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Brigitte Knudson

When Pedagogy and Policy Collide

As I sat in one of my high school classes listening to yet another uninspired teacher lecturing to equally uninspired students, I told myself that I could do better. In the doldrums of the type of moment that often sends us to the realm of the imagination, I could picture myself not lecturing at the head of a silent class, but creating a reciprocal teaching environment, drawing on my experiences and my students' experiences, to inspire them and to make education alive and meaningful. That's why I became a teacher.

Thirteen years of full time teaching have seen those distant dreams come to fruition in my classroom beyond my wildest expectations. The love of learning is contagious, and I have seen how the enthusiasm of an instructor and the atmosphere the instructor creates can be instrumental in students developing into lifelong learners. One of the most important lessons I've learned in the classroom is that learning doesn't happen the same way for everyone—not at the same time, the same pace, or the same level—and that is part of its aesthetic, for yes, learning, like teaching, is an art. And for the teacher artist, "[l]earning is not linear; it does not occur as a straight line, gradually inclined, formally and incrementally constructed. Learning is dynamic and explosive and a lot of it is informal; much of it builds up over time and connects suddenly" (Ayers, 2001, p. 15).

So when my students and I have been on walkabout, silently trekking through the fields and woods behind the school, notebooks in hand, early in the morning, experiencing our own private Walden, documenting the sights, sounds, and reactions, learning is happening. When students are working in groups on problem scenarios about being stranded on an island, like the boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, they begin to understand the complexities of intergroup dynamics, gaining insight into, among many things, human behavior. But that doesn't seem to matter much anymore, because "[t]hese days, it is not fashionable to talk about education that is humane as well as rigorous, about the importance of caring for students and honoring each one's potential" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 5).

On the contrary, these days school is very different. Shortly after No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001, the superintendent delivered an address to our faculty that surprised even the most jaded teacher, warning that it was our responsibility to prepare our students to compete in a global economy, emblematic of recent trends "to define the educational crisis in terms of global competition and minimal competence, as if schools were no more than vocational institutions" (Barber, 1993, p. 43). That same superintendent, hired from the business world, began to speak to us in the nomenclature of business, referring to customers and stakeholders, instead of students and parents. All of a sudden, a non-profit entity placed importance on maintaining for-profit activities, priding itself on a \$15 million fund, while students wanted for new texts and teachers went without raises. Suddenly, this wasn't sounding like school, but the business model applied to education. Hoffman (2000) says, "We

have swallowed the 'business' metaphor for schools totally ... We are comfortable in the language of productivity, inputs, outputs, standards, and quality control. After all, these are measurable outcomes where resource management and efficiency are what count" (p. 618). Others might not have noticed the language, but I was squirming in my seat. We were entering a new age.

Not soon after, teachers with general credentials who had taught successfully for years were displaced by others with credentials who were considered highly qualified yet had no teaching experience. Then came data dictates, where the central office demanded quantifiable scores. Walkabouts are not quantifiable. As a result, measurable common assessments were instituted several times each semester along with pacing guides. The message was: If we teacher-proof the curriculum, all of the students will be on the same page on the same day and will be equally prepared for the state's standardized tests. Darling-Hammond (1996) notes, "These days the talk is tough: standards must be higher and more exacting, outcomes must be more measurable and comparable, accountability must be hard-edged and punitive, and sanctions must be applied almost everywhere—to students and teachers" (p. 5). As I saw the situation unfold at my school, I could not believe it was happening.

A veteran teacher reminded me that our district had been one that had been awarded by NCTE for its forward-thinking, elective-based English curriculum in the 1980s, the type of inquiry-based curriculum criticized by the National Council of Education's *A Nation at Risk* (1983) as "homogenized, diluted, and diffused" (p. 23), in favor of one supposedly rigorous (and the same) for all. Why? Because the school district felt pressured to rewrite its entire curriculum to follow state standards based on federal guidelines, not only are our students affected by a prescribed curriculum, but our teachers are mandated to deliver a curriculum that offers them little room for autonomy or creativity—the elements that make teaching a craft. In the end, real learning and real teaching suffer due to the pressure to prepare for the test. Ayers (2001) writes of the limitations of such a mentality:

After all, standardized tests can't measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, good will, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. What they can measure and count are isolated skills, specific facts and functions, and the least interesting and least significant aspects of learning. (p. 112)

What we are witnessing in the classroom as a result of government dictates of standardization—and there doesn't appear to be any change in the immediate future given President Obama's and Education Secretary Duncan's direction—is a dulling of the curriculum that is affecting both students and teachers. This is not unlike Freire's (2001) Banking Concept of Education, where education "becomes an act of deposit-

ing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor” (p. 72). In such a scenario, students become passive, not having cultivated the critical consciousness that enables us to change our lives, our surroundings, our world.

Preparing students for testing, for choosing the best answer from a list of four or five, is not teaching them to think critically. If an education is not based on imparting students with critical thinking skills, the future is in peril, because democracy demands an education system that equips people with the ability to produce independent thought. For this reason, current trends toward standardization are problematic and neglect to embrace the idea that:

Education is risky, for it fuels a sense of possibility. But a failure to equip minds with the skills for understanding and feeling and acting in the cultural world is not simply scoring a pedagogical zero. It risks creating alienation, defiance, and practical incompetence. And all of these undermine the visibility of a culture. (Bruner, 1996, pp. 42-43)

So are we intentionally undermining ourselves?

What America is experiencing is the commodification of education. Education—the process of learning—has been co-opted by an alliance of business and government interests,

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for the dual purposes of maintaining the government’s economic interests and propelling the private sector, all while fostering a climate of continual educational crisis in the country that places blame on a system of its own creation that is intentionally underfunded to

perpetuate the cycle. The recent drive toward standardization is only further evidence of a trend that has been cultivated in earnest since the Reagan administration. While its effects are far-reaching, there is no doubt that policymakers have shaped both literacy education and its resulting assessment. This is what happens when pedagogy and policy collide.

Valencia and Wixson (2000) define educational policy to “include everything from new content standards or instructional frameworks to teacher certification requirements, systems of assessment, Title I allocations and requirements, and textbook adoption guidelines” (p. 909). Moreover, Cuban (1990) identifies three recurring areas of focus for school reform: instruction, curriculum, and centralized/decentralized authority, noting that their very recurrence begs the question of whether or not the problem lies in these areas in the first place. Instead, he interprets the real source of struggle in education over value conflicts, a result of a shift in public opinion “[w]hen economic, social, and demographic changes create social turmoil” (p. 8), problems that cannot be solved by schooling, but “dilemmas that require political negotiation and compromises among policymakers and interest groups” (p. 8). Only the consideration of the current power structure, coupled with important value conflicts of the day, will determine the

focus of the struggle. Because education is a focal point for the future, it invariably holds an important position for social and political reasons, though the latter half of the 20th century brought a new innovation to education, particularly its commodification, raising its value in the market to new levels.

While critics like Hoffman (2000) point to the reform movement as one “led by politicians who are using their position of authority and power to control the actions of educators” (p. 620), I’m not certain the argument is that simple. There is no doubt that is one effect, but it can be argued that it is not the primary purpose. Shannon (2007) argues:

[Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush] each promoted market ideologies as a solution to social problems, assuming the unfettered pursuit of profit would lead business to provide efficient, effective solutions to any problem. According to this logic, business would engage in research and development to employ the latest scientific expertise, leading toward the best option to fulfill social needs. (p. 97)

As a result of market ideology, the marriage between government and business interests strongly affect literacy education in the United States in several ways. Hoffman, Sailors, and Patterson (2002) state “policy mandates have a direct influence on the content and nature of reading programs placed in the hands of teachers and students,” noting that “textbook policy actions ... are shaping a national curriculum for reading” (p. 269). Further, Hiebert and Martin (2008) maintain that “[w]hile approaches to reading instruction and the materials used to support this instruction have changed over the years, what has remained constant in U.S. reading instruction is the use of prepackaged materials used by textbook companies” (p. 390).

What is important here is the top-down chain between policy, content, materials, and instruction. Policymakers dictate the content that textbook companies convert into materials that are purchased by schools for consumption by teachers and students. Somewhere along the way, someone figured out that education could be much more lucrative than pre-mid 20th century break-even propositions. What this means is that the instructional method in favor at any given time stands to make publishers and ancillary industries billions of dollars. Literacy education is big money, which is the reason why teachers must take an active role not only in informing themselves, but taking active positions and roles in shaping the policy that influences the process. What follows is a brief history of major policy shifts and their effect on various aspects of education, including literacy, teaching, and testing.

According to Lemann (1997), in the 1980s, “the idea of raising standards in public education emerged as a national cause” (p. 128). In an effort to decentralize education, the Reagan administration commissioned the National Council for Excellence in Education (1983), which produced *A Nation at Risk*, a report that not only identified an education crisis in the United States, but identified only one paragraph of (vague) implications for the teaching of, interestingly, high school English, also recommending the nationwide administration of standardized tests to measure student progress by State and local education systems to be used to diagnose and evaluate student progress. While for the most part the results were increased graduation requirements and teacher credentialing, before the 1980s,

"[t]he view in the education world [was] that politicians [had] never before tried to dictate specific teaching methods to this extent" (Lemann, 1997, p. 129).

Fast forward to the Clinton administration. In 1994, Clinton signed Goals 2000 into law to advance national education standards and assessments, legislation that fizzled because of "history and circumstance," according to Ravitch (1995), who notes that the law of the day said that the federal government could not dictate curriculum (p. xvi). Furthermore, Ravitch writes of an NCTE/IRA proposal for National English standards readily panned by critics, such as the *New York Times*, who deemed them too ambiguous. Perhaps this was code for not measureable on a multiple-choice test, and therefore not marketable. Nevertheless, states continued with "higher standards for curriculum materials, more rigorous certification requirements for teachers, and new testing programs" (McGill-Franzen, 2000, p. 892). As a result, disparate interpretations of standards were seen across the nation on all accounts.

In 2000, the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (NRP) was released. Its subtitle alone, an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction, is indicative of the rhetoric surrounding government sponsored studies—and it did not disappoint. Its recommendations touting a skills-based approach, the recommendations of the flawed report impact literacy instruction across the nation to this day, a testament to the power—and danger—of policymaking. Tacked on to the end of this over 400-page report is a three-page minority dissent criticizing the commercial implications of the recommendations of the report. Joanne Yatvin (2000) writes of the gravity of the sound bites that the public will hear out of context, lamenting that most will never sift through the hundreds of pages of the report:

But because of these deficiencies, bad things will happen. Summaries of, and sound bites about, the Panel's findings will be used to make policy decisions at the national, state, and local levels. Topics that were never investigated will be misconstrued as failed practices. Unanswered questions will be assumed to have been answered negatively. Unfortunately, most policymakers and ordinary citizens will not read the full reviews... Ironically, the report that Congress intended to be a boon to the teaching of reading will turn out to be a further detriment. (p. 3)

And it was because of the NRP and its little sister, the Reading First Program mandated by No Child Left Behind, that single-method literacy instruction became mandated in many, often urban and underperforming, schools nationwide. Though common pedagogy dictates that "reading instruction effectiveness lies not with a single program or method but, rather, with a teacher who thoughtfully and analytically integrates various programs, materials, and methods as the situation demands" (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999, p. 11), both NRP and Reading First included language that expressed they were based on scientifically-based information, again code for skills-based, measureable activities, focusing on phonics instruction for decoding, not comprehension skills.

In November 2008, the Reading First Impact Study was released, producing key findings. First, the program "produced a positive and significant impact decoding among first grade students tested in one school year" (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008, p. vi). This statistic makes sense, because they

were learning decoding skills. The next statistic is much more telling, because it better answers why we teach our children to read: "There was no relationship between reading comprehension and the number of years a student was exposed to RF" (Gamse, et. al., 2008, p. vi). Of what importance is a federally mandated and funded reading program if it doesn't affect reading comprehension at all? I think of all of the children exposed to this program, this method, and it is a tragedy. I think about all of the teachers who were forced to abandon best practices to receive government funding. And then I begin to think about who gained from the decision. The textbook companies, the after-school tutoring companies, and all of the private companies that benefitted from policy decisions. After all, policy does not just affect students and teachers. Yet there were people making the decisions who knew better.

Although commenting on different reports, but nevertheless ones containing disparate information, Gee (1999) observes problems with the political climate du jour, often claiming consensus when there is none. In response to the administration of George W. Bush and its input into policy decisions, the Union of Concerned Scientists (2004) said "an objective and impartial perspective"

was often "disregarded ...[w]hen scientific knowledge has been found to be in conflict with its political goals" (p. 249). Goodman (2004) identifies the issue of the Bush administration

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ordering the ERIC databases purged of "documents which do not support administration education policies," serving to censor past, present, and future practice (p. 43). Hoffman (2000) interprets such "[c]entralization and control" as affecting literacy education in the 21st century (p. 617). While groups like RAND, who produced the Reading Study Group in 2002, responsibly admit that there are no quick fixes to addresses the teaching of reading, others, like NRP, as seen above, take partisan positions for political reasons, because, as Shannon (2004) argues, "NCLB opens public schools to market and business forces" (p. 23).

An important aspect of the commodification of education is the ability to quantify education, even though quantifiable data—what we consider to be measureable and some might even be so bold to label scientific—is oftentimes deceptive. Rose (1989) discusses the "vast and wealthy industry of educational institutes and consultants" surrounding the drive to quantify data, asserting that "[n]umbers seduce us into thinking we know more than what we do; they give us false assurance of rigor but reveal little about the complex cognitive and emotional processes behind the tally of errors and wrong answers" (p. 200). Berliner (2006) "found high-stakes testing programs in most states ineffective in achieving their intended purposes, and causing severe unintended negative effects as well" (p. 949). Further, it is no

secret that “[s]tandardized tests ... distort the performance of people who are culturally or linguistically different, regardless of ability, intelligence, or achievement” (Ayers, 2001, p. 113). But nevertheless, according to Howe (1997), “testing has come to occupy a central role in proposals for school reform ... More than ever, it seems, educational testing is viewed as a magical elixir for curing education’s ills” (pp. 91-92). States such as Michigan and Illinois pay the American Testing Corporations millions of dollars each year for the right to administer the ACT to junior students—and ACT doesn’t even have to pay the \$125 proctor fee to each proctor, because schools provide teachers to give the tests. Students who don’t take the test may not graduate high school. High stakes. All paid to a private corporation.

For those students who attend schools that for some reason don’t achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and those reasons are myriad—NCLB has provisions to pay for after school tutoring—provided by private companies, such as Sylvan Learning Centers, a company that provides almost 75% of supplemental educational services in the state of Michigan alone. Shannon (2004) cites a Wall Street Journal article by Kronholz that reported that in one year alone, Sylvan Learning Centers expected to tutor 20,000 students because of NCLB mandates, receiving \$40-\$80 per child of taxpayer money, noting that this is an area where the conservative privatization agenda has become the most visible, begging the question: “How can the cost of public schooling be significantly reduced while creating markets for new businesses” (p. 24). Richmond (2009) writes the state of Nevada has spent over \$20 million on after school tutoring programs on reading and mathematics mandated by NCLB to improve students’ test scores. Literacy tutoring, focused exclusively on phonics-based instruction, “has had no effect on Clark County student achievement in reading,” according to results released after a five-year study by George Washington University. What is ironic in this age of standardized testing and increased requirements is that all 58 schools supporting the 30,000 students of military personnel on the country’s military bases are exempt from testing and other criteria mandated by No Child Left Behind (Rapoport, 2004, p. 251). It is curious that the government does not hold its own employees to its standards.

In writing and reading, I have asked many more questions than I can answer. What is common is that I go to my classroom every day, in spite of the mandates, in spite of the increasing class sizes, in spite of the obstacles that are put before me. Sometimes my students ask me why I don’t get a job somewhere else, where I could make more money. It’s then that I crack a smile and think about that bored high school girl sitting in a history class in 1985. “Because I can do better than that,” I say. And in spite of the pacing guides and the common assessments and the examinations, we gather up our journals, put on our jackets, and go out to the woods to look and listen and learn.

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