts to involve parents, students, and staff in authentic ways in these processes have been inconsistent at best.” (Editorial 2004).

CHAPTER 2: Reforms in Practice: Life at County West

“Policy reality is felt, not merely acknowledged; it is lived, not merely contemplated” (Fielding 2001:150)

An exploration of both national and Philadelphia reforms within the classrooms of County West involves ideologically placing these classrooms within a much broader social, historical, and cultural context. The daily practice which lives in each of these rooms reflects the interaction of a myriad of forces. As Cynthia Paris notes in her own research on teacher agency,

Each teacher’s classroom context, then, was located within the embedded and interacting contexts of the research project, the school, and school district. The policies and practices in each context influenced and were influenced by those in other contexts. Each context reached back into the histories of participants and organizations, creating a dynamic system in interaction with itself over time. Finally, each layer of context reached down into the underlying assumptions and theories that characterized its organizational or personal system of meaning. (Paris 1993: 45)

Approaching the study of recent reforms in practice at County West requires an awareness of these continually interacting and conflicting forces, which together create the evolving environment present within the school.

The formalized education reforms accompanied by the changing paradigm of schooling have created a shift in the education County West values and practices. While the school opened in the late 1970s as an “alternative” school for students otherwise struggling in more traditional environments, today it follows an approach parallel to other Philadelphia middle schools. In the words of one veteran teacher, it formally had an off-beat reputation within the city as “that different school.” Interestingly, the shift from alternative to traditional has occurred rather rapidly within the last three years, in part because of a changed administration as well as a shift in district priorities, closely correlated with No Child Left Behind.

Before this shift, County West offered a variety of alternative courses which teachers, often with the help of students, created. Courses included “Juvenile justice,” during which the class would attend a trial at a county court house, “Disney films and review,” during which students would watch and critique Disney movies, and “Basketball theory.” While these courses composed just a small portion of the regular schedule at County West, Mr. Radimer believed they created an environment more fitting to the needs of middle schoolers. “Were they all rigorous? No. But they all had value. They had value for the kids.”

In my discussion with Mr. Radimer, he noted the changed atmosphere of both the school and the accompanying change in his own role and power as a teacher. “Back then we had plenty of autonomy. I mean we created our courses.”

When asked if County West would have been able to resist the push of the District, Mr. Radimer replied, “No. It would have had to become a charter...There’s not

much you can do.” He expressed his own personal inability to make changes within the school as well.

The shift in both paradigm and practice at County West serves as a broad illustration of the ways in which reform has influenced practice and how these changes have influenced the roles of teachers within these contexts. While Mr. Radimer’s sense of longing for the old system and powerlessness under the new one does not match all teachers with whom I spoke at County West, it nonetheless underscores the interactions of reform, institutional and individual practice, and agency.

As seen through Mr. Radimer’s words, a sense of reminiscence exists among veteran teachers at the school, those like Mr. Radimer who have taught under both systems. These feelings come into contrast with those of Mr. Santoro, the principal who commented,

If you talk to some of the senior faculty here, they’re still living in the day of the glory days here. In their mind, it was the glory days here. I think that [County West] probably did have more to offer as far as activities, as far as a whole well-rounded academy feel. But their scores were horrible because nobody taught anything that was packaged in a way that was aligned with any curriculum. But the truth is, as wonderful as it is to offer, once a week, vegetarian cooking on the quad, I don’t really know how that’s going to help kids get into college and be better prepared for real life.

The reasons behind the shift at County West are many. The national movement towards standardized testing, and the accompanying standardization of curriculum, have heavily influenced practices at County West. In an effort to make Adequate Yearly Progress as outlined by No Child Left Behind, district and administrative forces have created a sense of urgency toward reaching these targets, which themselves are entirely data-driven and largely based on standardized test scores.

These changes, while simple, have consumed much of the school environment, from teachers' energy to hallway wall space. Making AYP, in the words of Mr. Santoro, "is a matter of survival."

The culture surrounding No Child Left Behind and the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress have created a data-driven culture within schools. Graphs with Benchmark scores over the course of the school year line one wall of the lobby at County West. No place, physically or psychologically seems to be exempt from this shift.

But I mean now, I mean you're bombarded with [data]. I mean, look, I even have it up on my window. It's blocking that beautiful view I have. I have Benchmark data, how it compares to Terranova data and how it compares to PSSA data and it's scary. I mean that's not me, that's really not me. I am much more of an affective education kind of a guy and I would prefer—I mean that's why my former middle school...was a very good fit for me because all I did was try to be the best social work/educator that I could be. But here, it's all about evidence, about monitoring. It's all about the Core Curriculum. (Mr. Santoro)

In addition to changing the environment and practices of schools, the shift towards data-driven education has changed the very definition of what good schooling is. As Michael Apple and Susan Jungck point out, "There is currently immense pressure not only to redefine the manner in which education is carried out, but what education is actually *for*" (1990: 229).

Good data reflects quality schools, in the eyes of district, state, and the federal governments. As Mr. Santoro stated, "An effective school today, everything is based on data." This data-driven culture controls both instruction and assessment, which fall under quantitative, but not qualitative, measurement. In critique of this paradigm, Michael Apple notes, "Unfortunately, American schools are more and more dominated by ideas

that seem to rest on the belief that if it moves in the classroom, it must be measured, and if it has not moved yet, measure it in case it does move tomorrow” (1999: xii).

Within this system, data becomes the foundation on which to build plans, strategies, and practice within a school. During several days of professional development at County West, teachers used sheets of Benchmark, PSSA, and Terranova (another annual standardized test) scores to identify students who had scored just below the proficient level the proceeding year and were believed to show the most promise for reaching proficiency this year (thus helping the school to make its AYP targets). Identified students were placed into groups for extra test preparation, a plan that involved pulling them out of untested subjects, such as science and social studies. This practice identified students demonstrating (through previous test scores) the greatest chance of reaching proficiency, rather than those truly needing the most help.

This study of data exemplified a shift that had occurred throughout the school. In the words of Mr. Santoro, “You [have to take data seriously] because everything is driven now by it. If you make AYP, if you don’t make AYP. What can you do to make a little bit of gain here? How can you grab a point there? You know we look at Benchmark data. We look at Terranova data.”

Such standardization strongly influences what happens in the classroom, traditionally a teacher’s greatest sphere of influence. While I observed several classes, including music, used for test-preparation strategies specifically, other classes also carried an undertone of the upcoming testing. Weekly themes in both reading and math content areas were displayed in the main office, highlighting for teachers concepts, such as “cause-and-effect” and “making inferences,” that would be valuable for students on

the PSSAs. Early in my own teaching at County West, I received an email from the principal suggesting that I should find a way to instill “a sense of urgency” regarding the PSSA in my own social studies class. In this manner, curriculum and instruction in all subjects become situated in the context of standardized testing.

If students themselves did not notice the influence of standardized testing within their lessons, the building environment itself would alert them of such. A sign declaring “PSSA’s coming to a classroom near you!” hangs in the main entrance of the school. Once in the building, students are also greeted with a sign declaring, “Gearing up for the PSSA & TERRA NOVA Tests. Proficiency is our only option!” A similar banner hangs in the school lunchroom. These signs, along with many other student-made signs throughout the building, also included a daily countdown until testing began.

An underlying “sense of urgency” also pervaded the building, a phrase Mr. Santoro regularly used in his communications with faculty members. Daily announcements reminded students of the importance of the upcoming test, once stating that, “They will follow you wherever you go.” During professional development Mr. Santoro remarked in a serious tone, “Given the system we’re all working in, if we don’t make AYP, you may be going to [the new building] without me,” highlighting his own concern about the security of his job.

Some teachers expressed their frustrations with this new system, one that places math and reading proficiency paramount to other subjects or school activities. Mr. Radimer critically expressed his observations of this shift. “We’re pulling kids out of music and out of science and social studies class for test prep. It’s all about prepping for the test.” Another teacher at County West noted her own changed mindset during school

wide professional development, expressing the way she had focused her attention on test preparation. “There’s no more hugging. We did that already. It’s time to say, ‘shut up!’ You’ve got to do this because it’s for you.”

The data-driven culture, resulting in part from standardized testing, also influenced instruction through teacher accountability. As Mr. Santoro commented, “Benchmark data is data you’re supposed to discuss with your teachers. So you know if you have three seventh grade teachers and two are kind of staying on track and one of those seventh grade teachers, the data is below the floor, then you have to have a conversation with that teacher and say, ‘What’s going on here? The data shows.’”

Much of the existing research similarly documents the way standardization and high-stakes testing control instruction (Sloan 2000). Mr. Santoro provided examples of this at County West, stating that “I mean the Benchmark data is [one way data-driven culture influences instruction]. I mean that’s probably the easiest one to understand because every six weeks we give a test, we get the results back in three or four days from the company that’s been hired and we assess what we’re doing, how we’re teaching, what we’re teaching and how the kids are learning.” In addition to prescribing teacher practices—from using class time to teach test-taking strategies to mandating a timeline of instruction—such standardization also influences the very material and content schools teach. “With control over content, teaching, and evaluation shifting outside the classroom, the focus is more and more only on those elements of social studies, reading, science, and so forth that can be easily measured on standardized tests” (Apple and Jungck 1990: 234). This idea was further reinforced during my participation in a professional development session for pre-service teachers. The facilitator, a Philadelphia

teacher, attempting to reinforce the value of teaching to the test, stated, “The ultimate goal is for them to do better on tests because that’s what they’re going to be tested on to get into college and high school.”

As content and instruction become increasingly prescribed and more narrowly defined, teachers own space for autonomy becomes similarly restricted. Ms. Williams described the professional development session where she first learned about the core curriculum. “I remember going over *how you had* to teach. Everything is scripted.” As curriculum researcher and theorist Michael Apple explains, “Increasingly, teachers are having to ‘teach to the tests.’ Even if they want to maintain their autonomy on this, most of the content and textbooks that are officially seen to be necessary are closely interconnected to the mandated tests in many cities and states. In essence, the ‘tail of the test wags the body of the curriculum’” (1999: xii).

Several researchers argue that this process works to deskill teachers. As Kris Sloan notes in his own research on teacher agency, “Apple and others argue that such external bureaucratic controls that monitor classroom instruction and teacher behavior work to de-skill teachers. This de-skilling process leads to teachers being viewed merely as technicians who are expected to and rewarded for delivering only instruction that directly targets that which is tested” (2000: 6)

Teachers at County West expressed various frustrations in their work with the Philadelphia core curriculum (aligned with the standardized state assessments). Several teachers felt their own experiences or knowledge of their students provided them a better ground on which to make judgments about what their students needed to know and what should be taught within their discipline. Ms. O’Leary commented in frustration to me

one morning when reviewing upcoming lessons in the science curriculum, “Listen to how ridiculous this is. The curriculum requires them to know all parts of the ear.” Similarly, Ms. Williams noted personal problems she found in the reading and writing curriculum which uses one textbook, *Elements of Literature*, a compilation of poetry and short stories. “But it doesn’t give them the classics, the stories that other people have read, so they don’t, they’re not exposed to the stories. For instance, we’re doing a unit on plays. I expected to see a Shakespearean play...I really want to have more richness in the language.”

At a professional development session aimed at introducing pre-service teachers to the core curriculum and retaining them within the district, the facilitators emphasized the flexibility the core curriculum allows. When I later asked Ms. Williams if she agreed with this representation, she explained the district’s approach as, “Just follow the skills.” In practice, she found this problematic.

So therefore, for instance, this week, my skill is cause-and-effect. If I use another particular book I can use cause-and-effect. However, if they’re looking at the core curriculum, they’re expecting me to read this play. If I can do both, that works. If I cannot do both and I have to make a choice, I have to follow the core curriculum... In addition to that, in the hour-and-a-half, I’m supposed to work with a guided reading group where there are specific guided reading books to use. So, I’m looking where would I use this particular literature piece [I want to use]?

Ultimately though, Ms. Williams returns to the core curriculum. “But the whole idea is will it fit in with the curriculum.”

Philadelphia first grade teacher Tracy Manela, quoted in the *Philadelphia Notebook*, notes both the advantages and limitations the core curriculum creates for teachers. “It’s good for people who need specific guidelines of what to teach. But for those of us who have already been there and can see a better way and a different way to

achieve these goals, it kind of ties our hands” (Oliff 2004). Ms. Patterson, a literacy teacher at County West expressed similar limitations, although appreciated the ease of using the core curriculum. “I kind of like it in some ways. It’s like a script. It’s easy. It’s right there for you. But then, when you want to use other things, you may have problems.”

A veteran teacher, Ms. Williams expressed a comfort with creating her own curriculum within a set of skills, but not methods, prescribed by the district. She found that the detailed prescription of the curriculum limited her own teaching. “I think the school district is saying, ‘You can put that in the curriculum.’ However, I’m saying, ‘How?’ If you just say, ‘These are the skills that the kids have to know by April because they’re going to be tested on it,’ then I can see that.” The editors of the *Philadelphia Notebook* highlighted a similar shortcoming in the Philadelphia reforms, pointing to the failure of the core curriculum to create space for teacher autonomy.

The School District has not sent a clear message to schools that the core curriculum allows for flexibility in content and for teacher autonomy in developing instructional strategies. Schools and teachers need to hear specifically that they can and should include lessons, activities, and materials—like full-length novels or strong multicultural content—that are not mandated by the core curriculum but that will enrich learning. (Editorial 2004)

Ms. Williams also noted the time constraints that limit teacher autonomy and adaptation of the curriculum. “The time constraint. It seems that once the students get really involved, they really enjoy it, we’re moving on. Like, for instance, in ‘Justice for all,’ I could do a whole year on that because they were interested in that. Oh no, this is now March so-and-so. We have to go to the next unit. We’re on plays, which are not connected at all.”

Research on the standardization of education follows the experiences of teachers at County West, noting the ways in which such curricula change instruction and the roles of teachers. Curriculum researcher Andy Hargreaves notes, “When standards are defined in great numbers and elaborate detail, they can create a ‘hurry-along curriculum’ where content coverage takes precedence over learning and even teachers’ ‘wait-time’ to answer students’ questions gets compressed. As well as inhibiting learning, over-prescriptive and unnecessarily detailed standards undermine the professionalism and morale of teachers” (2001a).

Several teachers expressed their doubts about the core curriculum itself, feeling that although teachers had been “consulted” during its creation, the curriculum did not best meet the needs of their students or match their own values as experienced educators. Reflecting this feeling, Ms. Patterson noted, “I think the people that make these, that design the curriculum have never taken an education course.” Ms. Williams expressed a similar sentiment. “The problem I have with educational policy—and this might be in any industry, maybe not just education—many of them have taught, but as my sister and I always say, ‘long, long, long, long ago.’” Speaking to her discipline specifically, she criticizes the high number of writing pieces the district requires of students each marking period. “Is six pieces of writing really important?...I have some people below basic, so obviously, they’re going to do many more re-writes, many more mini lessons, to get to the proficient level. So it’s not the amount of it. But when you’re writing your curriculum, you won’t know that if you’re not in the classroom teaching someone how to write.”

Swarthmore College Professor Eva Travers, writing for the *Philadelphia Notebook*, found that veteran teachers felt that the core curriculum ignored their own knowledge about their students and pedagogy. One English teacher states, “The core curriculum is all direct teaching, which is opposed to everything I have learned. Let me do what I want with texts. I want to do active learning, hands-on projects, write essays that draw on students’ experiences. My students have great strengths in oral and written expression, but these are totally ignored in the curriculum” (Travers 2005: 19).

Linking the curriculum and her instruction strongly to the recent reform movements, both nationally and in Philadelphia, Ms. Williams concludes, “And it all comes down to assessment and very objective data.” It is in this manner that classroom practice is so strongly linked to NCLB.

As seen in the environment of County West, an emphasis on test-based assessment and standardization shift the attention and absorb the energy within a school. A teacher’s focus shifts from creating lessons to following the timeline provided and to preparing students for test-based assessments. A teacher in the United Kingdom noted the way in which increasing standardization and reforms affect her position as a teacher.

They tell us to go and be busy over there, so we all swarm over there and get busy. Then they change their minds and say, ‘No, over there!’ So we all swarm over there and get busy again in a different way. And then it’s ‘over here’ then over somewhere else. And we all keep on swarming as they point fingers in new directions. Every few years, they come to watch you to see if you’re swarming properly” (Hargreaves 2001b: 6)

Resources, in the forms of both time and money, spent on preparing students for the PSSAs, as prescribed through the core curriculum, eliminate such energy and funds from other areas. As stated in the *Philadelphia Notebook*, “Science experiments, plays, creative writing, and after-school clubs were some of the many activities that school

officials and teachers said they had to eliminate last year in order to stay on pace” (Oloff 2004). At County West, a school that offers less than a half-dozen extracurriculars to its students, the District funds Power Hour, an after school standardized math and reading program, four days a week. Starting two months before the PSSAs, the school also offered a similar Saturday school program.

One County West teacher, highlighting his changed role, also noted the effect of these changes on students. “Kids are reacting to AYP and kids are reacting to what they’ve lost and a teacher doesn’t have time to know students. Kids sense that loss. We’re teachers as technicians. There’s very little time in the day to care for kids.”

While the intentions of national movements towards data-driven education and more localized standardization under the core curriculum in Philadelphia may not be to reduce teacher autonomy in the classroom, these reform movements have undoubtedly impacted teachers’ roles as makers of meaning, and more generally as educators, within their classrooms. Education reform needs to be examined not only from the perspective of the reforms themselves, but should be explored as they are lived in schools and classrooms.

This chapter has shown, on a micro-level, these reforms as they are lived and experienced by students, administrators, and particularly teachers. Such an approach is necessary to understand the way curriculum—and the reform of curriculum—“is not an abstract entity but a lived experience that has relevance for particular students and particular teachers in a particular context” (Simons 1998: 367). These narratives serve as a reminder that reforms must be studied within the socio-cultural context in which they were created and enacted. Curriculum and pedagogy interact with their environments as

well as with the people, teachers and students alike, within them. “The relationships between context and teachers’ curriculum work...are neither unidirectional or static, but interactive and evolving over time. Consequently, context cannot merely be documented as a precursor or backdrop to curriculum work, but must be treated as an integral and changing component of teachers’ curriculum” (Paris 1993: 43). Even the concept of curriculum itself must be explored as a social construct set within a given context, a topic which will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

Within the school district of Philadelphia, teachers have been receivers of curriculum. Rather than recent reforms empowering teachers to make active choices about their own teaching and development, the move towards standardization, in both instruction and assessment, increasingly prescribes activity within a classroom. Within Philadelphia, the core curriculum has prescribed method in addition to content. This move, together with the data-driven atmosphere resulting from No Child Left Behind, has changed the roles and options available for teachers. The following chapter examines these changes through a concept of agency, examining the ways in which recent reforms have confined the spaces for teachers to be active agents, causing teachers to renegotiate their space as educators and as professionals.

CHAPTER 3: Reforms and the Repositioning of Teacher Agency

“In the United States, George W. Bush’s educational slogan is to leave no child behind. The implication of our own collective findings on positive educational change is that leaving no child behind means leaving no teacher behind either.” (Hargreaves 2001a)

Recent school reforms, and particularly the implementation of the core curriculum in Philadelphia, are intimately connected with the very notion of what curriculum is, or the purpose it serves. Recent standardization represents the assumption that the curriculum can be constructed outside of the classroom and done so by those other than the people who will themselves implement such a body of work. As Cynthia Paris notes, such standardization carries with it the notion, “that curriculum knowledge—knowledge of what to teach and how to teach it—is scientific knowledge, discovered by curriculum experts using methods and prior knowledge that are inaccessible to the typical classroom teacher” (Paris 1993: 11). Removing such planning from the hands and minds of teachers delegitimizes their own position as authorities of teaching and learning, and of the needs of their students and communities. The teacher becomes an

implementer or “technician” in the words of one County West teacher—rather than a creator—defined outside the process of curriculum development.

This shift represents a change both in how teachers view their own role or value in the classroom, as well as how others see them. As policy analyst Linda Darling-Hammond notes,

The very definition of ‘professionalism’ in teaching has been turned on its head in public schools. Rather than connoting a high level of training and knowledge applied to practice that must, above all else, serve the needs of clients in intellectually honest ways, many policy makers and administrators use the term to mean unquestioning compliance with agency directives...The ‘professional’ teacher in common parlance is one who *does things right* rather than one who *does the right things* (Lofty 2004: 132).

Such standardization, in addition to redefining the roles of teachers, also influences instruction itself, reducing classroom material to easily measurable elements which can be transferred to quantifiable data. “One of the most telling criticisms of detailed, standards-oriented reforms...is that they reduce the curriculum, and curriculum planning, to narrowly technical and rational processes, losing much of what should be powerful and engaging in learning and teaching” (Hargreaves 2001b: 20). Here, the very concept of curriculum determines the ideological and classroom space available for teachers.

Additionally, the structure and purpose of the curriculum varies over time and within groups, as curriculum is a social construct influenced by various social and historical conditions,. As evident through the articulated frustrations of faculty at County West, teachers within the district of Philadelphia and the district itself—as represented by the School Reform Commission—may have dramatically divergent views of what curriculum itself is or should be.

Closely tied to the concept of curriculum itself, Ms. Williams, criticized the District's idea of curricular reform.

Is this really reform? That's what they're saying. But it's not really reform. What is reform? Reform is basically getting a student very interested in learning, increasing their skills and they should advance and become critical thinkers. I don't see critical thinking. Critical thinking is presented so they can pass the test. And everything that says, you're going to need to know this because it's going to be on the test and then that means they have to really believe the test is going to be helpful to them in the future. It's not what they're learning is going to be helpful. It's that how I score on the test is going to be helpful. So you're really learning composition and being a better writer so you can score well on the PSSA. You're not becoming a better writer because you need to become a better writer. That's the difference. So that's why it's not really reform.

Her statement details the way in which a teacher's position enables him or her to see and experience the effects of such reforms on students and the class environment. Such a view extends reform beyond theory—the level on which the district seems most connected—to implementation and practice.

Furthermore, divergent views on curriculum itself may not account for the discrepancies between district and teacher attitudes. Differences in the intentions and realities of the core curriculum may further distance teachers from an active role in such reforms. While Paul Vallas, Chief Executive Office of the newly restructured district, believes, "Teachers have flexibility to utilize their accumulated knowledge as they reach the goals aligned to state standards. One does not have to be at the expense of the other" (Oliff 2004), this view clearly contrasted with many teachers' own experiences at County West. Ms. Patterson, a literacy teacher, noted that, "The flexibility is not really there. I'm actually afraid to sway."

Ms. O’Leary noted the directness of the curriculum. “So now that the school district is taken over, there’s no, you try to fix it yourself or you try and reform yourself...It’s like you haven’t achieved for this amount of time. Now we’re telling you what to do. And that’s just a fact of life.” In this regard, the core curriculum is a punitive result of the shortcomings of teachers and schools.

In addition to the teaching staff, the principal of County West, Mr. Santoro, also noted the ways in which recent reforms have changed the culture of Philadelphia schools, as well as his own role within them.

But I think things have definitely changed over the past four years. Just the principalship has changed...I’ve been doing this for eleven years and I’m not having as much fun as I used to...Well, because you used to be able to have fun. You used to be able to enjoy the programs for your students and I think now everything is kind of like this race for the cure. It’s different you know. You can’t be as imaginative or as creative. Everything has to be extremely capsulized and delivered in a sterile way.

Especially powerful is the way in Mr. Santoro notes the change he has experienced—both within the school and within his own role—while also promoting the data-driven and PSSA-focused culture of the environment. In this manner, the inconsistencies that exist between the school district’s and the teachers’ notions of flexibility within the core curriculum also exist within Mr. Santoro’s own philosophy and practice.

Cynthia Paris documents a similar discrepancy between teacher and district views in her own research on teacher agency.

The teachers’ assumptions that curriculum is context-dependent, malleable, and generated out of the personal, practical, and situated knowledge of the individual classroom teacher placed teachers in the active and central roles of creators and implementers of curriculum. In contrast, the school district’s prevailing assumption that curriculum is static, generalizable, and created and certified by experts denied the existence and value of teachers’ existing curriculum and curriculum knowledge. It precluded the kinds of engagement with curriculum the

teachers had come to assume in their classrooms by denying them opportunities to select or create, test, critique, and when deemed appropriate, reject curriculum. (Paris 1993: 96)

A similar absence of participation exists in teachers' opportunities to assess recent reforms. Speaking of her introduction to the core curriculum last year, Ms. O'Leary stated, "There was no time for pointing out flaws with or problems or anything like that... Yeah, you didn't have a choice. And even now, like even built into the day now—we just spent two days of professional development. There's not time for, 'How can we fix this?' at all. There's really not. And in some ways, I think that's horrible because I don't think it's going to get any better if you don't have the opportunity to assess how it's going right now and change it."

Criticizing the scripted professional developments the school district has created, Ms. Williams pointed to the absence of the district in addressing or acknowledging her own needs in the classroom. "The professional developments are scripted! That makes no sense to me! Ask your faculty, 'What do we need to do?' One thing I'm not getting from the school district, which I really need to hear is, 'How can we help you?' They have never asked that question. I need a principal to say that. 'Mrs.---, I am here. How can *I* help *you*?'” Her comments highlight the way in which the authority and knowledge of teachers becomes absent in many of the dialogues surrounding reform.

While teachers in general expressed, both verbally and through their practice, a sense of frustration and a lack of flexibility with the recent reforms of the School Reform Commission, moments also emerged when teachers created space to circumvent the core curriculum and to implement changes. Ms. O'Leary, a young teacher and optimistic personality, maintained that amidst the struggles within the district, teachers could find

ways to implement change. “I think that within a school system where the curriculum is regimented and there are so many different paper trails, there are so many formalities, you have to do this and this, that you’re not going to feel—nearly as much—the ability to implement change. But I think that you can do it. You just to be motivated to do it and be able to be creative and work around it.”

Within my own teaching in social studies (an area currently exempt from standardized testing), staff supported my decision to extend a unit on Africa, eliminating time spent on the study of Russia. Another staff member asked me to implement a unit on black history in recognition of Black History Month. The two weeks during which I taught about school segregation in the United States did not align with the district curriculum, yet were accepted by my cooperating teacher.

Mr. Santoro, although expressing the increasing constraints of his position as principal, also maintained his ability to create change within the school. Speaking of his position, he said,

I don’t see it as power anymore. I just see it as leverage or being in a position of, I wouldn’t even call it a position of influence, I’d call it more of being a promoter, of being an advocate. Just by the sheer fact that you’re a promoter, that you’re an advocate for something you believe in, you can be a voice. I mean one thing I probably did this year to make it real, as an example, is the whole thing of taking this school out of lottery. I mean forever—this school might be 25 years old, something like that—it’s always been the same way...but to be able to take the school out of lottery and move it towards special admission and then have the school district recognize what you’re doing...

On several other occasions, I observed teachers in various disciplines adapt the core curriculum to their own interests, inserting supplemental lessons or materials. Both the sixth and seventh grade reading teachers, Ms. Williams and Ms. Patterson, integrated poetry (not in the curricular text, Holt Reinhart’s *Elements of Literature*) into their

classes. Ms. Williams planned a variety of poetry-related activities for National Poetry Month. I observed Ms. Patterson read the poetry of Maya Angelou to begin class, noting to me afterwards how much the students enjoy poetry, a fact evident in my own observations. She also asserted this as an area where she diverges from the core curriculum. Ms. Patterson also incorporated a series of her own *You Be the Jury* books into several classes, which students read aloud as they solved the cases.

In her science classes, Ms. O’Leary adjusted the scheduling to incorporate a week’s worth of environment-based activities in celebration of Earth Day. On other occasions, she manipulated the schedule, shortening or lengthening blocks of time for mandated topics based on student interest and understanding.

Ultimately though, teachers felt that their power and autonomy within their roles had been diminished over time and during recent educational reforms, both nationally and locally. Ms. Patterson noted that she had “very little” power within her classroom, “because of the curriculum, the core curriculum.” Mr. Radimer noted that the former culture of County West had been pushed out when the core curriculum came in, noting when asked if the school or teachers could have resisted, “There’s not much you can do.”

Ms. Williams noted that ultimately the limitations put on her teaching were causing her to rethink her place in education. “Yes, it is [very prescribed]. Very much so. To the point that I’m thinking, I’m getting very close to leaving education.” She concluded that, “I just want to have one more experience before throwing in the towel.”

The words and experiences of the teachers at County West resound with similarities of the teachers Cynthia Paris’ researches in her exploration of curriculum and teacher agency. Paris concludes in her own research that, “the very existence of

mandated standardized curricula was experienced by the teachers as a denial of their individuality, an interruption or obstacle to their ongoing curriculum work, and an affront to their existing practice and curriculum knowledge” (1993: 92).

The changes in teachers’ roles and autonomy within the classroom resulting from both national and local education reforms have dramatically changed the space for the development and maintenance of teacher agency. While teachers found ways to exhibit moments of autonomy in their classrooms, their ability to “act otherwise” has become increasingly limited within the data-driven culture of No Child Left Behind and more particularly, the core curriculum implemented by the Philadelphia School Reform Commission. The mandated curriculum limits the choices teachers have about instruction and the implementation of their own knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy, thus restricting the space for autonomy. Within County West, autonomy was a possibility in some regards, but also carried with it an element of risk. As Ms. Patterson noted, “If I’m not where I’m supposed to be and someone comes in, I could be in a lot of trouble.” This sense of threat acted to further reduce a teacher’s ability to exhibit agency within his or her environment.

As Kris Sloan concludes in his research on teacher agency and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the Texas equivalent of the PSSA, “As a result of the arrangement of the structural elements at these four schools, teachers at these schools were constrained from formulating the purposes and ends of their teaching practices; they were constrained from examining their own values and assumptions in relation to their practice; and they were constrained from playing substantive leadership roles in curriculum and school reforms” (Sloan 2000: 21). The absence of teachers’

voices and authority within the assessment of current reforms similarly demonstrated their lack of agency within these contexts.

The ways in which teachers did find ways to assert their autonomy and to negotiate their own interests and values within the existing structure demonstrated the power of an institution to constrain as well as enable one's agency, as detailed in Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration. The recent education reforms in Philadelphia, both lived and in theory, constrain teachers' sense of agency, as well as cause them to act against such limitations, as demonstrated through the ways in which teachers worked around and within the system.

This case study at County West also illuminated the way in which agency becomes embedded in the institutional structure of schooling, rather than lying completely within the domain of the individual teacher. Simultaneously, agents (i.e. the teachers) remained aware of the social structure and their own place within it. While the potential for agency was limited under recent reforms, teachers still actively reflected on their role within this structure, asserted criticisms and maintained a consciousness of their place within the changing environment of schooling.

As teachers reflect on the changing education system under new reforms, the school district seems deaf to the way in which such reforms have changed the role and agency of teachers. In more than language, the school district needs to demonstrate the ways in which teachers can maintain agency and autonomy within the core curriculum, if that is in fact, as noted in the earlier words of CEO Paul Vallas, a hope for instruction. As noted by the editors of the Philadelphia Notebook, "Schools and teachers need to hear specifically that they can and should include lessons, activities, and materials—like full-

length novels or strong multicultural content—that are not mandated by the core curriculum but that will enrich learning” (Editorial 2004). Until teachers not only receive this message, but are given the authority and room to do so, their ability to “act otherwise,” to implement the knowledge of experience and of their students, will be restrained.

CONCLUSION

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. “ –Albert Einstein (attributed)

The data-driven culture increasingly pervading America’s public schools is doing more than emphasizing a state-mandated standardized test. The reforms driving this new school culture change the environment of the school, from wall decorations and morning announcements, to the philosophy driving decisions about instruction and resources. These changes are seen, felt, and lived by students, teachers, and administrators, all of whom are under increasing pressure to meet district, state, and national standards. In broad terms, these reforms have brought about increasing standardization. While state-wide assessments and district standards have been in the limelight for several years, the mandated core curriculum in Philadelphia makes standardization *the* reform, rather than a component of a more holistic process.

Intended or not, these reforms have had dramatic consequences on the role and position of teachers. As explored through this research in the classrooms of a Philadelphia middle school and through the voices of faculty members themselves, teachers are increasingly limited in the expression of their autonomy. As their ability to make choices and act on those choices becomes restrained, their agency is simultaneously limited. While teachers have found ways to implement their own practices within the existing structure of the core curriculum, they still face ongoing pressures and limitations within it. Additionally, they develop criticisms of the existing system, noting the ways such reforms fail to acknowledge their needs and expertise as teachers. These shortcomings act to further reduce their power in dialogues on reform.

A theme which has emerged particularly strongly through this research is the energy and attention these reforms have consumed within the school environment. No space is free of the demands of the PSSA and core curriculum. The energy devoted to both in the enactment of prescribed curriculum, as well as meeting the targets defined by No Child Left Behind, have removed attention away from the effects of these changes on students and teachers. The “race for the cure” in the words of Mr. Santoro has drawn energy from examining and assessing the success of these reforms, obscuring the ways in which these reforms have shifted the role of teachers and their abilities to teach in a manner that reflects their professionalism and experience. The increasingly limited space for teacher agency becomes symbolic of many other shifts in the role and professionalism of teachers.

Without simply dismantling standardized education itself, further exploration needs to be made in how standardization can—if possible—co-exist with teachers’ abilities to bring their own expertise and individuality into the classroom. As suggested by David Tyack and Larry Cuban in their exploration of the history of school reform, “Reforms should be designed to be hybridized, adapted by educators working together to take advantage of their knowledge of their diverse students and communities and supporting each another [*sic*] in new ways of teaching” (1995: 136). Such changes require a deep rethinking of the *process* of reform creation and implementation.

Both teachers and educational reforms can benefit from a dialogic encounter between the two. To the contrary, leaving teachers out of the reform process eliminates a formal opportunity for teachers to reevaluate teaching and learning and ignores their own contributions in the classroom and to schooling more generally. As the editors of the *The*

Philadelphia Notebook warn, “The core curriculum presents opportunities for teachers to become well informed about standards, but it must not become a straitjacket. New and experienced teachers have skills, creative ideas, and energy they can bring to the classroom” (Editorial 2004). These contributions are necessary, both for education itself and student learning, as well as for teacher agency, all of which are intimately connected. The ability of teachers to include such aspects of themselves in the classroom benefits not only their own sense of efficacy, but benefits students as well.

However, creating the space for teachers to assert their role—creating curriculum, knowing the specific needs of their population of students and the surrounding community, and bringing in pieces of their own and their students’ interests into the classroom—requires a shift in the way in which reformers currently think about curriculum and the role of teachers. As Cynthia Paris notes in her own research, in order to create space for teacher agency, curriculum must be seen “as an evolving, context-specific interaction between teacher, children, and content” (Paris 1993: 16). This contradicts the current notion that curriculum can be delivered from experts and created outside the context of classroom, school, and community. Truly valuing and enabling teacher agency involves a redefinition of curriculum and an understanding of the way in which current definitions problematize the space for teacher autonomy and power. “Nurturing teacher agency requires alignment of assumptions underlying agency and the dominant ideologies in schools, or, at the very least, recognition of the ideological distance that currently exists between the two” (Paris 1993: 151).

Within the current mainstream ideologies of educational reform, the concept of teacher agency disrupts the existing paradigm surrounding teachers’ roles. With a

deskilling of the profession, as noted earlier in this research, a concept of teacher agency requires a move in the opposite direction, an assertion that teachers themselves have both the knowledge and experience to direct classroom instruction. This shift will inevitably involve conflict with current paradigms of teaching and learning and create, in the words of Michael Fielding, “a rupturing of the ordinary” (Rudduck 2002: 134).

In their writings on curriculum and democracy, Michael Apple and James Beane describe the involvement of teachers and students in curriculum-making and reform as a “democratic curriculum,” noting that it “is almost certain to involve conflict and contention. Practically all that is included in this sketch comes up against much of the dominant and longstanding view of what the planned curriculum ought to be about. The possibility of hearing a wide range of views and voices is often seen as a threat to the dominant culture, especially since some of those voices offer interpretations of issues and events quite different from those traditionally taught in schools” (1999: 19). Creating the space for teachers to exert true agency rattles much of the existing structure of schooling and reform.

Additionally, reforms must be understood within the complex social and cultural structures in which they exist. As noted through this research and that of Landon Beyer, “Questions and issues regarding pedagogy and curriculum intersect with the political, moral, economic, and cultural domains of society” (1998: 245). A variety of forces—student, teacher, district, and community—interplay in the creation of schooling, constructing the environment of teaching and learning, as well as defining the roles of students, teachers, and reformers. Beyer goes on to note that, “Educational choices frequently respond to, and help reinforce, some set of values, priorities, and perspectives

that have the effect of furthering some interests while hampering others” (1998: 245). This extends the examination of curriculum, and more precisely the forces acting upon it, beyond the school environment itself.

Implementing new reforms successfully means appreciating and understanding these forces. As noted by education reform analyst Michael Fullan, “[M]ost strategies for reform focus on structures, formal requirements, and event-based activities involving, for example, professional development sessions. They do not struggle directly with existing cultures and which new values and practices may be required” (2001: 34). To do so requires that teachers are given the agency, both in their classroom as well as in dialogues on reform, to be active creators, reformers, and assessors in these contexts. It is through the classroom context, and teachers’ roles, that reforms in practice can best be examined.

Furthermore, the agency of teachers needs to be seen as necessary part of the success of school reforms, as teachers are themselves the ones most readily implementing and evaluating—on a daily basis—such changes. As Los Angeles teacher Myranda Marsh states, “If reform of any kind is to succeed, teachers must believe that they will have a meaningful voice in decisions and will not become the lone scapegoats of a failure to reach goals” (Hargreaves 2001b: 7). As seen in my own research, the absence of active teacher participation in this process and the ability for teachers to maintain the space to assert autonomy, lead to teachers’ own frustrations with new reforms.

Teachers can lend the insightful position of reflection during reforms as well, offering feedback that those outside of the classroom may not otherwise hear. As examined in this research, education reforms need to be understood as lived experiences—in addition to changes in policy—a position teachers are privileged to

experience. “Neglect of the phenomenology of change—that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended—is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms” (Fullan 2001: 8). Case studies—such as this one—seek to illuminate the way in which recent reforms are lived, demonstrating the complex nature of reform implementation, as well as underlining the need for further examination and study.

Teachers remain at the heart of these issues and thus become essential to the success of reforms in a variety of ways. As enactors of such reforms, their voices and actions need to be a part of reform development and assessment. Hargreave’s research,

continuously points not only to the sense of urgency that commonly drives educational change efforts but also to the sense of agency teachers need to have to carry these changes through, and the sense of energy and hope they need to persist with these changes over the long haul. Respect, reward, involvement and engagement in reform agendas that provide guidance, along with sufficient flexibility for teachers to develop curriculum units, assessment formats, and standards with their colleagues and students, are all essential for making urgency, energy and agency into a powerful synergy for positive educational change. (2001a)

Teacher agency is an essential piece of reform success and should be viewed as such by the School Reform Commission and other policy creators.

My own research documents the increasingly limited space teachers have to assert their agency, to make choices and act on them in the classroom environment. In a career that requires constant decision-making, attention, and action, teachers should be given the responsibility and trust to extend these behaviors into the meaningful areas of curriculum development, pedagogy, and assessment. In the words of Michael Apple and James Beane, “Teachers have a right to have their voices heard in creating the curriculum, especially that intended for the particular young people they work with. Even the most

casual of observers cannot help but notice that his right has been seriously eroded over the past several decades as curriculum decisions and even specific curriculum plans have been centralized in state and district offices of education” (Beane 1999: 20-21).

My own research concurs with the findings of Beane and Apple, that the space for teachers to exert chosen actions is increasingly confined as power shifts to the hands of those in curriculum development offices. However, several teachers did demonstrate through their instruction, their ability to assert their autonomy in small, yet meaningful ways, in the classroom. As researcher Nancy Hornberger notes from her own research on bilingualism in education, implementation through action can wedge open the space for a change in ideology. While it is the reverse—practice resulting from ideology—that is often accepted as the pattern of action and change, Hornberger’s experience demonstrates that a shift in ideology may result from an instigating change in practice (2005). Through this lens, it may be possible for teachers themselves to change the ideology of reform and practice by first asserting their agency independently in their classrooms. Teachers, using the value and expertise of their experience and interaction with students, may increasingly find ways to assert their autonomy within a standardized system and through their actions begin to dismantle a standardized, lock-step system.

While my own research does not attempt to evaluate the merits or pitfalls of current reforms, it does highlight the lack of teacher agency available in an increasingly standardized system. Furthermore, it points to the way in which this changing environment has created frustration among teachers, causing some to question their place in education and others to seek out ways to maintain autonomy within the system.

Creating the space for teachers, as professionals, to maintain their agency acknowledges the value they bring to students, to schooling, and to reform.

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