

A HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER'S STORY: EXPERIENCES WITH CURRICULUM IDEOLOGIES AND NEOLIBERAL SCHOOL REFORM

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WORKING ON THE ASSEMBLY LINE

Several years ago, when I worked as a 12th grade English teacher at a large, traditional high school in North Carolina, I was thankful that my course did not include a high-stakes, standardized assessment. Instead, my students were assessed via the North Carolina Graduation Project (NCGP), a multidimensional, portfolio-based assessment that unfolded throughout the entire semester. Students selected a topic of personal interest, composed a lengthy, argumentative paper related to their topic, engaged in service-learning activities, and finally presented their work to a panel of individuals from the local community. The NCGP was by no means a perfect assessment, but I greatly appreciated that it offered students immense choice and allowed them to engage in inquiry relevant to their lives and the world around them. Sadly, the NCGP was eventually accompanied by a Common Core-aligned assessment called the Measure of Student Learning (its official abbreviation was “MSL,” so we referred to it as “The Missile”). This standardized assessment was a contrast to the NCGP in that it was divorced from students’ interests, required minimal critical thought (it was essentially a multiple-choice test), and was administered during a single day at the end of the semester. In further contrast to the NCGP, the MSL did not require students to perform research or interact with the community. I recognized this to be a deeply flawed, inferior assessment, and its inclusion in my course instantly heightened students’ stress levels.

Around the same time, I was assigned a 10th grade class. While I welcomed the younger students, I felt anxious about the course, because it included a North Carolina End-of-Course Test (the EOC test). This high-stakes assessment was more consequential than the MSL, as its results affected our school’s overall rating and helped determine whether teachers received bonuses. Its results were also tied to my evaluation and my students’ final grades. In response to the outsized importance of this test, I begrudgingly hauled stacks of bright orange test preparation books into my classroom. Stowed away under student desks, these hideously colored books remained out of sight and out of mind until they surfaced during dreaded “EOC Test Prep” sessions. During these sessions, students read passages, answered multiple-choice questions, and then waited for me to explain the “correct” answers. The looks on my students’ faces during these sessions have never left me; slack-jawed, they stared into space with vacant expressions. As they sat in silence, I led them through practice exercises, and we picked apart various passages. Like surgeons, we sliced through text to locate answers to multiple-choice questions; our work was mechanical, efficient, and devoid of emotion. These practice sessions were deadening for all, but they were utterly demoralizing for several of my students who could barely read or construct coherent sentences. The all-powerful test, however, discounted this reality and demanded that they rise to the occasion. If not, all would be punished. I remember feeling defeated by this entire process, and I felt guilty for subjecting my students to these mind-numbing test-prep sessions. As I looked to switch to a different course,

one without a standardized test, I realized that such a move would be futile. Like an epidemic, standardized assessments had infected all English courses. Unable to escape the “ever-increasing march toward standardization” (Morris, 2016, p. 293), I knew then that my tenure at the school would be brief.

When viewing the experiences described above through the lens of curriculum theory, the presence of the Social Efficiency ideology is undeniable. In this ideology,

The school is compared to a factory. The child is the raw material. The adult is the finished product. The teacher is an operative, or factory worker. The curriculum is whatever processing the raw material (the child) needs to change him [or her] into the finished product (the desired adult). (Schiro, 2013, p. 65)

During my time at this high school, I sometimes pictured myself working on an educational conveyor belt, where I distributed curriculum and manufactured children as quickly and efficiently as possible. The directions and materials for assembly came from the State (my “foreman”) in the form of standards, standards-aligned textbooks, workbooks, and tests. As I worked to construct children into finished products, I found myself unable to keep up with the demands of factory leadership and the quickening speed of the belt. As class sizes ballooned to thirty or more, students fell from the conveyor belt as I worked frantically to assemble them before the next group arrived.

To explain with less metaphor, my classes were large, and I only had each group of students for a single semester; thus, just as I began to know one group of students, they were whisked away and replaced with another. From a Social Efficiency ideological standpoint, however, this is not problematic, as it is unnecessary for teachers to intimately know their students. Rather, “the teacher’s job is to supervise student work, much as the manager of an assembly line supervises the workers on the assembly line” (Schiro, 2013, p. 92). For me, much of this supervision consisted of preparing students to regurgitate their knowledge on standardized tests. As previously mentioned, no matter the course, high-stakes standardized assessments loomed large, and their omnipresence and outsized importance reflected an additional feature of the Social Efficiency ideology: the use of testing “to pressure educators to improve student, teacher, school, and state educational performance” (Schiro, 2013, p. 81). While I certainly felt this pressure within the walls of my classroom, it was heightened when I walked into our school’s main office. Here, I was greeted by a towering “data wall,” a concrete block wall covered with rows of documents that displayed the names of teachers and their students’ test scores. A tool designed to expose, shame, and pressure teachers, the data wall had a chilling effect on all. Additionally, with its location in the heart of the building, this data display communicated to us that school administration believed test scores mattered most. To me, this was exceedingly troubling. As Welner and Mathis (2016) wrote, “All the standardized tests we’ve given, past and present, capture only a small part of what we care about in education and in our children” (p. 244). An inordinate amount of attention was being paid to assessments that measured a narrow slice of our students’ educational lives, and thus, educational facets not assessed by these tests were marginalized. Eventually, all of this became unbearable, and in 2013, I left the school.

FINDING A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Later that same year, I began work at an early college, a small innovative high school located on the campus of a local community college. The school’s stated mission was to “change possibilities” for students, and when I first entered the

building, I saw that the school was well-prepared to do so. With a total population of approximately 200 students, the school's small size encouraged the establishment of strong relationships between students, teachers, and administrators; class sizes were similarly small, with an average size of eighteen students. Further, most teachers had the same group of students for a full year, so there was abundant time to get to know students and establish meaningful relationships with them. The daily schedule also encouraged student success, as there was a support period (called "House") inserted between lunch and fourth block. During House, students met with their teachers to receive assistance on homework, and they participated in team-building activities with other students; on some days, House was an unstructured class period, and students decided how to best utilize their time. An Academic Support period also served as a unique feature of the school, and during this period, students received additional academic assistance, completed homework, and met with the principal so she could assess their academic and social progress. The early college had a small but influential Student Government that planned a variety of activities and events for the student body, including an annual Stand Against Racism program. During this program, students contested various forms of discrimination through short speeches, poetry, and musical performances. Often, I looked at this amazing school and felt as if I were dreaming. That said, the pressure of high-stakes testing still remained. I was hired to teach tenth grade, so the EOC test followed me from my last school to this one. But, the test and its associated pressures largely receded behind all of the wonderful happenings at the school.

If the assembly line is an appropriate metaphor for the large, traditional high school (and its Social Efficiency ideology), the kitchen table serves as an ideal metaphor for the early college. In my family, the kitchen table is a place of intimate communication and equal participation. Our table is a round one, so there exists no "head" of the table. I feel this metaphor suits the early college because each student had his or her own seat at the table, and while teachers still had ultimate authority in the school, students possessed tremendous autonomy. The table also serves as an ideal metaphor for the Learner Centered curriculum ideology, which the early college was firmly situated in. Educators grounded in the Learner Centered ideology believe that "it is important for children to make choices about what they will learn and that children have the right to direct their own learning" (Schiro, 2013, p. 102). During a walk down the early college's central hallway, one would see evidence of this belief in all classrooms. During such a stroll, one might observe a Student Government meeting in room 202; there, students would direct conversations and make decisions about various initiatives and programs they believed to be worthwhile. After passing this room, one might encounter a lively Paideia Seminar in room 203; there, students would unpack the written word and connect it to the world outside the school. Such conversations occurred daily at the early college, and they reflected the Learner Centered view of the student as a human being who investigates the world and strives to participate in it (Schiro, 2013). Indeed, the early college actually required students to directly participate in the world through frequent field trips, service learning experiences, and project-based learning activities. This brings to mind Schiro's (2013) activity school in that this type of educational environment "provides learners firsthand experiences with reality and avoids the traditional school's practice of providing only secondhand experiences through reading, writing, listening, and viewing" (p. 106). While "secondhand experiences" were certainly provided at the early college, they were often accompanied by rich, experiential learning opportunities like those mentioned above.

As a teacher at this school, I greatly appreciated its small size because it allowed me to form close relationships with students and shape the curriculum to better address their needs and interests. As I navigated this powerful educational terrain, I no longer felt like a “foreman” as I had in my previous workplace; instead, I assumed a role that felt much more natural: that of person. As Schiro (2013) explained, in the Learner Centered school, the teacher “must be a *person* within the classroom rather than a paragon, exemplar, or ideal representing inhuman virtues” (p. 140, emphasis in original). In my classroom, this teaching orientation was evidenced by my frequent expression of emotions and thoughts related to texts and social issues. This, coupled with the many informal interactions I had with students, allowed students many opportunities to observe my openness and vulnerability. This was reciprocated as students openly shared their thoughts, hopes, and fears during classroom interactions. Ultimately, our school encouraged the formation of close human relationships, and I felt incredibly privileged to work there. That said, all was not well in the world. While conditions were close to perfect inside the early college, the larger social and political environment outside the school was exceedingly troubling.

SHOCK AND AWE: SURVIVING THE NEOLIBERAL ASSAULT

In 2016, I left the early college. Despite the joy I experienced working with my incredible students and dedicated colleagues, I felt that it was time to quit teaching. Truthfully, this decision was not a spontaneous one, as I had debated leaving the world of high school education for quite some time. In fact, I started considering my exit from the world of high school education almost immediately after entering it. Looking back now, I vividly recall my early days as a new English teacher; I had been given the smallest classroom in the English department, a space roughly one-fourth the size of a standard classroom. On many days, long after the final bell had rung and my students had filed out of the tiny room, I sat alone at my desk, slowly wading through an ever-growing stack of essays. Often, I remained at my desk for hours grading essays, planning lessons, and watching the light dim as late-afternoon turned into evening. Each evening, I was visited by an elderly Ukrainian woman, one of the school’s custodians, who swept the floor of my classroom. I recall the soothing sound of her broom as she pushed it across the floor and removed the remnants of the day. At some point during each of these cleaning sessions, she would pause her sweeping, look up at me with a slight smile, and in heavily-accented English say, “Mr. Gilbert, go home.” The workdays were long, and my weekends were also filled with work; frankly, I was shocked by how much time and energy teaching demanded.

In light of the tremendous amount of energy I was expending at my new job, the arrival of my first paycheck was utterly demoralizing. I recall excitedly opening the envelope containing my first paycheck, and as my eyes came to rest on the miniscule figure, my excitement quickly turned to dismay. *All this work*, I thought, *for this?* Sadly, this first paycheck foreshadowed what was to come. A short while later, the housing market crashed, the Great Recession began, and teacher pay was frozen. This undoubtedly hurt all teachers, but it was especially damaging for newer educators because teacher pay was tied to years of service; newer teachers like me were stuck at the lowest levels of the state salary schedule. Next, in 2010, Republicans won control of both houses in the North Carolina General Assembly (a situation that had last occurred in 1896). Shortly thereafter, a Republican governor, Pat McCrory, was elected, and a devastating assault on public education began.

During my time at both the traditional high school and the early college, I experienced the effects of this assault. The teacher salary-freeze was an ongoing problem, and despite an eventual state surplus, it persisted for many years. Regretfully, I took on two additional jobs to compensate. On top of the freeze, state legislators abolished the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program, a program that had provided scholarships to students who agreed to spend at least four years teaching in North Carolina. The removal of this program incentivized students to become anything other than education majors, and university education departments predictably saw their enrollment numbers decline. Legislators landed another crushing blow when they removed pay increases for new teachers who earned advanced degrees. Unfortunately, the state legislature was just getting warmed up. Next, legislators removed the cap on charter schools, promoted school vouchers in the form of “Opportunity Scholarships,” laid off a number of teacher assistants, reduced textbook funding, attacked the State’s teacher advocacy group (the North Carolina Association of Educators), implemented a school grading scheme popular in other conservative states, initiated a controversial value-added evaluation system for teachers, and removed due-process rights (tenure) for future teachers. During this time, North Carolina teacher pay dropped to nearly the lowest in the nation, and teacher turnover increased.

Like many of my colleagues, I felt shocked, incredibly stressed, and enraged. The final blow for me came when the NC General Assembly proposed a new policy that directed districts to offer meager bonus payments to the top 25 percent of teachers; to receive this funding, however, these “lucky” teachers would have to give up their earned tenure and accept new, temporary contracts. This incensed me, and I published a critical piece on *The Washington Post’s* “The Answer Sheet” education blog denouncing this denigrating policy (Gilbert, 2014). I was also one of several people who spoke at a contentious school board meeting during which we successfully convinced the board to pass a resolution against this terrible policy. Eventually, after the protests of many concerned citizens throughout the State, multiple school board resolutions, and a lawsuit, the policy was abandoned. I, however, knew state legislators would not cease their assault. They had made their disdain for public education known, and I knew there was little stopping them from initiating more, anti-public education policies. Frankly, working as a public high school teacher in North Carolina felt like teaching on the deck of the Titanic, and I was determined to be off the boat when it sank. So, in 2016, I quit.

During the state legislature’s bombardment, I felt disoriented and overwhelmed by both the pace and scale of the assault. While the attacks discussed above occurred over a period of several years, many of them were clustered together, and the legislature never deviated from their mission. Naomi Klein’s masterful work, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, serves as a useful tool for understanding this experience. In her book, Klein (2007) discusses the post-Hurricane Katrina reform of New Orleans’ public-school system, which “took place with military speed and precision. Within nineteen months...New Orleans’ public-school system had been almost completely replaced by privately run charter schools” (p. 6). Klein goes on to discuss how school privatizers who push charter schools and vouchers (such as North Carolina’s Republican legislators) typically implement multiple education reforms at breakneck speed in order to shock, disorient, and ultimately discourage resistance. Unfortunately, these school privatization efforts represent only one prong of a larger project: neoliberal education reform.

Neoliberalism, according to Giroux (2004), is the “most dangerous ideology of

our time,” as it collapses “the public into the private” (pp. 74-75). Relatedly, Collin and Apple (2010) wrote, “many of the school reforms proposed and implemented by business-friendly figures in the neoliberal state, includ[e] high-stakes standardized testing, school choice programs, and slowed growth in governmental spending on K-12 public education” (p. 39). In light of these scholars’ statements, it becomes apparent to me that North Carolina has served as a proving ground for neoliberal school reform. Standardized testing has certainly increased in the State during the past few years, and school choice programs have also gained traction; despite questions about their effectiveness (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014/2016; Miron & Urschel, 2016), charter schools continue to open, and school vouchers continue to be distributed. These reforms weaken the public sphere because funds initially earmarked for public schools are instead funneled to unaccountable private entities. As a result of this decreased funding, the overall quality of the public-school system will eventually decline, thus, creating a crisis and subsequent calls for more reform. Just as the disaster of Hurricane Katrina enabled a slew of neoliberal reforms to be implemented in New Orleans, a public school “disaster” is being manufactured in North Carolina for the same reason. I wish I could say my State’s situation is unique, but neoliberal reforms have been enacted in many states, including those run by Democrats. Sadly, neoliberal ideology has successfully transcended party lines (Scott, 2016), and it serves as a growing threat to our democracy.

MOVING FORWARD

When I view my decision to leave public education in the context of this discussion, it seems that I am yet another casualty of the neoliberal project. Perhaps my exit from the domain of secondary education is a victory for neoliberal reformers. I, however, like to think otherwise. As I write this, I am beginning the third year of a doctoral program that I hope will eventually allow me to teach prospective teachers at the college level. Many of these students will go on to teach in secondary classrooms across the country, and they will face many of the same challenges I faced. They will also enter a profession that is now alien to me. Even though I have traded the trenches of public high school for the lofty confines of the ivory tower, I still believe that I am a participant in the fight to defend public education from neoliberalism. When I have doubts about my continued relevance to this struggle, I remind myself of the significant impact my undergraduate college experience had on my work as a classroom teacher. My education courses taught me how to plan meaningful lessons, interact compassionately with students, and advocate for the teaching profession. Equipped with the experiential knowledge from my days in the high school classroom and the theoretical knowledge from my doctoral work, I hope to be well-positioned to help my students challenge the neoliberal project and become passionate, effective teachers.

As I move forward and set my sights on working within the field of teacher education, I carry my past pedagogical experiences with me. My time spent working at the early college taught me that meaningful, personalized education is possible, and an entire curriculum can actually be organized around this democratic, educational approach. Further, teaching at this school reinforced my belief that students must be positioned as more than test scores or receptacles for standardized “learning targets” and outcomes; it is imperative that students be treated not as dehumanized data points or collections of curricular checkboxes, but rather as continually evolving human beings with distinct interests, talents, and goals. Ultimately, I believe my tenure at the early college provides an invaluable lesson for me and my future students in that

it illustrates that there is nothing “natural” or fixed about the present, standardized, accountability-focused, educational landscape; rather, this is only one potential educational reality that can, and must, be replaced.

While this realization gives me hope, I also recognize that the tentacles of educational standardization and corporatization are perpetually growing and extending their reach. I once thought that the realm of higher education would provide a sanctuary of sorts from these disturbing forces. However, as I proceed through my doctoral program and learn more about higher education and the field of teacher education, I am increasingly aware that the university is intensely subjected to neoliberal ideology and related educational initiatives. For example, during a recent attempt to obtain an adjunct teaching position in a university education department, I had several conversations with the department chair. During these conversations, this individual repeatedly mentioned the importance of the edTPA (a Pearson-associated, standardized performance assessment) within the context of the school’s teacher education program. Sadly, it quickly became apparent to me that this high-stakes, standardized assessment occupied a central position within the program. Tellingly, during these conversations, there was no mention of critical pedagogy, education for social justice, learner-centered instruction, or anything remotely related to a progressive, educational approach. I came away from these interactions disheartened, as I realized that the realm of higher education, like that of K-12, is now deeply subjected to the forces of educational corporatization and standardization.

Following this realization, two questions have persistently lingered in my mind: How will I navigate this troubling reality as an education professor? In what ways can I encourage students to critique and contest neoliberal education reform initiatives when most students have never experienced a reality without them? At this moment, I do not have complete answers to these questions. However, I can begin to address them. As I look ahead to my future role as an education professor, I believe I can draw strength from my past in that I recognize that I worked in a K-12 system dominated by standardized assessments and accountability measures, but I still managed to enact meaningful forms of pedagogy. Thus, I refuse to allow the edTPA and other neoliberal education reform measures to restrict and define my role as a teacher educator; I can, and must, carve out space for my students to engage in meaningful educational acts while also pushing back against top-down assessments and mandates that seek to marginalize them. In regard to my second question, I believe my work at the early college and my present research interests in critical pedagogy and education for social justice will assist me in my efforts to denaturalize and critique the current neoliberal educational “reality.” I have experienced (and continue to experience), in both concrete and abstract ways, alternative, educational realities, and I must work to expose my students to these realities as well. If students fail to see the present educational landscape as socially constructed and configured to serve specific ideological and financial interests, they will fail to reshape the system and work instead to reproduce it.

Relatedly, I believe that it is essential that prospective educators pay close attention to the statewide teacher strikes presently unfolding across the nation, as teachers’ collective resistance points to the existence of hope and the ability to reshape social and material conditions. Acts of collective resistance make it apparent that we *can* reject the present defunding of public education, the denigration of public-school teachers, and the continuing corporatization and privatization of a system that should serve all citizens. I hope to dialogue with my education students about these struggles and the associated need for them to engage in forms of activism. In this new reality,

educators can no longer focus solely on curriculum and classroom practice; while both of these things are undoubtedly important, teachers must also possess a critical mindset, deep knowledge of social policy, and a willingness and ability to engage in forms of activism to challenge neoliberalism and defend public education. We need teachers who can function as educational artists, scholars, and activists, and we need the creativity, perceptiveness, and passion associated with these roles. As I reflect on my past, present, and future, I see these qualities in myself and in those around me. I hope to hold on to these qualities as my journey continues and my path converges with others who seek to positively transform our collective educational reality.

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