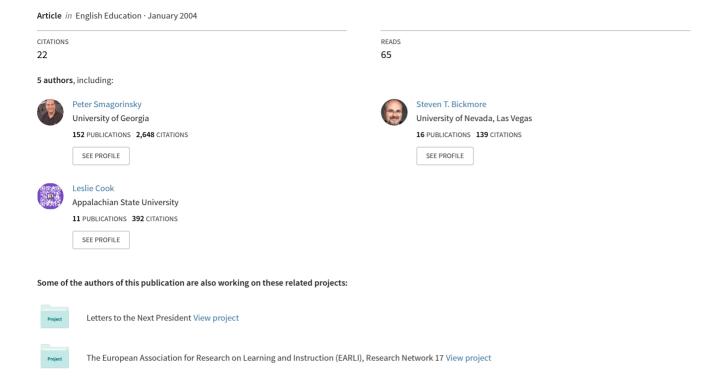# Praxis shock: Making the transition from a student-centered university program to the corporate climate of schools

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Praxis Shock: Making the Transition from a Student-Centered University Program to the Corporate Climate of Schools

Peter Smagorinsky, Natalie Gibson, Steven T. Bickmore, Cynthia P. Moore, and Leslie Susan Cook

The progressive ideas offered by John Dewey (e.g., Dewey, 1902) at the turn of the 20th century had an immediate and widespread impact on educational thinking. Applebee (1974) reports that in 1902, Percival Chubb, principal of the High School Department of the Ethical Culture Schools in New York City, wrote: "In prescribing literature . . . two requirements must be kept in mind . . . [the] characteristics, the needs, and the interests of the adolescent mind [and] the vocational needs and social demands" made upon the high school curriculum. Applebee argues that Chubb anticipated important developments in the decades ahead: "[I]t would no longer be the student who must adjust to the school, proving his competence to follow the prescribed, academic course, but the school that must adjust to the student, meeting his personal and social needs" (p. 46).

Across the ocean the British *Handbook of Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools* recommended in 1905 that

> The teacher must know the children and must sympathise with them, for it is of the essence of teaching that the mind of the teacher should touch the mind of the pupil. He will seek at each state to adjust his mind to theirs, to draw upon their experiences as a supplement to his own, and so take them as it were into partnership for the acquisition of knowledge. (cited in Peel, Patterson, & Gerlach, 2000, p. 204)

The sort of student-centered instruction outlined in these statements has endured in American schools since its articulation by Dewey and his followers. It is typically positioned as the antithesis of what Dixon (1975) has called the *cultural heritage* tradition of teaching that emphasizes the

authority of teachers, curricula, and texts, particularly those that embody the values of a nation's dominant culture. Cuban (1993, 2001) has argued that, while student-centered teaching has had its adherents and pockets of practice over the years, teaching since at least the 1890s for the most part has been teacher-centered, even when new technologies are introduced that will presumably change classroom relationships. Cohen (1988) has traced this instructional format to the Greek academies of antiquity, an inheritance that has engrained it in many a Western mind as the best and most appropriate way of conducting school. To Cuban, Cohen, and others, this approach has been virtually impossible to displace with methods that they feel are more intellectually invigorating and oriented to the growth of learners, those characterized as progressive or student-centered.

Ravitch (2000), on the other hand, believes that Dewey's ideas have produced a century of failed reform efforts. She argues that the progressives, not the traditionalists, have won the day. She lauds the efforts of courageous educators who have maintained their emphasis on traditional values and standards in the face of the soft, romantic, silly, and dangerous trends institutionalized by the progressives that she believes now dominate American schools. This progressive monolith, she maintains, has weakened the rigor and discipline necessary to have strong schools and a great nation. Only by returning to the standards toppled by whole language, student-centered teaching, and other progressive mistakes, she argues, can American education be rescued.

In this paper we focus on one early-career teacher, co-author Natalie Gibson, whose initial teaching experiences were mediated by educational settings shaped by these different and often conflicting traditions. (Other than the names of Natalie and research team members, all names of people and places are pseudonyms.) Our study of Natalie's early-career trajectory is concerned with understanding her effort to develop a conception of student-centered teaching, to which she was oriented during her university education, and to practice it in school settings that suggested or imposed authoritarian conceptions of teaching and learning.

This inquiry comes in the context of related work (Cook, Smagorinsky, Fry, Konopak, & Moore, 2002; Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, & Fry, 2003; Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, Cook, Jackson, Moore, & Fry, 2004; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002) in which we have studied the difficulty that early-career teachers have appropriating any sophisticated concept for teaching. In seeking to understand Natalie's experiences, we investigate the following question: How did the chief settings of her learn-

ing to teach—her university program, her student teaching experience, and the site of her first job—mediate her development of the concept of student-centered teaching? Though we focus on only one teacher in this study, our hope is that by considering this question we may come to a better understanding of how teachers like Natalie are affected by particular kinds of settings as they develop knowledge about teaching.

In seeking to understand Natalie's experiences, we investigate the following question: How did the chief settings of her learning to teach—her university program, her student teaching experience, and the site of her first job—mediate her development of the concept of student-centered teaching?

Student-Centered Teaching

Tchudi and Tchudi (1991) maintain that "We're committed to a philosophy of English/language arts education that's variously and synonymously labeled *student centered*, *holistic*, *whole language*, *experience centered*, or *personal growth*" (p. vi; emphasis in original). Not all would agree that these terms are synonymous. This disagreement is part of a wider debate on exactly what it means to be a student-centered teacher, a disagreement found surrounding any sophisticated conception of teaching (Smagorinsky et al., 2003). Despite such disagreements, educational theorists in general and English educators in particular have outlined some common traits:

> ❯ *Students' lives serve as the basis of curriculum*: Tchudi and Tchudi (1991) maintain that "*Language teaching begins 'where the student is' and moves him or her as far as possible*" (p. 13; emphasis in original). Students are involved in determining class rules and protocols so that their learning is relevant to their social worlds (Cuban, 1993), and the curriculum involves "problem-solving activities around students' perceptions of their own concerns" (Beach & Myers, 2001, p. 22).

> ❯ *Teachers emphasize student growth*: Classroom processes should be attentive and responsive to broader issues of human growth and development (Tchudi & Tchudi, 1991) which should foster students' growth into healthy, productive, happy, and knowledgeable citizens (cf. Dixon, 1975).

> ❯ *Student participation is high*: Student talk equals or exceeds teacher talk (Cuban, 1993) with the role of teacher named variously as "'guide on the side' instead of the 'sage on the stage'" (Slavin, 1997, p. 270; cf. Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993); co-inquirer (Beach &

Myers, 2001); and student-facilitator, coach, and fellow learner (Milner & Milner 1999; cf. Peel et al., 2000).

› *Students are active*: Students are active and mobile (Cuban, 1993; Tchudi & Tchudi, 1991) with learning seen as "active and productive, not passive and receptive" (Zemelman et al., 1993).

› *The curriculum is interdisciplinary and interactive*: Instructional materials and assessments are varied (Cuban, 1993), and learning is interdisciplinary and involves multimedia materials beyond print (Tchudi & Tchudi, 1991). Instruction is thus responsive to cultural and individual diversity among students so as to create an environment "for each student to make meaning from his own experiences from the material studied" (Peel et al., 2000, p. 321).

› *Learning is authentic*: Skills are taught within the context of learning activities rather than as discrete items in the curriculum. Similarly, students are not evaluated through disembodied assessments but in the context of meaningful, constructive activity (Peel et al., 2000).

› *Learning is individualized and multidirectional*: Instruction is often carried out through individual or small group instruction to be responsive to diverse student needs, interests, and heritages and thus to reach all learners (Cuban, 1993). Students, then, "center on and teach each other" (Moffett & Wagner, 1992, p. 20).

› *Students have autonomy and authority*: Within this environment, students become self-motivated, independent learners who develop proficiency in basic skills and learn to express themselves with confidence and authority in both oral and written language (Maxwell & Meiser, 1993).

While widely advocated by university faculty, such teaching—Ravitch's (2000) protests to the contrary—seems to be the exception rather than the rule in schools. A number of school observers have ventured explanations for this disparity. Lortie (1975) has argued that schools tend to attract and retain teachers who were successful as students within teacher-centered ideologies and who return to them because of their affinity for such instruction. Others have looked to policy contexts in which schools operate. What Dewey (1929) criticized as *the quest for certainty*—the positivistic assertion that the universe is knowable and reducible—relieves teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders of ambiguity, even given the multiple purposes

and goals of education (Smagorinsky et al., 2003) and multiple ways available of knowing and engaging with educational content (Eisner, 1985). Peel et al. (2000) argue that in such a policy context, "The new student-centered curriculum would not fit, because it lacked a clear statement of purpose and measurable outcomes. Traditional grammar instruction, on the other hand, could easily be translated into the terminology of the back to basics movement" (pp. 314–315).

These disjunctures between student-centered approaches and teacher-centered settings have been well-documented in a variety of studies (e.g., Borko & Eisenhart, 1992; Grossman, Valencia, & Hamel, 1997; Hadden, 2000; Mintrop, 2001; Roth & Tobin, 2002; Smagorinsky et al., 2002; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998; Zeichner & Tabachnik, 1981). Grossman et al. (1999) argue that while many studies agree that graduates of teacher education programs gravitate to the norms of their schools, researchers interpret the causes in a variety of ways: that preservice teachers never learn the concepts in the first place, that they learn progressive concepts in universities that get washed out in the orthodox settings of schools, and so on. Our goal is not to identify a universal explanation for this general phenomenon, but to understand more locally how Natalie, who along with her university professors represents one philosophy, negotiated the environment of school settings that institutionalized a different conception of teaching and learning. We see Natalie, then, as representative of a particular kind of teacher and her early career experiences, i.e., one who enters the workforce following a university program grounded in Deweyian progressivism and finds employment in a district in which a core curriculum is tied to system-wide, high-stakes, standardized testing.

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Cuban (2001) has argued that most school reform has been superficial rather than substantive, that it serves the rhetorical needs of administrators and politicians without having meaningful influence in the classroom. Sarason (1991) has similarly argued that educational reform is bound to fail because, among other problems, it fails to stir the deep waters of school culture, instead foaming at the surface with the rhetoric of change. The site of Natalie's first job, we will argue, made a systemic effort at reform that greatly influenced the ways in which teachers spent their time, engaged in discourse, and arranged their classes. The reform, however, rather than

encouraging the student-centered pedagogy favored by Cuban and others, was designed to meet the goals of Ravitch (2000) and those who embrace the cultural heritage tradition. Into this environment entered Natalie, taught by her university professors the tenets of student-centered instruction and mentored by her cooperating teacher during student teaching to care for students yet employ teacher-centered practices.

Context of the Investigation

Participants

Research Team

The research was conducted under the auspices of the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA); a more detailed description of the research as a whole is described at the center's website at http://cela.albany.edu/ (see Teacher Education and Professional Development strand, Project 4.1). The research team consisted of site principal investigator Peter Smagorinsky, case study teacher Natalie Gibson, and three University of Georgia doctoral students who were research assistants on the project: Steven Bickmore, Cynthia Moore, and Leslie Susan Cook. Peter did all data collection during Natalie's year of student teaching. Cynthia did all data collection during Natalie's first year of full-time teaching and also, with Leslie, contributed to the initial data analysis. Steven worked with Peter on the data analysis that produced this article. Natalie, following her participation in the research, read and commented on the manuscript at different stages of production and ultimately provided a commentary that we include at the end of the article.

Natalie

Natalie grew up in what she described as a "very small, small town" in a rural county served by a single high school. The community was fairly homogeneous; the population during Natalie's youth was 92% white and 7.5% African American and was classified as 95% rural. Natalie, like the majority of residents of this town, practiced a strong Baptist faith.

Many teachers influenced Natalie's feeling of success as a student. These teachers provided her with positive experiences with reading and writing. She valued these experiences, which she hoped to provide for her own students. When asked to explain why certain teachers stood out, she replied, "the good ones were more interested in their students."

Immediately after high school, she entered a large Midwestern University, hoping to pursue work in computer engineering. After a year she

"realized no way, couldn't do it. It's just not me, not what I want to do." She returned home and attended her state's namesake university, where she soon declared an education major with plans to be an English teacher.

Leila

Leila, Natalie's mentor teacher during student teaching, had taught for 28 years in the same school she had attended as a teenager. She had an established position in the school and the community, serving as chair of the English department and being a respected senior citizen of the faculty. She saw herself as a committed and student-centered teacher. Although she was just a few years from retirement, she valued her membership in a group of mentor teachers affiliated with Natalie's university and the rejuvenation that her involvement with this group brought her. She described how much she appreciated the ways in which her interactions with her student teachers caused her to reflect on her own teaching practices.

Settings

Teacher Education Program

The teacher education program at Natalie's university was one of the nation's largest. The English education program alone produced about 50 prospective teachers each year. During Natalie's senior year she was assigned to one of two cohorts served by the English education faculty. These prospective teachers spent considerable time in local classrooms taught by a field-based group of mentor teachers who met throughout the year with the university professors. By working with a stable group of mentor teachers with whom they met year-round—often with grant funding that provided a modest honorarium to the participating teachers—the university faculty members fostered a mutual exchange of ideas between classroom and campus.

Each student in the cohort was assigned to one of the mentor teachers for a semester of apprenticeship followed by a semester of student teaching. During the apprenticeship Natalie and the other students in the program spent 12 hours a week in a school with their mentor teachers. They then observed their mentor teachers throughout the semester, gradually participating in the teaching of students in preparation for a three-week practicum near the end of the semester.

The field experience in the fall was intertwined with three team-taught courses at the university. These courses covered young adult literature, teacher inquiry, and instructional planning and were team-taught in three four-hour blocks during the week. In the spring semester students took an

intensive reading course completed before student teaching and participated in a campus-based planning seminar during student teaching to allow the cohort members to share experiences.

The faculty's emphasis with this program structure was to provide a forum for their theme of *making connections*. This underlying philosophy stressed understanding students' interests and teaching toward those interests and suggested the need to make connections between the university program and the practice in the schools. The professors at the university used the extensive field experiences, the mentor teacher cohort, and the continued meetings of the teacher candidates throughout their student teaching as a way for campus-based students and faculty to stay connected to the teaching practice of schools. Students would then be able to make connections between the theory of their own course work and the classroom practice of the mentor teachers they observed.

Natalie's own reflection about the kind of teaching persona she wanted to develop matched the student-centered instruction of the university program (a note on transcription conventions: We use a dash to represent a pause and an ellipsis to represent eliminated text):

> I think to make it interesting to them you have to tie it to their lives and you have to—and to do that you have to know them and I don't think my teachers ever knew me or made the effort to really—the ones who were bad, the ones I don't remember or I didn't like, they—I don't know if they made the effort to get to know their students. I want to do that. I want to be that kind of teacher. I've always said I wanted to be a very big encourager and support them in their writing, support them in their efforts.

Student Teaching: Carter County High School

After beginning her apprenticeship with a teacher in an urban school, Natalie changed her placement to a rural school in a community similar to the one in which she had grown up. The school was the only high school in an agrarian county that also provided one middle school and five elementary schools. During her student teaching experience Natalie taught tenth-grade general students. Like most students from this community, the majority of her students had no plans to go on to college.

First Job: Flannery O'Connor Middle School

Natalie's first job was in a large suburban middle school in a district that was the state's largest and one of the nation's fastest growing. During the two years of Natalie's employment, the district was divided into 12 clusters, each of which included a high school and its feeder schools. In the four

years since Natalie began teaching there, the rapidly growing district has added two additional clusters, each with its own high school. Natalie taught in her cluster's only middle school.

The district has received widespread recognition for academic excellence, including a number of state and national awards and has adopted a kind of corporate approach to education. For example, in a letter written to district constituents in 2000, a school board member began by saying "you are stockholders in the [County] Public School System. Your [County] property taxes dedicated to the public school system qualify you for stockholder status." The letter continued: *"Moody's Investor's Service recently upgraded to AAA (Triple A) its bond rating for [County] Public Schools—the highest bond rating available"* (emphasis in original).

The county's corporate outlook was manifested in its emphasis on accountability. To ensure that students would not be granted what the district website calls "social promotion," the district developed an extensive curriculum, known as Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS), that was tied to "a results-based evaluation system." Tests, administered in 4th, 5th, 7th, and 8th grades, served as "gateways" to the following year of school; those who failed were required to repeat the grade. Additional tests in 10th and 11th grades determined whether a student graduated with a regular county diploma. Possibilities exist for retesting, summer school, and other alternatives for those who failed the test.

The curriculum, according to the district website, was aligned with a variety of standardized assessments, including the Stanford-9, SAT I, ACT, and the state-mandated Quality Core Curriculum standards, themselves aligned with the [State] High School Graduation Test and the Criterion Referenced Competency Tests. They thus encouraged teaching toward standardized test formats featuring multiple choice questions with specific answers.

Method

Data Collection

Natalie was one of seven students from her preservice cohort of 25 who volunteered to participate in the research. She provided an interview before both her student teaching and her first year of full-time teaching, the purpose of which was to elicit background information about her experiences and conceptions of teaching. During her semester of student teaching, Natalie then participated in three *observation cycles*, taking place in late February, late March, and mid-April. Each cycle consisted of a pre-observation interview, an observation of at least two classes that produced field

notes, and a post-observation interview.

The interviews followed the same protocol as that used with all participants in the cross-site research, which included universities in four states. (For more on the interview and protocol process, see Johnson et al., 2003.) Interviews also were conducted with Natalie's mentor teacher and university supervisor about the guidance they were providing for Natalie. During her first year of full-time teaching, Natalie participated in another three observation cycles.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Supplementary artifacts such as the district core curriculum and testing program also were included in this phase of the data collection. Additional artifacts from Natalie's university programs (e.g., course syllabi and program descriptions) and teaching settings (e.g., curriculum materials and mission statements) provided a third data source for the purpose of corroboration.

Another means of data collection were concept maps produced by the cohort of 7 participants before and after student teaching. The purpose of the concept map activities was for the participants to produce individual conceptions of their teacher education program's emphases and to then use those conceptions to produce a group concept map.

Finally, members of the research team e-mailed Natalie and maintained contact with her, both to verify their analysis and to gain insight into Natalie's career after the formal data collection period ended. During these conversations Natalie agreed to join the team as coauthor to provide her own insights into her experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were read and analyzed by Peter Smagorinsky and Steven Bickmore, using the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software to code each observation and interview. The interviews and field notes were analyzed to identify the pedagogical tools that were emphasized in the different settings of Natalie's university program and student teaching. (This coding system and the research design as a whole were originally developed by Pamela Grossman, Peter Smagorinsky, and Sheila Valencia for research conducted through CELA; for more on this process, please see Johnson et al., 2003.)

Results

In the following section, we outline the conceptions Natalie developed in the settings of the university program, her student teaching at Carter County High School, and her first job at O'Connor Middle School.

Influence of the University Program

The student-centered nature of Natalie's university program was revealed in the drawing of the two collaborative concept maps that the cohort of 7 participants produced before and after student teaching. What was striking about this group's concept maps was the way in which, on both occasions, the participants literally placed students at the center of their drawings, surrounded by words that represented the cultures in which they were immersed. The student-centered nature of these conceptions is noteworthy in contrast to the concept maps developed by participants in the research from other university programs we studied. Participants from the elementary education program from a different university, for instance, construed the task in terms of teachers, not students, placing the overarching concept of constructivism at the top of their drawing and listing pedagogical tools in a constructivist tool kit beneath it (see Smagorinsky et al., 2003). Natalie and her cohort members, however, interpreted the task in terms of who students are and what surrounds them.

The task called for each participant to produce an individual concept map, after which the group produced a single map that accounted for their various conceptions. Natalie summarized her individual map by saying, "The teacher program has taught me . . . to pay attention to your students and [the] need to make them the center of the classroom." When the participants produced their group map, they began with a group of students and above them drew a rainbow-like design, with each spectrum representing a key cultural influence: youth culture, the toolbox of teachers' resources, teachers themselves, administration, and culture marked by diversity. The decision to place students at the center of the drawing began about a third of the way through their discussion:

> **SHARON:** Most of us seem, you know—all of us, actually, seem to have focused around what we would use in the classroom. The classroom was the center, it seems, of everybody's. So wouldn't we want to make the classroom the center of our concept map?
>
> **STEFFI:** . . . Perhaps a student to represent the classroom student. . .
>
> **SHARON:** Okay, so student in the center?
>
> **STEFFI:** Student in the center—
>
> **SHARON:** Right. We all—anybody object to student in the center?
>
> **ABBIE:** We all endorse student in the center.
>
> **RANDY:** A student or more than one.

SHARON: I think I'd put more than one. I think I would put more than one because that's why we're looking at so many different tools—is because we're wanting to address more than one child. We're looking to meet the needs of—

ANNETTE: Well, I figure by putting the students in the middle we're putting everything that is student and student-oriented, in particular since we're putting multiple [students in the middle]. That's kind of the social interaction, what they're bringing into the classroom. They're the most important thing right in the middle. . . .

STEFFY: We could put everything around the middle feeding into the student, using arrows perhaps.

ABBIE: Yes.

STEFFY: All the things—like the students are in the center and all the tools that we would use to affect the student feed into the student. So you have arrows all into the student. . . .

The notion of student-centered instruction emerging from the group's discussion and drawing appeared to center on both individuals and diverse groups of students, and how teachers need to understand both young people and their cultures in order to provide appropriate instruction.

We interpret their second drawing, produced after student teaching, as even more student-centered. Natalie was not able to attend the second concept map activity, which was produced by four other participants in the study who drew a set of stick children surrounded by the large C within the word TEACHING, with the C filled in with influences from students' past, present, and future. In the students' past were their background/culture, family influence, prior ed[ucation], and health probs [problems]. In the students' present the participants listed part-time jobs, media, school et al., teachers, community, stereotypes/cliques, love/relationships, role models/mentors, health, extracurricular, current ed[ucation], friends, and culture. Spanning both present and future was the role of dependents, and in the future the participants wrote money, own family-new roles, job/college, culture, status, and a large question mark.

The conversation that produced this vision came after each participant had explained her individual concept map:

STEFFY: And I think that we all definitely focused on students and the influences that affect students and affect how we can try to reach them or teach them. . . .

ANNETTE: I think one thing that we all pretty much hit on, other than students, is the fact that we really realize how much the world impacts them, more than we realized [before student teaching]. . . .

JUDY: I agree. There seems to be like a big concern about what they're bringing into the classroom.

RESEARCHER: How would you draw that?

STEFFY: No idea.

JUDY: . . . . So do we want to make like the students the center there or the teacher? 'Cause we have that back and forth.

ABBIE: Philosophically I vote for the students.

JUDY: I would say the students.

UNKNOWN: I would say students.

Although Natalie did not participate in this session, she did attend seminars throughout the semester of student teaching with the other 24 teacher candidates in her cohort during which they discussed their experiences, successes, problems and solutions, lesson plans, philosophies, and other topics from their student teaching. We interpret the two concept maps as indicative of the emphasis on student-centered teaching in her teacher education program, even if the soft-spoken Natalie did not contribute heavily to the first discussion and was not able to attend the second.

Student Teaching: Carter County High School

During her student teaching Natalie worked under the mentorship of Leila, whom we have described as perhaps the least consonant of the university program's mentor teachers with the program's emphasis on student-centered teaching. We next provide examples of how Natalie negotiated Leila's mentorship during her year at Carter County High School, drawing on formal data from interviews and observations supplemented by informal conversations with both Natalie and Leila during the course of the research.

Leila's Mentorship

At a glance, Leila seemed completely out of synch with the university program's student-centered philosophy. For example, she had accumulated a wall full of file cabinets during her three decades of teaching that held innumerable worksheets, fixed-answer exams, and other teacher/text-centered pedagogical tools, all of which she freely encouraged Natalie to use in her teaching. Although the research design did not afford an exclusive look

at Leila's teaching, she was present in the classroom during most observations and very approachable for informal conversations about Natalie's teaching and other topics that availed themselves during site visits. These interactions revealed Leila's interest in both Natalie and the research and her willingness to talk about her teaching as part of the study. Her experience as part of the mentor teacher group suggested an ongoing interest in professional development, both her own and that of young teachers. Her curiosity about the research was therefore not surprising.

Natalie described a prominent feature of the classroom from which Leila drew the majority of her teaching ideas: "All those file cabinets in Leila's room . . . they're just jam-packed with stuff she's collected over 28 years." The contents of these file cabinets were much in evidence during Natalie's teaching, a consequence of Leila's generosity in sharing her instructional resources with her mentee. During Natalie's student teaching she used such worksheets as an exercise on "Using Modifiers" that included such items as a fill-in-the-blank section on sentence completion (e.g., "Graham crackers taste [delicious, deliciously] with a glass of cold milk") and a multiple choice section in which students chose the correct modifier for given sentences (e.g., "The jackal seems [ferociouser, more ferocious, ferociousest, most ferocious] than the hyena"). Natalie also used a worksheet from the file cabinet on *The Diary of Anne Frank* that consisted entirely of a series of correct-answer questions (e.g., When was Anne born? When did Anne and her family go into hiding? Where was the hiding place?). As described by Natalie, and as suggested by Leila's consistent recommendation that Natalie use such resources in her teaching, Leila appeared to employ what most observers would call a teacher-and-text-centered approach to teaching, both in her own instruction and in the guidance she provided to novice teachers.

Yet Leila described herself as nurturing toward her students. During an interview about her approach to teaching, she said:

> The students need to know, first of all, that I would not be here teaching if I did not care for them, that they are very important to me as human beings, first of all, and that I do care for them very much. And that's probably as much, as important as me trying to teach them subject [inaudible] or what's the plot of this story. And I try to convey that, I guess, in everything I do. It's changed over maybe the last ten years where I've put more emphasis on who they are more than I do on the subject material, simply because in 1990 we lost our teenage son in a car wreck. He was a senior here and that just really had a big effect on everything I do. That I want the students to enjoy and appreciate life. And I guess that comes through in my teaching. Because it did change a lot of things, how I looked at things.

Leila's great personal tragedy made her feel more attuned to the needs and life trajectories of her students. For Leila, being a student-centered teacher was not the same experience as that described by Cuban (1993), Moffett and Wagner (1992), and others who have published on the topic. Rather, it meant caring deeply for students and how their lives played out in this small town, the place in which Leila had spent most of her life as child, teenager, teacher, and citizen. Leila described her purposes for teaching English as

> To prepare the students for eleventh and twelfth grade, to get them ready for the [state] graduation test. But most of all is to get them to be able to go out into the world after they leave high school and have the skills they need as [inaudible] college, technical schools, but also for the students who may not necessarily go to school to be able to communicate effectively, be able to read and just to survive in the world.

She conceived this preparation, we infer, as skill-oriented, rather than directed to students' personal constructions of meaning, so as to prepare them for the kinds of lives she anticipated they would lead in and around this small, rural community. Observations and field notes from senior English classes at Carter County High School found many seniors discussing their plans for marriage in the summer following graduation, suggesting that Leila's concern for students for whom high school provided the final experience in formal education was well-grounded. We infer that Leila's sense of student-centered teaching was concerned with caring for students as individuals and helping to prepare them for entering the work force with the greatest array of life skills and personal qualities possible.

Leila's notion of being student-centered, however, departed radically from the conception that Natalie and her classmates learned at the university.

Leila's notion of being student-centered, however, departed radically from the conception that Natalie and her classmates learned at the university. Our observations revealed that she guided Natalie toward classroom processes and assessments that were highly restricted and text-based, allowing for little personal connection between life and classroom activities. Her great concern and care for her students, in other words, did not appear to translate into instruction that used students' lives as the basis of the curriculum, allowed for high levels of student activity, and so on, but rather provided students with concrete, measurable assignments that relied on their ability to complete tasks as expected.

For instance, in the following interview Natalie described lessons that Leila encouraged her to use from her bank of file cabinets:

NATALIE: She handed me a whole folder of like tests and quizzes for *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

Q: Wow.

NATALIE: And yeah, it's about two inches thick. And I really tried not to use those. She wanted me to resort to it, to the one I'm going to give tomorrow. And I didn't. I sat there for a long time and I was trying—I was going through and I was retyping it and I was going to use parts of it and then I was like, I'm not doing this, I'm not doing this. So I went back and came up with my own.

Q: Yeah. And have you—do you have to negotiate decisions like that with her?

NATALIE: Um-hum. I told her—well, I told her—I had told her, Okay, "I think I might just use this one." And then—but I said, "Leila, I just really think that some parts of it are just real tricky and just nit-picky." And some of it's true/false and I absolutely hate true/false questions. . . . And then after I sat there for about an hour in front of the computer I was like, "Leila, I'm not going to use this one. I think I'm just going to come up with [inaudible]."

Natalie's account of this exchange illustrates the kind of instructional mentoring that Leila appeared to provide: encouragement to use what Natalie termed "nit-picky" assessments of students' reading of literature. In this case Natalie resisted Leila's preference for a true-false exam. Next, we describe how Natalie incorporated what she believed to be student-centered activities into Leila's more teacher-and-text-centered classroom.

Natalie's Student-Centered Instruction

During our coding we sorted Natalie's pedagogical tools into three categories: student-centered, teacher/text-centered, and other. We decided how to classify each tool as student-centered or not based on whether it met at least some of the criteria we reviewed previously: students' lives serve as the basis of curriculum, the underlying emphasis is on student growth, students participate to a great extent, student activity is abundant, the curriculum is interdisciplinary and interactive, students engage in authentic learning, instruction is individualized, learning is multidirectional, and students have autonomy and authority. We did not require all criteria to be met for this classification for several reasons. One is that they represent an amalgamation of various perspectives on student-centered teaching, rather than being completely endorsed by all who discuss the construct. Another is that in

the context of Leila's mentorship, it was unlikely for Natalie to include all in any particular instructional activity.

Our identification of these categories of tools helped us to understand how Natalie conceptualized and practiced student-centered teaching, at least to the extent available in this setting. For instance, in the following excerpt she discussed her use of the tool of *symbol instruction* for a unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which we classified as student-centered. Prior to the class, Natalie described the activity as follows:

> They're going to be doing a symbols activity. We're talking about the sym-
> bols in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And they are—they're going to—we've al-
> ready read tomorrow the chapters where they find a lot of the things in
> the tree in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and a lot of those symbolize different
> things in the book, the objects in the tree. And we did an activity at [the
> university] that I'm actually taking this from, where you watch the begin-
> ning of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the intro to the film. And it has—it shows
> all these symbols in a box and they break into groups and they try to fig-
> ure—list all the symbols on there and then what the importance of each is.
> And then they're going to try to come up with their own personal symbols,
> symbols for themselves. And they'll have to come up with three and write
> a paragraph on each and why that symbolizes them.

We viewed this reference as a student-centered tool because it met several criteria: The small group format presumably allowed for student participation, activity, interaction, and authority; the task was open-ended and thus multidirectional and individualized; and the task was personal-ized and thus potentially allowed for student growth and authentic learn-ing. Natalie reinforced this notion when she said, "I really want it to be meaningful for themselves. I really try to talk about, you know, how they can relate to this because Scout is so much—her growing up and the things that she does are so much like our own growing up."

The next day Natalie began the 80-minute block class with a news segment on Channel 1, briefly reviewed a recent quiz, reviewed 5 vocabu-lary words on an overhead projector, had students do a worksheet from their *Elements of Literature* anthology series in which they made predictions of who or what would be the mockingbirds or mad dogs in *To Kill a Mocking-bird*, listened to a segment of the novel on an audiotape, and briefly dis-cussed their worksheet responses. Natalie then did the following:

> 9:17: Natalie puts the kids in groups, with each group's membership listed
> on an overhead. She tells them to pick a place and get in the groups—kids
> relocate and set up. Natalie says, there will be an activity and then some
> writing. She hands out the assignment. The kids appear to be unfamiliar

with group work—most don't rearrange their desks to face one another. Natalie said they would watch the title scene from the movie and that a lot of objects would be shown. Individually, they should list as many things as they can at the bottom of the symbol/film activity side of the handout—she'd show the film 2-3 times. Then we'll compare lists with other people in the group. She turns on the TV, plays the videotape, reminds them to listen for sounds on the videotape also. Plays through it once, then again. Kids are far more attentive to the videotape than to previous parts of the class, talk more about the text, show more animation and interest. With their involvement, Natalie seems a little more relaxed and conversational with them—the interactions in relation to the literary text were, in contrast, more formal and strained.

9:30: After the second showing, Natalie tells them to get in their groups and compare lists. Kids read their lists to one another, much more animated in voice and expression than in the first part of class. Natalie tells them which parts of the handout to do—identify the objects that appear later in the book.

9:37: Natalie says it's time to go over the questions together. The class is much more relaxed, Natalie more comfortable with the discussion. One group lists the objects that they saw in the box, students from other groups chime in. After listing the objects, she asks, what do the glasses say about Atticus? That he can't see, says one. Literal responses. She asks, does Atticus see things that others do not? He sees the reality of things. Natalie says, he foresees things that others don't. There are also objects that don't appear later in the story—jacks, marbles, crayons. What might they symbolize outside the novel? Kids struggle. Maybe childhood? says Natalie. There are white and black objects moving together. What might that mean? Kids again struggle—don't seem strong on identifying symbols. Maybe black and white people moving together, says Natalie. Do you think the opening was effective, now that you've read into the book? If you're really paying attention, said a kid. Very effective, says a kid. Why, asks Natalie? No answer. Natalie says, because it shows all of the important things that will happen—the mockingbird and the killing of it, other things.

9:47: We're running out of time, get the desks back in rows.

These field notes suggest the difficulty Natalie had in implementing what she felt was student-centered instruction. The students appeared to be enculturated to Leila's unambiguous approach to questions and answers. When given the open-ended opportunity to interpret literary symbols, the students struggled. In the face of students' difficulties, Natalie ended up offering her own interpretations of the symbols in this opening segment of the film. Accustomed to Leila's emphasis on factual understandings of literary works, the students had trouble thinking figuratively.

Summary

Natalie's effort to include a student-centered approach to *To Kill a Mockingbird* within Leila's restrictions typified the manner in which she incorporated student-centered instruction into prescribed instruction. Natalie felt that simple recitation of facts about the reading was not sufficient, even if recitation met the expectations for teachers and students in her school settings. She attempted to meet the institutional goals while at the same time developing activities through which she hoped that students would make personal connections to their reading.

Within Leila's mentorship she often had to accommodate her own goals for teaching with Leila's more literal approach: "I really just want them to enjoy the book and I don't think that can be done with all the quizzes that I'm having to give and the nit-picky details that they're having to

> **Natalie's open-ended, student-centered approach to teaching literature, then, might have been mismatched with the students' orientation to reading and expectations for appropriate classroom practice.**

remember." Yet as our fieldnotes suggest, her students appeared to have learned to follow the patterns established with Leila's restricted approach. Classroom observations and fieldnotes recorded a number of students declaring evangelical Christian beliefs, which Heath (1983) has associated with literal readings of texts in school. Natalie's open-ended, student-centered approach to teaching literature, then, might have been mismatched with the students' orientation to reading and expectations for appropriate classroom practice.

First Job: Flannery O'Connor Middle School

Natalie's first job was at Flannery O'Connor Middle School, one of 17 middle schools in one of the state's largest school districts. In our analysis of the observations and interviews from Natalie's first year at O'Connor, we identified the central tension she faced as being between the university's version of student-centered teaching and the district's mandate for achievement via a county-wide, test-driven curriculum, an accountability system compatible with the school's corporate identity within the community.

Our analysis suggests that Natalie's opportunities for using a student-centered approach declined when she moved from CCHS to O'Connor. Our observations of and interviews with Natalie suggest that the reason for this decline was that in the large school district of which O'Connor was a part, the type of skills-oriented curriculum favored by Leila had been institution-

alized through district mandates. The district website reports that "The [Academic Knowledge and Skills] are the standards for academic excellence for all students in [the County] Public Schools. They are what teachers are to teach and students are to learn. In every [County] classroom, instruction and assessment are tailored so that all students learn the AKS." This curriculum was tied to high-stakes assessments that determined a student's promotion to the next grade, overriding grades achieved in course work and ensuring, in the eyes of the district, that students would not benefit from social promotion. This interdependent relationship between curriculum and assessment was developed, according to the district website, in response to the district mission "*to pursue excellence in academic knowledge, skills, and behavior for each student resulting in measured improvement against local, national, and world-class standards*" (emphasis in original).

The pervasive nature of the curriculum made it difficult to negotiate, particularly for vulnerable early-career teachers such as Natalie. When Natalie disagreed with Leila on issues such as using true-false tests for assessment, she could discuss this disagreement personally with Leila and perhaps reach a compromise solution. The district that housed O'Connor MS, however, was less personal, controlled by a large bureaucracy, and administered by people invested in promoting the AKS and gateway exam system as a central means of validating the district's status among the state's elite school systems. As such, the curriculum's required objectives and assessments were virtually impervious to negotiation for the district's young, untenured teachers. The district's whole-hearted commitment to this curriculum and assessment system also provided a means by which administrators' and teachers' competence could be compared, creating consuming pressures for teachers to teach to the gateway tests.

Within this setting Natalie attempted to teach according to principles of student-centered instruction. According to the district's website, "Because the AKS detail exactly what a child is expected to learn, teachers can tailor the classroom experience to meet a child's individual needs." Natalie found this match between meeting the requirements of the AKS and engaging in student-centered instruction to be difficult to achieve in her teaching of eighth-graders facing the gateway writing test in the spring, the failure of which would deny their promotion to high school. We next review how this fundamental tension affected her teaching as observed during the three observation cycles conducted in October, December, and March of Natalie's first year at O'Connor.

Observation Cycle #1

On the first day of the first observation cycle, Natalie began with a Daily Oral Language (D.O.L.) lesson during which students corrected badly written passages on the chalkboard. The passages contained specific types of errors, such as capitalization and punctuation. She then led students through two discrete lessons. First, she led the class in a review of an analogy worksheet. Analogies were among the AKS objectives and, as Natalie said, "Every standardized test I've ever taken has had analogies on it. . . . That's the main reason that I'm covering those so heavily." She next conducted a vocabulary lesson in which students presented vocabulary words and their definitions to the class. Natalie identified the words used in the vocabulary lesson as "SAT words." During class she listed on the board the requirements for the vocabulary presentation and gave the point value for each evaluative category: the word, its part of speech, its definition, an illustration and explanation, the word used correctly in a sentence, the presentation, and neatness.

On the second day, following the D.O.L. lesson the students read aloud stories they had written in response to prompts Natalie had provided (e.g., a first kiss, being shrunk to an inch tall, getting caught passing notes, coming in after curfew, a time they really felt fear); the stories could be truth or fiction. Writing stories was one of the forms specified in the AKS, as explained by Natalie when describing a set of posters she had bought for her classroom walls: "They've got *Writing To Tell A Story*, they've got *Research* and *Writing to Inform* and *Writing to Persuade*, which are all the [County] AKS. That's all the writing that we're going to cover this year."

During this observation cycle Natalie focused all of her instruction on meeting AKS requirements. The D.O.L., analogy worksheets, and vocabulary presentations were designed to inculcate the knowledge students were expected to demonstrate in language competencies on the gateway tests; the essay writing was geared toward the eighth-grade writing test. Some AKS requirements, such as making presentations, were not amenable to multiple-choice testing, but were incorporated into the lessons as a way to dovetail the requirements in Natalie's instruction.

In these observations we see some efforts to connect the lessons to students' lives. The vocabulary presentations, while developed in response to strict grading criteria, at times prompted laughter from the students in the class as presenters came up with amusing ways to illustrate their words. The writing topics, while often fantastical, potentially enabled students to write about real or fictional events of importance to them, or play out fantasies such as, according to the field notes, a boy's story "about the first time

he felt fear. His story is about when he did something wrong in Natalie's class. He threw a stink bomb, and he writes about how he got in trouble at school and at home." These efforts were severely constrained by the mandate of the AKS curriculum, but still provided opportunities for activity, creativity, and personal connections.

Observation Cycle #2

Natalie began the first class of the second observation cycle with a D.O.L. lesson, then led the students through another analogy sheet. The remainder of the class was dedicated to small group preparation of vocabulary projects to be presented in class the next day. Each group had a particular sentence formation (simple, compound, compound/complex, etc.) that they would teach to the class on the following day. The presentations included examples of the particular kind of sentence featured (e.g., simple subject and simple predicate) and a test or quiz (often in the form of a worksheet).

On the second day students began with a D.O.L. lesson, then made their presentations. For homework they were assigned an analogy worksheet and studying for a spelling quiz. A typical presentation went as follows:

> Two students go to the front of the room to present their project. One of the students holds the poster and the other talks. They tell the class to be sure to write down what they are saying. They had also passed out an outline for the class which had a place for the class to write down all of the notes. Natalie reminds the class to remember their job in taking notes. Their presentation is on simple subject and simple predicate. . . . The presenters have also made a worksheet so that the class can practice on finding the simple subject and simple predicate. The class has to raise their hands if they have a question. The students seem to be enjoying (as well as finding it a little humorous) playing the role of teacher, and in being students for their classmates as teacher. They play their roles quite well. . . . The students ask if everyone is finished. They tell them they are going to go over the worksheet. They go over the worksheet, and Natalie has to help out with clarification a couple of times. The students finish and the class applauds.

When asked about this activity in the post-observation interview, Natalie said that she emphasized it as

> a student hands-on activity, I guess, and getting involved with it and making it their own project and just having it be their own. And, of course, I've taught [in order to] emphasize sentences. That's the major grammar concept. And the reason for that is to try to help them score better with—sentence formation is one of the areas that they score on that writing test they have to pass. So I wanted to go over it with them so that's one reason

we hit on it. And I just wanted to basically have them active and up and doing something.

Again we see the accommodation Natalie made between meeting the requirements of the curriculum and trying to make her instruction student-centered. Later in the interview Natalie identified three main purposes for her instruction: teaching students "to take responsibility for their own actions and for their work . . . preparing them for college. . . . And then, of course, I'm pushed by the AKS concepts, too, or those objectives." Students did appear to have opportunities for playful engagement during the vocabulary presentations; at the same time, this play was constrained by the teacherly accoutrements of the worksheet and quiz that they developed as part of their presentations.

Observation Cycle #3

For observation cycle #3 Natalie did not begin with a D.O.L. lesson, instead leading the class through a review of homework questions on Dorothy M. Johnson's "Too Soon a Woman," a story about pioneer life on the Oregon Trail. Natalie posed additional questions about the story and questions about the students' lives in relation to the difficulties faced by the pioneer women. Following this discussion the students did peer edits on persuasive essays, with at least three students proofreading each paper for spelling and grammar mistakes. The students had begun the essays several weeks before, first with drafting, then library research for factual support of claims, then revisions based on informal conferencing with Natalie.

On the second day of observations, the students worked individually on revisions of these papers, relying on the peer critiques. During class Natalie circulated and conducted conferences with individual students. On the board she had provided laminated sheets with AKS objectives: "AKS #26—edit for spelling, fragments, and run-on sentences, AKS #35—write to persuade classmates of an opinion, AKS #39—write, combine and vary sentences to match purposes and audience." These sheets helped to provide the criteria by which Natalie would grade the papers.

The classes observed during this observation cycle were illuminating in that Natalie described them as being part of a "writing workshop." Atwell (1987) has described this approach as one that "invites and supports writing process. . . . Writers need Giacobbe's three basics of time, ownership, and response" (p. 54). Natalie's instruction included response from both peers and teacher. The time factor, however, was compromised by the pace of the curriculum demands. Following the observation, Natalie described this con-

straint as coming both from students' enculturation to the pacing of school and her own eye on the ticking of the semester's clock:

> The first question out of their mouth [is], When is this due? And they don't want to take the time to sit down and work at it and really draft their writing and work on their writing. . . . Some days I'm not careful and I'll just sit there and I find myself just giving them some of the answers when I know I shouldn't be. And sometimes that's for time's sake because I feel like I'm having to rush to get through all their papers and read all their papers. And when I really want to spend longer on it. But then we just don't have the time.

Furthermore, her focus of the workshop ended up attending to the AKS objectives more than students' meaning-making, raising questions about the degree to which the workshop arrangement contributed to students' sense of ownership over their writing. Natalie described her evaluation of students' writing during the writing workshop as follows:

> I'm going to go over the five areas, the content organization and style and mechanics and usage and sentence formation. And we're going to talk about all those. And then I might save sentence formation, talk about it last because then I will—after we do the parts of speech I'm going to go into sentences and putting together sentences and subject and predicate and all that. Verbs. [inaudible] verbs and parts of speech. . . . I've tried to set up my scoring scale and the way I've weighted it similar to the writing test. And we've gone over the areas that they look for, that they score under. Content organization, mechanics, usage, sentence formation, and style.

We would classify these five assessment areas as being oriented to form rather than meaning. We see Natalie's implementation of a writing workshop format as perhaps the clearest disjunction between her student-oriented values and the pressures of the curriculum mandates and assessment system. Faced with an extensive set of curriculum objectives to cover, she attempted to teach them in the context of methods such as writing workshop that she'd learned at the university that, at least theoretically, would help students make connections with their schooling. The imperative to assess form and mechanics, however, tilted the writing workshop's emphasis away from the student-oriented qualities prized by its advocates and toward the sort of "nit-picky" details that Natalie had found so objectionable under Leila's tutelage.

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Summary

Throughout these observations we found Natalie attempting instruction—presentations, group work, projects, writing workshop—that are customarily regarded as tools in the student-centered teacher's toolkit. Undoubtedly it would have been easier for Natalie to have used worksheets exclusively to meet these objectives and to have reduced student activity to cover the curriculum more efficiently. Natalie's experiences under the mentorship of Leila provided a model for how to teach in such a way. However, she worked to develop activities that included many facets of what we have reviewed as student-centered instruction; e.g., high levels of student participation and activity and opportunities for students to draw on personal knowledge. In her own view, however, this hybrid approach provided for less robust instruction than would have been available without the imperative of the curriculum's objectives. The heavy focus on form and mechanics and degree of coverage expected resulted in a pace and emphasis that, Natalie felt, made it difficult for her to reach her own teaching goals. At the beginning of the next school year, Natalie wrote to one of the researchers,

> I don't like what appears to be the future of education, middle school education in particular, either. I don't believe in single tests that claim to determine a child's performance and improvement over an entire year. I don't believe my salary should be determined by that single test. . . . I already don't have enough hours in a day to do the things I am required and need to do.

This dilemma caused Natalie to leave O'Connor after her second year, providing a hiatus from teaching that ended when she began a new job at a rural school that provided a better match for her backgrounds and beliefs.

Discussion

> The transition from teacher training to the first teaching job could be a dramatic and traumatic one. In the English and German literature this transition is often referred to as the "reality shock," "transition shock," "Praxisschock," or "Reinwascheffekt." In general, this concept is used to indicate the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life. . . . reality shock deals with the assimilation of a complex reality which forces itself incessantly upon the beginning teacher, day in and day out. This reality must be mastered continually, especially in the first period of actual teaching. (Veenman, 1984, pp. 143-144)

Natalie's praxis shock concerned the problem of having to teach within a prescribed curriculum, first under Leila's mentorship and then within

the district curriculum and assessment mandate of the county of which O'Connor Middle School was a part. This shock reverberated throughout her student teaching and first two years at O'Connor, though for different reasons. In the small, rural, working class community in which she did her student teaching, this shock was muffled because the district did not super-impose on teachers a prescriptive curriculum or testing mandate. Rather, the shock came in transaction with Leila's personal belief in the efficacy of rote tasks as a means of preparing students for the world that she believed awaited them after graduation. If, as Lave, Murtaugh, and de la Rosa (1984) argue, contexts are relationships rather than static environments, Natalie's relationship with Leila enabled her a degree of freedom to enact student-centered teaching in ways that likely included Leila's notion of care yet also tried to re-enculturate students to viewing education as a means to personal growth.

At O'Connor MS this relationship was, for Natalie, less transactional and more impositional. The county's corporate identity led to a view of ac-countability that required continual testing of students according to pre-determined skills amenable to measurement through either standardized tests or writing assessments that focused exclusively on issues of form. Such an emphasis provided neither Natalie nor her students with much opportu-nity for play, a dimension of growth that Vygotsky (1987) among others has argued is central to a person's ability to stretch the upper limits of learning potential. As her instruction through such means as vocabulary presenta-tions reveals, she attempted to include playful opportunities within the re-strictions of the AKS curriculum. Such play was limited, however, by her concurrent effort to meet the district's standards for correctness. Further-more, Natalie was engaged in a curricular conversation (Applebee, 1996) that attended to students primarily in terms of achievement and not the range of other possibilities afforded by a student-centered pedagogy. This discourse of assessment, strongly suggested by the district curriculum and testing system, surrounded Natalie during her formative teaching experi-ences and imposed on her what she felt was a narrow way of construing students and their experiences in school.

One of the external reviewers enlisted by *English Education* for this article pointed to the ways in which the context of schooling works against the likelihood of teachers' developing and implementing a conception of student-centered teaching, saying that

> A big part of the problem—perhaps the root of the problem—lies in the conventional (and, I would argue, problematic) way both Leila and Natalie understand English as a discipline and its purpose in the secondary school

curriculum. I would argue that genuine student-centered pedagogies in English require a substantive rethinking of the discipline itself so that young teachers like Natalie do not simply try to deliver the same old English curriculum in a different ("student-centered") way. . . . The conventional way in which English teachers understand their discipline, regardless of overt curricular restrictions, may be the biggest obstacle to implementing genuinely student-centered pedagogies. . . . It may well be that such limitations make it virtually impossible for a teacher like Natalie to imagine alternative ways of conceptualizing English studies, much less to implement progressive pedagogies.

We found these comments provocative and worthy of quoting in our final consideration of Natalie's early-career development of a conception of teaching. When we introduced the notion of student-centered teaching at the outset, we cautioned that our sources did not share the same conception; that while there is general consensus on major points, each conception varies slightly. We have found that conceptions that guide and inform teaching are often disputed by their various adherents. Such notions, for instance, as *constructivism* are constructed differently, depending on the perspective of the stakeholder (Cook et al., 2002; Smagorinsky et al., 2003). We see student-centered teaching as being similarly open to interpretation, including such seemingly authoritarian conceptions as that held by Leila. It is difficult from this perspective to identify what is a "genuinely student-centered" pedagogy, given that different conceptions have been offered. Whether a set of practices is student-centered or not depends on how the construct is defined, based on one's pedagogical ideology.

Our reviewer's vision would require a wholesale reconceptualization of schooling overall and the English curriculum and traditions for teaching it particularly. As Ackerman (1993) has argued, such broader reconceputalization is necessary in order for any major shift in educational practice. For vulnerable early-career teachers such as Natalie, changing a school district's overall mission is an unrealistic goal. For Natalie, the instructional practices she employed at Carter County High School and O'Connor Middle School were, to the greatest extent possible in these settings, student-centered, even if they were compromised by the mentorship provided by Leila and the institutional goals of the corporate district that included O'Connor. As our reviewer notes, instructional contexts such as the ones in which Natalie taught affect the ways in which a teacher may define and implement the concept. When the curriculum is highly restrictive, it limits the imaginative work and play opportunities that would be necessary in order to conceive of alternatives to the traditional practices of schooling.

We see Natalie's growth as a teacher affected by the strict requirements of the curriculum: With limited opportunity to engage in playful experimentation with her teaching, and ultimately frustrated by the district's emphasis on form and the invasiveness of the testing, she left her job and temporarily left the profession. She ultimately returned after one year to a new district in a relatively impoverished community that reminded her in many ways of the town in which she had been raised. While many graduates of her program sought employment in districts such as the one in which O'Connor was located—with high salaries, ample resources, a curriculum that reduced demands for instructional planning, and other amenities—Natalie found its dedication to a corporate structure inhibited her efforts to teach in a student-centered manner. She instead found her professional home in the small district where she could establish the kinds of strong relationships she found in Leila's class and accompany them with the teaching practices in which she believed.

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Natalie's Epilogue

I taught two years at O'Connor Middle School and I was pretty much miserable the whole time. I felt very out of my element and not comfortable with what I was doing at all. I was very used to being successful at most things I attempted, and I just never could feel as if I was doing a good job teaching. Most days I felt like a total failure. I was terrified that my students weren't going to learn anything to take with them to high school, and that once they got there someone was going to let out my secret; I was nothing but a phony! I usually felt as if I was playing a role I was not prepared for and hoping no one would figure that out. I felt very isolated.

Some of this may have been due to the fact that I was newly married and living in a new city, so I was without the support network of my parents and old friends. I made sure when I started my current job that I sought out my mentor, and I can't say what a difference it has made. She is an endless supply of ideas and is becoming a very close friend. She has been the person I needed in my life to make me believe I can do this. And, most important, she cares more about the students than any other teacher I have met.

Back to my first two years. I said earlier that I was overwhelmed with planning, and I was. I had no idea where to begin. [The first county I taught in] has their own curriculum in addition to the state's QCC [Quality Core Curriculum]. It combines QCC objectives and standardized test objectives. I was supposed to teach the reading *and* language art curriculum in one daily 50-minute class period. It was an insane amount of material to cover. I have learned since coming to [my current county school system] that it would actually take something like 25 years to teach [the state's] curriculum! And in [my current] County they have categorized the state's curriculum into essential, important, and minimal strands. They have done what I could not do for myself during my first two years teaching. It was just too much to wade through. Especially considering I was supposed to spend even more time preparing my students for the high stakes writing test in the spring and a battery of other standardized tests, the CRCT, ITBS test, Stanford Achievement tests, etc. In [the] County where I currently teach, we only prepare for one standardized test, the CRCT, [the] state mandated standardized test. I still feel sometimes that I am teaching to the test, but I feel much more organized. I still wonder if the students are learning, and many times I think they are not. But I have also learned some new techniques to try and will continue trying until I figure it out, which is a big step from throwing in the towel and quitting.

In [the first county I taught in] I felt that no one was giving me those strategies to try. I felt that my planning time was eaten up with *useless*, I can't stress that enough, meetings. I never got the information I really needed. I got lectures on how to use cartoons in the classroom and what to do in a fire drill. And I resented that. I know we often had meetings or staff development courses four out of the five days a week. Thank goodness my current administrators work to protect our planning time! And because we prepare for fewer standardized tests I feel as though I actually have time in my classes to try the new strategies I've been given. I feel as though I actually have time to practice being a teacher, to become good at what I've chosen to do.

I am also happier now because I am in a school system that is much more like the one I attended growing up. It is much more rural. The students are much more grateful and respectful and appreciative. I have had nothing but support from my parents, and this is another tremendous difference from my first two years teaching where I felt as if every decision I made was being criticized. I never felt as though I did anything right. I had a parent call me a child predator which is so far from the truth that it brought me to tears. I entered this profession because I love students. I love their

energy and enthusiasm. I usually felt as though I was killing both of these things during my first two years. In the name of learning and discipline I found myself saying crazy, and maybe even ugly, things at times. It was almost like an out of body experience. I would look down on myself and think, "I can't believe I just did (or said) that!! I don't really feel that way! Do I?"

I still am not sure where I stand as far as students' learning goes. Sometimes I still may be guilty of caring too much about trying to prepare them for tests and not enough about their actually learning the material. Most days it is easier and less stressful for me to just go with the "test prep" approach. It requires less energy and thinking, and I'm as guilty of not wanting to think as my students on some days. I think I am lucky because I am part of a system that is trying not only to help us prepare students for the standardized tests of the system but also trying to help us learn how to teach students so that they retain information and their learning becomes meaningful. My current administration is helping to keep me from getting too lazy and pushing me to remember what is truly important.

Authors' Note

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