

Alignment and Convergence for What? And How? Tensions of Writing Instruction Within a Test-Based Accountability System

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Abstract: Alignment between standards, instruction, and assessments is typically portrayed as an ideal system of education that is often thwarted by political and logistical obstacles. I present a case where a State system was well-aligned around text-based writing instruction. Teachers also had common understandings of the policies and aligned their goals for instruction. However, whether this was a successful system depends on the learning theory used to evaluate it. The coherent and tightly aligned system is a “success” within a behaviorist or cognitivist frame, but in tension with sociocultural theories: both in *what* was emphasized and lost and *how* alignment and convergence occurred. High-stakes tests were the lynchpin of alignment, which created institutional pressures for teachers to acculturate their writing instruction to test-based goals. As a result, educational discourse narrowed and converged, but at the expense of engaging with the sociopolitical, epistemic, ethical, and cultural aspects of literacy.

Introduction and overview

Imagine a place where state standards, state assessments, districts’ curricula, and teachers’ writing instruction are all aligned. Teachers iterate a common understanding of what skills are important and the ways in which they teach them to students. Standards, state assessments, and instruction all focus on important writing skills like formulating claims and defending them with text-based evidence. Though teachers and other practitioners remain street-level bureaucrats (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), the policy alignment across different levels of the system and a mandated standards-based curricula minimize differences in teacher instruction. Similarly, there is minimal need for principals and teachers to craft coherence (Honig & Hatch, 2004) at the school-level because all policies are aligned in their focus. Is this the ideal, utopian educational system? The answer depends on one’s values and theories of learning. In the well-aligned State context within this study, I explain that the *what* and the *how* of alignment mattered because they revealed long-standing tensions between theories of learning. I argue that while the coherent and tightly aligned system is a “success” within a behaviorist or cognitivist frame, it is in tension with the purposes and values of sociocultural theories of learning and literacy.

While writing instruction has potential for sociocultural learning, one clear tension in the context studied is the State’s use of a test-based accountability system to assess writing. The logic of test-based accountability has its origins in behaviorist learning theories from the early twentieth century. One shortcoming of behaviorist frameworks is their overly simplistic understanding of the processes and motivations that lead to learning. This can be seen in the logic of high-stakes tests, where achievement scores on tests are both (falsely) equivocated with learning and used as a means to reward or sanction students, teachers, schools, and/or districts. This promotes a technical, “objective,” and “neutral” understanding of learning and literacy (Baird et al., 2017). Sociocultural/political approaches, on the other hand, recognize the subjective and contextual importance of writing and literacy. In a sociocultural frame, “the task of writing is ultimately rooted in a writer’s sociocultural background and the current sociocultural context in which the writer is creating text” (Behizadeh, 2014, p. 3). In this framework, writing is an empowering practice that helps students develop their identities and sociopolitical awareness (Kinloch, 2009; Perry, 2012). However, the behaviorist rewards and sanctions of the State test may undermine these approaches to writing instruction.

Using interviews, surveys, and instructional artifacts from five teachers across the State, I examined how teachers discussed their goals, rationales for decision making, and school context. I sought to understand whether and how teachers’ contexts and instruction were aligned or in tension with the State accountability policies and sociocultural theories. Teachers expressed surprisingly little resistance to accountability logics and discourse and predominantly described their goals in ways that aligned with test outcomes: improving the tested writing skills and improving test achievement. More problematic is that many teachers seemed to have difficulty engaging in discourse related to aims and broader purposes for education, even when prompted. I hypothesize that teachers’ goals and instruction converged towards test-based outcomes because the state policy alignment was grounded in behaviorist norms and logics of compliance. This limited opportunities for divergent discourse and professional learning.

Across all five cases, alignment was grounded in a test-based accountability system, which led ELA instruction and learning to be conceptualized as technical, objective, and neutral practices. As a result, the sociopolitical, epistemic, ethical, and cultural dimensions of instruction and learning were obscured. This is

problematic not only because it limits the scope of student learning, but *how* teachers engaged with their work. The implicit behaviorist theories and assumptions that undergird the State test and policy alignment limited opportunities for teacher learning, and reduced their ability to develop aims and practices that center issues of justice and support culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012). Engaging with these dimensions of literacy and learning are necessary to address historical structural inequalities like the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Without centering commitments to justice--an aim that is not technical, objective, or neutral--in policies and pedagogy, issues of justice will be peripheralized, which further perpetuates the unjust status quo (Philip et al., 2019).

Theoretical and methodological approach

This study is a qualitative case study and critical policy analysis of one State context. The five teacher participants were fourth, fifth, and sixth grade ELA teachers who were already participating in a study about student writing and were willing to do additional interviews for compensation. All five teachers were women, with one woman identifying as Black and the other four women identifying as white. The teachers' years of experience ranged from three to nine years. They worked in five different Title I schools and four different districts within one southern U.S. state. The State mandated that all districts and schools use standardized ELA curricula that aligned with the end-of-year state test. The ELA standards, curricula, and State test all emphasized text-based writing.

Teachers completed surveys about their writing instruction at the beginning and end of the year. They also submitted six classroom writing assignments during the school year. However, the primary data source for this study is a set of two 60-90 minute semi-structured interviews done at the end of the year. During the first interviews, I asked teachers about their teaching context, year-long goals for students, and rationales and motivation for instructional decisions. To discuss these topics more concretely, teachers selected one of their writing assignments with samples of student work to discuss. In the second interview, I provided teachers with two text-based writing tasks to discuss, so I could more directly compare how teachers made meaning out of writing tasks and their rationales for instruction. While both tasks were about oil pipelines, one was informational and one was controversial. The latter was a departure from the "neutral" topics within the State mandated curricula and discussed the Sioux nations' protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL task). Since the oil industry has a major presence in the State, I thought how teachers responded to the potential controversy could highlight the tensions between behaviorist and sociocultural/political pedagogies. For instance, I wondered whether teachers would interpret the DAPL task as presenting authentic opportunities for discussion and writing (a sociocultural/political view) or as potentially creating conflicts that distract from the technical aspects of writing (a more behaviorist view).

One way I captured these tensions in coding was by distinguishing between aims and outcomes. Hess & McAvoy (2015) describe *aims* as the non-neutral "purposes and values that undergird the project of schooling" (p. 76). Aims are often grounded in democratic ideals including equality, autonomy, and political engagement. Meanwhile, *outcome*- or content-based goals are observable skills, information, and behaviors that can be assessed and measured. While aims often inform desired outcomes, outcome-based goals need not be related to broader aims. This is particularly true in the case of test-based accountability systems where ontologies, axiologies, and epistemologies of education are often grounded in individualized and "objective" measurements on a narrow set of test-based outcomes (Au, 2011; Ewing, 2018; Tuck, 2012). In the accountability framework, (democratic) aims are rarely emphasized or discussed in educational policy and practice. Two other sets of codes attended to teachers' motivations for instructional decisions and descriptions of their teaching context to understand their alignment or tension with teachers' goals. When possible, I triangulated the descriptions and patterns from interviews with survey data and instructional artifacts.

Findings: Mandated convergence and acculturation to test-related outcomes

Teachers overwhelmingly discussed their goals and instructional decisions in relation to outcomes, rather than aims. Outcome-based goals were usually attached to test-based skills and achievement. All five teachers explicitly stated goals that related to the text-based writing skills on the State test (e.g., creating claims that are supported with relevant evidence). Motivations and rationales for these writing outcomes were often explicitly connected to the content and focus of the State test. For example, when I asked Kylie (pseudonym) for two or three year-long goals she had for her students, she responded: "Well the text-based writing for sure because it's something that for ELA that we do so much and that's like the main focus in testing." Four of the five teachers generally struggled to engage with aims and rationales for instruction that were detached from the assumptions and values of test-based accountability frameworks, even when prompted. For instance, Christina discusses the importance of writing instruction in terms of its utility in future school assessments, even when asked to think outside of the testing and schooling frame:

Interviewer: Of course doing well on the tests is big...but I also wonder...do you think in a bigger picture that organization and critical thinking [her year-long goals] are meaningful in some way outside of the testing or school life?

Christina: I think so. I definitely think so. I do think for anything 'cause even when I went to grad school and I was working on my Master's, I used [a writing mnemonic from the curriculum]. That is how I organized my ten-page paper. Even after I did it I came back and I showed my kids. Even though I'm in grad school, this is how I write. I write the same way I'm teaching you to write...I made an A on it so obviously there has to be some value to having organization in your writing. The way the world is, everything is a test. Everything is a test. I think it's very valuable and meaningful for them outside of standardized tests.

While all teachers had test-related goals, the extent to which teachers prioritized and discussed test outcomes did vary. For instance, one teacher also expressed aims throughout both interviews and two additional teachers discussed aims in the second interview. Teacher aims included helping students become media-literate citizens and actively considering other people's perspectives.

Teachers' descriptions of their school contexts suggest that their convergence around test-related writing outcomes may be due to policy mandates and institutional pressures rather than an authentic process of consensus building. Teacher interview and survey data both describe alignment between State's accountability policies, district curriculum mandates, and school priorities. All five teachers--despite being in 5 different schools and 4 different districts--explained how they were mandated to use district-mandated units from a State-mandated curriculum. Similarly, when teachers submitted six text-based writing assignments throughout the year, all tasks were from the mandated curricula and almost all were branded with the State test logo and/or graded with the State writing rubrics. Teachers also consistently describe the high-stakes nature of the test as an instructional motivation. When asked about what her school's goals are, Corrie explains: "Everything you're working on is towards that [State] test...Our student learning targets, which we get our bonuses off of, that's what they look at as far as did you meet your student learning target this year? They're based on [State test] so it's very, very high stakes."

The inflexibility of the curriculum mandates and the expectation of teacher compliance manifested in both interviews. When I asked Christina about how reflection helps her make instructional adjustments, she explains how this was constrained by the curriculum: "our curriculum...a few years ago I used to be able to supplement a lot of things, but now that we have these [new] guidebooks, they do not want us to supplement in a whole lot of things." In the second interview, where I had teachers compare two writing tasks, the subtext was that selecting writing tasks was not a form of professional judgment teachers were usually able to exercise. Katie explains: "I really don't have much choice. We follow that [mandated] curriculum and they lay out the units." Given these constraints, it is not surprising that all five teachers primarily evaluated tasks based on how well they aligned with writing tasks on the State test. While four of the five teachers preferred the DAPL task, this was often despite its sociopolitical, epistemic, ethical, and cultural potentials, not because of them. When teachers recognized the DAPL task's tensions with the "neutral" and "objective" stance of the mandated curriculum, teachers were unsure how to weigh these values against each other. In a particularly telling case, Corrie explained that while she believed the DAPL task would promote more interesting discussion and writing, she:

would steer clear of it just because of the culture I live in and you don't think 11-year-olds have an opinion, but they do because of their parents, so...that's not a text I would teach because of that. Which is sad because it really could get you thinking which side that you lean towards and why.

Conclusion and implications

While this is a small-scale case study of a particular State context, its tightly controlled mandates around test-based writing outcomes and the policy alignment across different levels of the system epitomize the logic of test-based accountability systems and behaviorist learning theories that continue to predominate in educational policy. The policies and structures of the State's educational system prioritized teacher compliance and a technical view of teaching and curricula. This alignment and its implicit ideologies obscure the sociopolitical, epistemic, ethical, and cultural dimensions of writing and literacy. The focus on test outcomes not only narrows *what* learning occurs but *how* teachers discuss and understand their work.

Many states are working to improve teaching and teacher learning as a means to improve student learning. However, high-stakes test-based accountability policies likely undermine these goals by promoting structures and discourses that create constrained and anemic professional learning spaces for teachers. It limits opportunities for teachers to engage with the broader aims, meanings, and dilemmas of teaching and learning. As a result, State policies that seek to improve “teacher learning” while also engaging in a high-stakes test-based accountability system are likely to mandate convergence around behaviorist pedagogies regardless of what specific concepts are being tested. In the interim of these policy tensions being addressed, teacher education programs of pre- and in-service teachers should engage in dialogue that allows teachers to both identify tensions in their teaching context and help them develop strategies to negotiate them. Such dialogue should help teachers recognize that test-based outcomes and skills alone are insufficient groundings for their work; that they also need aims and pedagogy grounded in commitments to social equality, resisting injustices, culturally sustaining practices, and student empowerment if their instruction aims to interrupt, rather than perpetuate and reproduce, educational inequities.

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