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The Necessity of Uncertainty: A Case Study of Language Arts Reform

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The call for language arts reform is clear. The expectations are high. The mission is to create classrooms in which all children are becoming strategic, critical, independent, and lifelong readers and writers (National Council of Teachers of English, 1996). Policy makers and administrators, however, cannot create these classrooms through instructional mandates. Duffy and Hoffman (1999) argue that teachers are key and that the success of language arts reform hinges on *independent, problem-solving, and spirited teachers who understand that their job is to use many good methods and materials in various ways according to students' needs* (p. 15). The educational community has repeatedly demonstrated that conceptualizing reform as training teachers to reenact an instructional program results in superficial or short-lived reform (Duffy, 1997; Fullan, 1996). A reform effort begins to fail when its participants become too focused on promoting the solution and *lose sight of the challenges that gave it life* (Hoffman, 1998, p. 109). Substantive and lasting language arts reform is inescapably linked to the abilities and the willingness of teachers to embrace and act upon the uncertainties that emerge as they teach students with many diverse needs.

Reform efforts that focus on preparing teachers to implement preordained practices without question or adaptation constrain teachers' abilities and willingness to refine their craft through reflective, insightful, critical, and ongoing inquiry (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Duffy, 1997; Fullan, 1996). Thus, such efforts discreetly undermine the process of real reform. Dewey (1929, 1933) explains that uncertainty is the force that creates space for real growth and change. A technical conceptualization of teaching and educational reform cannot provoke or sustain the ongoing reflection and inquiry needed for substantive and meaningful language arts reform. Knowledgeable teachers engaged in thoughtful decision making and probing inquiry who use instructional models as ideas for further refinement and who understand the role of uncertainty in their professional development are essential to successful language arts reform. Their uncertainties are its cornerstone.

I have worked with and observed the professional development of countless preservice and inservice teachers. My experiences have convinced me that developing more complex understandings of how teachers respond to and act upon the uncertainty that they uncover in their practices is a critical piece of understanding effective language arts reform. In this case study, I explore the varied ways in which elementary teachers in one system reacted to uncertainties inherent in a language arts reform effort. The teachers' varied responses were most likely linked in complex ways to differences in their beliefs, dispositions, and knowledge (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Schlechty, 1993); however, the primary purpose of this study was to describe how teachers responded to the uncertainty inherent in language arts reform.

Case Profile

Located in the same city as Auburn University, Auburn City Schools (ACS) is a district of nearly 4,300 students and approximately 300 teachers. Slightly more than 35% of the student population is minority (primarily

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African American). For many years, teachers in the district have been exploring how to teach language arts in more meaningful and effective ways. Many ACS teachers have challenged themselves to create more student-centered classroom environments that feature higher-order thinking and more active inquiry than traditional teaching paradigms. ACS teachers, to varying degrees, have been using children's literature, literature discussions groups, reading-writing workshops, and thematic units as they work toward teaching skills and strategies in authentic contexts, promoting self-regulating behaviors, and presenting language and literacy as lifelong ventures rather than simply school tasks. To further support these ongoing efforts, ACS initiated the Language Arts Revision Project.

The Language Arts Revisions Project was one of many projects that emanated from ACS's Goals 2000 project—a project in which parents, teachers, and community members worked together to delineate a vision for ACS. One of the major endeavors evolving from this initiative was the Language Arts Revision Project. The initial step in this particular project was to create an implementation team. Twenty ACS teachers (one per grade level per school), three ACS administrators, and three Auburn University (AU) teacher educators comprised the implementation team. Their responsibilities included exploring the links between theory and practice, writing a new language arts curriculum guide, creating new grade-level reading benchmarks, and facilitating ongoing discussion and learning among their colleagues.

The implementation team described a meaning-based philosophy in the new curriculum guide. Their terminology and tenets were consistent with the *Alabama Course of Study English Language Arts* (Alabama State Department of Education, 1993) and its emphasis on meaning-centered programs. The philosophy they described emphasized language learning as an active, student-centered, integrated, and social process that values and respects diversity and includes development of skills and strategic, critical, and self-regulating learning behaviors.

Teachers throughout the system received the new language arts curriculum guide. They also participated in staff development sessions led by consultants and members of the implementation team. In these sessions, participants discussed a meaning-based philosophy and shared practices grounded in this philosophy. ACS administrators worked with the implementation team to organize small group sessions for teachers to share their questions, refinements, successes, and frustrations. They also arranged for some teachers to visit other classrooms within and outside the system and for some teachers to attend professional conferences. Although ACS teachers and administrators were well aware that a meaning-based philosophy could not be mandated, the Language Arts Revision Project was born as a concerted effort to encourage and orchestrate systemwide inquiry into decisions regarding language arts. Although language arts reform is an ongoing process within ACS, in this study I focus on the first year of the project implementation.

Role of the Researcher

The role I played in the project was one of both participant and observer. I participated on the implementation team as an AU teacher educator. In this role, I observed the different ways that teachers on the team responded to the process and heard about the issues emerging in their respective school settings. Because I supervised AU lab students and interns placed in ACS, I saw and heard firsthand what was going on in the schools. I also served as one of several consultants, conducting several systemwide inservice workshops and facilitating numerous small group staff development sessions.

My participant-observer role gave me access to numerous formal and informal data collections. For example, I worked with other members of the implementation team to develop questionnaires and open-ended surveys so that feedback was gathered in a systematic way. These documents provided me with useful information regarding teachers' thoughts, feelings, concerns, and needs. However, I found that the most informative data came from unscheduled and spontaneous conversations that occurred as I participated in various aspects of the project. To manage the data and focus my interpretations, I made use of conceptual memos (Miles & Huber-

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man, 1984). I then identified and described themes that emerged from these memos.

Limitations of the Study

In a case study, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). Hence, the descriptions and interpretations that I offer in this study have been stimulated by and filtered though my interest in the role of uncertainty in professional development and my theoretical orientation that is grounded in the reflective practitioner paradigm for teaching (Schön, 1983).

To ensure that the lens that I used and the case study report were useful and meaningful to those participating in the project, I shared an earlier draft of the manuscript with the implementation team and participated in a discussion about its content in a meeting facilitated by ACS's assistant superintendent. I also participated in a discussion about the content of the draft manuscript with the principals at a meeting chaired by the superintendent. I continued to engage in informal discussions with the superintendent and several principals and teachers through the final stages of the revision process. These discussions not only validated but also helped clarify my observations and interpretations.

Although the uniqueness of this case study does not allow for wholesale generalization of the findings to other language arts reform efforts, the *real business of case studies is particularization, not generalization* (Stake, 1995, p. 9). Stake also argues that as readers visit and reflect on specific and unique cases, they bring their experiences into play. He refers to this process as *naturalistic generalization* and argues that this process enables readers to understand their particular situations in more refined and enlightened ways, thus promoting the thoughtful reflection and inquiry that are the foundation of effective teaching. My hope is that this case study will enable readers to view the uniqueness of their language arts reform efforts with increased insight and understanding.

Teachers' Reactions to the Uncertainty of Language Arts Reform

I have organized descriptions of the teachers' reactions to the inherent uncertainties of the Language Arts Revision Project around three themes: coping with freedom, searching for discrepancies, and dwelling in continuous revision. As might be expected, these descriptions illustrate how uncertainties that were tolerable and even stimulating for some proved to be intolerable and frustrating for others.

Coping With Freedom

In recent years, many ACS teachers had become increasingly less dependent on language arts textbooks for instruction; these teachers were becoming more confident in depending on their expertise and knowledge to teach language skills and strategies within the context of student writing. In contrast, prior to the Language Arts Revision Project, the system had leaned heavily on their adopted basal reading program for defining grade-level reading objectives, instructional routines, and evaluation protocols. Hence, at the onset of the project, ACS teachers tended to use basal reading programs more frequently and extensively than language arts textbooks.

The role of basal programs was turned on end with the move toward a meaning-based philosophy. Although the system adopted a new literature-based basal program, the implementation team worked with administrators to help teachers understand that the adopted program—featuring individual books and magazines rather than bound compilations—was to be used as a resource. It was not the reading program. They promoted the idea that the language arts curriculum guide provided the grade-level objectives and a theoretical framework to give direction to teaching, and they encouraged the teachers to use the *new* basals but not to feel compelled to use all the material that they provided. They also encouraged the teachers to use the *old* basal readers when appropriate and, of course, to continue using tradebooks. The implementation team wanted teachers to understand that the goal was to teach children to read, write, and think—not to complete a program.

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Some teachers were elated to be freed from the basals, language arts textbooks, and their accompanying evaluation protocols. Several teachers referred to having their *hands cut free* and *finally being respected to run their own classrooms*. Most of these teachers had been exploring more effective, meaningful, and authentic instruction and evaluation for years; they had assumed the personal responsibility to monitor and fine-tune what was happening in their classrooms. They had granted themselves the freedom to teach children rather than programs long before the central office defined, labeled, and sanctioned a meaning-based philosophy. These teachers were delighted when the system officially began removing some of the restrictions with which they had been dealing and offended at some of the rudimentary staff development sessions they were expected to attend. For these teachers, the Language Arts Revision Project had the intended impact. They viewed their increased freedom as an opportunity to venture even more deeply into creating authentic and challenging language and literacy environments, and they became increasingly comfortable with sharing themselves as readers, writers, and learners with their students.

Not everyone embraced the newly found freedom with equal levels of enthusiasm or confidence. Some teachers started the year with high levels of frustration. Nancie Atwell (1991), coining a phrase from Donald Murray, refers to the *terrible freedom* that some teachers experience as they realize they are being asked to stop teaching programs and start teaching based on what children are thinking and doing. More than a few ACS teachers, to varying degrees, found the freedom to choose their materials and activities disconcerting and uncomfortable. Many of these teachers had found prepackaged programs to be effective and felt secure in the consistency such programs provided across classrooms. Although some of these teachers seemed willing to reenact the motions of reading-writing workshop, literature discussion groups, and thematic teaching as technicians, they seemed uncomfortable with and frustrated by the degree of freedom, ownership, and responsibility that permeated these practices. They were concerned with the possibility of struggling students *falling through the cracks* if they strayed too far from structured language arts and reading programs written by *the experts*. They seemed to conceptualize teaching and learning as careful and responsible reenactment of information and practices preordained by others.

According to Watson, Burke, and Harste (1989), *a good way to get to know people is to listen to the questions that they ask* (p. 9). Their advice held true. The questions of some of the teachers—*So which basal am I supposed to be using—the new one or the old one? How do I teach skills without the workbooks? How do I get a grade?*-suggested that they were operating from a technical view of teaching. These teachers were not comfortable with the freedom that they had been given and pleaded for a more concrete definition of the new language arts program, more staff development, and more direction as to what materials they were supposed to be using and what activities they were supposed to be implementing. Several wanted assurance that classroom instruction would look fairly consistent across the system. *Look what happened in California* cropped up in more than a few conversations as some teachers expressed their concerns about the *deregulation* of the language arts program. Criticisms about *moving too quickly* were not uncommon. These teachers seemed unsettled by the freedom that they had been given.

Searching for Discrepancies

Within a meaning-based philosophy, teachers continuously refine their practices as they work toward creating meaningful, challenging, and affirming learning environments for all children. Progress, however, is contingent on a willingness to accept and participate in an ongoing search for discrepancies between beliefs and practices. Weaver, Chaston, and Peterson (1993) suggest that thoughtful teachers realize that they are *walking and talking contradictions* (p. 2).

In the early phases of the project, teachers were vocal in pinpointing contradictions between the system's espoused philosophy and its policies. They identified the use of letter grades, the emphasis on assigning and averaging numerical scores, the format of the report card, the mandated use of basal unit tests, and the practice of retention as areas of student evaluation that needed to be reconsidered. They also cited the

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numerical scoring of the formal teacher evaluation instrument with its grounding in a traditional lesson plan format as issues of teacher evaluation needing reconsideration. They identified the heavy expectations for committee work within a site-based management organization and the resulting lack of time for teachers to reflect on, discuss, and study what was going on in their classrooms as an issue of organization that warranted reexamination. Finally, they frequently mentioned the need for more efficient and productive communication between the central office and the schools regarding implementation guidelines.

In response to these concerns, changes began taking place. The implementation team completed and introduced the new systemwide benchmarks for Grades K-6. Central office administrators worked with principals to schedule small group sessions within the school day rather than asking teachers to stay after school. At some schools, principals and teachers worked together to simplify progress reports, to decrease the emphasis on *averaging* grades, and to explore the use of portfolios. But change was slow. Although many discrepancies had been uncovered, many of the policies regarding issues such as retention, grading, and teacher evaluation were etched so deeply into the fabric of the system and the community that they seemed impenetrable—at least temporarily. Some teachers accepted the incongruencies that were identified. They seemed comfortable with the concept that growth does not proceed evenly and that change causes things to get out of sync. They seemed to understand that fitting all the complex pieces together was going to be a slow and messy process. Others were less tolerant and complained that administrators were not providing sufficient leadership in aggressively initiating needed changes in these areas. They became disheartened and even angry because significant system-level change was not occurring more quickly.

Most teachers seemed to focus on identifying discrepancies between the espoused philosophy and system-level policies. Only a few teachers showed a willingness to open their classroom doors as they searched for discrepancies. These thoughtful practitioners called their familiar and comfortable practices into question and filtered them through their evolving philosophies. They questioned not only traditional practices such as workbook sheets and spelling tests, but also more innovative practices such as minilessons, literature discussion groups, writing workshop, and thematic teaching.

One teacher questioned the students' progress in applying the skills and strategies that she had taught through minilessons. She commented that *lots of skills and strategies seem to be floating aimlessly around my room, but only a few children have been able to anchor them.* In response to this uncertainty, she began identifying specific language arts skills and strategies to thread through a series of minilessons; she also began more intentionally to draw children's attention to these concepts in their reading and writing across the curriculum. Another teacher observed her students' growing disinterest in theme projects. She began questioning if her insistence on writing plans for the projects was contributing to their attitudes. This uncertainty led her to question if the language arts curriculum in her classroom was marked by too much writing and too little opportunity for other forms of expression. Several teachers wrestled with the notion of student ownership. They confronted their concerns about abdicating too much responsibility as they contemplated the balance between student choice and teacher assignments and between student-initiated learning and teacher-controlled learning. The varied discrepancies that these teachers uncovered served as evidence that they truly were immersed in a cycle of learning. These teachers viewed the messiness, complexity, and discrepancies within their teaching as a fertile ground for learning.

Dwelling in Constant Revision

If learning is a lifelong process, then language arts reform—like all learning—is in a state of continuous revision. Weaver et al. (1993) describe their vision of a teacher as *someone who continually strives to implement the best that is known about how to foster learning and who, by being a reflective practitioner, contributes to that ever-growing, ever changing understanding* (p. 2). Such a description demands that teachers learn not only to tolerate but to treasure the ongoing, never-ending nature of inquiry. At first glance,

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such a stance may appear dangerous and irresponsible to the public. What must be made clear is that the goals of education are constant and clear (Routman, 1996). Teachers must be able to clearly verbalize those goals and assure parents that, through reflective and responsible inquiry, they continually are achieving greater success in helping all children work toward these goals.

As I listened to teachers talk with parents during the first year of the project, I was able to see differences in the ways teachers used these overarching goals to stabilize the change process. In the midst of the uncertainty brought on by the Language Arts Revision Project, some teachers had no difficulty expressing constant and clear goals to the parents. On Parent Night, these teachers confidently shared the same message that they had been sharing for years—a message consistent with a meaning-based philosophy: *I want each of your children to become effective and insightful readers, writers, and thinkers. But I have another goal that is just as important: I want them to enjoy learning and to get caught up in a lifelong venture of learning.* They discussed what their children would be doing throughout the day, they shared with the parents what they would be trying this year, and they sincerely invited input from parents. They presented themselves as competent and confident professionals who had clear visions of what was important, who were engaged in an ongoing commitment to working toward those visions, and who were living examples of the thoughtful and reflective learner that they wanted their students to be.

In contrast, a few teachers faced Parent Night pleading with the administrators to tell them what they should say about the *new* language arts program. Conceptually, they did not view the Language Arts Revision Project as part of an ongoing learning process—as thoughtful inquiry into the messages being constructed by children about language, literacy, and learning. For them, it was a program exchange—the *new* program for the *old* program. However, nobody had explained to them exactly what the replacement program was. The teachers seemed to feel that being asked to face parents with such uncertainty was unfair and irresponsible.

Discussion

Teaching by nature is messy—full of complexity, doubts, contradictions, frustrations, and ambiguities (Dudley-Marling, 1997). Accepting this uncertainty is not easy. The discomfort created by the uncertainty is magnified when children and their futures are at stake. It is often comforting to be drawn into what McDonald (1992) refers to as the conspiracy of certainty. Parents, politicians, and educators who attempt to resolve complex educational problems with clearly defined, prescribed, and simplistic solutions perpetuate this conspiracy. However, this technical conceptualization of educational reform attempts to eliminate or ignore the uncertainty that sustains ongoing refinement of instructional models and thus constrains ongoing efforts to meet the complex and diverse instructional needs of students. Indeed, the failure of most reform movements has been linked to their inability to use the uncertainty of teaching as a means to spur further refinement of theoretically sound and research-based practices (Cuban, 1984; Duffy, 1997; McDonald, 1992).

In this case study, I attempted to describe the varied ways that teachers in one school system responded to the uncertainty inherent in a language arts reform effort. Predictably, I found that the teachers fell along a continuum in their willingness to tolerate and use uncertainty within language arts reform as a springboard for thoughtful and probing inquiry. Certainly, the different ways that these teachers responded to and made use of uncertainty were linked in complex ways to personal beliefs, dispositions, and knowledge; however, I became increasingly aware that the real challenge of language arts reform is figuring out how to create learning environments that aggressively nurture ongoing questioning, study, reflection, and exploration for all teachers. If policy makers, parents, and educators continue to privilege simplistic and technical conceptualizations of language arts reform over more complex and less certain conceptualizations, then classrooms in which children are becoming effective, strategic, and motivated readers and writers will continue to be the exception rather than the norm.

Although ACS teachers responded in varied ways to the uncertainty within the Lan-

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guage Arts Revision Project, overall they have demonstrated a growing willingness to be reflective and critical of their classroom practices. This growing willingness to be skeptical of their instructional practices has been accompanied by an increased willingness to question existing system policies. Gone are the days in which administrators created policy and teachers passively implemented it. ACS's Language Arts Revision Project seems to have injected system-level decision making with more uncertainty and more complexity than ever before. At a system level, unresolved tensions remain—primarily regarding issues of student and teacher evaluation policies. However, the teachers and administrators seem to be developing a greater tolerance for the uncertainty that creates the tension and more respectful of the role such tension plays in provoking and sustaining reform.

If ACS is committed to sustaining language arts reform, its teachers and administrators should confidently and joyously celebrate where they are. Many children are well on their way to becoming strategic, critical, and motivated lifelong learners. For these children, learning is an engaging, challenging, and affirming process of thoughtful and probing inquiry. But it is not that way for all their children. Similarly, many teachers conceptualize their professional development as an engaging, challenging, and affirming process of thoughtful and probing inquiry. But it is not that way for all of the teachers.

Guided by a vision of what is important about language, literacy, and learning, ACS administrators and teachers must allow themselves to wrestle with deeply engrained beliefs and firmly entrenched policies that impede the development of thoughtful and probing teachers and students. They must become increasingly comfortable with the tensions and uncertainties that emerge as they sanction the discourse of uncertainty as the primary vehicle for working steadily toward the goals to which they aspire.

Final Reflections

By taking the time to explore in up close and personal ways one school system's efforts to engage in meaningful language arts reform, I have been forced to reconsider and clarify my role as a teacher educator. I continue to view the goal of teacher education as twofold: to help teachers develop and refine their professional knowledge and skills, and to help teachers develop and refine their abilities and dispositions to think about practice in insightful and critical ways. However, I now understand that at times I have promoted thoughtful inquiry in restricted ways. Too often, I have privileged questioning of the practices and beliefs that I find problematic over questioning the practices and beliefs that I prefer. Phelan and McLaughlin (1995) argue that teacher educators must *abandon the discourse of certainty* used to promote preferred practices and adopt a healthy skepticism toward their beliefs and practices. Hoffman (1998) explains that teachers educators who advocate only their preferred program or method *set a group of future teachers on the wrong path of discovery* (p. 111).

As a teacher educator, I am charged with helping teachers develop their professional knowledge and skills, but just as importantly, I must accept the challenge to help them develop the inner strength to search for, embrace, and act upon the uncertainties that exist in their teaching. To become more effective as a teacher educator, I must become more willing to uncover and share with teachers the uncertainties that I harbor about the practices and beliefs that I advocate. And when I have no uncertainties to share, I need only to walk out of my office door and into a classroom of children. There I continue to find the uncertainties that breathe life into my professional development.

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