Opting Out: Examining Teacher's Beliefs When Faced With Core Reading Programs

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This qualitative study focused on how teachers in a small, urban elementary school in Pennsylvania negotiate their beliefs and instructional delivery the classroom. In the area of literacy instruction, there has been an increased reliance on Core-reading programs in elementary school. Classroom teachers, caught in the middle, are charged with the responsibility to raise test scores, plan curriculum, motivate students, and provide a welcoming learning environment for all students. In this article, teachers' beliefs about meeting the needs of urban students amidst NCLB were explored, in relation to curriculum planning. A case study approach guided this research, using interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data from participant statements and researcher observations, illuminate the reasons why teachers "opted-out" of having a sense of fidelity towards the mandated curriculum. According to the researcher opting-out was a means to equalize the discord between meeting student academic needs while adhering to the mandated curriculum and pacing guide.

Keywords: curriculum planning, linguistically and culturally diverse student populations, teacher beliefs

As demographic cultural and ethnic diversity continues to shift in the United States (US), so do educational efforts, educational reforms, and public school classroom demographics. Living in an era in which a system of standards/objectives drives instruction and curricular options, students are assessed against their knowledge of state standards, testing anchors, and objectives. The educational focus at the national level has been on establishing uniformly high academic standards in curriculum, practice, and assessment (National Reading Panel, 2000; No Child Left Behind, 2001; Common Core State Standards, 2010). With this emphasis, inadequate or inappropriate curriculum has profound implications for students and teachers (Allington, 2002; Coles, 2003). A continuing and fast occurring public school demographic shift has significantly added stress to classrooms using traditional pedagogy (U.S. Department of Education,

2003) with increased challenges to address the needs of diverse learners present in classrooms.

In addition, there has been a significant drive towards increasing teacher accountability by using students standardized test scores. These policy changes have lead to an increased effort to improve student achievement through effective teaching. However, schools serving low-income students, linguistically and culturally diverse student (LCD) populations continue to be under the microscope. In many urban contexts, the neighborhood school is a direct reflection of community demographics. The site of this study was just that. The site of study was nestled in a neighborhood of predominately individuals from Latino/a descent whose first language was not English and therefore the school population mirrored. Unlike other schools in this urban center in the state of Pennsylvania, students received

bilingual and transitional support to ensure success on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). In addition, this school has maintained a small student population and serves children living in the neighborhood, meaning all students are able to walk to school.

As a result of increased pressure for higher test scores, many teachers have been forced to teach from prescribed curriculum. In the area of reading, many schools have adopted core-reading programs, which are aligned to state standards and state assessments. These programs were once known as basal readers, but have undergone a name change to reflect their purpose, the core for effective reading instruction. As a result, these programs have dictated to teachers *what to teach, when to teach, and for how long to teach* and not *how to teach*. The responsibility of curricular program in contexts such as this is out of the hands of teachers, yet accountability in the form of test scores rests on the teacher's shoulders.

The purpose of this case study was to explore what teachers do at the early testing grades of 3rd and 4th grades specifically in the areas of reading instruction, when the reading program is decided at the district level. In this school specifically, teachers are forced to adhere to the core-reading program as well as the district- pacing schedule, which is directly tied to district-mandated and created benchmark assessments. In an effort to understand how teachers are making sense of their practice and prescribed curriculum, this study sought to explore how teachers negotiated their own beliefs about teaching and learning in an under-performing urban school. The author examined: (a) why teachers have opt-ed out of using the core reading program and (b) how they attempted to *do what is best for children* despite curricular mandates.

The Reemergence of Core-reading Programs

Standards and objectives from the national, state, and local district levels are translated into curricula: materials, binders, and scopes and sequences. These curricular resources are geared to creating a common curriculum and set of learning experiences, which are assessed on state tests (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). As a result, the scope of curricula has become quite narrow and in many instances, prescriptive and formulaic (Gallagher, 2009; Garan, 2002, 2004). This has caused districts to implement curriculum-pacing schedules and timelines for grade levels to ensure standards and testing objectives are taught.

Core-reading programs have been around for decades as a form of standardized curriculum. In the 1980's they were known as the basal reader. Much research has been done on their effectiveness and their ability to facilitate the process to teach children how to read. Since the passing of NCLB, funding has been provided at the national level to support the use of core-reading programs because of their completeness and alignment to state standards and state assessments. According to Education Market Research (2007), 73.2%

of the schools surveyed stated that they either closely follow the core-reading program or use it selectively, whereas only 25.1% reported not using a core-reading program. Core-reading programs have established the content and organization of instruction, thus removing teachers from the decision-making process (Marsh & Willis, 2007). As a result, NCLB has allowed policy makers to take credit when there are successes and blame schools, teachers, and students when goals are not met, with the insinuation that the program was not followed, co-opting the phrase, 'with fidelity' (Meidl, 2011).

Many scholars (Apple, 1986; Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Shannon, 2007) have argued that basal reading programs put limitations on teachers' freedom as it relates on what to teach and tailoring instruction to meet the needs of students. Deskilling (Shannon, 2007) has been used to describe this process. Since many teachers have expressed discontent with core-reading programs being referenced as teacher-proof curriculum materials, secured by being grounded in research and evidence associated with goals of the standards-objectives movement (Maslin, 2007). Baumann and Heubach (1996) sought to find out if basal readers deskilled teachers and they found that teachers saw the basal reader as an instructional tool. They surveyed elementary educators regarding their use and opinions of basal reading programs. They used both quantitative and qualitative methods, from a random sample of 553 teachers. However, their results are questionable considering the current state of education. Baumann and Heubach (1996) found that basal readers "empower teachers by providing them instructional suggestions to draw from, adapt, or extend as they craft lessons" (p. 511). However, since this work there have been several policy shifts in relation to accountability as well as the evidence and/or research base of core-reading programs.

In the last decade core-reading programs have made changes to their product to ensure the content is aligned to state standards. Despite the alignment, Dewitz, Jones, and Leahy (2009), in their study of comprehension strategy instruction in core-reading programs, found gaps in curricula and pacing. They conducted a content analysis of five "best-selling" core-reading programs as identified by the Educational Market Research Group. The researchers analyzed each lesson for a total of 90 lessons. They found that skills and strategies did not always relate to one another nor provided enough practice to ensure skill mastery (Dewitz et al., 2009). Learning was not scaffold or concepts did not build on one another. In fact, they found that many lessons did not provide ample scaffolding or guided practice as a means to prepare students to self-monitor their own learning. Dewitz et al. (2009) have concluded that "fidelity to a flawed program is not a virtue," and argue for teachers to engage in more thorough instructional practices through modeling and guided practice.

In this climate of standards/objectives based reform, teachers experience pressures in attempting to meet the needs of underperforming student populations within the confines of prescribed curricula and instruction. Despite the pressures of prescribed curriculum and subsequent methods of instruction, educators have to seek ways to address diversity in classrooms and employ practices that concentrate on the needs various student populations.

Teacher Beliefs and Curricular Decision Making

Beliefs and how beliefs are enacted in classrooms constitute the theoretical underpinnings driving the study. Individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about learning draw on a combination of psychological, philosophical, sociological, political, and scientific principles. Teachers develop philosophical and pedagogical understandings based upon knowledge of students, language, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and instructional needs (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Soto, 2002). Phillips and Soltis (2004) discuss teachers' articulation of beliefs about teaching and learning coming from personal values, assumptions, and viewpoints. Teachers' beliefs influence teachers' actions, according to Shinde and Karekatti (2012) teachers' beliefs influence how they feel about teaching, the methods employed, as well as student achievement. They argue that teachers shape curriculum according to their own beliefs, but if that autonomy is taken away, then do teachers operate in accordance with their own notions of teaching and learning.

The intellectual desire to understand the relationship between beliefs and action has been studied for almost a century. Dewey, for example (1916/1938) described beliefs as " all the matters of which we have not sure knowledge and yet which are sufficiently confident to act upon and also the matters that we now accept as certainly true, as knowledge, but which nevertheless may be questioned in the future" (p. 6). Since, his early writing there has been a renewed focus on teachers' beliefs about teaching learning influence classroom practices (Fang, 1996; Yero, 2002). Commins and Marimontes (2005) discussed the realization of how understanding beliefs influences decision making and quality instruction. Teacher expectations play a vital role in student success and day-to-day practices. Teacher beliefs are critical to promoting meaningful educational experiences because their beliefs about teaching and learning guide their practice (Soto, 2002).

Clandinin (1986) proposed "a teacher's special knowledge is blended by the personal background and characteristics of the teacher and expressed by her in particular situations" (p. 361). Fang (1996) stresses that teachers' daily interactions with children are guided by personal philosophies and/or an internal belief system. Teachers' beliefs are influenced by the understandings and experiences educators bring to the classroom. Beliefs are constructed based on theories of how the world works, as well as teachers' social and cultural backgrounds—combined, these act to mold teachers' thoughts about teaching and learning. Teachers' beliefs are complex because they are individually constructed. These beliefs influence curriculum planning and pedagogical approaches used daily in their classrooms.

Study Methods

The intention of this investigation was to explore how teachers negotiate between their beliefs about teaching and learning in urban classrooms and what influences teachers' curricular decision making and lesson planning in order to meet the academic needs of students. Other study-related goals included the following: (a) to ascertain ways that teachers articulate the needs of low-income urban students, and (b) to discover how teachers adapt curricula to meet the needs of their students within the current system of standards/objectives-based. The context for this study was in an urban elementary school in the state of Pennsylvania.

Investigation Site

The elementary school featured in this case study was chosen as the bounded case (Yin, 2009) based on convenience sampling and criterion sampling as outlined by (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). The school serves a low-income, Spanish speaking community in an urban area, which is of interest to the primary investigator. The interest stems from the researcher's teaching experiences at an elementary school in a rural low-income Spanish speaking community. The researcher grew up in an urban low-income community not far from the site of investigation.

Similar to other urban schools, this school site was representative of the "dismal sate of school in most of our urban cities" (Anyon, 1997, p. 9). The building was over one hundred years old and was built to serve 125 students, but home to 334 students at the time of the research. There were only two classrooms of each grade level and the average class size was 22 students. This was a Title 1 school meaning the school received additional funding for the number of students who received free and reduced lunch. The school also received Title III funding due to the large Latino/a population. The largest demographic group represented in the school was Latino/as at 93.4%, while the remaining population was 4.3% African American and 2.3% Caucasian. This school has the largest percent of students who identify as Latino/a than any other school in the district. Although the student population was largely Spanish-speaking, all classes are taught in English with an emphasis on English as a Second Language (ESL) strategies.

Participants

The participants invited to participate in this research study were state certified third- and fourth-grade teachers, who graduated from a 4 year undergraduate institution with teaching certification. Those invited to

participate had to have over 3 years of classroom teaching experience. There were two participants in the study due to the size of the teaching staff in the third and fourth grade and parameters set by the researcher. This eliminated two additional participants.

The participants hold elementary teaching certificates in Pennsylvania. Each worked in this school for a minimum of four years but both have over ten years of teaching experience. Both teachers identified as Caucasian and are from the geographic area but did not live in the community of the school. Mr. Joseph (pseudonym) has been at Urban Elementary for 5 years and 5 years prior taught at another school in the district. He teaches 4th grade at Urban Elementary. Ms. Pearl has been teaching at Urban Elementary for 4 years and teaches 3rd grade. She taught 1st and 2nd grade in the district. Ms. Pearl and Mr. Joseph both have Master's degrees in education. Ms. Pearl's degree is in reading education from a local university. Mr. Joseph's degree is in ESL and he speaks Spanish fluently. Mr. Joseph is also holds National Board Certification.

Data Sources

This study employed three data sources: daily observations that yielded field notes, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and documents. Of these three sources, observations were the primary data source.

Observations

The focus of the research was on teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in urban classrooms and how teachers' beliefs influence curriculum decision for low-income urban student populations. The purpose of observations was to understand the instructional intersections between the written curriculum, curriculum planning, and instructional delivery. Observations began the first day of school. They occurred every day that school was in session until Thanksgiving break. The first observation day was the first day of school. School began on a Monday during the last week of August until Wednesday the week of Thanksgiving, totaling 13 weeks.

There were two teachers in the study making it easy for the researcher to plan daily classroom observations for the district mandated ninety-minute literacy block. On a weekly basis author spent 450 minutes each classroom for a total of 900 minutes each week observing teachers during instructional time over 8 weeks. This was the average of minutes due to days the literacy instructional time was compromised for fire drills or assemblies. For example on September 11, the school met together on the play yard to do the Pledge of Allegiance and have a moment of silence in the morning, reducing the minutes of instruction in the 4th grade classroom that day by 15 minutes. The observations established a contextual basis for understanding, validating, and interpreting participant statements from the interviews.

Interviews

A primary source of data for teachers' perceptions was in-depth semi-structured interviews. Teachers were interviewed to collect information about their experiences and assisted the researcher in understanding beliefs and philosophies about teaching and learning. Interviews were scheduled at the end of the school day at the school site. Follow-up interviews however, took place during planning periods during the school day. These 30-minute daily interviews were grounded in observations and data from the initial interview. Follow-up interviews allowed teachers' to explain their instructional delivery. The explanations created an understanding on how teachers negotiate between their beliefs and the needs of their classrooms in planning and delivering instruction.

Documents

In this study, the researcher collected documents relevant to curriculum planning. This included documents such as district time lines, also called pacing schedules as well as textbooks. These documents were available on the district's website and were expected to be used by teachers in daily classroom instruction.

Data Analysis

Yin (2009) noted the most preferred strategy for analyzing the case data is relying on the theoretical propositions of the case. In this case, this investigation focused on how teachers negotiate their beliefs, teaching materials, and instructional delivery in urban classrooms.

Analyzing Interviews, Observations and Documents

Using Yin's (2009) analytic strategies for observations and interviews, a descriptive framework for organizing this case study was developed. First, interviews and field notes were transcribed. The researcher searched for patterns of behavior and outcomes that generated a list of categories. After categories were identified, the data was manually coded to visually denote patterns and contradictions.

Merriam (2002) pointed out, "the strength of documents as a data source lies with the fact that they already exist in the situation; they do not intrude upon or alter the setting in ways that the presence of the investigator might" (p. 13). The purpose of engaging in document analysis was twofold: to corroborate the researcher's observations and interviews, making the findings trustworthy, and to investigate the documents guiding and influencing teacher pedagogy. Documents were used planning for planning instruction.

Results

Two major themes emerged as it related to the influence of the mandated curriculum and the role of testing. These themes help to draw connections between how teachers constructed their beliefs. Their beliefs are contextualized vis-à-vis the instructional approaches in classrooms. Beliefs about teaching and learning are

grounded in lived experiences of these teachers in this particular school. Participants' reflections regarding teaching and learning and their student population, highlighted connections to personal experiences as a salient influence on pedagogical approaches and instruction. Teachers participating in the study used their personal experiences to articulated their beliefs.

The participants described the district's "core curriculum" required for instruction as, "mandated curriculum based on the state standards." As participants thought about how they planned for instruction often they referred to the district's pacing guide or pacing schedule. All participants criticized how the mandated curriculum "may not always fit every student or every classroom because student needs, academic and social needs, are not taken into account." The "core curriculum" outlines instructional standards and materials used in the content areas. Teachers described tension from attempting to address learning needs of individual students, their own beliefs about teaching and learning, and what the mandated curriculum intended for them to teach and their ability to do so.

The Mandated Curriculum

The curriculum published by the district is called the Planning and Scheduling Timeline. Teachers use the following: the pacing schedule, pacing guide, or core curriculum interchangeably when discussing the document. The Planning and Scheduling Timeline was informed by the state standards for content areas and the adopted basal reading series. Mr. Joseph described the curriculum as, "mandated curriculum based on the state standards." The pacing schedule reflects the content for district's benchmark testing which occurs every six weeks.

Although the study focused on literacy, when asked about the curriculum, teacher discussed reading and math equally. Reading and math were conceptualized together. The primary focus of state assessments for third- and fourth-grades are these content areas. The majority of instructional minutes is spent on math and reading leaving little room for science and social studies.

The mandated curriculum as described by Mr. Joseph is "used for the benchmark that is distributed by the district." Although an outside agency creates the test, the district expects teachers to follow the pacing schedule because that is what will be tested on the benchmarks given every six weeks, "to inform instruction as to what needs more attention and what concepts students grasped." "Students are scored similar to the state assessment; *Below Basic, Basic, Proficient,* and *Advanced.*

The mandated curriculum "does not always have what we need" and "needs more open ended writing in the curriculum," he explained. The curriculum has "no flow with it," Ms. Pearl added. She stated, "it is missing great strategies; inferring, questioning and visualization." She

elaborated, "as a teacher, a professional, [you] know what's best for your students, your class and what works." Continuing, "Teachers know what students need in their heart." Despite one of the Mr. Joseph's criticisms of the core curriculum, he expressed the idea, "you don't want to have them leave your room and not feel you've done the best possible job you could just because the curriculum says do this. You need to give them what they need to be lifelong learners." Mr. Joseph in his explanation of the core curriculum stated,

> On paper, [the core curriculum is] awesome, higher ups have said it's one of the best curriculums they have seen. If you ask the teachers who are actually implementing it covers everything, you know. It covers everything that they are going to test you on; they're going to test the children on. However, I don't know how many teachers were involved with creating this curriculum. And if there were, I don't know where they taught.

Curricula meant to address skills emphasized by state and district standards leave teachers struggling to provide learning experiences meeting the needs of their students. Ms. Pearl described, "they [students] need the structure, and they welcome it. It [the curriculum] appears to be; it is structured, if you know the skills already. But I'm very unhappy with it. That is what the district wants you to use, and I'm going to leave it at that." As she continued to talk about deficiencies within the mandated curriculum, she elaborated:

> As far as the literacy, as far as the literacy curriculum, we use an anthology, *Trophies*, which is actually just used for our shared reading piece, and our grammar, and word study pieces. They just offer lessons on that, and writing. We follow the writing, the lessons for that in the Trophies book. But then we are expected to have guided reading every day.

Teachers' beliefs about mandated curricula led one teacher to posit an inequality between materials provided to support the curriculum of the lower elementary grades and materials provided for the upper grades. The researcher, based on informal discussions and observations, concluded the lack of equity is a consequence of funding for the Reading First curriculum. The Reading First grant supports K–3 with additional funds for books and literacy resources. Ms. Pearl responded:

> If you are in K-3 that would be great, because they give you all kinds of books and all types of everything if you are K-3. And if you are in fourth-grade and you're pretty much "good luck" getting your books. So, actually the principal, we had my first year here, got fourth-grade books and they are the books we've had since. So if you need a level anywhere below

what you have, you need to go find books on your own. Whereas in K-3 they get new books every year, so we kind of pick up their old books, which is fine. Whatever, books are books.

Not only was the mandated curriculum seen as unsupported by materials, but also perceived as over utilized when it came to district assessment. The participants extrapolated as to how outside companies analyze the mandated curriculum and create tests assumed to accurately assess learning. Mr. Joseph described the assessments as:

Every six weeks there is what they call a benchmark test. What I gather is they look at the curriculum and they see what is supposed to be taught. What is supposed to be learned in the six weeks, they create a test using those skills.

He continued to explain how the results are then used to evaluate teachers' instructional ability rather than any other factors (i.e., background knowledge of students, test bias and validity, etc.) as stated:

However, and when we get the test back, we are supposed to look at what the children are weak at and work on that, which is great. I think that is an awesome thing; however, it is not used properly throughout the district. Because when it [the results] comes back that children are weak in main idea. It is automatically assumed that the teacher did not do a good job in teaching main idea. I believe the benchmarks in this district are used for teacher accountability. Throughout the years it has been, not so much said, but implied that's what they are using these for. It always comes back on us, it never comes back on, well why didn't little Joey learn this? And what is it about little Joey that he can't get this? It's, what did you do as a teacher that he didn't get this? Which, I agree, and in some cases teachers need that, because there are some teachers that don't do anything.

Participants discussed the mandated curriculum as including, "everything you need," but "it does not leave room for every child in the district or creativity." The data show how teachers experienced dissonance between the Planning and Scheduling Timeline, which help guide the learning of students for teachers, and meaningful learning experiences as formulated via teachers' beliefs.

Participants shared not only the challenges of the curriculum, but identified various positive statements about the curriculum. In explaining the curriculum, Ms. Pearl explained:

If someone [a student] leaves the room and goes to a different school, they will go and are

doing the same thing that I am doing. A lot of children do move often around here. Everyone is using the same materials. We are using *Story Town* this year. It is helpful to know what a new child is supposed to know. You are not working with nothing. It is helpful to know what they should have done already.

In planning and coordinating learning goals, Mr. Joseph shared:

I love the fact that the standards are delineated. That is helpful to me. The stories are okay that they chose for the basal that we use. They are okay; the stories are pretty good. I use them as a base. I like the literacy curriculum; it tells me what skills I need to teach.

As demonstrated here, even the participants who liked the literacy curriculum did not fully embrace all parts of it.

Testing in the Curriculum

Each teacher described the impact that testing has on the pacing schedule. Mr. Joseph shared how the mandated curriculum "covers everything that they are going to test the children on." Because of the correlation between the curriculum and benchmarking participants described pressure to teach "a lot of test prep with the kids." Ms. Pearl described learning strategies designed to help students with testing, "I do a lot of open ended writing practice with them, reading text and going back in and taking information out by being detectives. Sadly enough, that is what they need to do at the end of the year for the test."

The researcher observed students practicing to speak using full sentences after students' speech were corrected through the modeling from Ms. Pearl. She discussed using this practice so, "they [the students] sound intelligent" but "also for test taking skills." "They [the students] have to be able to write in full sentences," she responded. "They [the students] have to take a question and turn it [the question] around," for the test. "A lot of children write the way they talk," she stated. These statements continue to demonstrate teachers' perceptions about state and district tests as being accurate assessments of students' learning, but not necessarily *students' academic needs*.

In several observations the participants engaged in "test prep" with their students. Test prep was explained by Mr. Joseph. "It [test prep] does teach the kids a lot of the skills, the strategies you want them to have to become successful readers and writers." Test prep was not seen as "an add-on even though it sounds like it is." Observational data recorded by the researcher established most instances of test prep included teacher made materials rather than premade materials. Many of the teachers created worksheets targeting the skills tested on either the benchmark or the state test. Mr. Joseph would regularly give the "sample assessment item" or "point question constructed response," from the Planning and

Scheduling Timeline.

The teacher modeled, for the students, how to complete this form of response using a strategy called TAG. Students were expected to first T-turn the question into a statement, A-answer the question, and G-give details. Mr. Joseph also referred to an old and worn process chart hanging on the wall to describe this strategy. The teacher explained:

> I think the whole TAG [T-turn the question in to a statement, A-answer the question, G- give details] thing in the open ended questioning is important. It helps them become better readers, because they are in and looking back for information in the story to make sure they understand the text. It forces them to go back and check, is this really happening or not? So, I like it for that. On the test " they have to take a question and turn it around."

Based on several observations of participants engaged in test prep with their students, the pressure to perform well on the tests for both students and teachers was obvious. During interviews, participants justified the use of test preparation to teach skills, "because it [test prep] does teach the kids a lot of the skills, the strategies you want them to have to become successful readers and writers." Participants struggled with the decision to utilize test prep as an instructional practice because of dissonance between having students ready for tests based on mandated curriculum and personal beliefs about teaching and learning and students' needs, both academic and social. The need for test prep demonstrates teachers' constructs of teaching and learning being influenced and driven by standards/objectives and high stakes testing.

Opting-Out

The findings from this case study provide depth into Charlesworth et al's (1993) research on teachers' beliefs not aligning with their practices. District-mandated curriculum guided instruction in the school investigated for this study. Participants expressed that the mandated curriculum "does not always have what we need," "needs more open ended writing," and has "no flow with it." The missing elements of the curriculum included, "…great strategies; inferring, questioning and visualization." Ultimately, "you as a teacher, a professional, know what's best for you students, your class and what works." Despite the positives and challenges of the core curriculum, Ms. Pearl stated, "you don't want to have them [students] leave your room and not feel you've done the best possible job you could just because the curriculum says do this. You need to give them what they need to be lifelong learners."

Classroom instruction was influenced by participants' beliefs about teaching and learning, addressing *student academic needs*, and district and state tests used to evaluate instruction and learning at the school. Students were benchmarked every six weeks as means to monitor accountability. These assessments did not inform instruction as demonstrated by the lack of flexibility for revisiting past objectives and standards in the Planning and Scheduling Timeline. As a result, daily instruction mirrored test-prep. Mandated curriculum created a baseline from which teachers perceived students as being deficient or not based on ability to perform certain skills. The relationship between teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning interwoven with a mandated curriculum caused pedagogical dissonance. The expressed discord reinforced the claims of Henkin and Holliman (2009) of how the power of the mandated curriculum decreased teachers' ability to make professional and autonomous decisions in their classrooms.

Both participants described the curriculum used in their classroom as a "mandated curriculum based on the state standards." Consequences were evident when participants state "student needs are not taken into account" or that "the pacing schedule does not always fit every student or every classroom." The research also reinforced Deemer's (2004) notions of how the curriculum has significant implications on the ways teachers instruct and how learners and learning experiences were developed. Learning environments are structured around the beliefs of the curriculum and curriculum designers, not teachers or students (Deemer, 2004). The curriculum assumed all students should be at the same level.

The viewpoints participants expressed towards the curriculum were mixed because they saw the value and role of the curriculum differently. For instance, Mr. Joseph indicated "that the pacing schedule is great because students move around the district." Teachers across the district were expected to teach the same content on the same day. This provided schools with knowledge of what students across district should know and be able to do.

Conclusion

Curricular control at district levels transformed and distorted teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, which were constructed through personal and professional experiences. Teachers' instruction revolved around a district-developed curriculum that fails to acknowledge their professional ability (Darder, 1997). In fact, teachers in this study felt they were doing an injustice by teaching to standards. Teachers were compelled to do so because a perception that an even greater injustice would be to leave students unable to pass tests required for promotion and eventually render them unable to graduate.

Teachers continue to be left with the monumental task of educating children in an environment where curriculum mandates constricted a teacher's ability to build relationships, meet students' needs, and scaffold learning. Teachers readjusted, scaffold learning and attempted to make connections to and with the curriculum

based using their best judgment, and at times "opted-out." Rather than challenging the curriculum, participants opted-out of implementing all curriculum mandates, as a means of meeting student needs. Opting-out was exemplified when there was a disparity between beliefs and practice. When the theories and practices espoused by the mandated curriculum contradicted with teachers' philosophies about teaching and learning, teachers opted-out. The relationship between teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning interwoven with mandated curriculum caused pedagogical dissonance.

Mandated curricula may create high educational expectations for all students, but will be met with resistance if they do not allow room for change, creativity, and professional judgment. District-created curriculum and learning experiences rarely allows for the teachers to leverage the community and culture of students in the curriculum. Overemphasizing skills-based instruction does not allow for students to make connections between their learning and their world. This study unveiled the power of the mandated curriculum on curriculum planning. The curriculum forces teachers to operate at a technical level in which content and skills are the predictors of the outcomes and goals of students as measured by benchmarks and the state assessment. Teachers are struggling, as professionals, to make pedagogical decisions meant to address the unique needs of their students. Teachers understand of their students, their language, their culture, and their lives.

This study attempted to understand the beliefs of teachers and their role in curriculum planning and instructional delivery. More research on the nature of teachers' beliefs in environments in which standards and mandated curricula drive what teachers do in the classroom is needed. Future studies should explore innovative ways in which teachers identify and meet the needs of their students, specifically in low-income contexts.

Studies of how teachers' beliefs have changed while working in environments in which the curriculum is either highly scripted or mandated as a means of raising test scores would be beneficial. Understanding teachers' reflective process for navigating the curriculum and creating classroom environments and lessons to meet the diverse needs of their students is imperative, including collaborations and co-teaching to explore "best practice" pedagogy. Although this was a snapshot of one school, findings would be even more meaningful through the lens of a cross-comparative case study. Research that compares and contrasts schools across the nation serving urban and low-income students could deepen understanding of how teachers' beliefs change due to curricula, experiences with urban students, and professional development. Continuing with research that compares and contrasts schools, an understanding of how teachers who must use a constrictive curriculum manage to infuse innovative methods in classrooms to create positive learning environments for underserved classrooms could guide strategies taught in teacher preparation programs and during professional development.

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