

MIDDLE-SCHOOL TEACHERS’ ENACTED BELIEFS Negotiating the Nonnegotiables of High-Stakes Accountability Policies

Christy Maranda Howard
East Carolina University

Samuel Miller
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The purpose of case study was to examine the beliefs and practices of a successful teacher in a high poverty middle school. Specifically, the study examined the role of teacher beliefs and how these beliefs were enacted in a middle school classroom. This article, part of a larger study, focuses on 1 teacher in order to more thoroughly probe and explore her story. Data collection included classroom observations, audio-recorded interviews, teacher assignments and information from school, district, and state websites. Results revealed 3 major themes surrounding teacher beliefs and practices: (a) high expectations with follow through, (b) building relationships and classroom community, and (c) self-authored actions through agency. These findings suggested that successful teachers in high-poverty schools held and enacted beliefs that were centered on high expectations and social learning experiences. As teachers acted on their beliefs, they also enacted agency in order to “push back” against the contextual constraints, primarily in regard to curriculum demands and assessment mandates, discussed in this study as “nonnegotiables.”

Never before has there been such a critical demand for quality teachers and instruction to meet and overcome the barriers and challenges of teaching in our nation’s urban high-poverty schools (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008, p. 69)

Middle school recommendations for providing a quality education for young adolescents call for teachers to use a variety of critical thinking

strategies, while simultaneously promoting student engagement and supporting individual students’ developing academic needs (Association for Middle Level Education, 2012; National Middle School Association, 2010; Nesin & Brazee, 2013). Demonstrating such expertise in schools where students’ historically perform poorly is critical because in such settings teachers can have an overwhelming

• Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Christy Maranda Howard, howardch14@ecu.edu

Middle Grades Research Journal, Volume 11(1), 2017, pp. 47–61
Copyright © 2017 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1937-0814
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

impact on student achievement (Delpit, 2006b; Ravitch, 2010; Tough, 2012). Advocates thus point to the need for schools to recruit and retain successful teachers as a critical component of any reform effort (Delpit, 2006b; Hanushek, 2008; Ravitch, 2010; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Tough, 2012).

The feasibility of using teacher hiring as a central reform component is limited, however, because an estimated 50% of teachers, who work in such schools leave in their first 5 years (Gimbert, Desai, & Kerka, 2010). It might be more appropriate to examine the teachers who stay and experience success. A better understanding of what causes teachers to succeed in such settings might help to improve students' achievement and serve to inform the professional development of teachers working in these settings. To address this issue, the present study focused on the case study of a middle school teacher, who was viewed as successful by her school administration because she met the challenges of effectively teaching literacy in a high needs school with high teacher turnover.

History of Accountability Policies and Practices

In framing this present study, we believe it is important to understand the larger accountability context because it presents teachers with certain expectations, deemed as nonnegotiable by policymakers and district administrators (Baker et al., 2010; Misco, 2008; Sleeter, 2007). Reform efforts in the United States historically have been aimed at providing a better education for an increasing number of students, particularly those from diverse populations (Sleeter, 2007). Beginning with the report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which called for higher standards to address the deficiencies in our education system (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), conversations and strategies for improving education became a daily focus for policymakers, resulting in a summit meeting of our nation's governors,

called by President G. H. Bush, in 1989, to focus on school improvement. The summit produced, *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act*, which when aligned with the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act, resulted in the Improving America's Schools Act (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). This act called for the increased use of assessments to measure whether reforms improved achievement for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Even though several states showed improvement following the authorization of the America's Schools Act, most failed to show adequate positive changes; therefore, the President and legislators called for new reforms (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), which resulted in the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001. This act strengthened accountability through state-mandated testing and coupled test scores with school-based rewards and sanctions (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Unfortunately, hopes for improved achievement, especially for traditionally low-performing poverty-designated schools, never matched initial expectations. A new policy passed by President Obama in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act, continues to address the concern of low-performing poverty-designated schools by calling on states to develop their own school improvement policies that will meet the needs of diverse students, with less focus on testing policies and an increased focus on teaching and learning. With this policy, there is hope that a balance can be found between accountability and authentic learning. Although it is unclear how each state will interpret and implement this act, it does appear to be a promising approach to increasing student achievement for all students.

A Dominant Pedagogy for Raising Test Scores

Teachers' mandatory adoption of a particular set of limited instructional practices designed to address accountability pressures might be a reason why achievement scores

have not increased (Delpit, 2013; Ravitch, 2010; Tough, 2012). Au (2007) identified dominant pedagogy practices as including (a) a narrowing of instruction to focus on test-defined content, (b) a fragmentation of the structure of the knowledge to include mainly decontextualized isolated skills, and (c) an increased use of teacher-centered practices. The use of pacing guides and district-developed lesson plans, presented as nonnegotiables by many district supervisors, narrowly specify which content should be covered and the frequency and order of its presentation (Delpit, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). Critics of these practices voice concerns because this sort of pedagogy primarily focuses on low-level knowledge and fails to promote critical thinking (Au, 2011; Baker et al., 2010; Misco, 2008; Resnick, 2010).

Teachers have reported frustrations with these nonnegotiables because they increase the emphasis placed on "teach-to-the-test" instructional approaches (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Costigan, 2002; Massey, 2006), thereby promoting a deficit view of learning, where lower performing students are viewed as needing more repetitive basic skills practice, denying them the opportunity to work with more challenging academic content (Delpit, 2006a, 2006b, Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2007). Ravitch (2010) and others (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Delpit, 2013; Sleeter, 2007) view teach-to-the-test practices as having a "dumbing-down" effect on learning, providing an easy excuse to ultimately blame students (and often their teachers) for their low performances.

The dominant pedagogy's limited instructional focus, along with its resulting negative effects on teaching and learning, stand as possible reasons why reformers' initial expectations for improved achievement failed to materialize. Nevertheless, many teachers have continued to be successful in the midst of this culture of low expectations. Studies of successful teachers should offer evidence of what policy makers and school leaders need to do to recruit and retain successful teachers in our

most challenging schools. A review of this evidence follows.

Teachers Who Resist the Dominant Pedagogy

Haberman's (1995) study of "star" teachers documented how teachers needed to "redefine and broaden the boundaries in which they work" (p. 779) to overcome the negative effects of teaching-to-the-test approaches to instruction. Haberman's star teachers negotiated nonnegotiables by having students wrestle with ideas of vital personal concern, particularly those that were related to issues of fairness, equity, and justice in their everyday worlds. Teachers involved students directly in the planning of their academic studies, emphasizing the need to understand major concepts and principles, as opposed to simply having them memorize facts and details. Students had opportunities to improve the quality of their academic work as they reflected on their lives and how they came to support certain ideas and beliefs. Star teachers viewed it as their responsibility to interest and engage students by creating learning contexts that were relevant to students' lives and interests (Haberman, 1995).

Similar to Haberman's star teachers, Cuban (2009) identified teachers, whom he described as "hugging the middle," as those who were able to find a balance between district accountability expectations and personal teaching philosophies by melding student-centered practices with more explicit teacher directed instruction. To meet the nonnegotiables of testing and curriculum requirements, successful teachers balanced direct instruction mandates with the need for students to take greater ownership of their learning. Interestingly, Cuban's (2009) work spanned across three school districts in both high and low poverty schools; not all teachers were able to find this balance, but those who did were very successful and flourished in such settings.

Zoch (2013) provided a detailed analysis of why some teachers were successful in high poverty settings by studying how teachers used

student-centered practices to drive instruction in meaningful ways. Despite their concerns with high-stakes testing, successful teachers integrated authentic literature with sophisticated reading and writing strategies to engage students in learning. This approach matched students' backgrounds and interests and as a result, students were engaged and teachers found greater enjoyment in teaching. As stated by Zoch (2013), successful teachers "acted in agentive ways when their beliefs about literacy teaching were threatened by test preparation" (p. 63). Further, Zoch expressed the need for more teachers to become agentive decision-makers, "who are able to navigate the demands of working in a high stakes testing culture while still promoting quality literacy instruction" (p. 63). Studies of effective teaching (Lasky, 2005; Lazar, 2006; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995), including those focused on culturally relevant pedagogies (Delpit, 2006a; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Tatum, 2000) confirm Zoch's findings and recommendations.

A closer look at the nature of successful teachers' student-centered practices further documents how teachers resisted the nonnegotiables of district-mandated testing, pacing guides and scripted lessons. This resistance stemmed from teachers' agency. Agency is defined by Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) as "the strategic making and remaking of selves within structures of power" (p. 4). Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) view agency as a tool to resist contextual constraints and create self-authored actions. This agency allowed teachers to engage students with a rigorous curriculum, designed or modified by teachers to align with students' needs and spark their interests, giving them frequent opportunities to exchange views, insights, and interpretations of texts' meanings with classmates (Johnston, 2012; Lasky, 2005; Lazar, 2006; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995). These learning experiences are aligned with the research surrounding middle school students' need to engage in curriculum focused on higher level questioning, problem solving,

and synthesizing information (Edwards, 2015; National Middle School Association, 2010). These teaching and learning practices underscore the need for teachers to have high expectations for all students, while challenging them with authentic tasks (Delpit, 2006a; Jensen, 2013; Miller, 2003; Ravitch, 2010; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007; Tatum, 2000). Indeed, students' reading and writing abilities are most likely to improve when they have frequent opportunities to read and write extended prose, collaborate with peers and teachers to set realistic academic goals, and monitor their own progress (Delpit, 2006a; Massey, 2006; Miller, 2003; Miller & Duffy, 2006). As indicated by Blumenfeld, Mergendollar, and Swarthout (1987), successful teachers bring the lesson to students while simultaneously bringing students to the lesson.

To study how teachers negotiated the non-negotiables of external accountability mandates, the present study examined the following research question: *How do successful teachers in an economically disadvantaged school adapt their beliefs and practices to meet their students' academic needs?*

METHODOLOGY

The present study utilized the case study method (Yin, 2009) to examine the teaching practices of the participant in a designated high poverty middle school during a given unit of study. To provide an in-depth view of participant experiences, this article focuses particularly on one of the case study participants, Julia (pseudonym). Data collection included observations, interviews, review of assignments, and public information gleaned from school and state websites. Data sources were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in an attempt to identify themes related to teacher success.

Dyson and Genishi (2005) asserted that researchers should use the case study approach to ascertain how the participants experience the world around them. The case study

approach (Yin, 2009) was appropriate to the present study as it helped us to examine how teachers' beliefs were related to instructional decisions. Examining classroom literacy activities as they took place provided insight into teacher beliefs about instruction and how those beliefs were enacted. Activities were examined and analyzed in terms of how they represented teacher beliefs as described in participant interviews and enacted in observations.

Context and Participant

Grove Middle School (pseudonym) was a magnet school located in the Southeastern part of the United States. The school served students in Grades 6–8. While some students apply to the school as part of the district's lottery system, other students at the school come from the neighborhood surrounding the school. The school was located in the downtown area of a small city in the middle of low-income housing developments. At Grove Middle School, 73% of the students were minority and 22% of the students were European American. The state reports 300 of the 442 (67.8%) middle school students were economically disadvantaged (receiving free and reduced lunch benefits). As a high needs school, during the past 4 years prior to this study, the school had been part of district incentives aimed at increasing test scores and teacher retention.

For the purpose of the present study, we discuss one teacher in depth in an effort to amplify her voice and experiences and to adequately and efficiently tell her story. Her story also clearly exemplifies the study's themes, which were consistent across the other teachers. Julia, an African American female, was a sixth-grade English language arts teacher, who had been teaching at Grove Middle School for 5 years. At the time of the study, Julia taught three 90-minute classes of English Language Arts each day. She carried leadership responsibilities, including grade level team leader, student government association faculty leader, CHAMPS (classroom management) leader,

and member of the school improvement team. Additionally, Julia had served for 2 years as a district teacher leader in helping implement the Common Core State Standards in her school. In these roles, Julia was both an advocate for students and a resource for fellow teachers. Additionally, during the study, she was named the school's "Teacher of the Month." By the study's end, Julia had been designated as "Teacher of the Year" for the school and was going on to compete for recognition at the district level.

Data Collection

Julia was formally interviewed two times during the study, once at the beginning of the unit and once at the end of the unit. Interview questions were based on literature surrounding teacher challenges, beliefs, and instruction. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed and coded. In the first interview, Julia was asked open-ended questions about how she came to work in the school, her leadership roles, her beliefs about teaching, and the unit she would be teaching. The second interview focused on Julia's reflection on the unit, her beliefs, and the context of the school. Throughout the study, informal interviews were conducted based on input Julia wanted to contribute. These informal interviews included clarifying questions. Handwritten and typed notes documented these interviews.

In order to observe particular behaviors and environmental factors, Yin (2009) suggested case study research should take place within the setting of the "case" (p. 109). In this instance, the case's setting was the classroom. An observation protocol was developed based on the literature surrounding effective instruction and teacher beliefs. Further, the protocol reflected information found in the interview questions in order to see how teacher responses to the interview questions were enacted in the classroom through observations. Observations afforded the opportunity to see firsthand how Julia navigated her challenges and found a balance between her beliefs about

literacy instruction and the expectations of the school/district. Julia's class was observed every day during the course of a 4-week unit of study to examine the sequence of Julia's instructional decisions and how she executed a unit. During observations, detailed field notes were recorded focusing on Julia's instruction, the context of the room such as instructional resources she provided or information on the boards, how she spoke to students, and the literacy activities she provided for students.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of each observation, the first author reviewed the raw data and initial thoughts and responses were recorded in researcher memos. After each interview was transcribed and initial coding was complete, the data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in an effort to recognize emerging themes and arising issues. Open coding was used after reading and rereading interview transcripts and observation data to develop initial categories. Coding charts were created in order to organize the data by examining each of the developing codes found in interviews, observations and informal conversations.

RESULTS

Findings revealed how Julia's beliefs emphasized (a) high expectations with follow through, (b) building relationships and classroom community, and (c) self-authored actions through agency. As Julia acted on her beliefs, she focused on academic expectations that asked her students to think critically about text while engaging as a community of learners in collaborative assignments and discussions. These findings highlight how Julia veered from the district provided lessons and created opportunities for her students that would allow them to share their ideas and perspectives col-

laboratively while examining topics from multiple perspectives and mediums.

High Expectations With Follow-Through

Julia's high expectations for students' learning were apparent in both her interviews and observations. She used several strategies to translate her expectations into daily instructional practices. Instead of following the district developed curriculum and lesson plans provided her, Julia went beyond these expectations by demanding the demonstration of more complex literacy abilities—the reading and writing of extended prose, connecting to previous learning, personal experiences, and real world happenings and using technology to communicate new learning. In addition, Julia required that her students present their ideas orally to classmates, work for extended periods of time on the topic of study and thoughtfully engage with classmates while sharing ideas. These expectations gave students academic opportunities that went beyond the expectations of the school and district mandated, multiple-choice assessments. These high expectations for learning were as represented in Julia's final interview as well. She stated:

I think you have to believe in the kids and know that regardless of their circumstances, situations, that they're still children and that they want to learn. My kids know that I believe that they can learn and that I teach as much as I can and give them as much as I can without blowing their minds in one given day. (Interview 2)

On the first day of an assignment on "The Bracelet," Julia asked a student, "If you were reading this to me, would you say this covers everything you need to cover? When a student responded, "No," she quickly stated, "Then, keep working!" With her consistent monitoring, she quickly assessed students' understanding and progress. She regularly asked, "Do you understand? Are you confused? Does anyone

need more time?" When constant monitoring revealed misunderstandings, she gave immediate feedback with follow through. Occasionally, Julia asked students to answer questions about the day's lesson before being dismissed. On one occasion, after returning test grades, she remarked, "A lot of you struggled with direct and indirect characterization on your test and that's okay. We are going to keep working on it. We will work on it in homework and warm ups, so you will get it." Julia expected students to work their hardest and, as a teacher, she supported them by creating an environment with constant conversations about their learning.

Evidence of her support and concern was evident after students received their report cards. Julia discussed the importance of making sure their grades represented their ability:

So you have your grades now, if you're not happy with it, then think about how you can make that different next quarter. For some of you, I put that your grade doesn't reflect your ability. Some of you are not giving your best ability. Even if you got a B, that doesn't mean you are giving your best ability, so think about that. I always want you striving to be better. Today is a beginning of a new quarter so today everyone has a 100% so you should try to keep that 100, but you're going to have to work hard for it.

To increase the effectiveness of these conversations, Julia involved students as coinvestigators in the learning process. Students kept data notebooks, where they tracked their learning progress across units. They tracked scores for each standard and recorded their scores as red, yellow, or green. On one occasion, Julia returned a test to the class, letting them know she had higher expectations: "Today you will get your test back, I was expecting a little better, but we will talk about it later." Later that day, as students recorded their grades in their data notebooks, Julia followed up by stating:

If you begin to see a lot of red on your graph, I will step back and look at my teaching, and you should step back and make sure that you

are doing your part as well. Yellow means we need to work together in tutoring. Green means you're good to go. Thumbs up if you understand this. This is going to help you to take ownership of your learning. When we do conferences and review, I will use these data folders to see where you are. (Observation)

Through such actions Julia communicated her expectations and monitored students' ability to meet them. Julia used rubrics to further engage students in the learning process. She stated: "When it comes to your book project, I am not going to give you any leeway. Your rubric has been given to you. Read it very carefully." The rubrics clarified her expectations and helped students' to monitor their understanding throughout the project. The completed rubrics also allowed Julia to monitor closely student learning and intervene at the earliest possible point in time. This emphasis on student ownership helped Julia to negotiate accountability by making assessment a more open and participatory process.

Julia's last strategy for implementing high expectations was to present material in a variety of formats. She used PowerPoint presentations, video clips, whole group instruction, and student-directed small groups. She integrated technology into her lessons and offered students access to texts in multiple ways, including read alouds, independent reading, and students' sharing of texts with each other. Her use of multiple formats allowed students to understand concepts from different perspectives, increasing the likelihood of transfer of this conceptual knowledge to other settings. The use of these three strategies exemplified a statement from her first interview: "I want kids to be able to walk out of my door to apply what they learn, not just take a test and forget it the next school year."

Building Relationships and a Positive Classroom Community

The second theme related to Julia's ability to develop a positive classroom community by

building close relationships with and among her students. Julia explained in her first interview how everyone had to have a sense of belonging for her to achieve her instructional goals, noting: “I’m not a teacher who feels like I’m the teacher, I’m in charge, I know everything, this is my room. This is our classroom and we’re learning together.” As a result, to effectively meet her goals, Julia emphasized the influences of the broader classroom community on students’ learning and motivation.

One of her strategies for promoting a positive learning community involved the use of student interest surveys. Soliciting students’ opinions helped Julia to gauge on an ongoing basis her classroom’s climate. It also helped her get to know her students personally as well as academically. She stated:

I do interest surveys, and a part of the interest surveys—it’s like a minireading and writing survey ... I also do a lot of “getting to know you” activities in order to help me make connections with my students and their families so I can pull those [ideas] into the various reading and writing activities.

By increasing awareness of students’ lives within and outside of school, Julia believed she was more able to promote greater engagement of students in their academic studies. She explained,

I have conversations with my kids outside the classroom about their personal lives. I show interest, and I ask questions so that they know that I really do care. And I think that makes the most—that impacts what I can do in the classroom the most because the kids know that you care about them, you truly care about them, [and they] will work for you. (Interview 1)

Encouraging students to support and celebrate each other’s accomplishments was central to promoting a positive classroom environment. In one observation, Julia asked a question, and when the student was reluctant to answer, she asked the class to encourage her. “Jane, you can do it, let’s everybody give Jane

a hand clap and tell her she can do it.” The class responded by encouraging Jane, and she did indeed answer the question correctly. On occasions when students were absent, Julia would ask for volunteers to take notes for them. Each time she asked for a volunteer, almost every hand in the classroom shot up. In addition, she celebrated student relationships. During one observation, students selected partners with whom to work on a project. An unlikely pair formed and, as they were working, Julia approached them and said, “I can’t believe y’all are working together. Usually y’all are always arguing. I’m glad you’re working together on this.”

Her reliance on developing shared governance further strengthened the sense of community in the classroom. Julia regularly asked for students’ input on assignments and classroom management practices. On one assignment, where students elected to work in pairs, Julia encouraged partners to focus on how they wanted the assignment to come together: “You decide how you want this to work. You get to decide what your poster looks like and how you want to show this information.” Julia believed this encouragement had other benefits for students. As she stated to one group of students, “The best part of working in partners is that you get to help each other, so why don’t ya’ll discuss that together?” Students regularly could be found all over the classroom and beyond where they had found comfortable places to gather: sometimes they would work in groups in the hallways, on the counters, on the floor, at the back table, or gathered together at their desks. It was clear that the students saw this as their space where they could gather together and learn from each other in a productive community of learners. This approach is supported by middle school theories of social learning that suggest that small group activities engage students in the learning process and allow them to take an active role in their learning (Association for Middle Level Education, 2012; Edwards, 2014).

On quarterly surveys, Julia had students evaluate their work ethic and effort, rate their

interest in assignments and activities, and set goals for the next quarter. Julia expressed how this evaluation was important for her and her students:

I want to see how I'm doing with them and I also want them to think about where they can improve. Are they doing their best? What do they plan to do to work on their goals for the next quarter?

To build a strong sense of community within the classroom, Julia used a variety of strategies to strengthen relationships among students. These strategies increased students' input into classroom decisions and facilitated their achievement of academic goals.

Agency Through Self-Authored Actions

Julia's strong sense of agency helped her to negotiate the nonnegotiables within her classroom: as a result, she resisted various contextual constraints and created various self-authored actions (Holland et al., 1998). Her knowledge of her students and her passion for teaching helped her to enact this sense of agency, which in turn, strongly influenced her instructional choices, particularly when they differed from the practices recommended in district curriculum and pacing guides.

When asked about how the new standards and curriculum impacted her practices, Julia shared how her negotiations evolved over time, helping her to teach based on her vision rather than being limited by the standards:

I felt like I really wasn't being me, I wasn't who I believe a teacher should be last year because every time I turned around I was jumping through a state-mandated hoop. This year I think I have more of a handle on it as far as that balance between what I have to do and what I really feel is best for the kids. (Interview 1)

Moreover, to become a successful teacher and to stay true to her ideal of herself as an

educator, Julia sought her own professional development:

Instead of—I guess to be honest, instead of whining and complaining about the changes, I've embraced them, and I'm like okay, it's not going to change. I have to accept this. And I've also—I've done more research. I realize that our school, or our district, I'm not sure which, doesn't have the money for a lot of professional development and I honestly can't afford to pay for my own stuff to go and to do it with the places that are out there and available. So I've just been doing a lot of reading, purchasing books, online reading, brain-based research, practices that work, working with a lot of like teacher communities and things like that to get ideas. I've made myself more familiar just through my own research and reading. So I've put more of an effort this year into trying to make this work and fit into who I am as a teacher, to make it work for my students, to make myself a better teacher for them. (Interview 1)

By demonstrating life-long learning practices, she became more knowledgeable about which instructional practices would best meet her students' needs while also meeting the changing demands of her school's accountability standards. Julia regularly altered the district's unit plans, making additions and deletions to meet her students' needs.

This unit is focusing on reading and writing informational text. The way it was written from the county it's supposed to focus on three major standards—citing textual evidence and making inferences; determining the central ideas and writing summaries, unbiased summaries; and then integrating information and presenting it in different formats. I'm going to add to that text structure, author's purpose, and comparing and contrasting different works. (Interview 1)

In making these decisions, Julia pushed against some of the district requirements because she did not feel that they optimally met her students' needs. Instead, she focused on the standards she was required to teach in

order to ensure she was meeting the needs of her students. She explained further:

I chose—I mean I focused on the actual standards. I didn't use anything that the district prepared just because I didn't think that the resources that we have available to us in the school would really lend to a successful outcome. It was dealing with music piracy, and I think that the kids wouldn't have bought into it anyway. (Interview 2)

This enacted agency was a tool for Julia to resist the contextual constraints of curriculum guides and instead create “self-authored” actions that would more effectively meet the needs of her students. This agency was exemplified during the classroom observations as Julia focused on texts and topics that were relevant to students rather than following the list of resources prescribed in the district curriculum guide. Instead of following the recommended lesson plans teaching students about piracy, Julia created her own lessons that still focused on the required “reading informational text” standards, but instead chose relevant topics for students. For example, in keeping in line with the required standards for this unit of study, Julia decided to teach about equality through WWII and the Japanese internment camps. In teaching this topic, she included the arts, music, poetry and writings from the time period as well. “I want them to see that nonfiction, informational text can be interesting,” she shared. In addition, Julia shared videos and photographs that represented the lives and experiences of people in internment camps. She worked diligently to provide the information to students using different mediums that would meet the standards, but that would also meet the interests of students, often integrating technology and pop culture.

In order to make these agentive decisions, Julia had to have knowledge of the curriculum as well as knowledge of her students' interests and what they may or may not “buy into.” She also had to understand the boundaries of the flexibility she was given by her principal. Again, there were requirements and expecta-

tions, but she was able to navigate those expectations in a way that stayed true to her instructional beliefs:

The pressure is there, either through the state or through your school or through the county.

So I had to adjust my teaching methods. I don't let that take over what I do in my classroom or take away from projects or the hands on activities. It's not all let's answer the question, analyze the text, and highlight and underline, we still do more hands on projects and application of the skill. I still don't feel like I'm a teacher that teaches to the test. (Interview 1)

As previously mentioned, Julia gave an assessment where students were to create a poster on “The Bracelet” in partners; however, she balanced this with a second part to the assessment in which students had to answer 25 multiple choice and open-ended questions about the text. In the initial interview, Julia explained how she realized she had to find a balance in her instructional methods and provide students access to testing vocabulary and some “EOG style reading passages” in order to help students become familiar with how they will be assessed when the EOG test is given. Julia also told students they needed to remember certain topics or concepts because they may be helpful on a benchmark or End of Grade test. With high-stakes assessment pressures continuing to pervade the educational system, Julia had to consider where she stood. Her instructional decisions characterized her enacted agency. She was a “data focused” teacher because she wanted students to find success and celebrate this success; however, she found multiple ways to assess students in ways that were meaningful to them. In addition, Julia found a way to give students ownership of their learning by having them create their own data spreadsheets.

Julia discussed the fact that she had to give common assessments every 3 to 4 weeks based on the district standards. She accepted this as a mandate and discussed how she made sure the students were prepared for it by giving them

exposure to similar questions. However, she also discussed how in between those assessments, she did what she believed was best for meeting the needs of students, which included ensuring that students show growth beyond the narrow expectations of the mandated assessments:

My ultimate goal in any situation is just to see a child grow. I don't operate on the fact that I need to get them to grade level. I operate on the fact that I want to see them learn, I want to see them grow. (Interview 1)

This goal was evidenced in the growth charts Julia had her students create and the discussions she promoted in class.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated ways in which a teacher in a high needs middle school, successfully negotiated accountability policies, which regularly promoted a teach-to-the-test instructional approach. Along with ongoing state pressures to increase test scores, the teacher was forced to use district-designed lessons and pacing guides which further supported a teach-to-the-test focus by specifying which instructional content should be emphasized and the frequency of its presentation. As stated earlier, these nonnegotiable requirements mandated the use of dominant instructional practices, where decontextualized skills are emphasized at the expense of curricula integration or student input (Au, 2007). Although the apparent logic of this approach appears intuitive—focus on what is tested and use district approved curriculum guidelines and materials—the successful teacher in the present study negotiated these parameters by implementing a more holistic, integrated, and student-centered instructional approach.

Julia's negotiations involved the adoption of high expectations, the establishment of trusting relationships within a positive learning community, and the demonstration of agency through self-authored actions. She had

confidence in students' ability to perform at higher levels than were expected by state-mandated assessments. Instead of demonstrating understanding through the use of multiple-choice tests, students read and wrote extended prose while collaborating with peers on assignments across several days or weeks (Miller, 2003). As advocated for middle school students, Julia developed engaging lessons and gave her students choices within them (Pate, 2005). Acting on the principle that academic standards do not demand a uniform curriculum (National Middle School Association, 2010), Julia avoided adopting the dominant pedagogical practices expected by the school districts in her efforts to enact agency on behalf of students. Students became coinvestigators in the design of lessons and assessments as Julia continually sought feedback from them regarding their engagement or lack thereof. To facilitate an understanding of topics and transfer of abilities across lessons, Julia presented the main concepts in a variety of formats across several occasions. Along with high expectations, she promoted positive learning communities by nurturing positive relationships. For example, a strong sense of involvement was paramount as Julia sought students' feedback through surveys and openly celebrated their successes. In her classroom, students evaluated their work ethic, commented on their efforts to be successful, charted their progress across the semester, discussed their challenges with classmates and their teacher, and rated their level of interest in their academic studies.

Julia used students' feedback to design more effective lessons and promote shared governance (Miller & Meece, 1999). Her agency allowed her to find spaces within the curriculum where she could resist the restrictive parameters of the district's rigid pacing guides and lessons by using a more balanced response to accountability expectations based on formative assessment (Miller, 2003; Zoch, 2013). Her approach broadened traditional views of cognition (Willingham, 2009) to include greater attention to the potential influences of using understanding of student's

personal and social lives to improve achievement (Afflerbach, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013, in press; Johnston, 2012; McCaslin, 2009). Julia's actions were consistent with middle school researchers' recommendations for teachers of young adolescents to implement developmentally appropriate instruction within their daily lessons by responding to diverse students' needs and interests and in a safe and supportive environment, where a sense of belonging is promoted by teachers (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Faircloth, 2009, 2012; Nesin & Brazee, 2013; National Middle School Association, 2010).

Julia's agency and instructional practices underscored a strong commitment towards what she expected from students as well as herself (Duffy, 1998; Fairbanks et al., 2010), advancing the notion that teaching is an avocation, not an occupation, where each day provided opportunities for the teacher to positively influence students' lives (Danielewitz, 2001; Palmer, 2000). Julia did not blindly follow prescribed lessons or simply attend to the expectations of state-mandated assessments because she did not view such practices as promoting students' learning and engagement. Her commitment to doing the best for students aligns with the dispositions of Haberman's "star teachers" (1995); Cuban's "hugging the middle" teachers (2009); and Zoch's (2013) teachers as "agentive decision-makers."

Implications

The present study's findings provide insights into how teacher educators and school administrators might increase the number of teachers who successfully meet the challenges of teaching in high-stakes accountability districts. Successful teachers' negotiations were based on visions for themselves as professionals, particularly as related to students' learning and motivation (Duffy, 1998; Fairbanks et al., 2010). As noted by Duffy and Hoffman (1999), visions provide a barometer by which

teachers may assess their professional development. We also believe visions served as a fulcrum for their agency (Holland et al., 1998), helping them to decide whether to modify, alter, or replace district suggested curricular recommendations and materials. In this view, teachers' success does not depend upon the adoption of "best practices," but instead upon their ability to align instructional practices with their beliefs (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Further, this view challenges the popular practice of questing to discover a "magic bullet" to improve both teaching and learning (Cohen, 1987; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Instead, the key to recruiting and retaining teachers might be to help them to align instruction practices to their visions of themselves as a teacher.

We are not suggesting an "anything goes" approach to promoting teacher development. However, teachers should be valued both for their abilities to engage students and to promote high achievement. Teacher educators and district administrators need to attend to both dimensions in their quest to promote excellence in teaching and learning. Student centered practices are successful because they both complement and provide relief from accountability policies' narrow expectations for improved classroom learning.

The present study raises important questions. The principal played a critical role in allowing teachers a "space" to negotiate accountability expectations. We did not collect data related to how this permission developed or the circumstances under which it was extended to teachers. Future research needs to look at how administrators decide to allow (or not allow) teachers to negotiate certain district and school mandates. Second, we started with experienced successful teachers; therefore, we are unable to discern how they developed their expertise. Unfortunately, preservice and novice teachers usually lack an ability to align their beliefs and practices (Kagan, 1992): thus, future research needs to examine how this alignment develops across a teacher's career, starting with an individual's entry into a teacher education program.

Limitations

Despite having collected data across an extended time period, the present study focused on a single teacher. The extent to which these findings relate to other teachers and other schools is unclear. Nevertheless, the present study addresses a gap in the literature that focuses on successful teachers in that it specifically explores teacher beliefs and *how* these beliefs are enacted within ever changing contexts of high poverty schools within high stakes testing environments.

Consistent with middle school researchers' recommendations to provide rigorous and engaging instruction, the present study showcases how successful teachers can enact their beliefs through their high expectations, by establishing a caring and trusting classroom climate, and by enacting agency through self-authored actions. Additionally, teachers' visions can serve as a barometer to evaluate their successes and a fulcrum to enact agency to negotiate the nonnegotiables of meeting accountability expectations.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, L. M., Pedulla, J. J., Madaus, G. F. (2003). Views from the classroom: Teachers' opinions of statewide testing programs. *Theory Into Practice*, 42(1), 18–29.
- Afflerbach, P. (2016). Reading assessment: Looking ahead. *The Reading Teacher*, 69(4), 413–419.
- Amrein, A. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2003). The effects of high-stakes testing on student motivation and learning. *Educational Leadership*, 60(5), 32–38.
- Association for Middle Level Education. (2012). *Middle level teacher preparation standards with rubrics and supporting explanations*. Retrieved from <http://www.amle.org/AboutAMLE/ProfessionalPreparation/AMLEStandards.aspx>
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258–267.
- Au, W. (2011). Teaching under the new Taylorism: High-stakes testing and the standardization of the 21st century curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(1), 25–45.
- Baker, E., Baron, P., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E., Ladd, H., Linn, R., & Shepard, L. (2010, August). *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers* (Briefing Paper 278). Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publication/bp278/>
- Blumenfeld, P. C., Mergendollar, J., & Swarthout, D. (1987). Task as a heuristic for understanding student learning and motivation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19, 135–148.
- Cohen, A. S. (1987). Instructional alignment: Searching for a magic bullet. *Educational Researcher*, 16(8), 16–20.
- Costigan, A. (2002). Teaching the culture of high stakes testing: Listening to new teachers. *Action in Teacher Education*, 23(4), 28–34.
- Cuban, L. (2009). *Hugging the middle: How teachers teach in an era of testing and accountability*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Danielewicz, J. (2001). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy, and teacher education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Delpit, L. D. (2006a). Lessons from teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 220–231.
- Delpit, L. D. (2006b). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Delpit, L. (2013). *Multiplication is for White people: Raising expectations for other people's children*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Duffy, G. G. (1998). Teaching and the balancing of round stones. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 79(10), 777–780.
- Duffy, G. G., & Hoffman, J. V. (1999). In pursuit of an illusion: The flawed search for a perfect method. *The Reading Teacher*, 53(1), 10–16.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (1997). Young adolescent development. In J. L. Irwin (Ed.), *What current research says to the middle level practitioner* (pp. 15–29). Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Edwards, S. (2014). *Getting them to talk: A guide to leading discussions in middle grades classrooms*. Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.
- Edwards, S. (2015). Active learning in the middle grades. *Middle School Journal*, 46(5), 26–32.
- Fairbanks, C. M., Duffy, G. G., Faircloth, B. S., He, Y., Levin, B. B., Rohr, J., & Stein, C. (2010). *Beyond knowledge: Exploring why some teach-*

- ers are more thoughtfully adaptive than others. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 161–171.
- Faircloth, B. S. (2009). Making the most of adolescence: Harnessing the search for identity to understand classroom belonging. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(3), 321–348.
- Gimbert, B., Desai, S., & Kerka, S. (2010). The big picture: Focusing urban teacher education on the community. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(2), 36–39.
- Haberman, M. (1995). Selecting “star” teachers for children and youth in urban poverty. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(10), 777–781.
- Hanushek, E. (2008). Teacher deselection. In D. Goldhaber & J. Hannaway (Eds.), *Creating a new teacher profession* (pp. 165–180). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Holland, D., Skinner, D., Lachicotte, W., Jr., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. H. (2013). Engagement with young adult literature: Outcomes and processes. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 48(3), 255–275.
- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. (in press). Engaged reading as collaborative transformative practice. *Journal of Literacy Research*.
- Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning Points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Jensen, B. (2013). Finding synergy to improve learning opportunities for Mexican-origin students. In B. Jensen & A. Sawyer (Eds.), *Regarding educación: Mexican-American schooling, immigration, and bi-national improvement* (pp. 299–324). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Johnston, P. H. (2012). *Opening minds: Using language to change minds*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Implications of research on teacher belief. *Educational Psychologist*, 27(1), 65–90.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that’s just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159–165.
- Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 899–916.
- Lazar, A. (2006). Literacy teachers making a difference in urban schools: A context-specific look at effective literacy teaching. *Journal of Reading Education*, 32(1), 13–21.
- Lewis, C., Encisco, P., & Moje, E. B. (2007). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalist inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Massey, D. D. (2006). “You teach for me; I’ve had it!” A first-year teacher’s cry for help. *Action in Teacher Education*, 28(3), 73–85.
- McCaslin, M. (2009). Co-regulation of student motivation and emergent identity. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(2), 137–146.
- McKinney, S. E., Haberman, M., Stafford-Johnson, D., & Robinson, J. (2008). Developing teachers for high-poverty schools: The role of the internship experience. *Urban Education*, 42(1), 68–82.
- Miller, S. D. (2003). How high and low challenge tasks affect motivation and learning: Implications for struggling learners. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 19, 39–57.
- Miller, S. D., & Duffy, G. G., (2006). Are we crazy to keep doing this? *Reading Today*, 24(3), 18.
- Miller, S. D., & Meece, J. L. (1999). Third graders’ motivational preferences for different reading and writing tasks. *Elementary School Journal*, 100(1), 19–36.
- Misco, T. (2008). Was that a result of my teaching? A brief exploration of value-added assessment. *The Clearing House*, 82(1), 11–14.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, 84(2), 112–130.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.
- Nesin, G., & Brazee, E. (2013). Developmentally responsive middle grades schools: Needed now more than ever. In P. G. Andrews (Ed.), *Research to guide practice in middle grades education* (pp. 469–493). Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.
- Palmer, P. J. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

- Pate, P. E. (2005). Academically excellent curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In V. A. Anfara, Jr., G. Andrews, & S. B. Mertens (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of middle grades education* (pp. 15–23). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Sanders, W. L., & Rivers, C. R. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. University of Tennessee Value Added Assessment Center. Research Report. Retrieved August 28, 2013, from <http://mccluelearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Cumulative-and-Residual-Effects-of-Teachers.pdf>
- Sleeter, C. (Ed.). (2007). Democracy, equity, and accountability. In *Facing accountability in education: Democracy and equity at risk* (pp. 1–12). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Sleeter, C., & Stillman, J. (2007). Navigating accountability pressures. In C. Sleeter (Ed.), *Facing accountability in education: Democracy and equity at risk* (pp. 13–29). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London, England: SAGE.
- Tatum, A. W. (2000). Breaking down barriers that disenfranchise African-American adolescent readers in low-level tracks. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(1), 52–64.
- Thomas, K. F., & Barksdale-Ladd, M. A. (1995). Effective literacy classrooms: Teachers and students exploring literacy together. In K. A. Hinchman, D. J. Leu, & C. Kinzer (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy research and practice* (pp. 169–179). Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.
- Tough, P. (2012). *How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1997). *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) guidance*. Retrieved November 21, 2010, from <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/Final/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *Overview: Key policy letters signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary*. Retrieved March 14, 2013, from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/020724.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Retrieved November 21, 2010 from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>
- Willingham, D. T. (2009). *Why don't students like school?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Zoch, M. (2013). Crafting theoretically defensible literacy teaching practices while supporting students with test preparation. *Literacy Research Association Yearbook*, 62, 53–67.