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INQUIRY, POLICY, AND TEACHER COMMUNITIES: COUNTER MANDATES AND TEACHER RESISTANCE IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

ABSTRACT: This paper offers windows into two teacher inquiry communities that met regularly in Philadelphia during the 2010-2011 school year at a time when the school district was implementing a series of top-down mandates aimed at improving student achievement in low-income, low-performing schools. We document how teachers in both inquiry communities collectively grappled with neoliberal reforms and de-professionalizing initiatives and consider how these spaces offered opportunities for teachers to draw upon their own "counter-mandates" which included personal histories; their commitments to social justice; and the expertise of educators and scholars who informed their philosophies and practices. The paper concludes with implications for those working with teachers, especially ones in urban centers, in which neoliberal reform initiatives are increasingly shaping policy and informing teachers' experiences.

Introduction

> Numbers. PSSAs. Percentages. Prior to my induction into the realm of teaching, I never imagined children being represented by numbers in such a manner. Ripped of their essence, their history, their culture, far too many children have solely become bodies that are required to meet standards and objectives with no regard to the relevance of their lives…In my classroom, I have 24 third graders who, while living in the same community, have different stories that color their experiences. Yet these students rarely have an opportunity to share these experiences, inform their classmates of their experiences, and truly become the community that I envisioned early in the school year
> — Dawn, third grade teacher, Philadelphia School District

Dawn's words represent one of the primary tensions she and other teachers experienced during the 2010-2011 school year in a district faced with market-driven reforms and test-based accountability. She entered the profession determined to draw upon the lived experiences of her students to design rigorous, culturally responsive curricula. However, faced with an oppressive set of top-down mandates, Dawn questioned whether actualizing her vision of teaching was possible within the Philadelphia schools. While many teachers are left to contend with these troubling dualities in isolation, this paper considers how teachers like Dawn used the space offered within teacher inquiry communities to problematize and disrupt mainstream perceptions of students and schooling. In this paper we tell the story of two contrastive teacher

inquiry communities - one was a cadre of veteran and novice educators who voluntarily convened twice monthly to critically reflect on their practice. The other included Teach for America (TFA) corps members who met weekly as part of a certification course required by the state. We seek to illustrate the ways in which these two communities gave educators the space to appeal to different kinds of authority and ultimately reimagine "accountability" and reform. In particular, we engage three questions: How do two groups of teachers working in Philadelphia in an era of school reform and standardization negotiate, subvert, and grapple with the various mandates that are imposed upon them? What challenges and feelings related to standardization and mandated curricula do they bring to the groups and how do they frame them? Finally, what do the community spaces offer in terms of contending with these mandates?

The data for this project is culled from two separate qualitative studies focused on the power of teacher inquiry communities. Because both studies incorporated urban teachers in Philadelphia and took place during the same time period, we sought to look across them in the hopes of generating new insights regarding how teachers collaboratively make sense of, negotiate, and resist neoliberal reforms. Our findings suggest that by utilizing their autobiographies, appealing to social justice, and drawing on educational research and theory, teachers in both groups were able to resist policies that aimed to de-professionalize them and limit students' opportunities to learn. The invitation to imagine new possibilities alongside colleagues enabled the teachers to gain confidence, experiment with curricula and pedagogy, take risks in their classrooms, and ultimately find models of resistance among one another.

Neoliberal Initiatives in the School District of Philadelphia

The School District of Philadelphia is the eighth largest in the United States, with 214 schools and over 131,000 students (School District Website, March 17, 2014). During the 2010-2011 academic year, the district introduced a number of neoliberal reforms aimed at chronically low-performing schools including high-stakes accountability measures, scripted curricula, and the privatization/corporatization of schools. In defining neoliberalism, we draw upon Lipman (2011) who describes it 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). Thus, neoliberalism is manifest in policies that reduce governmental regulation or public services (e.g., health care, prisons, education) and outsource public sector "goods" to corporations and private entities. 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). The reform climate that comprises the background of our studies is strikingly similar to initiatives underway in many urban centers across the United States including Chicago and New Orleans. Scholars in these cities have critiqued the ways in which these tactics disenfranchise communities of color and undermine agency among teachers, parents, and students (e.g. Buras, 2011; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2011).

In the context of these top-down initiatives, Philadelphia has struggled to maintain local control of its schools. As a result of ongoing fiscal crises and low student test scores, the district is currently managed by the state through a governor- and mayor- appointed school board, the School Reform Commission (SRC), which has increasingly allowed charter and contract organizations to bid for control of district schools. Once taken over by management companies, many turnaround schools institute significant staffing changes; an extended school day and year; and the adoption of tightly controlled, scripted curricula in both reading and math. For example, one of the most pervasive charter networks in Philadelphia at the time of the study was the Excel Charter Network, a no-excuses school that manages an increasing number of elementary, middle, and high schools. Excel's stated educational philosophy includes an overarching sense of urgency in addressing student underachievement, a focus on identifying and utilizing the most "efficient" instructional methods, and the "relentless" work of teachers towards achieving their goal of educational equity.

The sweeping changes to the district were not without controversy among the community at large. During the year this study took place, a citywide protest erupted when a young teacher was disciplined for resisting the takeover of her high school by a charter company and encouraging her students to do the same. The teacher was reinstated after a month of suspension, but the incident brought to light the tensions surrounding school transformation in a troubled urban district and raised serious questions regarding whether or not schools were being offered adequate opportunities to improve their performance before undergoing significant shifts in leadership and staffing.

Teacher Inquiry as a Mode of Resistance

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle, teacher inquiry communities are spaces where teachers "generate local knowledge of teaching, learning, and schooling when they make classrooms and schools sites for research, work collaboratively in inquiry communities, and take critical perspectives on the theory and research of others" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 18). In differentiating teacher inquiry communities from other forms of group-based professional development for teachers (such as professional learning communities or PLCs), Cochran-Smith and Lytle focus on the ways that inquiry communities are rooted in social movements, see community as an end as well as a means, take a broad definition of data (rather than only considering standardized test scores), emphasize the local context, and focus on equity (pp. 53-59).

Philadelphia has a history of teacher inquiry and activism, which provides a mechanism for resisting and challenging top-down mandates. The city has a rich culture of inquiry and social-justice-focused education with several institutions providing the context for overlapping and nested teacher inquiry communities. The Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania (PennGSE) has been described as "a center from which teacher research emanated" (Lagemann, 2000, p. 244). Practitioner research, which is often collaborative and justice-oriented, is supported by an annual conference, the Ethnography and Education Forum at PennGSE. This conference is unique in that it includes a Practitioner Inquiry Day that provides a venue for practitioner researchers to make their practice public and is free to district teachers. In addition, several other inquiry communities have a strong presence in the educational landscape of the city. The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (PTLC), a progressive group of teachers that gathers to look closely at students and their work, has been meeting weekly in group members' homes since 1978. In 1986, the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) was founded with an inquiry focus that promoted cross-visitation among teachers in different parts of the city. PhilWP is currently comprised of a network of over 700 teachers in Philadelphia who participate and lead a "broad array of programs that focus on the teaching of writing and using writing as a critical tool for learning" (PhilWP website, retrieved March 17, 2014). These programs include summer institutes, workshops, book circles, study groups, and teacher inquiry communities, and many participants in these organizations present at the Ethnography Forum.

More recently, the Philadelphia Teacher Action Group (TAG) has become a growing grassroots teacher-activist force in the city, with about one hundred members and a core leadership group of about fifteen. TAG is part of the Network of Teacher Activist Groups, a national grassroots coalition of similar organizations in cities across the country. TAG's website states, "we work together to build an education movement for liberation, locally and nationally, through shared analysis, political education, mutual support and learning, and joint projects" (Retrieved March 17, 2014). TAG organizes Inquiry to Action Groups, or ItAGs, that bring together educators and community members to explore issues such as culturally relevant pedagogy, language rights for English Language Learners, community-based mathematics, restorative justice, and developing curriculum for social justice. TAG also holds an annual Education for Liberation Conference, which provides venues for teachers to share their work, network with other educators for social justice, and collectively articulate their visions for social change.

Taken together, these organizations, institutions, and annual conferences offer spaces and venues for collective learning, organizing, support, and resistance in a school system that is plagued with top-down

reforms, mandates, and strictly-controlled curricula. They offer images of what is possible in terms of providing spaces where teachers can exercise agency, engage in critical collaboration, develop alternatives to the neoliberal agenda, and take action towards social change. The class that Katy taught was situated within PennGSE, with an inquiry-focused curriculum, while the study group led by Kathleen included members who had been involved with many of the groups described above. Our analysis offers images of how teachers used the spaces we created in the TFA course and the Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group to construct *counter mandates* to the reforms that were being imposed on them. Specifically, we explore the ways in which the inquiry groups provided opportunities for teachers to draw upon and mobilize their own counter mandates which included 1) personal histories and autobiographies; 2) commitments to social justice; and 3) the expertise of educators and scholars who informed their philosophies and practices.

Conceptual Framework

To make sense of the work of these inquiry communities in relation to top-down school reforms, we draw on two frameworks. We use the concept of *counter mandates* to theorize how the teachers in both groups responded to reforms. We also draw on *feminist pedagogies and practices* to describe and analyze the potential of the inquiry communities for offering spaces to voice and mobilize counter mandates in the face of constraints. Together, these frameworks allow us to see multiple facets of these communities that include both the "language of critique" and the "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1985).

Counter mandates

One way that critical scholars and educators have responded to neoliberalism is by re-appropriating the language used to promote neoliberal ideology. Campano (2007), for example, redefines accountability to include being accountable to family and community. He asks, "might teachers and students, through their relationship with one another, create their own versions of accountability?" (p.45). Campano discusses two different types of accountability: quantitative, policy-oriented accountability and qualitative, ethical, value-oriented accountability. His discussion illuminates the multiple ways that notions of accountability might be reclaimed. Similarly, Ghiso, Campano, and Simon (2013) problematize innovation, another key term widely employed by neoliberal school reformers. The authors attempt to "delink automatic connections between innovation and entrepreneurship" (p. 105) by questioning where innovation happens and demonstrating how grassroots collaborative inquiry can be a model of democratically oriented innovation.

Following Campano and others in repurposing neoliberal discourse, this article attempts to reconfigure the features of school reform described above by focusing on the *counter mandates* that were used within two teacher communities in Philadelphia. We conceptualize *counter mandates* as alternate forms of authority to which the teachers appealed and to which they felt accountable for their actions. In other words, in the face of top-down, prescriptive mandates imposed on them by the District, SRC, administrators, and charter-companies, the teachers appealed to *alternate* forms of authority in making decisions that ran counter to the mandates imposed on them from above.

While many studies and policy discussions have focused on the challenges that teachers face in systems characterized by heavy-handed school reform that limits their autonomy (e.g. Ingersoll, 2006), this study joins a growing body of research that documents how teachers in local contexts are responding to these reforms in their practice (e.g. Curry et. al., 2008; Lytle, 2006; Nieto, 2003; Sleeter, 2005). The construct of *counter mandates* offers a framework for considering how teachers reframe mandates in order to find alternative "evidence-based" justification for their decisions.

Feminist Pedagogies and Practices

Both inquiry settings utilized feminist pedagogies as a primary approach for organizing the learning space. According to Shrewsbury (1993):

> feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning - engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change (p. 166).

Expanding on this definition, feminist teachers in university settings have theorized and practiced feminist pedagogies that assume that students bring personal experiences, feelings, and multiple facets of their identities into the classroom to engage in the work that Shrewsbury describes (hooks, 1994; Weiler, 1991). For example, Lorde emphasizes the role of feeling in learning when she writes: "I don't see feel/think as a dichotomy. I see them as a choice of ways and combinations" (Lorde, 1984, pp. 100-1). More recently, feminist pedagogues in the post-structuralist tradition have re-examined oversimplified notions of personal experience and learned to help students critically view experience within institutional constraints (Hesford, 1999; Britzman, 1999). Britzman (1999), for example, writes about the role of the "institutional biography," which allows teachers to gain a critical distance from their own assumptions and resist unconsciously reproducing educational practices. These perspectives open up frameworks for considering how our autobiographies, feelings, and a sense of empathy can shape our learning and how multiple perspectives can be utilized to create meaningful new insights.

As researchers situated within the paradigm of critical, collaborative feminist research, we hoped to encourage our participants to think "beyond and outside of" the immediacy of their current experience as classroom teachers in Philadelphia (Lather cited in LeCompte, 1994, p. 99). And yet, creating learning atmospheres that emphasized the collective rather than the individual was not always easy. As Weiler (1991) notes, "feminist pedagogy within the academic classroom addresses heterogeneous groups of students within a competitive and individualistic culture in which the teacher holds institutional power and responsibility (even though she may want to reject that power)" (p. 129). Even though our settings and demographics differed, we structured our spaces and facilitated interactions in similar ways based on the philosophical underpinnings of feminist pedagogies. For example, we both de-centered ourselves as primary knowers; promoted authentic question- posing by teachers; encouraged collaboration; prompted critical analysis; provided experiences and structures that allowed teachers to share their own localized experiences as a means of making sense of practice; and cultivated group cultures that embraced uncertainty as a necessary part of the inquiry process.

In both groups, the regular meetings became informal sites of resistance to dominant discourses of teaching and learning. The teachers relied heavily on insights from their inquiry groups as they designed locally-contextualized curriculum, wrestled with how to approach administrators, created space for alternative practices, and otherwise negotiated district mandates in order to enact their visions. These alternative pedagogical spaces and practices encouraged collaboration; affirmed the primacy of lived experience; and employed writing, theater, reflection, poetry, and dialogue as modes of inquiry. We argue that these approaches allowed counter mandates to surface and gain legitimacy in a world where they had been previously silenced and/or de-legitimized.

Methods and Modes of Inquiry

For this study, we employed a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2003; Yin, 2003) of teacher inquiry communities in Philadelphia that met regularly during the 2010-2011 school year. We used cross-case analysis as a means of looking across two settings in the hopes of generating new insights related to how teachers mobilize counter mandates in the interest of imagining new possibilities for schooling. According to Stretton (1969), cross-case analysis is a methodology that provokes new questions and reveals new

insights about independently investigated cases. Cross-case analysis thus enables researchers to compare across settings, groups, and communities in the hopes that these kinds of comparisons will lead to new understandings. Similarly, Donmoyer (1990) views cross-case analysis as a meaning-making endeavor that involves a process of integrating ideas and knowledge from previously studied cases. Considering the shared contexts and methodologies of our studies, we sought to look across our particular cases with the goal of examining what Stake (2006) calls the "quintain" or common phenomena underlying the studies. In our case, this quintain focuses on how inquiry communities create space for resistance within a neoliberal context. Thus, we hoped that putting our unique cases into conversation with one another could lead us to make some "conditional generalizations" about how teachers in our respective inquiry communities mobilized counter mandates in the interest of educational change (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Collection

In this section, we briefly describe our individual studies, noting our goals, objectives, and research questions. Then, we discuss how we approached the shared analysis across these cases.

Case 1: TFA Corps Members

During the 2010-2011 school year, Katy followed one cohort of TFA corps members teaching in Philadelphia at a time when the School District of Philadelphia faced intense pressure to raise student test scores and address disparities in the achievement of minority students. All of the corps members were working full time as teachers in Philadelphia as they simultaneously completed certification requirements at the university where Katy worked as an instructor. In an effort to understand how corps members negotiated the tensions inherent in this policy environment, Katy utilized practitioner research methodology to examine her teaching and collected data that emerged from two methods course (Elementary Literacy and Social Studies) that she taught. .

Participation in the study was voluntary and out of forty-six possible participants, thirty-nine elected to take part in the study. Of the first-year corps members, there were 27 White teachers, three of whom were male, 10 African American teachers, all of whom were female, two Latina teachers and one Asian male. Twenty self-selected for more intensive participation, expressing a desire to have Katy conduct regular weekly visits to their classrooms and consented to be interviewed in one-on-one or small group settings. Of these, Katy used purposeful maximal sampling (Creswell, 2007) to select a diverse group of thirteen teachers to interview and observe regularly. Primary data for the study included audio-recorded and transcribed class sessions; field notes from classroom visits; interview and focus-group recordings and transcripts; and documents such as lesson plans, student assignments, and official materials disseminated by TFA, the School District of Philadelphia, and various charter networks. In conducting data analysis, Katy began with an initial round of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) in which she re-read the data, attended closely to emic terms that surfaced, generated themes and categories based on her research questions, and wrote analytic memos to document her emerging understandings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In subsequent rounds of coding, she developed more specific insights and conducted regular member checks with the corps members enrolled in her classes.

Case 2: Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group

In the spring of 2010, Kathleen created the Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group for the purpose of better understanding how an inquiry community could support teachers of adolescents in times of increased mandates and standardization. The teachers in the study group were recruited from the listserv of the Philadelphia Writing Project and alumni networks from the university where Kathleen taught. The five participants who joined the group worked in urban school contexts that were diverse in terms of

school culture and mission (e.g. a large neighborhood high school; a high school in the Excel Charter Network; a small social justice-focused magnet school; and a program for 18-21 year old students returning for their high school diploma after being out of school). They also ranged in years of teaching experience from two to 10 years. All of the teachers were white and all taught in school contexts comprised of a high percentage of African American students.

The group met twice monthly for one year, and the structure of the meetings took different forms at different points over time. During the first five meetings in the spring of 2010, the teachers got to know each other and each other's contexts. Then, over the summer, each teacher selected an individual inquiry question to pursue throughout the fall, with each meeting centering on a different teachers' artifact of practice related to his or her inquiry. In the winter, the group's work culminated with a presentation at Practitioner Inquiry Day at the Ethnography in Education Forum.

Kathleen audio-recorded and transcribed the first eleven meetings of the study group and took meeting notes based on her observations as the group's facilitator. For the final thirteen meetings, data were in the form of more detailed field notes, written directly after each meeting, in which Kathleen used her jottings to recount in writing the group's conversation. Each study group member was interviewed two times, once at the beginning and once at the end of their work together. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis started with several rounds of inductive, open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) in which Kathleen generated themes based on research questions and based on what was salient to the study group members. She wrote analytic memos throughout each round of analysis, debriefed regularly with peers, and conducted collaborative analysis sessions with group members to gain new perspectives on the data.

Shared Data Analysis

Although we employed several rounds and forms of analysis on the separate groups, in the fall of 2012, we came together to collectively analyze data from our studies in an effort to consider what commonalities might exist between our two distinct inquiry communities. We conducted an initial round of analysis, in which we re-read our data, generated themes and categories based on our shared research questions, and wrote analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) to document our emerging understandings. In subsequent rounds of coding, we developed more specific insights and began to compare how each group responded to top-down mandates. Throughout the spring of 2013, we continued to have monthly collaborative research conversations in which we refined our questions and discussed phenomena by considering particular cases. During this time, we also considered how data from our inquiry groups could inform our understanding of the educational climate in Philadelphia and how this context similarly shaped our understanding of our groups' work.

Findings

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the policy environment in which they were situated, we found that teachers in both groups drew upon counter mandates in order to resist, negotiate, and respond to mandates that attempted to deny their autonomy. The most prominent counter mandates evident across data sources were autobiographical mandates, social justice mandates, and textual mandates. In the sections that follow, we discuss these mandates and how each manifested in the two groups. We then turn to a discussion of the implications of our findings.

Autobiographical Mandates: Drawing Upon Personal Histories to Oppose Dominant Modes of Schooling

Teachers in both groups drew upon their lived experiences, or what we refer to as *autobiographical mandates*, in order to justify practices and stances that ran counter to top-down mandates. This counter mandate was expressed in the form of teachers drawing on painful past experiences in school to develop more critical or inclusive curricula and in teachers drawing on past learning in other contexts in order to bolster their rationale for taking on particular issues in their classrooms.

Many teachers who had experienced the marginalization of their cultural background during their own K-12 educational experiences attempted to re-work and supplement curricular resources that ignored students' cultural histories. In the TFA course, Katy facilitated an inquiry into beliefs about curriculum in which she invited the teachers to line up according to their degree of belief with a series of statements related to learning American history, for example, *there is a certain body of knowledge that all students should know.* Students from marginalized backgrounds took issue with the statement and used this opportunity to problematize content presented in the elementary social studies texts they were required to use by their respective schools. Three of the African American TFA corps members, for example, expressed distress at having to implement a prescribed curricular program that essentially erased the cultural experiences of their students. They described the pain they experienced in school when their cultural and familial histories were not acknowledged by teachers, peers, and classroom materials. However, even with rich autobiographical histories to draw upon, these teachers found themselves torn between their personal belief that culturally relevant teaching could transform the educational experiences of minority youth and the pressures exerted by their schools to conform to a more mechanistic instructional approach. Kayla (all names are pseudonyms), for example, shared the following anecdote in a written assignment:

> When I joined the ranks of Teach for America, it was my honest intention to engage my students in manners that would truly invite them into the classroom. However as a first year teacher I have found it grueling to do so...However as I consider my students, I see similar sentiments of frustration with schooling that does not include their experience. Their experience mirrors many of the sentiments of disengagement and disenchantment with an educational system that alienates a minority existence that I felt in my own educational experience.

Although Kayla entered Teach for America with the intention of incorporating her students' cultural experiences into her lessons, she struggled to find the support she needed to make her vision a reality. However, in two other instances, the inquiry community provided an opportunity for corps members to draw upon their personal histories to justify transformative practices. Nancy, for example, designed a thematic unit about the Black Power Movement for her class of African American third graders and used the unit to make meaningful connections to their lived experiences:

> The two and a half weeks that I spent teaching this unit invested me further in the notion that knowledge of self and the history of one's culture can be a truly motivating experience that leads to academic and behavioral success. Because this unit expanded beyond what we did in the classroom, it was a small taste of what culturally competent learning can look like when parents and families are used as funds of knowledge.

In a parallel effort to consider how their personal histories influenced their teaching, teachers in the Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group decided that they wanted to write and share *Where My Teaching is From* poems in an effort to get to know their own and each other's personal histories and raise collective awareness of how these histories shaped their practices. In the reading aloud of these poems and the discussion that followed, teachers had in-the-moment insights about the relationships between their personal histories and their teaching. Joel, for example, after talking about a missed opportunity in his class to analyze race and racism, harkened back to his experiences in college to justify his belief that issues of race are important to talk about:

> Something that I probably could have added in my "Where I'm From" poem is one of the experiences that I had was with the Race Relations Project at [my university], which was a really great project that I got involved with where I co-facilitated discussions on race and gender and stuff like that. Today, race and identity is definitely a topic. When I started designing my own curriculum, race and identity was number one that I brought to the classroom. I was like, "No, we need to talk about it." And they were really resistant about it at first. But, I think that one thing I learned from my experiences with the Race Relations Project is that the topic of race at least really needs to be on the table. It can't be something that's so taboo that we can't touch it.

In this statement, Joel draws upon his beliefs and values developed in his past educational experiences to justify practices (in this case, a race conscious curriculum, or at least a classroom culture where race is not a taboo subject). While other study group members challenged him to wonder about why some of the students may be resisting, Joel remained committed to keeping race at the forefront of his classroom in ways that felt generative for his students. As a white teacher teaching mostly African American students, this goal was difficult for Joel, but values he developed in a previous learning community, along with the support of the study group, allowed him to continue to keep the issue of race an active inquiry in his classroom.

Another place where teacher autobiographical mandates were expressed and explored in the study group was in teachers' rationale for their selection of inquiry topics. Lucy, who focused her inquiry on questions of language, power, and schooling, described how her first encounter with these issues was when she moved to college from a small farm in upstate New York. She said that the way she talked made her feel isolated, disadvantaged, and excluded from the academic discourse of the university. She frequently drew upon this experience of linguistic marginalization to justify the collaborative inquiry into language that she conducted with students at an alternative high school. Through group discussions, and in her own writing, she made connections between her own experience of speaking a rural dialect in a middle-class environment and the experiences of her students who spoke African American Vernacular English. She foregrounded her own journey through school with the following juxtaposition of her own experience and that of her students':

> I am a teacher, a learner. I am a researcher, and an inquirer. And still, after all these years, I am a farmer's daughter in the big city. As I teach, and as I learn to teach, what happens to my identities? As my student's leave their homes and communities and enter the school environment, and then the English classroom environment, what happens to their identities? What is the effect of school on their home identities? What is the effect of home on their school identities? Which of these identities are legitimized or delegitimized in which space or domain?

In this passage, Lucy connects her own experiences of border crossing to her students' experiences. Even during the informal times before and after meetings, she told stories about tensions in her own relationships with family members as a person who left the farm for the city.

These autobiographical explorations – the pain in feeling one's culture being excluded from the curriculum, the tensions in experiencing assimilationist language ideologies, or a deep belief developed in a different educational setting – served as grounds upon which teachers justified practices that went against the grain within their schools.

Social Justice Mandates: Pursuing Education as a Venue for Equity

The term "social justice" surfaced repeatedly in both groups as teachers reflected on their reasons for choosing a teaching career and considered what they hoped to accomplish as classroom teachers. In this section, we describe the ways that identifying as a social justice-focused educator functioned as another counter-mandate in the face of neoliberal reforms.

In the context of the TFA class, many of the teachers identified as activists and had been involved in various justice-based initiatives prior to entering Teach For America. While they continued to reference these identities, a number of corps members felt as though these social justice stances were in conflict with the administrative mandates they encountered in schools. As a result of TFA's emphasis on measurable outcomes, a number of corps members reported feeling that the very qualities that made them compelling TFA recruits caused them to experience tension in the actual TFA context. For example, a strong desire to work for social justice or a penchant for innovation and inquiry were summarily dismissed in favor of a demonstrated ability to raise test scores, which is TFA's primary gauge for progress. One corps member, for example, shared the following during a focus group:

> TFA recruits people who have all of these ideals about education and social justice, all of these fantastic, progressive …and TFA recruits you because of those things, then you get into TFA and they are like, "Oh, all of that stuff we wanted you for? That's all gone. You've got to get the data and you're not a leader unless you're going to do that.

Fiona, a corps member deeply committed to social justice and student-centered teaching, planned a social justice-focused after school unit focused on well-known activists from different communities. Despite these intentions, Fiona found that she could not teach the afterschool unit she originally designed due, in part, to concerns regarding student achievement and pressure from her administration to make sure that all of her third grade students were reading on grade-level by the end of the school year:

> The suggestion from my administration came coupled with my own urgency to finish helping my remaining four students to read on grade level. And so began the siphoning off of my original intentions; and in its place appeared a class too similar to what I'd created in my scripted classroom. It was April and I was tired of fighting the directives and my curriculum. Also, I knew that the year was in its last months and that I still had students who needed to master the basic skill of reading. And so, in the space I had specifically created to liberate myself and my students from basic-skills curriculum, I couldn't help but feel the pressure to let my original ideas hit the sidelines. Each week I came prepared to do my lesson and community-oriented activity, but I would watch the clock eat away minutes as I pushed sight words and extended individual reading time to work independently with my group of struggling readers.

Although Fiona, like most corps members, had a strong desire to ground her curriculum in the lived experiences of her students and to draw upon community resources, she was both fatigued by the pressure to conform to the constant directives of her administrators and also concerned that if she abandoned basic-skills instruction, her students would not attain grade-level proficiency in reading. Thus, her desire to imagine a different kind of classroom, no matter how strong, did not overrule her belief that skills instruction was more important or, at least, must exist apart from more open-ended kinds of instruction.

The teachers in the study group also appealed to identities as social justice educators to justify their responses to district and school-level mandates. Joel, a second year teacher in a large neighborhood public high school with a scripted reading program, came to the group somewhat frustrated that he was not able to enact his ideals in his classroom. Early on, he posed the question: "How do I respond to reductivist pedagogical pressure in my attempts to be a dynamic social justice educator?" This question reflects an early-career teacher seeking ways to enact his ideals in the face of the pressures that he felt. While Joel came to the group frustrated, throughout his work in the group, he continued to pursue topics of race, language, and injustice as he raised questions and considered his practice in relation to his ideals.

The more experienced teachers in the study group had moved in and out of various institutions during their careers and therefore their appeals to social justice were more complex and varied. For example, Becca, who worked at an Excel school, came to the study group because of a tension she felt between the inquiry-based social justice orientation of her graduate program and the no-excuses culture of her school, which also drew upon social justice discourse. She wanted to explore the ways that these two philosophies were compatible and discordant and also where she stood in relation to this ideological landscape. She discussed these tensions in an interview with Kathleen:

So standardized tests, not that Excel Charter loves standardized tests, but I think that's probably our most credible set of data about our kids. And then at [the university where I got my master's], the data is less important and I think things are more about experience. I think [the university] values the kind of growth that isn't necessarily measured by, or seen in the data that Excel Charter looks at.

Social justice fits in there somewhere, although I think that Excel Charter would argue that their whole mission is social justice. That they serve to make schools better for communities where they weren't working.

So, I feel like the social justice bit is different. But I think that both organizations believe very strongly that they have this mission of social justice.

Kathleen's next question was "what are some of the biggest concerns you face in your teaching?" to which Becca responded:

I wonder whether I've lost myself a little bit because I'm part of this organization that has such a strong philosophy and I came from an organization, frankly, that also had a very strong philosophy. How have I made these things my own or am I just a cog in the machine? I mean am I doing someone else's bidding or am I actually doing the things I believe are right? And the fact that I can't answer that question quickly is concerning, you know? So I think wanting to revisit and refine my personal teaching philosophy or beliefs about teaching is one concern. That's a really broad one.

With these comments, Becca reveals how she felt torn between two institutions, both of which claimed to be working on behalf of social justice. She also reveals strong desire to use the study group to untangle these opposing discourses and clarify her own stance in relation to them.

Whether in the form of trying social justice oriented practices for the first time or reflecting back on a longer career to clarify one's beliefs, the context of each inquiry community became a space for teachers to define and redefine social justice and their identities as social justice educators within and against their school contexts. Katy, for example, allowed space for struggles and questions to come up about Teach for America, other institutions (such as the corps members' schools), and their own roles as teachers. The teachers in the study group, too, raised critical questions and supported each other in taking the risky step to, as one teacher put it, "subvert the curriculum." Ultimately, both groups provided a space to grapple with complicated issues and questions such as: What does it mean to teach for social justice? Is there a place for teaching the code of power within culturally relevant pedagogy and how might this be done? How can I as a (beginning teacher, experienced teacher) enact a social justice pedagogy and advocacy role within my current context? Where and how do I experience tensions in my work?

Textual Mandates: Identifying Alternate Forms of Authority

Throughout the work in both inquiry communities, the teachers appealed to a different kind of authority when they invoked theoretical and research mandates that ran counter to current policy trends at their schools. The TFA corps members drew mostly from assigned course readings that ran counter to the school and district mandates that they experienced. Many found inspiration in the work of Gerald Campano (2007), who was able to challenge school policies and deficit perspectives of his mostly poor, immigrant students through his work as a teacher and researcher. Reading an account of a teacher who faced similar struggles emboldened the corps members to approach their practice differently, viewing it from a platform of possibility. For example, after reading Campano's text, Christine wrote the following in a reflection:

This view of education is incredibly alluring to me. I wonder what instructor would not relish the opportunity to teach in such a free and nurturing environment. However, this is far from what my placement school expects me to do. I am encouraged to stay far away from this type of "activity"

and instead rely on "real' measures of student growth such as data gained by answers to multiple choice questions.

Although Christine finds aspects of Campano's approach "alluring" and expresses a desire to create a classroom that encourages more creative and open-ended instruction, she worries about whether this kind of approach will actually produce the test results that her school requires as evidence of successful teaching. She goes on to ponder whether or not the data provided in his text can count as legitimate knowledge when she writes, "Should teachers and researchers publish actual studies with real data in order for school districts to take their conclusions seriously? Can longitudinal studies based on the individual stories of one teacher be generalized to make a change for the public?" Christine, then, is unsure what counts as "expertise" and "data" in the realm of teaching and learning. Moreover, unlike the teachers in the study group, she has no models of peers who draw upon visions like Campano's in theorizing and enacting their practice.

Jayna, an African American corps member, responded to Campano's text with a reflection on her own hesitancy to incorporate culture into her teaching:

> I always thought that I would introduce my students to various cultures when I taught and now as a teacher, I often wonder how I can incorporate culture into my lessons when I have such a rigid curriculum to follow. Students' various cultures are silenced through the curriculum I have to follow and it is important to their educational success that I allow them to explore and express these cultures.

Although Campano's text lent Jayna a certain level of conviction about the need to create curriculum derived from students' lived experiences, it was not until the spring of her first year of teaching that she was able to mobilize his text in the interest of culturally relevant teaching. As part of her unit design assignment required for Katy's class, Jayna designed a unit on slavery for her second grade African-American students with the goal of making explicit connections to a shared cultural and historical past.

Siena, another African American corps member, also responded powerfully to Campano's text. Like Jayna, she expressed concerns over her inability to foreground students' cultures and experiences in the classroom. However, she did not blame this exclusion on the administrative mandates or rigidity of the curriculum. Rather, she lamented her own lack of experience with infusing culture into a curriculum. In her response to Campano, she noted the following:

> I think my primary reason for not further incorporating students in my curriculum is personal experience. I have never participated in a class in which students' cultures and histories were given much emphasis and so therefore am not really sure how to begin. My personal experiences as a student tell me the large impact that student culture can have on achievement. Up until I reached high school, my culture was not something we discussed in school. However, this dissonance from my culture was in conflict with how I felt in the classroom. Every day I was reminded by my teachers and peers, sometimes purposely and sometimes accidentally, that I was the only Black student in my classes. Not discussing with my teachers how this affected me did not make it easier for me to survive. If anything it actually increased how uncomfortable I felt.

Siena's statement illustrates how essential it is for new teachers to acquire a vision of what is possible within schools. Not only did a number of corps members critique their own schooling experiences for offering narrow and limited images of education, but many also shared their lack of foundational knowledge of education, which they deemed detrimental in constructing an image of what schooling *could* be. In this sense, critical collaboration takes on tremendous significance as it allows teachers to draw upon narratives other than their own in beginning to imagine what might be possible in their classrooms.

The study group teachers (many of whom had read a wide variety of educational theory and research prior to this experience) drew heavily on published teacher researchers' accounts, foundational thinkers in education theory (e.g. Dewey, Freire), and more veteran and other teachers within the Philadelphia teaching community (including fellow study group teachers and others) as thinking partners and experts

with whom they could align in justifying decisions to go "against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1991) of the mandated curriculum. For example, Becca, who was trying to enact a pedagogy that put student talk more at the center of her classroom in a school environment that favored direct instruction, drew upon teacher researchers such as Bob Fecho (2004) and Linda Christensen (2009) to justify her attempts to create more student-centered pedagogies. Joel brought *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970) to an early meeting as an example of a "thinking partner text" and said that Freire was a person who he greatly admired and who had significantly influenced his practice. In addition, Joel often cited Lucy's work on language and power as inspirational and informative to him as he crafted his own inquiry unit focused on similar issues. As a group, the teachers decided to watch and analyze a video of a well-known local teacher at one of the meetings. All of these examples point to how the study group teachers drew on their *literacies of teaching,* which Lytle (2006) defines as "a critical framework through which classrooms, schools, districts, and communities are viewed as texts with multiple possible interpretations and the potential to become generative sites of inquiry" (p. 258). In the study group, the "texts of teaching" (Lytle, 2006) included published teacher researchers, educational theorists, videos of other teachers, and mentors within and outside of the group to ground their practice in authorities other than those of school administrators, mandated curriculum, or district policies.

Discussion and Implications

Throughout this paper, we have demonstrated how two distinct teacher inquiry communities – a university class for TFA corps members and a voluntary study group of teachers – drew on *counter mandates* in order to develop alternative discourses and enact pedagogies that ran counter to the top-down mandates proliferated by the district in which they taught. The examples we have highlighted illustrate how the teachers responded to top-down mandates by invoking their own autobiographies, identities as social justice educators, and outside texts to justify alternative practices, pedagogies, and curricula. We believe that these examples offer a "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1985) from which alternative realities might be imagined. Moreover, this study illustrates the ways in which the responses of participants differed across groups, with the more experienced study group teachers having access to a wider range of discourses and, in some cases, more institutional authority to enact their beliefs in their school contexts.

We see these findings as relevant to those working with teachers, especially ones in urban centers, in which neoliberal reform initiatives are shaping policy and informing teachers' experiences. Thus, we note four implications of our work:

First, as an increasing number of school districts choose to privatize, democratic educative spaces become scarcer. Thus, creating venues for teachers to voice, explore, and enact *counter mandates* can be a powerful response to top-down reform. In the case of these two groups, these spaces allowed teachers to develop and stay in touch with their own beliefs about teaching and to have these beliefs validated by their peers. Moreover, these spaces allowed teachers to express their emotions in safe and supportive environments. For many of them, the inquiry communities served as an opportunity to have their feelings of frustration and anger affirmed by their peers.

Second, these findings add to the growing litany of examples that document how neoliberal reforms de-skill teachers. Particularly, we illustrate how educators survive and even thrive in the midst of this reform movement. If our societal goal is to nourish a teaching force that is intellectually engaged and internally motivated, then we must cultivate opportunities for teachers to respond to these reforms (as noted above) but also to formulate a vision of what education could be if it were imagined differently. Many teachers in both inquiry groups were able to articulate alternatives based on the counter mandates they invoked, yet only a few were able to translate these mandates into pedagogical and curricular action.

Third, when teachers did take significant action in each of the inquiry groups, it often occurred as a result of their collaborative relationships. In other words, teachers served as models of resistance for one another. In the study group, teachers expressed this expectation openly with the hope that their relationships and shared inquiry would promote changes in practice and hold them accountable to enacting

their educational beliefs on a daily basis. On the other hand, TFA corps members largely entered the methods course expecting to be told "how to teach," but then discovered moments of inspiration as their peers tried out new practices and curricula and reported the results. These moments often affirmed for corps members that it was okay to deviate from the script and that powerful classroom moments might occur as a result.

Fourth, we believe that this study illustrates the critical importance of intergenerational and cross-institutional dialogues among new and more experienced teachers in various contexts within districts in the throes of top-down reform. As we analyzed our data and discussed our two settings, we often wondered what would have happened had our groups intersected. While the study group members benefitted significantly from interacting with others across generations and contexts, the TFA corps members were all novice teachers without a background in education working in "No Excuses" charter schools. While the conversations in the methods class were undeniably rich, they would have been greatly enhanced by the presence of veteran teachers with deep roots and experience in the context of Philadelphia. Thus, one of our primary contentions is that discussion *across* these different kinds of groups is imperative to promoting and sustaining true educational change.

Conclusion

The landscape of teaching has shifted dramatically in the past decade and thus teacher education and professional development efforts must respond accordingly by cultivating spaces of authentic inquiry that position teachers as knowledge-generators, collaborators, and activists. In an era when urban school districts are increasingly being starved of public funding and forced to adopt neoliberal alternatives that aim to privatize and standardize educational institutions, the voices of teachers are more important than ever. While no one person or group has the power to change these systems single-handedly, we believe that the counter mandates voiced by the teachers in these inquiry groups act as a call to teacher educators, educational leaders, and teachers themselves to come together to open up new dialogues about possibilities for change within and beyond the classroom. If not, we will continue to contend with a system that aims to quantify rather than humanize students.

Teachers like Dawn, who enter the profession with deep commitments to diversity, equity and criticality, are poised to alter the reality of schooling; however, they must be armed with the tools to do so. When teacher educators, community leaders and inquiry group facilitators create spaces where teachers are able to draw upon the salience of their lived realities, leverage their commitments to social justice and mobilize the expertise of educational researchers and theorists - and do it collaboratively - radical change becomes possible.

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