

THESIS

THE PARALLEL ALIENATION OF STUDENTS FROM LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC
BACKGROUNDS AND NEW TEACHERS IN THE U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

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The shift in focus from process-based to product-based education in United States public schools since the mid-twentieth century has degraded learning and teaching, compromised the student-teacher relationship, and caused parallel alienation from both learning and teaching, especially among students who are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers.

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The last day of actual classes for the year! I walked around my bare classroom checking with students working on final multi-genre projects for the semester. Seeing that no one needed anything, I took my perch in the middle of the room on my stool by the projector and watched them work. Up against a deadline, their efforts were intense, and they broke concentration only to have a quick, quiet word or get a question answered from friends nearby. I smiled to myself seeing them so engaged.

Pete always worked next to me to keep himself out of trouble. When I was at my desk during classwork, he pulled up a chair. If I was at the projector, he had the desk in front. Our arrangement had kept him in my class through the entire grading period for the first session that year, and he had A to boot. However, when I looked up, I found him staring down Trent about ten feet away, and Trent was giving him a steely stare right back.

“Whoa. What just happened?” I asked, hoping to stop whatever it was from escalating.

“Pete called me a nigger, Miss,” Trent blurted, on his feet in an instant. I immediately jumped up as well.

“You fuckin’ liar! I didn’t call you nothing!” Pete countered, jumping to his feet.

“Come on, you guys,” I urged. “Settle down. We can talk this out. Lets go in the hallway.”

Instinctively, I stepped between them. Trent took a step toward Pete yelling. Pete yelled back in Spanish. I was losing control of them fast.

Trent took another step as I yelled, “Boys, sit down!” To a student next to me, I urgently whispered, “Go get Mr. Birch. Now!” I needed back up.

“Yeah, you’re real safe hiding behind a teacher, huh?” I knew with that accusation that I was in trouble.

Trent broke past the desks and students and ran toward me. I closed my eyes, braced, and waited for impact. As the boys stood chest to chest, I realized I’d somehow gotten out of the way. I watched, dazed, as Mr. Birch grabbed Trent into a headlock and began leading him to the office, as Pete tried to run after him and was caught by a classmate who sat him down at a desk and began calming him down.

The students had scattered to get out of the way.

“Okay, everyone. Back to work,” I urged, trying to get back normal as quickly as possible.

I approached the student who had gotten Pete settled. “How did I get out of the middle?” I whispered. I had come out of the scuffle unharmed, but I didn’t know how.

“Pete moved you.” he replied.

I looked at the kids back at work. Even Pete had gotten his papers and was trying to refocus until the office dealt with Trent and called him down. I knew that I had been lucky. I sank down in my desk chair wondering whether next time, my luck would continue.

Introduction: Why This Project?

I am a teacher dropout. I can't believe I am writing those words after six years of teaching high school. Ironically, I spent most of my short career fighting desperately for students not to drop out since I worked primarily with at-risk students¹, many of whom were from low-socioeconomic backgrounds². However, at the end of spring 2011, when I found myself unable to bear the thought of returning to the classroom, I began to understand how many of my students felt when they found themselves unable to come back to the classroom. Of the reasons cited for why teachers leave³, several apply to why I left the classroom, specifically "poor working conditions, testing pressure, and burnout" (Smollin 1). Because students are subjected to these same conditions, I have been struck by the similarities that exist between why at-risk students drop out and why young teachers leave public secondary education. Students are enduring these conditions with their teachers, especially students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, for their teachers, often new and inexperienced, are most affected by the difficult circumstances cited by Smollin.

What exactly does this mean for students and teachers in the classroom? For students, many of them face personal obstacles to academic success. According to Mike Rose, "Poverty does not necessarily diminish the power of one's mind, but it certainly draws attention to the

¹ To be labeled as an at-risk student most often implies that the student is from a low-socioeconomic background. Of the seven factors that put a student "at-risk" for struggling academically and eventually dropping out of high school, three of those factors are related to the low-socioeconomic status of the student's family. Specifically these are "not living with both parents, family income below \$10,000, and neither parent/guardian being employed" See Kominski, et al for more details on at-risk students. Other risk factors include: "having at least one disability; having been retained in grade at least once; speaking English less than 'very well'; having either parent emigrate in past five years."

² "A family's socioeconomic status is based on family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community (such as contacts within the community, group associations, and the community's perception of the family)," (Demarest, Reisner, Anderson, Humphrey, Farquhar, and Stein in North Central Regional Education Laboratory's "Low-Socioeconomic Status").

³ Smollin cited other reasons as "low wages" and "threat of layoffs."

competing demands of safety and survival” (*Why School?* 28). Some students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who are labeled at-risk bring a variety of outside issues to school, including difficult home lives and unmet basic needs. These students often comprise the remediation classes new teachers are assigned. Thus, working conditions for these students and new teachers are often difficult, and “despite the added challenges they face, these teachers are often given few resources and little professional support” (Smollin 1) such as adequate mentoring and shared planning. This makes it difficult for them to balance working toward students’ academic success⁴ with working toward meeting students’ individual needs. Adding to this is the current pressure around assessment. Both groups struggle to meet standards in adverse conditions brought forth by the emphasis on test scores. Sadly, nearly half of teachers exit teaching after only five years (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future).

I slumped at the back table of the staff meeting listening to the discussion of Alternate Assessment Portfolios for students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. I had so many of them to do. How did I walk into this my first year in the classroom? I could feel the burning behind my eyes starting, my stomach churned. A flush crept up my face as I raised my hand.

“Does anyone have directions or advice on how a new teacher can fulfill these requirements? I’m nervous to do a portfolio for the state if I’m unsure of what I’m doing.”

“No one really knows how to do them. We just have to try our best,” the Testing Coordinator replied, looking embarrassed.

⁴ Success is engagement and acceptable academic performance as measured by the school grading scale in a particular discipline.

I stared at my pack of portfolios. Portfolios that if found to be incorrectly completed during a state audit could cost me my job. We had discussed portfolios and their grading in college, but I never imagined I'd have to do them with such high-stakes attached to the outcome. I looked down and felt the tears come. The students to be evaluated in these portfolios spoke almost no English. How was I supposed to complete their evaluations, and how could I get them to be able to perform at a seventh-grade level by the end of the year without speaking English? As we dismissed, I just sat there and let the tears fall. I didn't realize the challenges my students would be facing. I felt at such a loss on how to help them.

We all sat down in the library. Another staff meeting. I felt the familiar burning behind my eyes. I raised my hand.

“Any helpful information from the state to help us understand how they want our portfolios to be completed?”

She moved on to staff lunch duty reminders pretending she hadn't heard me. I knew she had.

I slouched down in my chair staring hard at the table. The tears came again. My mind screamed, “Why won't anyone help me?”

Similarly, new teachers may also find themselves experiencing the same economic insecurity as many of the at-risk students they teach. According to a study titled “The Teaching Penalty,” “Public school teachers in 2010 earned about 12% less than comparable workers” (2). Essentially, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and the new teachers who serve them both find themselves struggling with the issues of safety and security brought about by lack of

resources, both in and out of the classroom, which makes class a central factor in the exodus of at-risk students and new teachers from our supposedly equalizing public school system.

How did a system that was supposed to be “The Great Equalizer” manage to become one that is structured to maintain inequality? One attempt to answer this question can be found in “The Negro Artisan,” in which W. E. B. DuBois wrote, “The ideals of education. . . must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars” (82). Though DuBois wrote these words more than a century ago, he foresaw that a change of focus could happen in United States’ public education. In spite of increased access for previously excluded groups⁵, our educational system has evolved over the second half of the 20th Century into what DuBois feared—one that prioritizes product-based outcomes to target those individuals who will someday make our nation more prosperous (“Dollars”) rather than holistic education in which classrooms are focused on developing human beings (“Souls”) due to the emphasis on product-based achievement.

Presently, product-based assessment outcomes such as standardized test scores have emerged as having priority over process-based learning⁶, and the focus in the classroom has shifted from use value, or “intrinsic value” (“The Alienation of American Society”), to exchange value, converting knowledge to capital—scores, distinctions, credit, and classroom placements for students and continued employment and pay-for-performance for teachers. This has meant the single quantitative measurement (yearly standardized assessments) being given to determine a student’s content knowledge or a teacher’s pedagogical abilities has become extremely valuable. As such, those who can meet the standards set by the state and federal government are

⁵ Throughout the first half of the 20th Century, education was reserved for white, non-disabled, English-speaking, wealthy students.

⁶ Connell and Seville describe process-based learning as instruction in which “students [are] given opportunities for learning how to learn for themselves and what they learn [has] relevance to their career aims and personal development” (90).

rewarded while those who cannot meet the standards are punished. For example, states that produce assessment programs that meet the federal standards are eligible for more funding than those who do not participate. This mechanistic (factory-like) characteristic of this quota-centered classroom misses the most essential element of the classroom experience—the development of the “Souls” who are engaging in the field of the classroom. By disregarding the difficulties faced by students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and often new, inexperienced teachers with this population, our system is failing some of our neediest students and driving out teachers who in other educational climates would be seen as having great potential.

In this thesis, I will argue that class intensifies the issues faced by secondary students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and the teachers who serve them in the current system causing teachers and students to share a parallel experience of alienation⁷. Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and the often new, young teachers who serve them struggle to meet needs outside the classroom specific to lack of economic, social, and cultural capital, leaving them with fewer resources with which they can engage in learning in the classroom. Additionally, these students and teachers often do this in the shared and marginalized⁸ space of the remedial classroom where they are required to learn and teach degraded, product-based classroom work designed only with the purpose of raising test scores. Both students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and their teachers are faced with a loss of agency, for the product-based system punishes students who do not test well and teachers who cannot get students to test

⁷ John Clark defines alienation as the feeling of being “powerless to achieve the role that he has determined to be rightfully his in specific situations” (849). Alienation is described as having four associated feelings: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and social isolation (Newmann in Johnson 179).

⁸ “Marginalized” is defined as “individuals, groups, or communities. . .excluded from the center (of society) or regulated to the periphery or margins on the basis of some characteristic (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation)” (Pedersen 224).

well, no matter what is behind either group's failure. A final contribution to this claim is that with this degradation of work where the focus is on product rather than process-based learning opportunities, the student-teacher relationship, essential to preventing alienation, is compromised. This leads to the shared burnout of both groups characterized by a loss of passion for learning and teaching. I will explore how the loss of passion puts both students and teachers at risk for burnout and often leads to both dropping out of the system, a choice that has negative consequences for not only individual students and teachers, but also for schools and our society as a whole.

"I have an announcement," my principal said. "In accordance with the district's focus on student achievement, we will be using staff meetings for a new purpose called 'data dialogue.' From now on, you must bring print outs of your student practice test data to staff meetings. That will now be the focus of discussion for these meetings."

Mrs. White raised her hand. "But what about 'kid talk'? Our students have bigger problems than test scores. When will we talk about home and behavioral issues so that we can all be on the same page for the kids' needs? Our program is designed to take care of those needs that the main high school didn't address, so why turn this alternative program into one similar to the high school's?"

I was glad Mrs. White had spoken up. I was always afraid to voice my concerns for fear that I would be seen as uncooperative. The other teachers and I looked at our principal waiting for an answer. This didn't sound like her idea. Pressure had been building from Central Office around scores though, and it looked like they were coming after our alternative program just like they were coming after the high school.

The principal looked at all of us. “This is non-negotiable. Central office insists every school do this. The bottom line is we don’t have a choice. Hopefully, we will have time to do kid talk afterward.”

All of us looked at one another. It was apparent that our focus was going to be required to change. I walked back to my room and looked disdainfully at the spreadsheets, the numbers by which we would all be weighed and measured. Nowhere did it let us discuss how to help Natalie with problems at home or Mike’s constant truancy. The numbers didn’t show the smart and worldly kids I knew we had. They didn’t show Sandra’s ability to write stories that made us laugh so hard that we cried. They couldn’t capture the beauty of Mara’s artwork.

“The kids will be the ones hurt by this,” I thought.

Students began coming through the door, so I slapped a smile on my face. The new normal had arrived.

How Reform Created Alienation of Students from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds and New Teachers

From the mid-twentieth century to present the goals for U.S. public education have changed drastically, and these changes reflect the shift in focus from process-based education to product-based education. School reform over the past sixty years has furthered the alienation of both students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers by increasing federal regulation and accountability that ignored the obstacles many students face and that teachers must address for academic success to occur. This federal control was initiated by the Supreme Court’s ruling against segregation in public schools in 1954’s *Brown versus the Board of*

*Education*⁹. Another key event in the progression of federal regulation was the launch of the Soviet Union's *Sputnik* satellite in 1957, where the government's "finger of blame quickly and sternly pointed at the schools" when the Soviets beat the U.S. in launching the first satellite into space (Rutherford). The National Defense of Education Act of 1958, which sought to "strengthen training in math, science, and foreign languages, was the response to being outdone by the Soviets," (Finn 9). Federal interest in public education meant money being contributed to local education agencies, and with this money came accountability from formerly independent districts to the federal government. Compliance with the federal government's product-oriented approach, which focused on students getting "themselves and the nation ready for the global marketplace" (*Why School?* 57) was required in order to receive federal funds. A side effect of this accountability is student and teacher alienation because of the diminishing agency of local school districts.

The effects of federal control and the subsequent alienation of all students and teachers were revealed in different ways in the next decade. In the sixties, both students and teachers recognized their place at the bottom of outside forces (federal, state, district, and school administrations) who dictated the goals for the classroom. An increasing dropout rate throughout the sixties indicates a negative student reaction. According to Fitzpatrick and Yoels, "The average high school attrition rate in 1960 was 31.57 percent" (76), so nearly one-third of high school students found themselves unable or unwilling to endure the system in which they had been invited to be included. Subsequently, teachers resisted by unionizing to attempt to reclaim some control. As Cox and Wood identified,

⁹ Brown vs. the Board of Education was a landmark Supreme Court case that mandated the desegregation of United States public schools and enforcement of the desegregation by the federal government.

The 1960s has been a decade of increasing alienation among teachers. Teachers are demanding a new role for themselves, including greater professional autonomy and larger voice in educational policies and programs. Moreover, they are willing to back up these demands with militant tactics, including strikes (1).

Such teacher strikes disrupted school systems across the country and reflected the frustration of teachers with a system in which they felt they had little professional power¹⁰.

Throughout the next decade, educational reform events alleviated neither the frustration felt by classroom educators nor decreased federal involvement in education. In fact, product-focused assessment found a significant place in classrooms, for this decade saw the development and implementation of minimum competency tests, a measure of the basic knowledge a student must know to graduate. As of the mid-seventies, 35 states already had implemented some form of minimum competency testing (Pipho in Winfield 157). Additionally, the federal government also continued efforts toward desegregation, supervised the implementation of the Bilingual Education Act, and created the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (ERIC). All of these efforts designed to increase access for previously underserved students brought local school districts even more responsibilities, stretching classroom resources and demanding more of classroom teachers than ever before. Students who had previously been excluded from school were now invited into the classroom, an unfamiliar place for them, decreasing the dropout rate temporarily to 21 percent (Fitzpatrick and Yoels 76). The response of teachers to the new challenges they faced in the classroom was to continue to unionize for protection in a time of drastic change. As Finn explains,

Ill-prepared (and largely white) faculties were expected to deal with a host of new and different students, many with special needs and unfamiliar demands, and to keep kids in

¹⁰ Power is the “ability to impose one’s will” (Clegg).

school even when their home lives pushed in the opposite direction. . .All this transformed the teacher's work in powerful ways that school-system bureaucracies were none to skilled in helping their staffs to address. Union membership offered sanctuary and solidarity. (38)

Though proving to be positive for teachers, unions alienated teachers from school administration as well as from parents and students due to the impact strikes had on the communities in which they occurred. The disruption of the school environment due to strikes created even more division throughout local school districts.

In spite of unionization, nothing was done to reverse the demands being heaped on educators from the federal level in the 1980's. This decade also saw a rise in dropout rates by six percent from the previous decade (Fitzpatrick and Yoels 76). Documentation and paper work increased as districts were forced to prove their compliance with federal laws passed the previous decade. These responsibilities accompanied the demands of managing the everyday work within teachers' classrooms such as planning lessons and grading papers. The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* decried the state of U.S. public education, claiming that "schools were failing, that the primary blame for this failing lay with teachers, and that teachers must be held accountable for the performance of their students" (Bank 300). This led to further alienation of teachers from administrators as "principals had to serve as evaluators of teachers, which challenged the perception of their supportiveness and collegiality," (Dworkin 498) solidifying the estrangement of teachers from school leadership by forcing them into a manager-worker relationship.

"You will have sixty minutes to complete the writing portion. If you need anything while completing this test, please raise your hand and I will come to you. Are there any questions?"

The students looked at me silently. I tried to mentally prepare for the hour of excruciating boredom that was required when proctoring the state writing assessment.

“Then you may begin,” I instructed as I wrote the start time on the board.

I began my pacing the room. I noticed one student write a couple of sentences and close his book. I waited to see if he’d reopen it, but he pulled his hood over his face and put his head down. What was he doing? I wondered what the prompt could be that he had quit so soon. Was it too hard, too unfamiliar, too personal? I couldn’t even ask him what the problem was. I resisted my teacher’s instinct to want to walk him through it. I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m finished, Miss,” he mumbled pulling his hood half back.

“Are you sure? You didn’t take very long on it. Once I take your book, you can’t have it back. This tells everyone what you learned this year.”

This was all I was allowed to say, and I had probably really said more than I was allowed. He hunched into his hood. The look on his face said he had checked out. They had been testing for several days for hours. I was ready to be finished, too, but so much was riding on those scores. I needed so badly for him to try.

“Are you positive that you’re finished,” I asked, making one last-ditch effort.

“I said all I can about the topic,” he snapped.

Not wanting to make a scene and disturb everyone, I took his book off of his desk and walked away fuming. I wanted to yank his hood off and yell at him that my job depended on this. He pulled his hood back over his head and fell asleep. Nap time.

NCLB and Race to the Top: A Decade of Federal Control

With the millennium looming, politicians promising to get changes in place before the turn of the century took center stage; however, attempts to implement national content area standards or accountability testing, which lawmakers believed would provide proof that teachers were teaching and students were learning, failed. Despite these failures, this decade paved the way for George W. Bush's reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. NCLB would prove to tighten the federal government's control over state and local education agencies more than ever before, mandating minimum competency testing in all fifty states. As a result, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers were often forced to focus on assessment-related questions in the remedial classes they endure, which often overshadowed any other part of the curriculum.

In addition to problems with the tests themselves, this law has focused on what Mike Rose has called "no excuses rhetoric," insisting teachers produce grade level proficiency for every child (no matter what his or her circumstances may be) as determined by achievement on one yearly standardized test with punishments in place for schools that do not make the cut, namely loss of autonomy and possibly closure. When Barack Obama was elected in 2008, educators hoped that he would see the flaws in NCLB and overhaul the law at the federal level. However, NCLB remains unchanged and is now accompanied by Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT). RTTT has not done anything to discontinue the federally-centralized approach that was with NCLB. It ties extra funding to the compliance of state administration to federal demands. It awards more points to states that tie student standardized test scores to teacher evaluations and pushes districts to offer teachers whose students perform well on state assessments financial

incentives such as merit pay for test scores (Connell). So, under RTTT, the teachers who “produce” more students who perform are still rewarded and those who do not are punished by denial of funds. Students who do not perform well on tests are also punished. Students who produce proficient results are spared intervention classes designed to improve test scores, while the students who do not produce proficient results endure them. Students who are performing below proficiency (often students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds) continue to be at the greatest risk for narrowed and diluted curriculum. Students’ scores on state assessments can prevent them from being allowed into the more challenging English and math classes, and it may even keep them from taking subjects of interest since they are often required to take remedial classes in place of electives.

Education historian Diane Ravitch describes the current system of accountability testing as “mechanistic and even antithetical to good education. . .not just a measure but an end in itself . . .not raising standards but dumbing down the schools” (*Life and Death* 12-13). Ravitch, who came to this conclusion after being a strong supporter of accountability at its inception¹¹, adds weight to the argument that the system disadvantages students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers. However, these test scores still supposedly indicate overall success or failure on the part of both teacher and student and even entire schools by labeling them negatively¹² if they fail to meet adequate yearly progress for more than one year. The side effects of these high-stakes assessments—requiring time in the classroom be focused on preparing for the outcome on one standardized assessment (or product), judging the abilities of teachers by their student assessment test scores and students by their individual test scores, and

¹¹ See “Why I Changed My Mind” by Diane Ravitch.

¹² According to the report “States’ Evidence: What It Means to Make ‘Adequate Yearly Progress,’” NCLB labels for missing adequate yearly progress include: “in need of improvement,” “corrective action,” and “restructuring.” Adequate yearly progress refers to the school meeting the required percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced on the yearly state assessment.

punishing schools, teachers, and students for not completing the goals picked by them by an outside entity—is not a system that values what Jerome Bruner called “the process of knowing” (72). The primary blame for the alienation and eventual burnout of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and their teachers continues to rest with the system itself.

Spring was always the worst part of the year. Another meeting where we revisited our poor test scores. It seemed that was all we talked about anymore. The numbers. How our scores needed to come up.

“As you know, testing will be here before you know it. This year, I’m really excited about the program we’ll be using to help students prepare for the ACT. It’s required to be used on the dates specified by all teachers,” explained Ms. Black, the testing administrator.

Like I could forget that testing was upon us. I looked down at the booklets before me piled chest high on the desk. Eight days of test preparation ahead of me. I resisted the urge to groan. It was a struggle to get the kids to care, even if it was the ACT. No matter how much I stressed that the score would follow them and was important for their futures, they resisted.

I looked around to find the other teachers around me staring at their own booklets. I heard whispered grumbling start at the back of the room. Trapped in the front, my neighbor and I just shared discouraged looks.

The administrator cut off the obvious lack of enthusiasm. “Are there any questions?”

Mr. Birch raised his hand. “What about the pacing guide the district already gave me for the curriculum I’m teaching? I’ve already been told to stick to that timeline. How am supposed to do this and that at the same time?”

Theoretical Framework

The issues of mechanization of education, socioeconomic factors, and recent federal policy are addressed by several philosophers and educators: Karl Marx (Theory of Alienation); Matthew Crawford (Theory of the Degradation of Work); Pierre Bourdieu (Theory of Capital); Christine Maslach (Multidimensional Theory of Burnout); and Jerome Bruner (Educational Constructivist Theory). Before looking at the possible corrections to the damage done by a product-based focus, it is important to understand underlying theoretical themes.

With the issues of the mechanization of education and class differences that arise in the examination of current federal policy, two theorists who provide effective tools to examine this current situation are Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu. Marx's Theory of Alienation argues that there are three interrelated forms of alienation in a capitalist system: the alienation of a person from themselves, the alienation of a person from other people, and eventually the alienation of a person from the world (in this case, school) (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* 4). Though this theory is often discussed in regard to factory-based work, Marx observed that alienation occurs in intellectual work as well:

If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive laborer when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation (*Capital*; ch. 16).

Marx recognizes that the use of teaching as a means of production to satisfy the needs of the "school proprietor" or, in this case, the State, does diminish the complexity of teaching to the work of the factory. He correctly applies this theory to students and educators. Current trends in

education have made this the reality for Pre-K-12 education due to the high stakes now attached to student standardized test scores.

The Theory of Alienation predicts that commodification/greater exchange value given to the product (student achievement as evidenced by test scores for federal funding) versus the use value or “intrinsic value” given to the process of becoming educated will alienate those doing the major work in the system—teachers and students. Lack of consideration for the role the experience of being in the secondary classroom in a public school contributes to a person’s development beyond the basic skills measured on assessments dehumanizes students and teachers to things, treating them as machines expected to produce desired results under any circumstances. This commodification is allowing federal and state regulators to attempt to answer a very capitalistic question: Are public school teachers producing students who can produce proficient results on state tests? Can the classroom machine produce the numbers that indicate success and guarantee the future prosperity of those students and the nation?

Fritz Pappenheim observes, “Once commodity production becomes the universal economic mode, all of man’s activities come to center around it. Its main feature—the paramount role of exchange value—reaches beyond the merely economic realm and penetrates the whole of human existence.” (“The Alienation of Society”). This process is observable at all levels of our Pre-K-12 public schools, for test preparation consumes much of the instructional time in the classroom. Test-taking skills, tests to predict performance on state assessments, targeted skills-based lessons to improve performance on state assessments, curriculum designed to focus on basic skills instruction to improve performance on state assessments, and, last but not least, the state assessments themselves have come to dominate the language arts classroom experience. The skills have become separated from the contextual processes of reading, writing, speaking,

listening, and researching as they are experienced in real classroom instruction and real life. There is no room for trial and error, which involves examining the logic of mistakes and using problem-solving to fix where meaning breaks down. Thus, both students and teachers are regulated to degraded work divorced from real world application and forced to engage in preparation to produce as the system expects.

Matthew Crawford's Theory of the Degradation of Work rests on his view that degraded work occurs "whenever the separation of thinking from doing has been achieved" (37). He talks about this degradation occurring in blue and white-collar work but applies his ideas to the current state of classroom work as well. He observes, "Standardized tests remove a teacher's discretion in the curriculum" (45), sacrificing what Crawford identifies as "tacit intelligence," which he describes as knowledge gained by experience (169). This theory helps to explain the loss of agency for students from low-socioeconomic status and new teachers associated with high-stakes testing. Teachers are no longer allowed to use their professional expertise to instruct but must instead often use materials approved and purchased for them by the district. The lack of creativity allowed to teachers transfers to students as engagement becomes a secondary goal to "covering material" in workbooks or through paced or even scripted curriculums. This, then, further alienates teachers and students from one another, and alienates teachers from themselves and their school district leaders. In the remedial classroom, because the stakes are high and students struggle to perform on tests, this situation is even more likely to occur.

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Capital is essential in the examination of the role that class plays in the system's impact on students and teachers. Bourdieu claims that there are three forms of capital--not only economic, but also cultural and social capital. Economic capital obviously refers to available financial resources; however, Bourdieu argues that the other forms of capital,

cultural and social, are essential for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers being successful in our public schools. Bourdieu's theory indicates that without attention to a person's lack of capital, he or she is being set up for failure and further alienation in the system.

Both students and teachers who lack the capital to be successful could feel the stress of the alienation created by the effects of federal regulation of our public schools. Christine Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout explains why students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers who serve them eventually withdraw from public school institutions. Maslach describes "burnout" as "a prolonged response to stressors in the workplace" that stems from the "chronic strain that results from an incongruence, or misfit, between the worker and the job" (Maslach 189). According to Maslach's theory, burnout shows itself in individuals in three ways: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low sense of personal accomplishment (190). Burnout is rarely used to describe students who leave our public schools. However, because school is a student's job, burnout can affect not only teachers, but also students, especially socioeconomically disadvantaged students who are already feeling alienated in the school environment.

According to a report entitled "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," "lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events" are all reasons cited by students for why they have dropped out of high school. In examining Maslach's description of burnout, the application of this affliction affecting students can be made through connections in the behaviors and feelings of students who dropout and her description of professionals who burnout. Dropping out is "a prolonged response to stressors in the workplace

(school)” that stems from the “chronic strain that results from an incongruence, or misfit, between the worker (student) and the job (school)” (Maslach 189). I argue that dropping out and burning out share connections. For example, “the perception that school is boring, or the student being unmotivated, and the weight of real world events” could all be symptoms of the emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout. Furthermore, depersonalization could be demonstrated in the “lack of connection” a student feels toward school, just as a low sense of personal accomplishment could manifest from academic challenges. The important question is: what will prevent and heal burnout in our students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and the new teachers who serve them to allow them to be successful in the classroom or to return after leaving the classroom?

Part of the answer is found in educational constructivist theory. A process-based focus must be revitalized in our public school classrooms in which students and teachers engage in the following actions:

[B]uild personal interpretation[s] of the world based on experiences and interactions, [explore] knowledge [that] is embedded in the context in which it is used (authentic tasks in meaningful, realistic settings). . .create novel and situation-specific understandings by “assembling” knowledge from diverse sources appropriate to the problem at hand (flexible use of knowledge), believe that there are many ways (multiple perspectives) of structuring the world and its entities, believe that meaning is imposed by the individual rather than existing in the world independently. (Instructional Design Knowledge Base)

Instead of the product-centered approach, the basis of my argument rests on constructivist Jerome Bruner’s work which argues that education should be about process not product. In his 1966 work *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, Jerome Bruner claims, “To instruct someone. . .is to

teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. . .to get a student to think. . .for himself. . .to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process not a product.” (72) This goal of student engagement is essential to avoiding the commodification of both students and teachers as well as the degradation of classroom work by the current test-preparation environment of our Pre-K-12 language arts classrooms.

Thirty years later, on the cusp of No Child Left Behind, Bruner recognized the dangerous direction federal education reform was heading:

Education is not just about conventional school matters like curriculum or standards or testing. What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. (*The Culture of Education ix-x*)

He asks us, “What do we want our young people to grow up to be able to do?” Fill in blanks in workbooks and color bubble sheets? By returning to constructivism in the classroom, both students and teachers will be able to regain their sense of agency and become productive, innovative members of our society. Bruner’s educational constructivism reminds us of all that is missing in our current model of education due to the focus on test scores.

Workbooks. I looked around the rooms as I walked through my day—science to social studies, math to language arts—each content area had its own workbook. All of them had the state emblem on them. They had been provided by the state to target tested skills, and they had been used in every classroom I visited that day. I sat down at the end of the day to write notes for the teacher for whom I had substituted that day. I wanted to ask her if the workbooks bothered them like they had bothered me, but she came through the door before I had written a word. She

slowly sat down and looked at me with tired eyes. I would get my chance to ask. I worried she'd get defensive. Maybe the teachers didn't mind them. I took a deep breath and asked anyway.

"What are all of these workbooks? Did the state send them out?" I asked.

"Yes, they sent them out this school year." Ms. Watts sighed. "I just keep telling myself I have to keep pushing through this time. I keep hoping it'll end soon, that I won't have to try to teach kids out of workbooks. Some of my students don't even have the basic skills to do them, but they insist I use them anyway rather than go back and try to fill in the holes in their learning. Other students are so bored."

I looked at her face full of frustration at the unrealistic goals, the lack of freedom she felt she had in how to help her students. I saw frustration that I knew personally. There was something else in her eyes though that I no longer saw in my own. Hope. The difference was, I realized, that somewhere along the way, I had given up hope she still had that the system might be different, that I was making any kind of difference for the kids I was teaching. I didn't know how she kept that hope, and I didn't know how to get it back.

Degradation of Classroom Work

We test them and assess them. . .in order to determine what they know and don't know, can and can't do. The supreme irony, though, is that the very means we use to determine those needs—and the various remedial procedures that derive from them—can wreak profound harm on our children, usually, but by no means only, those who are already behind the economic and political eight ball. (*Lives on the Boundary* 127).

In the shared and marginalized space of the remedial¹³ classroom, both students and teachers are commodified and thus alienated by attempting to meet assessment goals rather than engaging in the inquiry involved in process-based learning that allows students to “seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently” (*Life and Death* 226). Federal regulation has not only had a negative impact on teacher-student relationships, but also on the quality of classroom work in which students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and teachers engage. Education has been reduced to mastering the basic skills of a limited number of content areas (reading, writing, and math) because those are what will be on the standardized tests at the end of the school year. Such skill-based, limited engagement with curriculum is a prime example of what Matthew Crawford describes as degradation caused by the “separation of thinking from doing” (37). In the remedial classroom, both teachers and students are forced to endure such a separation and degradation due to high-stakes testing and the severe consequences for schools, administrators, and teachers if test scores are below expectations.

The remedial classroom, in theory, should be a place where students go to fill in the holes missing in their education while simultaneously engaging in the type of education Ravitch describes. However, students are instead often limited to workbook assignments similar to high stakes tests and denied access to more challenging work (*Why School?* 128). Secondary English Language Arts curriculum is one area that has undergone dramatic changes over the past ten years as a result of No Child Left Behind, continuing to be revealed during the implementation of Race to the Top. One of these effects is that rather than pushing states toward standards emphasizing process-based, critical thinking approaches to reading and writing tasks, it has

¹³ Remedial classes are meant to assist students who are lacking the skills expected of them at a certain educational level.

forced many states to tailor their curriculums to the skills tested on assessments. Like state assessments, these practice tests require students to answer multiple choice and sometimes short answer questions over short reading passages. Writing practice is often an isolated, uniform essay prompt about which kids are required to write rather than student-generated writing in a variety of genres. The writing assessment is administered using the writing process, but it allows little time for each of the steps to be utilized and gives much weight to correctness rather than content. Rough drafts and revised drafts are often written in the same day. Neither activity allows time for Bruner’s “process of knowledge getting.”

“After you drop your bag, go grab a computer. It’s Scantron day!” I hoped my voice was enthusiastic. I had promised students that they could compete in their debates all week forgetting that two tests—first Scantron Performance Series and now, not even two weeks later, Achievement Series—would be sucking up several periods of class time. As the word passed along as students entered the room, groans and slammed backpacks quickly changed the vibe in the classroom. Eyes that glimmered with excitement about presenting a side on a chosen topic and arguing with their peers now looked stony. I struggled to keep the smile plastered on my face. I hated to see them all disappointed. One boy slouched in his chair, eyes cast downward, hadn’t even gotten a computer.

“Come on, kiddo. We need to get started. This test will tell me what you do well and what you need to be working on. Please grab a computer.”

“Miss, I just finished the last test. Remember? I kept havin’ to start over? You already know what I need to be workin’ on. I don’t wanna do this again,” he replied, his jaw clenched.

He had struggled so much through the last test. I didn't blame him for not wanting to go through that again so soon, but I knew I had to have his score before the testing window closed. I put my hand on his slumped shoulder and whispered desperately, "This one doesn't make you start over. You just answer the 30 questions and you're done! I promise."

With a sigh, he dragged himself out of the chair and very slowly returned with a computer.

"Thank you," I told him. I didn't want to be forced to send him to the office for refusing to take the test. I was so relieved he complied.

I went to my desk to wait for scores. As they began to come in, I scanned them, looking at the bright red "unsatisfactory" scores and yellow "at-risk" scores. Their scores showed their disappointment at our changed plans for the class period. They were rushing to finish so that we could move on to debates. I would have a talking to about my low scores to look forward to. I felt someone next to my desk and looked to find the reluctant test taker next to me staring at my computer screen.

"What does 'at-risk' mean? And why is it yellow like a stoplight? Does it mean they think I'm slow?"

With more time focused on basic reading, writing, and math skills, students are also losing exposure to other disciplines that are not tested, such as music and art. In cutting out these so-called "extras," many of our students are left without the incentive to endure the disciplines in which they are less interested. Students who have passions that are in untested areas may find themselves with no access to classes and experts in that discipline and with no way of connecting the relevance of reading, writing, and math skills to their interests. Even if these classes are

offered, some schools require that remediation be taken in place of such electives. In *The Life and Death of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch observes:

Lack of attention to history, science, and the arts detracts from the quality of education, the quality of children's lives, the quality of daily life in school, and even performance on the tests. . . Children expand their vocabulary and improve their reading skills when they learn history, science, and literature, just as they may sharpen their mathematics skills while learning science and geography. And the arts may motivate students to love learning (108).

Test preparation, in contrast, only prepares students for testing rather than the connections and relevant, rigorous critical thinking processes to be found in exposure to a variety of disciplines.

Students do not perform for reasons that go beyond capability, such as unmet basic needs, and low-socioeconomic factors are a major contributor to that underperformance (Eamon 2005). Low-socioeconomic students who are already on the edges are further excluded from the process of knowledge getting due to this underperformance, and, as a result, school is even more alienating for these students. Meanwhile, new teachers of students from low-socioeconomic standing are also faced with alienation, for they are also asked to “separate thinking from doing” along with their students in order to improve scores on high-stakes tests. With their livelihood on the line, it is not surprising that in many classrooms, especially those where remediation is being attempted, there is “a teaching-learning process characterized by compliance and bereft of creativity” (Mann in Johnson 189). Teachers are also burdened with the conflict between what they know would be best for struggling kids and what they have been mandated to do by the school district to raise scores, such as using workbooks mimicking state assessments or adhering to scripted curriculum.

Scripted curriculum is the most extreme example of the effects high-stakes testing is having on English language arts curriculum. Teachers at varying levels of experience are forced by schools who have adopted such curriculums to follow instructions on what they teach, how they teach it, and when they teach it. Often such extreme measures are taken to help schools that are struggling with test scores by using what Jonathan Kozol describes as “openly conceded emulation of the rigorous approaches of the military and a frequent use of terminology that comes out of the world of industry and commerce” (“Still Separate” 47). In the program Kozol witnesses, he observes that all of the different learning activities are given to teachers standardized in language and method, and teachers are required to use these in their classrooms. In an effort to keep perceived teacher ineffectiveness from impacting student scores, more and more of what a teacher does in the classroom is being dictated by an outside power¹⁴.

With such degradation of the student and teacher’s classroom work, feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness are inevitable. While students are robbed of process-based learning experiences, teachers are also faced with being deprived of the chance to use their professional judgment, identified by Matthew Crawford as tacit intelligence, which he describes as knowledge gained by experience (37). Teachers’ professional judgment is being subordinated to other sources of knowledge regarding student needs such as “data” from computer-based achievement tests as well as scripted, textbook-based curriculum. Like their students, teachers experience disconnection from the “process of knowledge getting,” for they are deprived of the chance to use their resources to help students, and are instead forced to rely on computers and pre-packaged assignments.

¹⁴ Administration to which the teacher must answer or face consequences.

“We lost Matthew,” was all my principal mumbled, and I knew why she had called me first. They called him Cali for where he was from, and I was the only one who had spent time with him that school year. He had behaved his way out of school and was at home working online. The day he left, he loped up to me, his eyes bright, and told me, “I’m sorry, but they’re sending me home because I’m getting in trouble in other people’s classes. I tried this time though. I really did.”

I didn’t think he’d do much work online, but I was surprised to get an email. “Can I stop in and get some of the worksheets for my class?” He came in smiling, his little brother holding onto his hand. He gave the little guy his keys to keep him busy as he talked to me about his work. I was in a hurry, so I quickly sent him off with a smile and all of the work he’d need for the next two chapters. I came in the day I found out what happened and absentmindedly picked up my mail. Yesterday, someone had put his work in my mailbox that he dropped off, but he was already gone and it hadn’t even been graded.

I kept seeing his last moment next to his parent’s car in a parking lot, alone. I pictured him opening the trunk to find the loaded gun he knew was kept there. How could I have not seen this could happen? And then we sent him home to work alone. I went to my classroom, pulled every piece of writing of his I could find, and searched it for anything I’d missed. So much of it was impersonal—responses to random prompts for testing practice. Nothing of him was in there. If he had only been in school, if I had only had more time to devote to him, I could’ve watched him.

My kids filed silently into the room, circled up, and were sitting on the floor. Some were straight-faced, others had streams of tears rolling silently down their faces, one guy punched his

fist into his hand angrily. I numbly looked at them, choking back tears. All I could get out was, “We lost Matthew” before they fell.

Capital and Compromised Relationships

Of the four parts associated with student alienation—powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation—teachers have the potential to address all of these if given the opportunity to form relationships with their students. However, Rose recognizes that “due to class load, bureaucratic protocol. . .the difficulty of reversing established institutional perceptions, and a dozen other factors make it very hard to act fully on their teacherly instincts” (*Lives on the Boundary* 128). With all that teachers are expected to do—learning plans, lesson plans, data management, grading—even teachers who want to help may find themselves discouraged because the system does not lend itself well to helping their students personally or helping them gain the needed capital to be successful. Jonathan Kozol asks in his work *Shame of the Nation*, “What does it do to those who enter a profession, as the best of educators do, out of enlightened and unselfish inclinations that are not unlike the call to ministry or service that brings others into occupations that are altruistic at their core?” (122). The answer is that teachers share a parallel experience of the alienation endured by their students complete with their own feelings of powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. Both groups find themselves estranged, not only from the system, but also from each other and themselves.

Of our educational system, Diane Ravitch criticizes, “We must attend to the conditions in which children live because their ability to attend school and to learn is directly influenced by their health and the well-being of their families” (“Why I Changed My Mind” 4). Pierre Bourdieu elaborates on the role socioeconomic status plays in education in his work “The Forms

of Capital,” in which he attributes the challenges students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds face in school to a lack of economic, cultural, and social capital in the family of origin.

According to Bourdieu, lack of all three of these interrelated types of capital put students at a disadvantage from the moment they enter the public school system. Arguably, new teachers also lack economic, cultural, and social capital though they have left the family of origin. Most starting teacher salaries are low, most teacher education programs fail to fully simulate the realities of having one’s own classroom, and most young teachers have few connections within the institution to find assistance for their needs as a new classroom teacher. Sadly, in spite of this lack of capital, new teachers are often given the toughest assignments, and the lack of capital puts them at a disadvantage before any teaching even takes place. Thus, both groups struggle to meet their needs due to lack of these three types of capital and fail to do so.

Economic capital is at the core of the struggles for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, for the lack of resources is the foremost concern for parents in these families. Earning enough economic capital to meet basic needs is the focus, so, as a result, the family is unable to devote time to what Bourdieu describes as “the domestic transmission of cultural capital” (48). Many working class parents simply do not have the time necessary to assist in the child’s accumulation of cultural capital before they enter school and during the student’s education. Bourdieu argues:

Differences in the cultural capital possessed by the family imply differences first in the age at which the work of transmission and accumulation begins. . .full use of the time biologically available, with the maximum free time being harnessed to maximum cultural capital—and then in the capacity. . .to satisfy the specifically cultural demands of a prolonged process of acquisition. . . time free from economic necessity. (50)

Though students may have free time, working parents, especially in households where both parents must work or in single parent households, have less time to spend imparting cultural capital to their children. If their parents are lacking economic capital, then they, consequently, have less time to pass cultural capital on to their children. In addition to lack of time, they may also lack resources to assist in the transmission of cultural capital. Books, computers, and Internet access are extras in struggling households. As Mike Rose explains about his own childhood, “I was lucky in that although my parents didn’t read or write very much and had no more than a few books around the house, they never debunked my pursuits. And when they could, they bought me what I needed to spin my web” (*Lives on the Boundary* 19). As Rose recognizes, he was empowered by his parents’ ability to provide him with resources, for lack of time and resources cause major academic disadvantages for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Though students are coming to classrooms from homes where they acquire varying levels of cultural capital, schools, specifically teachers, could be in a position to assist low-socioeconomic status students in gaining what they are missing through meaningful relationships, partnerships with reliable adults who could help transmit the cultural and social capital missing from home. “The relationships that teachers build with students form the single strongest access to student goals, socialization, motivation, and academic performance.” (Harris in Jensen 20). However, most new teachers are enduring the some of the same deficits as students and, because of this, find they are unable to help, as they lack time and resources to fully assist students as well. For example, it is estimated that 62 percent of teachers moonlight in another job (coach, bartender, waitress, barista) to attempt to make enough money to pay the bills (Eggers and Calegari). With the overwhelming scope of a teacher’s work, much of the

energy for acquiring cultural and social capital to make up for students' home deficits is otherwise occupied. Though some teachers may manage to simultaneously gain the forms of capital, this is a difficult prospect for new teachers who are working elsewhere while still learning their job (Armario). The education of teachers obviously gives them more social and cultural capital than their students, so they have much to offer. However, this can only be fully possible if time and resources are present for them to do so.

Lack of social capital can also make school more difficult for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers because both groups find it hard to access relationships within the institution, never before having to form such relationships ("The Forms of Capital" 51). Parents' economic concerns and resources decrease the likelihood of time being left to engage in seeking such relationships for their families within the school. Rose illustrates this in his discussion of his own placement due to low test scores in Vocational Education, a track that in his high school was "most often a place for kids who are just not making it" (*Lives on the Boundary* 26). It took until his sophomore year for a teacher to realize that his class grades were far higher than those of most of the other kids in the class he was in. The teacher then discovered after doing some research that his test scores had been mixed up with another student's scores. About this experience, Rose writes, "According to all I've read since, such a shift. . . is virtually impossible. Kids at that level rarely cross tracks. The telling thing is how chancy both my placement into and exit from Voc. Ed. was; neither I nor my parents had anything to do with it" (30). Like Rose's, the parents of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds may lack the social capital to feel they can challenge the school's decisions about their child's placement.

New teachers also face the challenge of developing their own relationships in schools. Many mentors are put with new teachers, but often these mentors, like the teachers they are serving, are struggling to keep up with their own workloads. Additionally, schools often have schedules that do not allow time for collaborative work with teachers, mentees, and administration. These personal and structural difficulties hinder the ability of the mentor to impart their social and cultural capital to the mentee (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory). Also, mentoring often requires teachers to engage in even more paperwork, leaving even less time for quality mentoring to take place. All of these factors reduce the chance that new teachers will receive adequate mentoring to assist them in gaining the coping skills to deal with the challenges of their classrooms.

Bourdieu's Theory of Capital helps to illustrate that students are coming to public schools with needs not being met at home and that schools are not places where such needs are being addressed. For low-socioeconomic students who struggle academically and do not have role models or advocates at home, school continues to be a place of alienation. Thus, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds need relationships with teachers the most. According to the 2004 National Research Council, "When researchers ask youths who have dropped out of high school why they left school, the young people frequently say it was because no one cared. Those who stay in school cite meaningful relationships with adults who show an interest in them as individuals" (Stipek 47). Teacher-student relationships clearly make a difference for at-risk youth's feelings of belonging in school, yet new teachers are challenged to find the means to help students. As a result, the alienation of both groups continues and the transmission of capital is prevented.

“I’m so sick of these kids’ excuses!” Mr. Lill growled as he threw himself in his chair.

“They’re full of them, that’s for sure! Especially Eli,” I agreed.

“I don’t think he could find his ass if I handed it to him. His backpack is a mess,” Mrs. Ernst chimed in.

Soon we were all gathered at the table, and the teacher’s lunch room was alive. As we slung horror stories, I could feel my energy draining. It was the end of the second quarter, and we all were angry. Finals had come and gone and class averages were abysmal. My voice criticizing my students didn’t even sound like my own. There I was in the middle of the teacher’s lounge talk I had always been warned about, but I couldn’t stop myself. I had to get it out somewhere. I was dragging myself to work every day, dreading the moment the students came through the door. What was happening to me?

“I have so many failures that I’m afraid to submit them to the “F” list. We’re only supposed to have one or two failing, you know.” I said.

“Who came up with that number?” asked Mr. Lill.

“That’s what I was told in my mid-year evaluation. Any more than two, and they consider that a teaching problem, not a student problem.”

“Now they’re telling us how many students fail without knowing what goes on with that student every day? Have they met some of these idiots we’re trying to teach?” Lill snorted.

I sighed. “Many just don’t seem to care. It doesn’t matter how much I try to help them. And some of their parents don’t care either. It doesn’t matter how many times I call or email. I feel like I’m just wasting my time.”

Loss of Passion for Teaching and Learning

Current federal regulation requires that all students be proficient at grade level in reading and math by 2014—no matter what. This means that no matter what level the student is at in literacy and numeracy when he or she walks into the classroom, no matter what level of engagement the student displays in the classroom, no matter the behaviors exhibited by the student, no matter what circumstances outside of school the student is enduring, and no matter how often the student even shows up, the classroom teacher is responsible for that student's growth as measured by the state assessment that academic year. According to education historian Diane Ravitch, a one-time supporter of the law, "NCLB set an impossible goal. . . No state is close to meeting that goal. So by 2014, if the law is not changed, nearly 100 percent of our schools will be stigmatized as failures," ("Interview with Diane Ravitch"). Thus, teachers and students are not only being expected to prove proficiency through a tool inadequate to the task (one that examines only a single product of a student's work to judge his or her ability), but they are also being pressured to perform to a standard that cannot be achieved.

Unfortunately during George W. Bush's first term, any attempt to question the tenets of NCLB were pushed aside by what Mike Rose terms "no excuses" rhetoric (*Why School?* 49). Before it was even signed into law, Bush made this stance clear when he stated, "I believe every child can learn and I refuse to accept excuses when they don't" (*Good Morning America* 2000). In this statement, Bush effectively warded off challenges to the impossibility of the goals of NCLB by charging anyone who questioned it with undermining the abilities of our nation's children, refusing to address the struggles that students bring into classrooms and the difficulties of the teachers who try to teach them in spite of those struggles. This lack of understanding of

the classroom, combined with narrowed curriculum that fails to address the needs and interests of more students set classrooms up to be a breeding ground for frustration.

Through current federal regulation, the system has also “ignored the importance of knowledge” and “promoted a cramped, mechanistic, profoundly anti-intellectual definition of education where “knowledge [is] irrelevant,” (*Life and Death* 29). In addition to the current system’s effects on teacher-student relationships and classroom work, a final consequence is its potential to destroy students’ and teachers’ passion for what Aristotle argued was our nature—a desire to know. (*Metaphysics* 1). While some students and teachers continue to thrive in the system, there are other students and teachers for whom this tension produces stress to such an extent that they are emotionally, mentally, and physically unable to stay and work effectively inside the system. (Dworkin 492). Many of these students and teachers are on the fringes already, and after prolonged feelings of alienation, burnout occurs, and a need to remove one’s self grows and is acted upon. Students drop out of the system and teachers leave the profession.

Dr. Christine Maslach describes burnout as “a prolonged response to stressors in the workplace” that stem from the “chronic strain that results from an incongruence, or misfit, between the worker and the job” (Maslach 189). According to Maslach’s theory, burnout shows itself in individuals in three ways: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low sense of personal accomplishment (190). Dworkin claims that teachers are much more likely to burnout than other professionals (492). However, since school is a student’s job, burnout can affect not only teachers, but also students, especially students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who are already feeling alienated in the school environment and dealing with the stressors in their home lives. “Lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events” (“The Silent

Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts”) are all reasons cited by students for why they have dropped out of high school. In examining Maslach’s description of burnout, the application of this affliction affecting students can be made through connections in the behaviors and feelings of students who drop out and her description of professionals who burn out, including teachers.

There are shared connections between the reasons teachers burn out and the reasons students drop out. For example, the boredom and lack of motivation that characterizes a student’s withdrawal from school fits the description of emotional exhaustion. Since new teachers experience similar outside stressors, the degradation of their work, and subsequent alienation from their students, lack of motivation and boredom on the part of both groups is unsurprising. Another symptom of burnout—depersonalization—could be demonstrated in the “lack of connection” a student feels toward school and their teachers and vice versa. Depersonalization is characterized by cynicism believed by Maslach to be caused by emotional exhaustion. For struggling students and new teachers, it is easy due to proximity for both groups to blame each other for the difficulties of the current system rather than realizing they are both enduring the effects of systemic problems.

The final symptom of burnout, a low sense of personal accomplishment, could manifest for both students and teachers in the remedial classroom from academic and teaching challenges. For students, the low sense of personal accomplishment is the one that is most aggravated by current federal regulation. The labels and scores used for class placement and the nature of most remedial classes bring these students’ already low sense of personal accomplishment even lower. Mike Rose captures this experience in *Lives on the Boundary*:

They open their textbooks and see once again the familiar and impenetrable formulas and diagrams and terms that have stumped them for years. There is no excitement here. No excitement. . . There is, rather, embarrassment and frustration and, not surprisingly, some anger in being reminded once again of long-standing inadequacies. No wonder so many students finally attribute their difficulties to something inborn, organic. . . Given the troubling histories many of these students have, it's miraculous that any of them can lift the shroud of hopelessness sufficiently to make deliverance from these classes possible. (31)

As Rose argues, the students' repeated exposure to the same material presented in the same manner leads to emotional exhaustion or no excitement, depersonalization or frustration, anger, and embarrassment, and finally low sense of personal accomplishment in which they attribute their difficulties to something inborn, organic. This cycle, repeated often enough, can lead to a student dropping out of school altogether.

Dworkin argues that faced with the alienation of current federal regulation, teachers are (like students) "more powerless and prone to burnout" (506). Though the effects of the current system on students and teachers are explored, a factor not addressed explicitly in much of the literature is the effects of these circumstances on a teacher's passion for his or her content area, profession, and working with students. For example, in spite of the conditions currently in place for teachers, Mike Rose writes little about the loss of passion for teaching. With all of his criticism of the system, why is this aspect of the teacher's experience absent from his work? Though the findings regarding gender as a factor in teacher burnout have been inconsistent, gender is one explanation for the absence of this discussion (Comerchero 38). Despite

inconsistencies in research on gender and burnout, the differences in the engagement of female teachers in their classrooms are clear.

There exists much research on gender differences in activities in the classroom. In general, female faculty interact with students, use student-centered and collaborative techniques, engage students in higher-order cognitive activities, [and] use diversity in their classes to a greater extent than male faculty. (Park and Umbrach in Myers 40).

In all of the activities listed above, there is an aspect of interaction with students that would exert a lot of interpersonal energy. This combined with the lack of discussion of burnout in Rose's work suggests that female educators may be more at-risk than male educators for burnout. It may also be that, in the workplace in general, male workers are better at self-preservation than female workers. "Men are more likely than women to do things that help their personal wellbeing at work, thus negating burnout" (Captive Network in *Forbes*). It seems that male workers are better at taking time outs during the day to decompress than female workers, leading to increased longevity in the workplace. This fundamental difference in working styles could also contribute to the lack of conversation among male educators about the loss of passion for teaching.

Losing students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers, particularly female teachers, both have consequences that will impact not only individuals but also communities and society as a whole (Tyler and Lofstrom 86). Individual consequences of less pay and fewer job opportunities are just the beginning of the losses that come when students drop out. The community is also affected by teacher attrition. Teacher turnover "[contributes] to . . . instability, low quality of instruction and as a consequence [leads] to low student performance" (Terry and Kritsonis 1). Thus, it is imperative to our society that we find solutions

to keep both students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers from leaving the system.

It had seemed so easy to turn in my resignation letter in April. Now the last day of the school year had come and gone. What a day. My eyes burned from crying with students because I wouldn't be there when they came back. My heart broke as I imagined how they probably felt deserted, some of them let down by yet another adult in their lives. I never thought I would be one of those adults, but it just didn't feel like I had it in me to try to teach them anymore.

That eerie quiet filled my room that always does when students have left for the summer. I started to sort through files but just left them for the next teacher. Maybe they could use them. I wouldn't need them anymore, I realized. I waited to pack the kids' good-bye cards last. I had hauled all of my boxes out to the car, but I came back and sat in the center of my room on a desk (like I had always told my students not to), not quite ready to let it go. I couldn't believe I was leaving them. I read all of their messages again. Why hadn't it felt like I was making the difference the card and tears said I had?

I wondered briefly if I could go to the office and say I'd changed my mind. When I started teaching, I promised myself though. I promised myself that if I was losing enthusiasm, I would leave. As hard as it was to take the risk, I kept that promise. I gave them the best I could while I was there.

I finally stood up clutching my cards and made my way to the door. Lights out.

Conclusion

A conclusion to all of this is overwhelming to write, for so much must be done to repair the system as well as to repair those who have suffered in the system the most—students and

teachers. How do we repair the alienation that results from the effects of the degradation of work, loss of relationships and, most importantly, the loss of passion for teaching and learning? There are no easy answers to this question. Rather, it will take a concerted effort at every level to change what is wrong with our public school system.

Little evidence suggests that repeal of No Child Left Behind and the end of Race to the Top will take place anytime soon. Though the Obama administration is offering states waivers from the law, it still requires power to be handed over from the federal government to the state after a lengthy application process and continued monitoring by the federal government. As Congressman Scott Tipton explains, “States need genuine relief from NCLB, and these waivers won’t accomplish that goal. Rather than increasing local control over education, the administration is requiring that states hand over more control to Washington in order to get some temporary relief through waivers” (“Tipton: States Need Genuine Relief from No Child Left Behind”). Since change will be slow at the federal level, I believe that schools will have to work to begin addressing the problems created by current policy by making their own changes.

A first step to this will be creating a culture of constructivism in school classrooms that allow the focus to be on the process rather than the product. Teachers must be allowed “to teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself, to consider matters as an historian does” (Bruner 72). In other words, students must experience the content area using the thinking that is required in the real-world application of that content area. Students must also be assessed in more real-world ways. Constructivist assessments are not multiple-choice, one-shot assessments. Instead, assessments could be “teacher observation of students at work and through exhibitions and portfolios” (“Constructivism in the Classroom”). As long as the focus on high-stakes testing continues,

degraded work such as practice tests and scripted curriculum will continue to replace process-based work that allows students to be engaged in inquiry that relates to their interests and builds upon skills rather than just drilling them to use skills in isolation. At the school level, such a switch to this type of curriculum seems risky, given the sanctions imposed, such as state takeover, if such a switch fails. However, idealistically, I believe that such a risk would assist schools in combating burnout for both students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers.

Another step toward addressing the loss of passion for learning and teaching is letting go of the “no excuses” rhetoric that surrounds No Child Left Behind. This can be accomplished by involving local social agencies in the school districts to address the issues students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and new teachers face due to lack of economic, social, and cultural capital. Mike Rose argues, “For disadvantaged populations. . . education must be one of a number of programs that would include health care, housing, family assistance, and so on” (*Why School?* 13). Without addressing the basic needs of these students and teachers, learning will always be a secondary agenda to basic needs.

Providing these groups opportunities to gain cultural and social capital through a focus on creating positive relationships between administration, teachers, and students could also help to address the problem of burnout. This can be accomplished through several steps. First, administration and teachers must enter into partnerships rather than manager-worker relationships. This must be accomplished by collaboration focused on the teacher’s effectiveness as measured by more than student scores and one to two formal evaluations throughout the year. Teacher effectiveness should take into account more than just a few snippets of a teacher’s potential. Teachers also need to be provided opportunities to collaborate with their peers through

Professional Learning Communities or programs outside of the school district such as the National Writing Project. Such programs are often in danger of funding cuts, but reconsideration for funding these programs is necessary to teachers finding relationships they need to avoid alienation and burnout.

Students also need to be able to form stable relationships with their teachers. In order for that to happen, new teachers must have time and freedom to provide students with more inquiry, process-based work rather than focusing on testing in the remedial classrooms. With so much at stake with student test scores, new teachers will struggle to meet the needs of students in their classroom, and students will continue to fall through the cracks. In one survey of students who dropped out, “More than three out of five (62 percent) said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class” (“The Silent Epidemic” v). If given the opportunity, teachers, with more time to spend with individual students, could be the solution to this problem.

Smaller classes are one more way to allow new teachers to address student issues and have more opportunities to impart more cultural capital to students, but it would require an overhaul of many of our public school systems. “Students are less likely to drop out of high schools where relationships between teachers and students are positive. The impact of positive relations, however, is contingent on the organizational and structural characteristics of high schools” (Lee and Burkum 353). Simply changing degraded curriculum will not be enough if new teachers are not relieved of the logistics of managing classes of over thirty students, some with obstacles that make teaching them an incredibly difficult job.

Much must be restructured and changed to make this new vision a reality. I hope that as I take this break from the classroom and work to reverse the burnout that drove me out, I will be

able to witness steps toward such changes occurring. As I write this, I have observed little that could persuade me such changes will come quickly. However, the idealistic teacher in me who once believed I could make a difference is hopeful for new and veteran teachers who are sticking through this hard time, who are trying to keep their classrooms from becoming product and high-stakes testing-based. As Mike Rose notes on his own observations of classrooms, “There are...long-standing and cultural reasons for this failure of our schools. . .And yet there [a]re these rooms. Vital, varied, they [a]re providing a powerful education for the children in them” (*Possible Lives* 412). I like to believe that I had one of those rooms; I know that many teachers are still fighting for theirs, and I hope that all students will get to learn in such rooms in the future.

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