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Narrating neoliberalism: Alternative education teachers' conceptions of their changing roles

Abstract

The signifier 'alternative' in education has largely shifted from progressive or humanizing pedagogies to deficit framings requiring alternate graduation criteria. This development is part of broader neoliberal educational reform efforts that disrupt longstanding conceptions of teachers' roles. This study serves to investigate long-term teachers' understandings of their shifting roles in one secondary-level alternative education program in New York City. Specifically, this narrative analysis study explores participating teachers' meanings around agency and their ability to form the relationships that they argue are central to meaningful pedagogies. Findings demonstrate a sense of loss regarding teacher agency and relationships, and a belief that neoliberal reform efforts have limited possibilities for a shared sense of purpose and collaboration.

Key words: alternative education, teacher agency, neoliberal education reform, narrative analysis

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Speaking with her high school principal, a teacher asked about the school's governing methodology. The principal related a vignette to explain the strict adherence to the X curriculum philosophy. A grade nine learner had asked the principal about a certain lady who occasionally visited the school, wondering why "everything changed" in the learner's classes following these visits. The principal shared that this was the famous Dr. Jane Doe, and that the school was lucky to have such an esteemed curriculum expert travel regularly to this part of the city to share excellent advice on how the teachers should teach. The learner, wondering why the teachers would change so many aspects of their classroom practice based on this visitor's advice, asked the principal if she would jump off a bridge if the expert Dr. Doe told her to do so. The principal looked her squarely in the eye and told the fourteen year-old that yes, she would—there must be a very good reason if Dr. Doe was recommending that she jump. The girl walked away, incredulous. The teacher soon chose to teach elsewhere. A year later, the funding for the collaboration between the school and Dr. Jane Doe evaporated, and the teacher's former colleagues at the school were told that they could no longer use the same methodologies, or if they did, they needed to call them something different lest the school be sued.

This anecdote, shared by an educator in New York City, the largest urban district in the United States, is simultaneously humorous, sad, and frightening. It may resonate for researchers studying any industrialized nation's educational systems in this age of neoliberal education reform. Neoliberalism, understood here as "a political, economic, and ideological system that privileges the market as the most efficient platform for distributing social goods, minimizes the role of government responsibility in ensuring collective well-being" (Weis and Fine, 2012, p.188), instead emphasizing individual responsibility and vastly diminishing support from the state (Saltman, 2014). Within these reforms, education is framed as a largely cognitive process driven by neutral "best practices" (Golden & Womack, 2016, p.36). Increasingly, these best practices are codified and commodified, packaged in ways that make them appealing "one size fits all" curricula to meet the needs of diverse groups of learners. Families and students are positioned as consumers, and teachers are rated on how well they can transfer knowledge

commodities to these consumers. Resources are increasingly directed towards expensive “teacher-proof” packaged curricula that are marketed as the answer to perceived teacher or learner deficits (Taylor, 2013).

Within this context, many of these reform efforts have disrupted long-standing framings of teachers’ roles (Hirsch, 2000; Klaf & Kwan, 2010; Tuck, 2013; Weiner, 2011). As a result of constantly changing market-based ‘fixes’ to the deep inequities in resources, access, and pedagogical approaches, teachers are positioned as flexible technicians who enact processes that can erase these inequities (Connell, 2009). This is a move from a conception of educators as members of a caring profession, a shift that has occurred over decades (Noddings, 2003). Within earlier conceptions, it was taken as a premise that learner success is predicated upon generative relationships between students and educators (Comber & Nixon, 2009). The sense of relationships being at the center of strong pedagogical practice was particularly true within one strand of the alternative education movement started in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States (e.g., Byrne, 1977; De La Rosa, 1998; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Meyers, 1999). These educational sites often valued student progress in ways not reflected in formal learning metrics, causing some scholars to term them “successful failures” (McDermott & Varenne, 1999). The ethos of these schools has historically been one that encouraged highly individualized opportunities to meet learners’ needs, offering a particular framing of what it means for educators to have and exercise agency: namely, the absence of prescriptive curricula (Foley & Pang, 2006).

The neoliberal understanding of teachers as flexible technicians offers a different understanding of what it means for teachers to have and exercise agency. Within this

framing, teachers exercise agency by enacting research-tested prescriptive curricula in ways that meet state-mandated learning targets. While there are worthy debates as to whether prescriptive curricula are the cause of limiting teacher agency (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Spring, 2015) or whether outcomes-driven methods themselves are more responsible for delineating the range of possible pedagogies (e.g., Biesta, 2004, Tarnoczi, 2006), the ways that teacher praxis are limited are understood to stem from a neoliberal approach to educational processes that involves control over what is possible in spaces of formal education (Ball, 2003; Brass, 2014). Empirical work highlighting ways that educational and other social policies both limit and produce potentialities for teacher agency is needed if teachers are to be professionals able to respond to local and individual needs and conditions (Schleicher, 2008).

To this end, this study explored these conditions, practices, and understandings of policies in one context, guided by the question “How do teachers at one alternative High School Equivalency program in New York City understand their roles and how they have shifted?” to investigate long-term teachers’ understandings and perceptions of shifting roles in one “second-chance” program. Specifically, this narrative analysis study explored teachers’ meanings around teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-administrator relationships as well as the ways in which current reforms have shifted their possibilities for autonomy, collaboration, and the ability to form the relationships that they argue are central to their work. These meanings have implications for understandings of teacher agency as well as what multiple stakeholders can do to work for collective, professional, and systematic collaboration and sense-making of pedagogical practice.

Literature review

Teacher agency and policy

Agency is understood here not as an individual or intrinsic quality, but as an ecological effect, an outcome determined in part by local conditions, practices, and understandings of policies (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta, Priestly, & Robinson, 2015; Priestly, Edwards, Priestly, & Miller, 2012). A central tenet of neoliberal education reform is that existing practices and policies must be disrupted if learners are to develop sufficient human capital to compete in the knowledge economy (Spring, 2015). The mission of schools is often shifted towards these ends in industrialized nations, but without educators' beliefs, judgments, and interpretations of assessment data being tied to these new visions and goals the changed language becomes little more than window dressing (Klenowski, 2013). For this reason, neoliberal education reform works to shape educators' dispositions (Shannon, 2014), setting the conditions for some practices while curtailing others (Brass, 2014). Practitioners are thus required to organize themselves in response to evaluation systems driven by "policy technologies of management, market, and performativity [leaving] no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self" (Ball, 2003, p.226). This shaping of dispositions can be understood as an effort to shift understandings of teacher agency, as well as how and why it might matter for students' learning.

Critics of neoliberal reforms have argued that nationalized curricula and associated high-stakes testing negatively impact educational opportunities for multiple stakeholders (Apple, 2005; Au & Ferrare, 2015; Hirsch, 2007). An example of this was in Western and Southern Australia, where Thompson and Harbaugh (2013) investigated teacher perceptions of the Australian nationalized standardized testing program, National

Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and found teachers were being directed to teach to the tests in ways that limited the curriculum, decreased motivation, and increased teacher-centered instruction. The extent of limiting impact on teacher agency is of course dependent on the ways policies are enacted in local contexts, existing frameworks for practice, and available resources.

Researchers have documented that teacher agency plays a central role in shaping strong pedagogical practice. In a study of two secondary schools in Scotland, both the nature and the extent of pedagogical innovation was found to be dependent on teachers being able to navigate conflicting policies to interpret and articulate a clear vision of practice in local learning contexts (Priestly, Minty, & Eager, 2014). In the U.S. Midwest, Martinie, Kim, and Abernathy (2016) found that differing “zones of enactment,” or spaces within which educators make sense of policies in light of their own practices and beliefs, greatly impacted the ways the teachers enacted new learning standards in their discipline. Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Soini (2014) found in Finland that professional agency and intrapersonal meaning-making processes lead to responsible enactment of new learning targets. Nyugen and Bui (2016) found that educators in Vietnam were able to exercise collective agency to resist poorly thought-out language policies to create transformative pedagogical possibilities for students learning English. What is evident from the literature is that teacher professional agency is needed to meaningfully enact potentially limiting policies in a variety of contexts. This literature suggests that educational systems that achieve both high excellence and high equity are those that balance accountability with professionalism, pairing teacher prescription with healthy

doses of teacher autonomy to adapt curriculum and pedagogy (Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2013; Schleicher, 2008).

Relationships and shifts in pedagogy in neoliberal reform

Contemporary educational reform is changing what counts as pedagogy, shifting notions of how teachers enact and further meaningful teaching/learning practice (Luke, 2006). Teachers' relationships with learners are integral to understanding learners' lived realities and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013), and those relationships influence outcomes at multiple levels of teachers' education, practice and student outcomes (Sabon & Pianta, 2012). Within new framings of the ideal pedagogy, these relationships are no longer valued as education is increasingly seen as the transmission of neutral skills, content, and competencies (Golden, 2016). These framings contribute to the devaluation of what can be a meaningful educational space for learners in under-resourced communities.

Recent research has documented some of the ways that teachers experience these shifts in pedagogy and changes to their roles. In K-12 settings, practitioners have responded to neoliberal education reforms by suggesting that they take the joy out of teaching (Endacott, Wright, Goering, Collet, Denny, & Davis, 2015). New teachers have struggled to enact the constructivist philosophies of their teacher education, succumbing to new cultures of test preparation (e.g., Loh and Hu, 2014). Even early childhood education has been altered: teachers of the youngest learners have struggled to make sense of what new conceptions of effective practice mean in early childhood contexts (Brown, 2015). The effects of neoliberal reforms on alternative educational programs, though, are grossly under-researched, a significant gap given that a central defining

feature of one strand of alternative education has been teacher agency, collaboration, and generative relationships (Bartolome, 1994; Foley & Pang, 2006; Young, 1990). While multiple conceptions of alternative education have existed side-by-side since the 1960s (Lange & Sletten, 2002), including deficit model “last chance” approaches (e.g., Leone & Drakeford, 1999, p.86), this strand of alternative education has long offered spaces in which educators “structure their relationships with young people to be inclusive, supportive, and responsive rather than exclusive, disciplinary, and authoritarian” (Waters, 2016, p.1). These alternative education sites, too, are increasingly becoming spaces where learners are positioned as “at risk” and in need of remediation (e.g., Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). ‘Alternative’ as a signifier has shifted from humanizing pedagogical practices (e.g., McGregor & Mills, 2012; Waters, 2016) to signal alternative exit criteria, increasingly understood as achievement exams like the tests given in U.S. contexts to earn the High School Equivalency (e.g., Zajacova & Everett, 2014). Research on how neoliberal policies are impacting alternative learning spaces is needed in order to highlight generative framings of agency and to explore the ways that agency matters for educators in multiple contexts.

Theoretical framework

Agency as collective and ecological

While neoliberal conceptions of agency reduce it to individual “compliance within dominant schooling discourses around pedagogy and teacher professional development” (Charteris & Thomas, 2016, p.2), agency is understood here as collective and ecological. While individuals and ecological contexts can be analytically separate, they are understood to be mutually constitutive of each other

(Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2012). There is a tension between the neoliberal education reform in which learning targets are legislatively mandated and the democratic processes that promote active participation and involvement in professional agency (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Tarnoczi, 2006).

Professional agency is constituted by the socio-cultural conditions of the workplace as well as individual identities, understandings, and motivations. Professional mandates risk superseding the possibility of collective goal-setting as professional agency is bounded by available cultural and material resources that include opportunities to rehearse agentic moves and mentors who encourage such rehearsal (Eteläpelto et. al, 2012; Kolman, Roegman, & Goodwin, 2016; Ticknor, 2015). An understanding of agency as collective values professionals working together to take a stance on practices and processes that impact the range of pedagogies and supports for both educators and learners (Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, & Mahlakaarto, 2015). Without “opportunities for systematic sense-making” around educational practices and philosophies (Biesta et al., 2015, p.636), teachers’ collective agency diminishes as educators are left to individually navigate externally imposed systems of meaning-making around teaching and learning. For these reasons, this exploratory study focused on the ways that teachers perceive they are able to collaborate, create and adapt curricula, and engage collective goals.

Linking macro-structures and the conditions for agency

To connect teachers’ conceptions with the larger reform movement, this study is situated within a critical bifocal framework, tracing linkages between macro-structures and the local-level perceptions and constraints that shape possibilities for teacher

professional agency (Weis & Fine, 2012). Specifically, this study investigated teachers' understandings of their own professional and collective agency as well as the factors that limit these possibilities. In linking larger structural shifts in education reform with teachers' understandings and experiences in a particular context, this study is situated within wider discussions of how neoliberal reform frames severely disparate outcomes as the result of individual competency and effort as opposed to deeply inequitable inputs and available resources (Golden, 2015). The eroding of state support for a sustainable and meaningful educative process is framed in such a way that "the draconian disciplinary apparatus of the neoliberal age [becomes] invisible" and "these schools...make it seem like individuals are failing rather than social supports and public investments"(Saltman, 2014, p.49) Empirical work is needed to trace linkages between neoliberal reform and shifts in local contexts, and this exploratory study serves to further knowledge on how policies can engender or limit the conditions for teacher agency.

Methods

Setting

The setting of this exploratory study was a High School Equivalency (HSE) center that is part of New York City Department of Education (NYCDoE), a schooling system that is arguably the nexus of neoliberal educational reform in the United States (Brathwaite, 2016). The HSE Center served roughly one thousand five hundred students ages seventeen through twenty-one per year during the time of data collection, with just over 24% arriving from their initial high schools with mandated special education supports detailed in Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). Learners were overwhelming young people of color, working class or poor, and roughly one third were

recent immigrants to the United States. The students all attended to their learning in the same building but were tracked into three groups: learners deemed to have low literacy levels that hindered content learning, roughly 60% of the students, were deemed “literacy students” and attended functional literacy classes; learners deemed to have low English skills that hindered learning in English, comprising 30% of the learners, were grouped in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes; and students who tested well in functional literacy and English skills, the remaining 10%, were grouped into skills and test preparation classes across the content areas.

At the New York state level, the HSE Center and other alternative education programs are defined using characteristics associated with the humanizing strand of alternative education, designating these programs as “nontraditional environment[s]” in which

mastery of learning standards and attainment of a high school diploma are achieved through a learner-centered program structure, multiple learning opportunities, frequent student performance review and feedback, and innovative use of community and school resources to support youth development. (Porowski, O’Conner, & Luo, 2014, p.31).

Despite this designation, these sorts of test preparation centers, primarily focused on skills and competencies transmission for participation in labor markets, are increasingly replacing the humanizing pedagogy strand of alternative education that prioritized close relationships between learners and educators, connections to community issues, and humanizing critical pedagogies (e.g., McGregor & Mills, 2012; Waters, 2016).

‘Alternative’ in this context is now a signifier of the alternate exit criterion¹ as opposed to the earlier framing of a humanizing pedagogy relying on teacher agency (Golden, 2015).

HSE centers occupy a strange netherworld in formal education: long derided as having little value in the labor market (e.g., Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2010) and currently being re-aligned to focus on national standards to better produce human capital, they are often designed to produce failure (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015; McDermott & Varenne, 1999)². One example: at the HSE Center that is the setting of this study, there were five hundred more students on register than the building could officially hold (i.e., the number of registered students was 155% of its official building capacity); the expectation was that one third of the students or more would not attend regularly. A far cry from the individualized attention, generative relationships, and teacher agency of the humanizing strand of the alternative education movement, a significant number of learners in this alternative context are assumed to be a priori lost causes.

Researcher positionality and participants

As a former literacy teaching/learning practitioner at the secondary level, I write with my “practitioner identity inseparable from my scholarly one” (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013, p.104). For nine years, I taught literacy and served as a teacher literacy coach at Franz Fanon Academy, an alternative program in the heart of New York City’s South Bronx that exemplified the ethos of teacher creativity and collaboration of the early alternative education movement. Following this, I moved to the alternative education

¹ Additionally, the city’s current ‘alternative’ system functions as a means of obscuring the scores of learners who are considered “bad data;” these scores are not counted in city calculations unless the learners either leave the program or earn a HSE diploma (Golden, 2014).

² These arrangements do not mean that the HSE diploma is without value for the learners. For some learners, these programs may be the only option for learning English and continuing formal education. Often considered to be “less than” a traditionally-earned diploma, or a “proxy for inadequate schooling,” the HSE diploma can hold much value for youth with limited formal educational opportunities (Tuck, 2012, p.4).

district and served as a literacy coach for the network of High School Equivalency (HSE) centers described in this study. In this role, in which I served for three years, I provided one-on-one mentoring, engaged in co-planning and resource sharing, and enacted large-scale professional development workshops for teachers in all disciplines. Perplexed as to why the collaboration and focus on teacher curriculum design that had been a part of my alternative education teaching experience were not defining features of these centers, I later returned as a researcher to request focus group discussions revolving around teachers' conceptions of their work, possibilities for generative relationships, and histories of collaboration.

The six teachers who took part in this exploratory study worked with adolescent scholars in all of the program's service strands, including students strengthening basic literacy, students for whom English is a new language, and students preparing to take the HSE exam (see Table 1). Julie, Stanley, and Sam were all teachers who I worked closely with in my previous role as a literacy coach, while Beverly, Erica, and Mark primarily knew me through program-wide professional development workshops. Stanley self-identifies as African-American, and Julie, Sam, Beverly, Erica, and Mark identify as Caucasian. All have between six and twenty-three years of teaching experience and responded to a request to the entire teaching staff to participate in focus groups on teachers' roles and experiences. They participated in talk on shifts they have witnessed and experienced through semi-structured interviews.

Table 1

Name (pseudonym)	Years taught	Learner population
Julie	23	English as a New Language Students
Stanley	23	Basic Literacy Development Students

Beverly	16	English as a New Language Students
Sam	17	Basic Literacy Development Students and Students preparing for the HSE exam
Erica	6	English as a New Language Students
Mark	12	English as a New Language Students

Data collection and analysis

Data for the study are narratives culled from one focus group and three follow-up interviews with the six teachers at this center. The semi-structured interviews focused on histories and current practices of collaboration, the design and enactment of curricula, and relationships with learners, peers, and administrators. The first round of analysis led to three themes: the perception of teacher agency, shifting roles as teachers, and relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators. Following this initial round of data analysis, participants were invited to member-check (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) to clarify intended meanings and strengthen the validity of the work. These interviews solidified the three themes, and informed analysis of the ways the participants took up or challenged what they perceived to be the emerging dominant discourses on pedagogy and the roles of educators.

To facilitate deeper analysis during the second layer of interpretation, the narratives were rendered into ‘stanzas,’ or idea units, to explore their form and meaning (Gee, 1991, 2011; Riessman, 2008). In making narratives into ‘stanzas,’ no words or phrases are removed, nor is the order changed: this process simply allows the researcher to see themes and their relationships to the narrative as a whole in new ways. Rendering narratives in this way allowed me to explore the themes of teacher agency, roles, and relationships in relation to the whole narrative or specific idea units within each narrative.

Each idea unit, or stanza, was given a title to represent what I see as its central theme, and words or phrases that we said with emphasis have been underlined. As the narratives are rendered, “/” indicates a non-final intonation contour, “//” marks a final intonation contour, a comma indicates a pause, and “–“ represents a moment when the narrator breaks off to say something else (Gee, 2011, p.111). Phrases that were said with emphasis have been italicized.

Findings

“Curriculum...that has shifted throughout”

When asked about the differences between their early teaching careers and their current work arrangements, the six teachers began talking about curriculum. Stanley claimed that the current choices for curricula, made at the district-level, did not work in his classroom. He asserted: “all of these different programs, [names three approaches used by the district in the preceding years], so on and so forth, um, again, good ideas, but I never found them to be practical.” This connected with Julie’s narrative, which I have entitled “Constant Curriculum Changes.” In it, Julie repeats variations of the phrase “we’ve been told” eight times here. The three stanzas of the narrative are shared as a data display to invite the reader into the analytic process.

Table 2

Julie’s narrative: Constant Curriculum Changes

Stanza one: The curriculum keeps changing

1. My/my/my.../ I’m gonna talk about what/
2. Different curriculum/ curriculum that we’re being asked to use/uh/ that has shifted
3. throughout the last seven years//
4. so *we’ve been told* to do specific kind of lesson planning then *we’ve been told* to do
5. different kinds of lesson planning//
6. then *we’ve been told* no that doesn’t work/ we have to do this kind of/ so what’s the/
7. what’s the first one I was thinking of/ we had all the books/ text—(looks to peers)

Stanley—um/[textbook name]//

Stanza two: The administrators do not know what's going on

8. First it was [textbook name] then it was/ an enormous amount of money was spent an
 9.enormous amount of training//
 10.some teachers who were reading teachers were given [program name]/ and that was/
 11.they were/ they absolutely had to use—
 12.then we were also given a [curriculum name] training/ we absolutely had to use that/
 13.now is scrapped/ then we were told-- we should do certain kinds of lesson planning
 14.which is basically primarily what's being taught in the graduate schools which is
 15.backwards design which is/ which is fine as well//
 16.then *we were told/ we absolutely told* that we have to plan for weekly projects/ then
 17.we were told/ no don't do that//
 18.and my problem with all of this is that things are being tried and tested but-- we're not
 19.*we're not told* they're being tested/ *we're told you absolutely have to use them*//
 20.and they're not/ the administrators that are deciding that we need to be using this aren't
 21.really sure about what's going on academically/ that's my experience//

Stanza three: Tensions (They don't understand what curriculum means)

22.I feel like a lot of the administrators are confused about what curriculum means//
 23.*we have one high level administrator that like is telling* certain teachers to use a
 24.textbook/ apparently this textbook must have been purchased/ and they're calling the
 25.textbook a curriculum//
 26.a textbook to me is a textbook it's not a curriculum/ and it predates the common core//
 27.now we're told during a PD [professional development] we watch this video how we
 28.all have to become these fantastic new teachers of the future which I didn't disagree
 29.with about how to use blogs in our classroom how to teach students how to use apps
 30.and-- and how can we use [social media application]/ how can we use [educational
 application] and all these really cool
 31.things that would definitely prepare our students for the future//
 32.and yet we're told that we have to use a textbook with a bunch of writing and then a
 33.bunch of questions at the end of it which is completely the opposite of any of the
 34.newer forms/ So I feel like at least for me in this program/ what the administrators
 35.have been telling us to do-- they're very very confused/ and I just go back to what I
 36.know as a teacher/ and what I know works//

During the second layer of interpretation, these three stanzas were analyzed in relation to the meaning of the narrative as a whole. In the first stanza, the ways that Julie repeats variations of “we’ve been told” as she expresses frustration with these curriculum changes emphasizes the fact that these decisions are not the purview of teachers themselves, but instead shifting dictates from above. Teachers have been instructed to do

things one way only to be told to do them a different way shortly thereafter. In Stanza Two, she offers evidence for her argument that administrators do not have a firm grasp of classroom practices and needs, highlighting new curricula, testing regimes, textbooks, and methodologies. In the third stanza, she closes with a sense that there are multiple uses of the term ‘curriculum’ at work, and that the confusion, primarily on the part of administrators who make the decisions, interrupts her practice of “what works.”

These concerns about the lack of administrator awareness of classroom practice, strengths, and needs were echoed in other narratives. Stanley voiced the following:

I would think that they would need to come in and get a feel for the student population. What I find is that we have new people that arrive here on a daily basis who we do not know, who the students do not know, and so there's a level of impracticality that comes into play when they start bombarding us with all of these different programs and so forth. And so, they mean well, but it's not practical because the kids, there's a disconnect. Between what they are talking about and what actually, what actually happened in the classroom between the teacher and the students. And so, you know, from a professional level, that's where the conversations needs to begin.

For Stanley, the teaching/learning process needs to be grounded in the relationships between the teacher and the students. The academic work needs to connect with the students’ lived realities and these relationships. His focus on the “new people that arrive...on a daily basis,” which I interpret to mean the district-level specialists who come in with these curricular and other changes, suggests that there is a tension between emic and etic understandings of the community. Stanley seems to feel that the community is threatened by the interests of people he perceives to be outsiders. These people do not know the relationships and what is happening between the teachers and students. Julie touched on similar themes when talking about her early teaching career in the beginning of the 1990s, a time when the defining features of the humanizing

alternative education movement were still prevalent in the district. She exclaimed that the students “had the same difficulties with skill level, the same issues” and yet were “treated as human beings and individuals and it was very-- we were using very individualized curriculum. And it was very successful. It--it wasn't overnight, it still took them a long time.” In this, Julie seems to be lamenting the fact that there is no longer time for an individualized approach with each learner. Erica, too, voiced resistance to the notion that the district-level administrators were best positioned to make decisions about what was best in her classroom, advocating that teachers respond “in a more polite way, ‘this doesn’t work for my population.’ Why are you forcing me to do it? This [textbook name] book doesn’t work for me, why are you forcing me to do it?” The repetition and the use of ‘forcing’ suggests frustration with decision-making power that affects her students being in the hands of people removed from her local context. She closes with “And they’re not even pedagogues that have been in a classroom in God knows how many years making these decisions...it’s more of a financial vendor decision.” Stanley’s, Julie’s and Erica’s comments and narratives on issues of curriculum in this exploratory study suggest a sense of loss regarding the individualized approach, strong relationships with students, and ability to make curricular decisions that defined their earlier years in the classroom.

A shared sense of purpose

The teachers also focused on the lack of time for collaboration as a shift in their professional work, a challenge that limited a shared sense of purpose amongst teachers. Due to responses similar to the above findings, the district had attempted to ameliorate teacher concerns of top-down decision-making by offering stipends to teachers who

chose to develop curricula in workshops during the summer recess. Julie shared that the district initiative to allow teachers to participate in summer workshops focused on curriculum design was a step in the right direction, but that she was frustrated that those who chose to participate were now dictating what *all* teachers had to do in their classrooms. Sam agreed, calling for structural reforms that would allow for meaningful collaborative time, saying: “if the city was serious about making a change on the school level, they would give us time during the day, during the day, real time...and we're there planning, talking about the kids.” This, for Sam, would mean “we're serious about some kind of school level effective change. Until then, squishing us in with per session hours [after-school workshops with additional pay] or trying to give us additional assignments during periods where we already have things is not sincere, it's insincere.” This led to emphatic agreement from the other five teachers, suggesting that time for collaboration is a concern, and a shift from the veteran teachers' earlier professional arrangements: Julie shared that in her early years as a teacher, she worked for a school that had half days every Wednesday so that the teachers could meet to discuss student progress and needs while engaging in collaborative planning, an example of teacher collective agency that fostered a shared sense of purpose in the earlier alternative education site.

Relationships and competing framings

Relationships were seen as important not only between teachers and students, teachers and teachers, but between teachers and administrators as well. Julie shared that earlier in her teaching professional life “the administrators that I worked for believed the same thing that I believed.” She then added nuance to her statement:

We didn't always agree of course, but there was really this very strong sense of, of-- that these students were here and we were gonna treat them

in a particular way that was not going to-- was going to be very different from the school that they came from, and that's why it was called alternative education.

Describing the earlier incarnation of alternative education using language similar to Waters' (2016) description of non-mainstream settings, Julie argued, in effect, that this had changed: teachers and administrators no longer believe the same things in the current model. Julie's halting speech here suggests that it is difficult to put into words the extent to which there were once shared assumptions about how best to value learners.

Administrators, in her experience, no longer value treating students in ways that Julie associates with alternative education.

As has been found in other contexts, Beverly asserted that this was because of a "narrowing of the curriculum" that is the result of initiatives like the U.S. national standards known as the Common Core. Within these initiatives, "everything is prescribed and to what you can teach, and you're teaching to the test." These policy shifts in education reform have led to a different approach on the part of administrators.

Beverly asserts:

Even in this program, where Melissa [administrator] has been pretty good, and Jerry [administrator] has been pretty good in the past, about letting you buy books that you wanted, that's really tightened up now, we don't get squat unless it's some stupid [textbook name] text. So I think I see it getting narrower and narrower.

Beverly traced widespread policy shifts like alignment with the Common Core with the narrowing of the curriculum and the associated tensions between administrators and teachers. For Beverly, these shifts are the genesis of teachers and administrators no longer believing in the same things, to paraphrase Julie. This is echoed in comments by Mark and Erica in terms of how their progress with students is framed. Mark exclaims "I

think words are important, I wouldn't describe our students as failure in any way. I would describe them as survivors. I think it puts the...that's a positive way of framing the issue.”

This came up when the teachers were debating whether the students who came to the HSE program could be described as failing the educational system, or whether the educational system had failed them. While there were varying thoughts on this among the six teachers, they all nodded when Erica wanted the official discourse of the program to value more than just High School Equivalency completion. This, she said, kept the program from valuing the progress the students made in other ways, ways perhaps not visible on practice tests or the high-stakes exam itself. For Erica, the tensions between administrators and teachers are about “having different ideas of what, what we mean when we say we're helping students.” She asks:

Could we still consider ourselves to be helping the students who are...we're making progress with on any of those levels, even if it's just social-emotional or a slight bump in their reading and being able to develop their functional literacy. Having some respect for that would also be a big step.

The shift in framing student learning, which the teachers identify as derivative of policy shifts, is central to what the participants identify as tensions between teachers and administrators in this alternative educational program.

Discussion

Analysis of the teachers' narratives demonstrated deep concern over the shifting relationships with students, fellow teachers, and administrators, qualities that had been hallmarks of the earlier alternative education movement. Specifically, the teachers' narratives show that the participants no longer feel that they can know their students, and their students' academic and social growth are not reflected in the complex metrics and

evaluations measuring learning. Analysis also revealed frustration that greater trust is placed in ever-changing curricula than educators' professional expertise, and that time for collaboration is no longer prioritized. In essence, agency is reduced to compliance with mandated-from-above curricular and pedagogical decisions, and there is little space for collective, professional, and systematic sense-making of pedagogical practice.

The fact that the participants trace these experiences to larger policy shifts like the national standards shows the teachers are exercising a form of critical bifocality, understanding how macro-level policy and discourse frame and live at local levels like their alternative education center. As in the case of the administrator who would jump off the bridge if the latest curriculum theorist recommended she do so, educators are encouraged to turn off their own critical faculties and outsource pedagogical expertise and decision-making. Erica and Beverly both suggest that these curricular decisions are made for financial reasons ("sold to the highest bidder," in Beverly's terms, or "more of a financial vendor decision," as Erica claimed). There is a significant financial windfall that accompanies the decisions to privatize learning exit criteria exams, and the associated textbook sales that prepare for these exams are undoubtedly part of this. What these teachers are experiencing is a shift from a professional understanding of their work in which *they* make decisions based on students' interests, desires, and needs to a framing in which the educative process is driven by financial concerns and the demands of the market. Teachers are positioned as technicians who enact this process using "expert"-designed and chosen curricula (like those of Dr. Jane Doe) that meet the academic needs of adolescent learners in this and similar alternative programs. These shifts in

relationships point to a system of ever-changing approaches stemming from decisions made in spaces distant from teachers' collective agency.

Implications

Given that relationships are integral to a meaningful and generative learning process (Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, & Burke, 2010; Hibbert, Heydon, & Rich, 2008; Wentzel, 2010), it is imperative that we better understand teachers' perceived constraints and possibilities of making the work of teaching and learning both collaborative and grounded in relationships in particular local contexts. This is particularly the case in alternative education contexts like the setting of these teachers' narratives, in which a sense of loss of curricular design agency and relationships with learners, colleagues, and administrators was voiced. It is critically important that we better understand teachers' perceptions on the constraints and possibilities of making their professional work both agentic in the collaborative sense as well as grounded in meaningful, generative relationships. 'Alternative' education can only provide an alternative to mainstream approaches if educators are able to work within conditions for agency. Teachers' understandings and experiences are rarely considered in public debates on education reform, and their views can contribute much to discourses on how our society can transform schools into participatory and democratic spaces. This exploratory study understands both secondary-level educators and learners as public scholars whose work is increasingly being overtaken by market-driven top-down reform. Building knowledge on how practitioners understand these shifts can support work interrupting these processes, and contributes to the task of re-visioning our schools as sites of public scholarship in their own right. If we do not want educational programs to become spaces beholden to

the dictates of distant experts like Dr. Jane Doe, scholars, administrators, and teachers must challenge neoliberal notions of educators as flexible technicians whose agency is reduced to following prescriptions well. Without the conditions for professional and collective agency, teachers will be jumping from an ever-changing series of curricular and pedagogical bridges as opposed to collaborating and employing available resources to build their own.

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