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“If I give one more piece, it’s gonna be the end of me”

The trauma of teaching in an Era of High-Stakes Accountability

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Abstract

This paper traces the experiences of 12 elementary school teachers working at a high-poverty school in the urban Southwest, rated an “F” by the state department of education. In the tradition of phenomenological qualitative research, we utilized interviews, focus groups and participant observation over the course of one academic year to examine how teachers come to understand, negotiate and resist policy mandates that position them and their students as failing. Findings indicate that teachers experienced three dimensions of trauma as a result of increasingly oppressive policy mandates including the physical toll of an unreasonable workload, psychic disequilibrium and ongoing marginalization.



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You know... in my career I've bought kids clothes, I've bought them food, I've given them Christmas presents. I've done all these things and right now, it's like they [policymakers] are pulling so much out of me, it's just like, I can't do anymore, I can't even do the things that I want to do - helping people. I can't even do that because if I give one more piece, it's gonna be the end of me, and it's like, Charlotte and I were talking, she [told me] her mother was in a bad working situation, and it made her sick inside, and sometimes I feel like I go home with my stomach going, 'Oh, am I giving myself an ulcer from this?' This is crazy. And it's not the teaching. It's not even the hours - it's the hours of doing things that are meaningless.

In the above statement, Heather (all names are pseudonyms) describes her work as a 5th grade Bilingual teacher at an “F” school in the urban southwest where neoliberal policy initiatives employed over the past decade have significantly altered the nature of education and exacted a tremendous toll on teachers’ sense of physical and emotional well-being. No longer able to support children and families the way she once could, Heather laments the long hours she must work, shares worries about her physical health and directly connects these concerns to the changing nature of her work which increasingly demands compliance with a host of meaningless tasks. Heather is a veteran teacher with 19 years of teaching experience and holds a Master’s degree in STEM education, as well as TESOL and Bilingual endorsements, credentials that indicate she is “highly qualified” under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Despite her rich expertise and commitment to serving a diverse student body, many of whom live in poverty, Heather must contend daily with dehumanizing initiatives and punitive policies that limit her ability to substantively connect with students and families and promote academic achievement.

Like all narratives, Heather’s account cannot be understood outside of the historical and political context in which it is situated. As Wortham (2001) notes “the meaning that experience has for people cannot be understood if people are considered to be isolated individuals. Instead, one must consider how social, cultural and relational contexts play a central role in producing the meaningfulness of experience” (p. xii). For example, Heather’s narrative must be interpreted in light of the competing discourses of teachers and teaching currently shaping how policy is both created and implemented in an era of market-driven rather than democracy-driven reforms. On the one hand, teachers are depicted as the most important factor shaping a child’s educational future, or even, at times, as “saviors” (Crawford-Garrett, 2013). On the other, they are portrayed as “rotten apples” who take advantage of generous time off, pension plans and other benefits while contributing little to student achievement (Edwards, 2014). As Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2006) note, “NCLB contributes to the paradox that teachers are considered to be both the problem and the solution to what is wrong with schools” (p. 680). NCLB policies have been followed by similar heavy-handed and punitive policies such as “Race to the Top” characterized by assessing schools and teachers using value-added models based on student achievement data (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014). Heather, like all of the teachers featured in this study, is caught in the web of these disjointed dualities. This paper aims to explore the struggle teachers like Heather face as they attempt to reconcile their own sense of professional competence with a set of mandates that consistently positions them as dysfunctional, disposable and failing.

By engaging these tensions, we aim to reveal the deeply human cost of neoliberal school reform that ironically aims to remedy the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) through approaches that inflict trauma on both students and teachers (Dutro, 2010; Hargreaves, 2001). In

particular, we theorize the ways in which these teachers' narratives reveal three dimensions of trauma: the physical toll of an unrealistic workload, psychic disequilibrium, and ongoing marginalization both within local contexts and in national conversations about school reform. We argue that these dimensions of trauma result from the ways teachers are increasingly represented as low-level, bureaucratic workers who are viewed as incompetent and blamed for school failure. We then consider how these representations are emblematic of a problematic neoliberal policy discourse that conceptualizes teaching as a simplistic, technical endeavor. Lastly, we consider how negotiating these various traumas might impact teachers' work with children who live in poverty and are thus subjected to traumas of their own. We also wrestle with our role as researchers who, as former teachers in high-poverty schools, must bear witness to these testimonies and make critical decisions about how best to represent the narratives of these teachers.

Conceptual Framework

We conceptualize and situate this study within two broad strands of literature: representations of both teachers and teaching in neoliberal times as well as the manifestation of trauma in schools. These threads of literature are interrelated in the sense that conceptions of schooling since the inception of NCLB until the present have led to new dimensions of trauma within schools (Dutro, 2013). We offer a definition of neoliberalism, consider how this definition is operationalized in ways that directly impact teachers, and make direct connections to how various forms of trauma might manifest themselves in school settings.

Representations of Teachers and Teaching in Neoliberal Times

Along with Porfilio (2012), we understand neoliberalism as “the dominant ideological doctrine driving social, political and economic developments in schools and in society for the past 40 years” (Porfilio, 2012, p. 65), and see it consisting of “a set of economic and social policies that work to expand the free market and eliminate the government expansion of social programs” (p. 66). Lipman (2011) defines neoliberalism similarly as “an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (p. 6). In accordance with this vision, neoliberals redefine democracy as marketplace freedom and the ability to choose goods and services (Lipman, 2011). These dual emphases on choice and consumerism have obscured the ways in which particular groups of citizens have experienced disenfranchisement and marginalization by those in power (Apple, 2013, p. 7-8).

In their analytical account of how NCLB depicts teachers and teaching, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2006) illustrate the policy's neoliberal underpinnings by revealing the ways that teachers are positioned as consumers who are tasked with simply choosing instructional materials from a cache of “what works.” Thus, having the illusion of choice, teachers can select curricular materials that policy makers claim will lead to an increase in test scores, a notion which reveals how understandings of teaching and learning have become increasingly limited over the past decade. As Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2006) state, “...diverse stakeholders in the educational process are coming to regard teachers as technicians, student learning as performance on tests and teacher learning as frontal training or retraining on *what works* (emphasis in original)” (p. 689).

In likening neoliberal education reform to the “New Taylorism,” Au (2011) further documents how these representations of teachers and teaching become actualized on a daily basis in schools:

When we look at the research on how high-stakes testing is affecting US classroom practices, it becomes quite clear that such testing is promoting the standardization of teaching that both disempowers and deskills teachers. For instance, due to the pressures exerted through policies associated with high-stakes testing, teachers are teaching to the tests with increasing regularity, consistency, and intensity. (p. 30).

As teachers are represented as technicians who must follow a set of orders, it becomes increasingly difficult for these teachers to demonstrate a sense of agency and efficacy, even when they doubt the effectiveness of the programs they are told to implement (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Crawford-Garrett, 2013).

The irony is that the culture of fear created by these reforms undermines the possibility of bringing about actual change (Crawford-Garrett, 2013). For example, Schoen & Fusarelli (2008) consider the way that fear operates within NCLB and inhibits the very innovation and risk-taking required for educational transformation:

The paradox of reliance on NCLB and high-stakes testing to reform education is that it creates a high-threat work environment for educators, conditions not favorable to the risk-taking behavior and experimentation needed to bring about change (Hagel & Brown, 2002)...The fear factor, an unintended consequence of high-stakes testing, may ultimately inhibit the capacity of the school accountability movement to transform American education. (p. 194)

Not only does this system of fear and surveillance discourage experimentation, but it also creates a set of working conditions that lead to multiple dimensions of trauma and, we argue, a diminished capacity to do the kinds of teaching that can contribute to true systemic change.

Manifestation of Trauma in Schools

The term trauma, translated from the Greek, means “wound” or an injury inflicted upon the body (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). In psychoanalytic literature, including Freudian theory, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind and used thus as a means to understand and interpret the experiences of humans who survive catastrophic events. Over the past several decades, scholars have theorized the ways in which physical and emotional traumas 1) are experienced as ongoing, repeated occurrences (Caruth, 1996; Dutro, 2013; Forter, 2007); 2) surface in schools and classrooms (Dutro, 2011, 2013; Jones, 2012); and 3) are legitimized (or not) through a process of witnessing and testimony (Dutro, 2011; Grey, 2007).

We seek to build upon this body of work that has largely focused on the traumas students bring into the classroom (Dutro, 2011; Jones, 2012; Campano, 2007), by shifting the focus to teachers and considering to what extent NCLB and its extant policies and implementation have contributed to dimensions of trauma among teachers. Although he does not use the word “trauma,” Hargreaves (2001) theorizes the negative emotions teachers experience as a result of the moral distance that is created when “their purposes are at odds with those around them” (p. 1067). As teachers are forced to implement policies and mandates that conflict with their beliefs

and intentions, they must negotiate complex emotional terrain, which often leads to a depletion of energy. The repercussions of these emotions can be severe as they cause teachers to lose enthusiasm for their work and contribute to an overwhelming sense of demoralization. Hargreaves (2001) also theorizes the idea of emotional labor, which is evident in Heather's opening narrative and which involves the giving of oneself over to others. Teachers invest a tremendous amount of emotion into their classrooms, an investment that according to Hargreaves (2001) can yield greater distance or closeness depending on a broader range of circumstances.

Lastly, we seek to build upon notions of how traumas experienced by teachers are or are not viewed as legitimate within society, especially as we consider the ways in which teachers and teaching are represented in the media. According to Grey (2007), "The question of legitimacy and institutional authority remains central to understanding the dynamics of trauma and its impact on individual and subcultural identities (p. 186). As researchers who also seek to embody the role of critical witnesses (Dutro & Bien, 2013), we hope that our work will contribute to legitimizing the teachers' experience as forms of trauma, as they attempt to work within and against a system that values compliance over compassion and creativity.

Methodology

This study is designed as a phenomenological, qualitative research study aimed at understanding teachers' relationships with policy mandates at a particular school site in the urban Southwest. Phenomenological studies consider the life histories of participants while simultaneously interrogating or relating to specific phenomena (Schwandt, 2003; Seidman, 2005). This study invites teacher participants to consider what is it like to work as an educator within and against policy discourses that have designated their school an "F" (Vagle, 2015). Two interview approaches were utilized: in-depth interviewing and semi-structured interviews, both of which emphasize how the participants make meaning of their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Seidman, 2005; Wengraf, 2001). In particular, we sought to explore the following question: How do teachers experience and make sense of their work in a majority-minority elementary school that has received an F grade by the state Public Education Department?

Research Context

Nopal Elementary School (pseudonym) has been in existence since 1953 and is comprised of a majority-minority student population (5% African American, 30% Caucasian, 55% Hispanic and 10% Native American), which is reflective of the population of the state in which it is located. 25% of the students are designated as English Language Learners and close to 100% of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. The school received an "F" designation by the state in 2011 due to students' performance on standardized measures in which approximately 30% of students scored proficient in both reading and math. The school is also a special education cluster site that serves students with severe emotional, learning and behavioral needs from across the city. Although these students have substantial IEPs (Individualized Education Plans), they are mandated to complete the same testing requirements as their peers with their scores factored into the overall school grade.

As three female teacher educators (one Latina and two Caucasian) and former classroom teachers in high-poverty contexts, our own involvement at the school emerged from an invitation to hear a group of teachers share their experience with Japanese Lesson Study, a process

developed in Japan in which teachers plan collectively, observe one another teach and debrief the process as a means of deepening and improving instruction (Isoda et al., 2007). This initial encounter led to conversations about how we might collectively expand the collaboration between the elementary school and the university. Although the group was established to discuss Lesson Study, the challenges associated with the punitive policy environment and the impact of high-stakes testing began to characterize the discussions. Specifically, the school was engaged in a collective discussion about the recent designation as an “F” school. Tamara, a fourth grade teacher at the school, expressed interest in designing and implementing a journalism unit with her fourth grade students and we discussed how we might support her as university faculty. During the journalism project, the fourth graders began to critically examine the concept of school grading, in particular Nopal’s depiction as an “F” school. As university faculty, we helped the fourth graders get printing and publication support from the city newspaper and we regularly visited the class to help students polish and finalize drafts. As a result, the students had a professional-looking final product that was widely distributed within both the schools and community. Through this work, we also began to engage with the idea of school grading as a policy maneuver and wanted to explore how teachers, like Tamara, responded to these kinds of designations.

Data Collection

In the fall of 2014, we sent an email to the entire staff of Nopal Elementary and 11 teachers responded and expressed interest in participating in the study (approximately 1/3 of classroom teachers at the school). We also recruited one student-teacher who was in our university program and placed in a 5th grade classroom at Nopal, for a total of 12 participants. Data was collected over the 2014-2015 academic year and included a 1-hour interview with each of the 12 teachers (see protocol in appendix), a focus group in which 7 teachers participated, and informal, semi-structured interviews, which occurred at school events, district board meetings, protests or other spaces where we encountered the teachers outside of their school and classroom contexts. As evidenced by the table below, most of the teachers in the study identify as veteran teachers who have made significant investments into the profession. For example, the teachers have collectively amassed a wide range of endorsements and credentials, which further mark their expertise as educators. For example five of the teachers have TESOL endorsements, one has a Master’s degree in STEM, one has an administrative credential, two are nationally-board certified, one has a Master’s degree in reading and three have dual certification in special education. The teachers in the study also participate in a wide array of professional development activities, organizations, and initiatives.

Table 1: Teacher Characteristics

	Name	Position	Ethnicity	Years Teaching	Years at Nopal
1	Adam	3 rd Grade	White	7	7
2	Tamara	4 th Grade	White	10	10
3	Amelia	Math Instructional Support	White	17	16
4	Charlotte	2 nd Grade	Hispanic	9	9
5	Grace	3 rd Grade	Hispanic	23	15
6	Hailey	K-5 Science	White	13	1
7	Manuel	5 th Grade	Multi-racial	10	2
8	Alice	Gifted	White	More than 10	1
9	Heather	5 th Grade Bilingual	White/Hispanic	19	2
10	Ian	3 rd /4 th Special Education	White	14	4
11	Naomi	5 th Grade	White	2	2
12	Carla	Student Teacher	White	1	.5

Data Analysis

We utilized an interpretive phenomenological approach to data analysis (Van Manen, 1990). Data analysis occurred after both the first round of interviews and a focus group had been conducted (7 of the 12 participants agreed to participate in the focus group). We used our initial impressions from the interviews to construct focus group questions, viewing this as an opportunity through which we could confirm, disconfirm and refine our emerging understandings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). We also viewed this focus group as a mode of conducting member checks. In this sense, we viewed our analysis as a recursive process that occurred with and alongside the teachers who chose to participate in the study.

After the focus group session, we reviewed all data collected and identified trauma as a central theme associated with the phenomena of working in an “F” school (Van Manen, 1990). A secondary round of coding allowed us to identify the core facets of the phenomenon and understand the nuanced experience of trauma. Further, to ensure validity, we triangulated the data and cross-checked this theme across all data sources. Like Van Manen (1990), we contend that “[p]henomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience” (p. 79). Thus, through the coding process we identified three dimensions of trauma that the teachers voiced in relation to neoliberal reforms; these dimensions of trauma are the structures of the experience (Van Manen, 1990). In the findings below, quotes have been chosen as “exemplars” (Ryan & Bernard,

2000, p. 784) to represent these dimensions of trauma. The highlighted quotes are representative of instances of trauma that surfaced across the data in multiple instances and among multiple participants.

Findings

Our findings revealed that the teachers at Nopal experienced three dimensions of trauma including (1) the physical toll exacted by an unrealistic workload focused primarily on the execution of meaningless tasks, (2) a sense of psychic disequilibrium and cognitive dissonance resulting from teachers having to reconcile their own local understandings of their classroom, school and community with broader depictions of the school as failing, and (3) experiences of ongoing marginalization based on repeated instances of de-professionalization.

The Physical Toll of an Excessive Workload

According to Darling-Hammond's (2014) analysis of international data, teachers in the US are the most overworked in the world, are the most likely to teach in high-poverty schools and have larger class sizes and less planning time than teachers in other contexts. Despite clear evidence of these disparities, policymakers and media outlets consistently manufacture a sense of crisis in US education (Berliner and Biddle, 1996) that disavows the working conditions of teachers while simultaneously blaming teachers for declines in student achievement (Berliner, 2014; Edwards, 2014). Ironically, efforts to remedy the achievement crisis, including the high-stakes accountability culture embedded in NCLB, have resulted in a significant increase in teachers' workload and a problematic shift to more meaningless, bureaucratic tasks (Crawford-Garrett, 2013; Madaus, Russell & Higgins, 2009). Grace, a 3rd grade teacher, noted this troubling shift when she stated:

Our professional development of late is mostly on how to fill out forms on the computer so you can do your TeachScape, or your evaluation system. It's not about children, it's not about education, it's not about becoming a better educator, it's about how did you, did you fill out the right lesson plan form on this? Did you put your data in? Oops. Well the computer's down, well you didn't do this, or you didn't do that. It's more nitpicky, and it's really not, it's not, to me, education geared. It's more government or business, it's more like a business model.

Tamara, a 4th grade teacher at Nopal, echoed Grace's frustration with the toll of meaningless tasks and empathized with administrators who, as a result of increasing bureaucratic demands, cannot support teachers in doing deep, instructional work.

I would think it's all affected administrators in that they have to spend more and more time filling out all of these rubrics that are pages long on all their staff members instead of, in my idealistic world, the administrator would be there to kind of support teachers and help them think about how they can become better at their profession in like a, in a teaching and learning way. Not in like a punitive way. So it seems very punitive.

Here, Tamara theorized the ways in which the dimensions of teaching and learning have shifted from supportive to punitive. Like Grace, she lamented the administrative tasks that impeded authentic engagement with students and curriculum. Similarly, Hailey, who was in her first year

of teaching at the time of the study, recounted administrative requests that require her to ‘jump through hoops’ which, again, indicates a shift in the kind of work valued by policymakers:

Well, um, last year I had to get out some lesson plan formats that originally they wanted people to use, and try and figure out how I was going to put what I was already doing into this format for them, so that took away from my teaching time, because I was already going to teach the lesson, but now I had to spend a lot of time, again, figuring out how I'm going to jump through the hoop.

In this instance, Hailey was not resistant to time spent planning lessons; rather she viewed the act of having to translate previously-created lessons into a new format as problematic and questioned whether this is an acceptable use of her time.

As teachers discussed the shift in workload away from meaningful planning to increasingly bureaucratic mandates focused on paper work and forms, they began to mention the physical toll of this work on their bodies. For example, Grace discussed the ways in which the stressors of teaching in an F school combined with an unrealistic and un-gratifying workload led to the physical symptoms:

I know it's hugely political and it's hugely stressful. I mean I went home and threw up because I had to go do this ‘cause I spent hours...I mean we get paid [for] 6.5 [hours] when we're working 8 hours a day and not counting weekends. That was pretty much okay. Now, we are having to work 10 or more hours a day.

In discussing the increase in workload, Heather recounted her inability to effectively manage her responsibilities and drew upon vivid images of harm to her physical body:

I didn't feel the support from my leader and I just, I just felt like my workload because of these policies and all this stuff and what's expected of me, was literally killing me, literally. And I'm just, like at the end of that year, I was like, my body, I'm just gonna die physically. I'm just gonna break in half, like, I felt like the load was impossible.

Amelia, an instructional support teacher for Math, shared that the stress of administering standardized tests to a group of special education students caused her to have an outbreak of Shingles on her face. “What was most awful about it was that even though I believed so deeply that it was wrong, I couldn’t choose not to do it.” Like Heather, Amelia’s emotional anguish at having to subject a group of special education students to “17 hours” of testing resulted in physical symptoms or outward wounds that were indicative of her inner turmoil.

Ian, a teacher in the special education program at Nopal who works with a high-needs population including students who qualify as emotionally disturbed also invoked the physical toll exacted on his body but did so by speaking metaphorically about what it feels like to be pulled in competing directions:

The idea of walking with one hand tied behind your back and the other one cut off is something I think about sometimes... If I could cut myself in three I would and I would do that you know.

In this instance, Ian used powerful metaphors to indicate how crippling these policy demands feel. When he posited cutting himself in three, he is referencing, to some degree, the impossibility of completing everything he is required to do. Like Hailey, Ian is not opposed to

doing the work required to support his students. However, even when working his hardest, he is unable to meet the demands. When recalling that the literal meaning of the word trauma is “wound,” it is evident that the ways in which these teachers experience de-professionalization has indeed been marked on their bodies in particular ways as they try to reconcile their ability to complete their work with and against their deteriorating sense of physical well-being.

Psychic Disequilibrium

In addition to the physical weight of an increasingly unrealistic workload, teachers struggled with the psychological dimensions of trauma. We conceptualize this phenomenon as psychic disequilibrium, cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) or even double consciousness (DuBois, 1903) in an attempt to suggest the extent to which teachers’ lived experiences contrasted dramatically with dominant conceptions of the school. Like DuBois (1903), we consider what it means for these teachers to always have to view themselves and their work through the eyes of others and to justify their lived experiences and localized knowledge within and against mainstream paradigms that discount their perspectives. For example, while teachers predominantly viewed themselves as competent and believed the school was effectively serving students and families in the wider community, they constantly had to temper these perspectives with the school’s F grade, a marker which came to emphatically shape how the school was discussed throughout the city. While the teachers often insisted that they ignored the school grading system, there is evidence that it did indeed penetrate their understanding of themselves, their students and the school context. According to Grey (2007), this kind of psychic disequilibrium is indeed a form of trauma: “*Trauma* denotes the impact of events that produce severe ruptures in social cohesion and threaten stability of cultural narratives” (p. 174). For the teachers at Nopal who operated according to a narrative that they were successful educators who could utilize a range of tools to support children and families, the designation as an “F” school presented a distinct rupture in how they understood themselves as agentive teachers.

In his statement below, Manuel, a 5th grade teacher, demonstrated the ways in which teachers struggled to cohere their everyday experiences with outside designations:

I saw these kids working. I saw that kid read. I saw those small groups. I saw them playing at recess. I saw that. I saw learning. I saw growth. They want to label a school an F. We made it to a D somehow which was great but it’s still again: We are D students?

Manuel’s statement reads like a piece of testimony- he testified to what he has seen and witnessed in his own classroom as a means for providing evidence that can refute the school grade- a move that points to broader questions concerning what types of credibility are considered valid in neoliberal times. Further, reflective of the sociopolitical context in which he works, Manuel’s testimony reveals the uncertainty and dissonance embedded in his conceptions of his school, classroom, students and community. While on the one hand, he extolled the move from an F to a D as “great,” on the other he questioned its accuracy: “But it’s still again: We are D students?” These kinds of accounts occurred throughout the data set as teachers struggled to interpret school grades in light of their own understandings.

Carla, a student teacher new to the school context aptly interpreted the dualities the teachers experienced, and stated, “And [the kids] know they are being pushed, they know they’re having a good social experience. But then, you know, also teachers just joke around with each

other, well, look at us, we had an extra good day and we're still an F school." This duality exacerbates individual trauma experienced by each teacher, but it also contributes to lowered morale and a sense of collective angst, ultimately (re)shaping school culture.

The teachers were not the only ones subjected to the psychic disequilibrium caused by teaching at an F school and it is important to indicate the level to which this sense of cognitive dissonance permeated the building and the school culture. Hailey shared a narrative based on her conversations with the Nopal principal shortly after the principal received a negative evaluation:

Our principal said well I got a bad, you know she tried to help us, and she's like well I got a sucky evaluation, so know that I'm the worst principal in the district, and we're like, no you're not, but on paper that's what you are....I don't feel we do that to kids, we give them a fair shake, we don't just go, oh, well, yesterday, you know or, I came in there for 15 minutes and this is what I saw and you only progressed this amount, you know, we're grading them, you progressed, that's good, now let's keep going, where else can we go?

On receiving her "sucky" evaluation, the principal, on some level accepted the district's assessment of her performance by stating, "I am the worst principal in the district." Even though the teachers at Nopal tried to console her by insisting, "no you're not," Hailey still conceded that "on paper that's what you are." Again, teachers must attempt to reconcile what they know to be true (their principal is dedicated and effective) with an outsider's assessment that stands in sharp contrast to their own lived understandings. Amelia, who provides the school's instructional support for mathematics, shared a parallel account of having to respond to teachers distressed by their evaluations.

So they [the classroom teachers] would be crying because they felt they got a poor evaluation and I found this interesting, and of course, people should have known this would've happened. But when you quantify a profession, like they're trying to do with us, when you quantify it and you reduce what we do to a number, what's going happen is people are going to start comparing their number to another, a fellow teacher, a colleague's number because you know when you get your number and you think, you know, oh my god, yeah, that's horrible but maybe everybody got this number. So we had that going on. And you know, somebody would go in and somebody would have a higher number than their number and they'd break down. It was horrible. Absolutely horrible....

What the school grading provokes then is a sense of competition among teachers even as research indicate the importance of teacher collaboration and professional learning communities in promoting student achievement and school transformation (Wood and Whitford, 2010). Or as Selwyn (2007) suggests, NCLB fosters competition among teacher candidates, schools, practicing teachers and teacher education programs which promotes isolation among educators and encourages a myopic focus on the narrow metric of the test score, phenomena which compromise efforts for equity and justice. Thus, the collaborative work that can sustain lasting change is seldom possible in schools and classrooms that embrace strict accountability approaches and scripted curricula.

Moreover, in a very real sense, then, these outward designations inhibit teachers' own ability to reflect upon their practice, make locally-meaningful and contextualized instructional decisions and to trust and rely upon their reservoir of professional expertise. This is, of course,

deeply problematic and indicative of the many ironies embedded within neoliberal education reform. For example, while policymakers place a premium on the importance of being “highly-qualified,” they simultaneously subvert any sense of teacher efficacy or authority by imposing an evaluative framework that forces teachers to constantly question and re-question their own abilities and capacities as teachers. For example, Ian, noted the following in an interview:

But that to me you know that's a little bit frustrating knowing that I know I'm a good teacher. I have confidence in myself. I know my administrator thinks I'm a good teacher, but when you look at the paperwork, I'm just average. And I don't consider myself an average teacher. But that's the way the system is.

Thus, instead of relying on meaningful, localized indicators of teaching effectiveness like the engagement of their students, their relationships with parents and families or their sense of having created a successful classroom community, teachers are accosted with outside metrics against which they are forced to reconcile their sense of worth as educators.

Ongoing Marginalization

Although often conceptualized as a single significant, harrowing event, trauma can also be understood in terms of “uncanny repetition” (Caruth, 1996, p. 9) or what Forter (2007) referred to as “mundane catastrophes.” Dutro (2013), who has extensively documented trauma within urban school settings, likens these seemingly small and everyday occurrences to micro-aggressions (Solorzano, 1998) or racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2008) both of which involve “an accumulation of subtle and overt racial incidents” (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Soloranzo, 2009, p. 661). Researchers who have studied the effects of microaggressions on college students have noted that “[b]attling racial microaggressions drains the energies and enthusiasm of Latina/o undergraduates, leaving them feeling like ‘outsiders’ in their own universities” (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Soloranzo, 2009, p. 680). While we are not suggesting that the traumas teachers experience are racialized, we make this comparison to microaggressions in order to illustrate that seemingly minor incidents of de-professionalization can accrue to have lasting and substantial impacts on educators. Specifically, teachers face a similar kind of fatigue to the college students described above as they are subjected to images of teachers as ineffectual and lazy. As Heather noted,

’Cause I give a lot of, a lot of time to my job, a lot...Um, so anyway, this feeling of like working so hard and, and then you see on the news that education's bad and failed and we're the worst in the country and, and, and you're like but all I do is work. It, it, it's this defeating, defeating, defeating feeling, like you feel like it's impossible, and then, you know, the negativity - humans can't survive that defeating and so few of the humans around are being positive at that point.

In this account, Heather echoed the persistent and ongoing nature of this trauma when she stated “this defeating, defeating, defeating feeling...” Throughout the interviews participants consistently described, using repeated phrases like “again and again” and “over and over,” the persistent sense of de-professionalization and the never-ending pressures associated with accountability policies.

Teachers also mentioned having to confront and resist these ineffectual stereotypes among their own friends and family members. Charlotte, a 2nd grade teacher at Nopal, discussed

the challenge of trying to explain “school failure” to people in her life who may have opposing views:

Well when they make blanket statements like, yeah kids are failing, [I ask] well, what do you mean by that? And then I try to give my own personal experience... It's really hard to have those conversations with people and a lot of people don't want to listen, but you still have to do it.

The teachers in our study spoke to the ways teachers must consistently justify their role as professionals, defend their intelligence and dedication and attempt to explain school failure in ways that reveal how the very policies meant to remedy “crises” of student achievement, actually perpetuate them. We argue this is a form of trauma similar to how other researchers have shown how students’ of color report their exhaustion at having to field questions about where they are from or rebuff subtle insults that question their intelligence, abilities and overall sense of belonging (Dutro & Bien, 2013; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Soloranzo, 2009).

Hailey, in a slightly different example of how teachers experience ongoing marginalization, shared her distress at a popular local news story that reports on the governor selling a private jet in order to purchase books for first graders:

I think they’ve [policymakers] made enough noise and their annoying ‘We sold the jet to buy some books for first graders’ is driving me crazy, to hear that again and again and again and over and over and over and they’re creating so much strife.

When Hailey discussed the idea of ‘strife,’ she was illustrating the ways in which the shallow self-promotion of policymakers through media and news outlets can inflict trauma on classroom teachers. Having to hear accounts of what policymakers are doing to support schooling “again and again and again,” Hailey recognized the superficiality of these approaches. By telling the story of selling the jet repeatedly, policymakers can avoid addressing actual issues in education. Hailey recognizes this hypocrisy and aptly illuminates that overly-simplistic moves on the part of state officials like buying books does little to address the systemic inequity that shapes students and teachers experiences in high poverty schools.

This depiction of the ongoing infliction of wounds is echoed by Amelia who believes the school’s failing grade will continue into perpetuity, no matter how much paperwork is filed to the contrary:

Well there’s schools that are failing year after or get an F grade year after year after year after year...What we found is when we got our F, we spent hours and hours and hours and hours, the principal and I, submitting paperwork on how we would not be an F school again.

Like Heather and Grace, Amelia noted that the F designation yields unrelenting paperwork and a sharp increase in bureaucratic tasks even though it is unlikely that these efforts will result in a higher school grade. To the contrary, as Amelia stated, these schools often remain an F “year after year after year.”

Lastly, Adam, a 3rd grade teacher addressed the deep stress of having to do things over and over again each year. As in Amelia’s narrative above, Adam noted how the reasons for these repeated changes remain obscured but were mandated nonetheless:

You can try and do what you're being mandated to do, and try and do it in a way that you feel like is good teaching, which can be really hard because you feel like you're constantly trying to change what's being given to you. And what's given to you is changing every year anyway. So any changes you make, you're just having to re-do the next year anyway. Um, and then the last thing is probably the saddest thing that some teachers do, is they just give in and they just do what they're told, and, they sort of lose themselves in their instruction, and they sort of become like these instructional robots where they're just doing what they're told and they're using this curriculum out of the box exactly as it's given to them.

In this instance, Adam revealed that in order to make curricular materials into “good teaching” or adapt them to reflect the lived experiences of students, teachers must put in a significant amount of extra work every year as new materials are constantly being introduced. As the reasons for these large-scale curricular changes remain opaque and teachers must alter their curriculum again and again and year after year, they begin to lose their sense of instructional agency and instead become “instructional robots,” capable of only doing what they are told.

Discussion

One of the primary tensions revealed by this study is that teachers who choose to teach in communities, like the one served by Nopal Elementary, where families may be navigating multiple dimensions of trauma, including homelessness, endemic poverty and hunger are now themselves subject to various forms of trauma, a positioning which undoubtedly impacts their practice in profound ways.

On the one hand, these parallel traumatic events may lead to increased understanding and a shared sense of testimony and witness as teachers and students listen to one another's wounds (Caruth, 1996; Duto, 2013). Ian, for example, described in detail the interconnectedness of the traumas experienced by teachers and students and further considers how students might be impacted by the policy traumas that their teachers experience:

Well it kinda trickles down. You know, we are professional teachers. Obviously we try to contain our emotions but what all these people [teachers] are doing here, even the ones who I consider slackers, are still giving and are still in a profession where you are very, very underpaid, not getting the recognition you should be getting... The state is really down us. It impacts them... Even someone like me. I was like, ‘this just sucks.’ I want to see if I can get out of this state. Um and the morale kinda rolls down hill. The teachers are upset, stressed, overworked, underpaid, under-appreciated and it just flows down. The kids sense that the teachers are maybe not in the best place right now. And it just kinda flows through the building. And when state-testing time comes, tensions are high. It's high. It's high stakes because teachers know their jobs are on the line.

Similarly, Tamara, in facilitating the journalism-as-activism project with her 4th grade students openly shared some of the hardships she experienced and perceived as a teacher at an F school. This pedagogy of sharing hard times, which Duto (2011) calls “purposeful pedagogy” (p 203), might invite new opportunities for a mutual witnessing of trauma.

However, despite the pedagogical possibilities that emerge from this shared positioning, important questions also surface when one considers the increasingly bureaucratic nature of the teachers' work. We wondered, for example, how teachers can effectively serve students experiencing trauma when they must negotiate policies that subvert their autonomy and professionalism and threaten their health.

As Heather expresses in the quote that opens this article, she can no longer provide the tangible supports to students that she once offered including food, clothing and Christmas gifts for families who struggle to make ends meet. As Heather's workload changes to reflect the piecemeal, bureaucratic tasks required by the District and State, she must turn attention away from meeting the highly individualized needs of her students and their families, a shift in effort which causes significant distress. In that sense, this study raises serious questions about the unintended consequences of policies that seem innocuously focused on raising levels of achievement among poor children (e.g. Goodman, 2013; Golann, 2015) and thus aims to illuminate the deeply human cost of mandates that prevent teachers from leveraging the localized knowledge of their respective contexts (Campano, 2007).

This study also raises important questions about what it means for researchers to act as critical witnesses able to provide testimony to the various dimensions of trauma that teachers experience as a result of neoliberal policies. In early presentations of this work, audience members have asked how we propose to engage policymakers and the broader public around the issues manifest in our study. Given that Academia privileges publications in peer-reviewed journals, we struggled to reconcile our institution's requirements for tenure and promotion with the desire to disseminate our findings in venues that might reach a broad audience. In wrestling with these tensions, we considered how we might embody a stance of critical witness which Dutro (2013) describes as being composed of two distinct elements: (1) reciprocity and (2) attention to structural inequities (p. 30). As former elementary and middle school teachers in high-poverty classrooms, we identify with many dimensions of the struggles our teacher participants face on a daily basis, most significantly in relation to supporting and working with students who have experienced poverty-related traumas. However, each of us exited classroom teaching prior to the true advent of NCLB and thus were spared the subjection to meaningless tasks and the painful act of having to negotiate our values and beliefs as educators against a set of problematic, top-down mandates. Thus, while we may engage in some reciprocal sharing with our participants related to our shared histories as elementary classroom teachers, we recognize that there are elements of their experience that we will never truly understand as academics who possess a host of privileges, not least of which being curricular freedom.

We have also engaged the idea of addressing structural inequities as a mode of critical witness. In so doing, we have brought the data from this study into our teacher education courses by asking our students to critique local and state policies in our courses alongside the content we teach (mathematics, literacy and social studies) and consider their impact on children and teachers; we have attended protests with the teachers and advocated for issues at district and state levels that they deem salient by writing letters and testifying at school board hearings; and we have shared our emerging research across departments in our university as guest lecturers in an attempt to engage a wider audience in this work and raise consciousness regarding the hidden costs of neoliberal reform. In all of these ways, we attempt to position ourselves as scholar-activists (Lipman, 2011) who outwardly recognize and acknowledge the political dimensions of

our research and seek to use our positions as university faculty to work alongside those members of our community who are engaged in the daily dimensions of the struggle.

Conclusion

Teachers like Heather theorize a significant part of their work as their ability to transcend what Hargreaves (2001) calls the “sociocultural distance” between them and their students by building relationships with children and families and designing and implementing curriculum that is closely connected with students’ lived experiences. And yet, in the face of market-driven reforms, it becomes harder to accomplish these goals. As Au (2011) notes, “Standardization, in order to maintain a claim to objectivity, has to assume that local, individual conditions and local, individual factors make no difference in either student performance or test-based measurement” (p. 37). In this sense, then, the salient dimensions of Heather’s unique school and community context are rendered obsolete. Furthermore, as Heather and her colleagues spend increasing amounts of time reacting to neoliberal policies, their own expertise and professional knowledge is undermined. As the unique school community, the children that it serves, and the teachers working at the school are quantified and dehumanized with numerical and letter grade assignments, the working narrative of the school is impacted based on internalized trauma.

The narratives recounted in this paper are particular and uniquely situated in one school context, in one city in the Southwest. However, within this singular account, there are echoes of the struggles teachers face in Chicago, Philadelphia, Oakland, New Orleans and Newark, among others. In these and other cities, teachers are attempting to reclaim their dignity and humanity from forces that aim to obscure the complexity of teaching. As Lipman (2004) stated,

And schools, as well as their communities, in all their complexity—their failings, inadequacies, strong points, superb and weak teachers, ethical commitments to collective uplift, their energy, demoralization, courage, potential, and setbacks—were blended, homogenized, and reduced to a stanine score ...(p. 172)

In recounting the narratives of the teachers at Nopal Elementary, we hope to reclaim and amplify, on some level, the story that has been lost or buried. As scholars, teacher educators and former classroom teachers, we hope our work will reveal what lies beneath an “F” grade and, in so doing, disrupt an obsessive reliance on quantitative portraits of schooling. Moreover, we argue that the traumas these policies inflict on teachers have profound consequences: If these educators choose to leave the profession, who will be left to sustain humanizing, principled teaching in high-poverty schools? If Kristen Buras’ (2014) work on the mass firing of veteran African-American teachers in post-Katrina New Orleans is any indication, this gap will be filled by Teach for America corps members or other graduates of expedited training programs who help keep labor cheap, seldom question neoliberal policies that narrow curricula and promote compliance and lack rich understandings of the local community and context- a grim prospect indeed.

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Appendix Interview Protocol

This list includes potential questions. As a phenomenological, semi-structured interview, it is possible interviewers will ask follow-up questions.

1. What events and experiences led you to become a teacher?
2. What does it mean to be a teacher?
3. Describe your work as a teacher.
4. Tell me a little bit about this school. What do you like about teaching here? What would you change?
5. What district, state and national policies have most affected your teaching and how?
6. What is your understanding of the school grading system?
7. Describe your perceptions of how various policies (i.e. the school grading system) have impacted the administration, teachers, students, family members of students at this school.
8. What impact have these policies had on your teaching, planning, and evaluation?
9. How would you define school success?
10. How would you measure teacher effectiveness?
11. What other perceptions and comments do you have about the current policy environment in education?
12. Final thoughts?

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