Making Room for the Middle Grades:
High-Stakes Teaching in an Era of High-Stakes Testing

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This case study describes a middle school language arts teacher attempting to maintain high standards of instruction while attending to the increasing demands of high-stakes assessments. Understanding how this teacher, Lisa, maintained effective pedagogy while attending to the external demands of standardized assessments offers ideas for maintaining responsive pedagogy in an era where assessment is moving toward uniform expectations for all middle school students. The tensions that emerged between Lisa's professional beliefs and the opportunity to enact these in her daily practice raise questions about the current trend in assessment procedures in middle school language arts classrooms.

Introduction

The mandate to place "highly qualified teachers" in every classroom has sparked multiple conversations about how "quality" is defined (No Child Left Behind, 2001). "Quality" teaching and learning, according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is, in part, defined by students' successful performance on high-stakes assessments. Recent discussions are solidifying this definition. Correlating teacher quality with middle school students' performance is arguably more complex than taking a test at the end of the year. What goals do we have for middle school students' literacy development? What assessment systems truly measure these expectations? Can we assume uniform assessment systems in our diverse society?

The growing body of research on exemplary literacy instruction across grade-levels offers a useful paradigm for investigating conceptions of "quality" in middle school language arts instruction. The models evolving from this research in the primary and elementary grades suggest "quality" is not a uniform definition, but instead it is a complex synthesis of content knowledge, pedagogical understanding, and the ability to navigate culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Morrow & Casey, 2003; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson & Rodriguez, 2002; Willis, Garcia, Barrera & Harris, 2003). On the other hand, there is little research related to exemplary literacy instruction at the middle school level. To truly understand what constitutes quality middle school literacy instruction, it is necessary to go beyond test items and scores and into middle school classrooms to understand how they support student learning.

What Research Suggests

In one study of first grade teachers' classroom instruction, teachers identified by supervisors as effective were surveyed about their classroom practices (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, Rankin & Mistretta, 1997). Survey results indicate that effective teachers balance explicit skill instruction with constructivist learning opportunities, using both or either, based on the needs of the students and the area of instruction. These teachers make use of a wide range of materials and encourage critical thinking. Case studies of five of these teachers report similar results (Wharton-McDonald et al.). Reviews of related studies of primary grade exemplary teachers document similar

findings (Block, 2001; Cantrell, 1998/1999; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block & Morrow, 2001; Pressley, Rankin & Yokoi, 1996; Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole, 1999).

Studies of the intermediate grades, while fewer in number, describe effective teachers as balancing explicit instruction with authentic learning opportunities (Morrow, Reutzel & Casey, 2006; Pressley, Yokoi, Rankin, Wharton-McDonald & Mistretta, 1997). A study involving 30 fourth grade teachers in several states questioned whether patterns of exemplary teaching practices emerging in the primary grade literature were applicable in fourth grade settings as well. Case studies described 30 fourth grade teachers identified as exemplary. Findings are consistent with those characteristics identified by the primary grade research. Generally, these teachers developed stimulating activities, held high expectations for students, encouraged critical thinking, and used a wide variety of materials and instructional approaches (Allington & Johnston, 2002).

The teachers studied across the primary and intermediate grades show evidence of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). Gay (2000) moves beyond paradigms of multiculturalism to suggest that responsive teaching involves understanding how students' background and position within the larger community influences their learning. The effective teachers described in the primary and intermediate grade studies successfully support students' literacy development by pairing a strong understanding of content and pedagogy with an awareness of the unique learning needs of their particular students (Pressley et al., 2001; Allington & Johnston, 2002). This level of responsiveness moves beyond cultural differences to consider students as unique learners whose out-of-school experiences and relationships with others within and outside of the school space sets the stage for their reading and writing development (Casey, 2006).

Effective Middle School Literacy Programs

Effective literacy programs generally incorporate a variety of instructional approaches to meet the needs of all learners. Students learn via direct instruction as well as through constructivist or embedded techniques. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of a well-informed teacher to use techniques from either "camp" to help students learn. Students need both direct and embedded instruction in comprehension strategies and the writing process. In a study of seventh grade vocabulary instruction, students' vocabularies increased when new words were presented directly before reading *and* when they were given the opportunity to learn new words incidentally while reading (Harmon, 1998). Similarly, survey responses from students in a sixth grade language arts classroom indicate that when students are taught reading and writing strategies explicitly and then given the opportunity to apply them to authentic reading and writing experiences, they demonstrate success (Dalhouse, Dalhouse & Mitchell, 1997).

Instruction that considers the social development of adolescents has proven effective as well. Studies of student writing groups found that when adolescents work in small groups with their peers they are more likely to take more risks and their writing improves (Anders & Pritchard, 1993; Graham & Perin, 2007). Many researchers argue that adolescents need to work and learn with their peers in social environments in order to be successful (Harmon, 1998, 2002; Strauss & Irvin, 2000).

What is Really Happening in Middle Schools?

Middle schools have historically favored a "one-size fits all" curriculum. This is often attributed to the number of students middle school literacy teachers work with on a daily basis, frequently as many as 150. Additionally, it is difficult to implement a literacy framework that offers motivating, differentiated materials that are responsive to the unique learning needs of adolescents.

Middle school teachers often assume the identity of either elementary grade practitioners or secondary specialists (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000). Many teachers working within this system are not encouraged to consider middle school as a distinct system bridging elementary and high school learning (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Dalhouse et al., 1997; Graham & Perin, 2007; Ivey & Broaddus; Larson & Richards, 1994; Strauss & Irvin, 2000).

In recent years, the "highly qualified teacher" stipulation of NCLB (2001) has redefined quality in middle grades, privileging content area knowledge over general pedagogy. This shift positions the middle school as a unique system that is not simply an extension of elementary school or a miniature high school. Unfortunately, despite recognition of the distinctive needs of adolescents, preservice and inservice training rarely reflects a focus on middle grade literacy instruction. Currently, schools of education are beginning to offer content area courses specific to middle school teaching. Informing this shift in the area of language arts/literacy is a belief that middle school students are more successful in literacy classrooms providing choice, a variety of materials, multiple methods of instruction, and the opportunity to work collaboratively (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Finders & Hynds, 2007; Graham & Perin, 2007).

Methods

This qualitative case study examines the beliefs and practices of one exemplary middle school literacy teacher.

Setting

The setting was a heterogeneous seventh grade language arts class situated in a middle class northeast suburb. It consisted of 24 students identified as having average to below average literacy skills. Students' literacy skills were determined by the school's leveling system. This included writing samples evaluated by a team of teachers, a standardized test given at the end of sixth grade, as well as teacher observation,

description, and recommendation. The standardized assessment received the greatest weight in placement decisions. This class is one described by the participant as a "level 2," which is designed for students working at grade-level. While this is the definition put forth by the school, the study participants demonstrated a range of ability. Five students were performing one to two years below grade level in the areas of reading and writing. These students received pull out remediation support at the end of the school day.

The school functions on a rotating schedule, with the observed language arts period ranging from 60 to 120 minutes, depending on the day. The middle school houses grades seven and eight with approximately six-hundred students in each grade-level. In an effort to personalize learning experiences for students, each grade-level is divided into four "communities" of approximately 125 to 150 students who work with the same cluster of teachers.

Introducing the Participant

Lisa (all names used are pseudonyms) is a middle school language arts teacher identified as exemplary by the school principal. The principal based his decision on the following criteria: (a) positive student response, (b) evidence of student learning based on informal and formal assessments, (c) positive relationships with the school staff, and (d) positive relationships with students' families (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Morrow et al., 1999; Pressley et al., 1997).

Lisa has been teaching for thirty years, spanning multiple grade-levels. She serves on various school committees and is considered a "pioneer" in her department as she piloted and implemented the current integrated model of literacy instruction used in seventh and eighth grades. Lisa is also a regular contributor to the school outside the classroom. She organizes the music for school musicals and serves as an accompanist for student performances. Lisa is well liked by current and past students who, during the interviews with Lisa, frequently stopped in to chat with their former teacher.

Data Collection

In keeping with case study design, multiple sources of data including field observation notes, interview transcriptions, and other documents were collected in order to develop a rich description of the teacher (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995). Data collected included notes and audiotapes from approximately ten hours of observation and five hours of semi-structured interviews occurring over the course of five weeks in the classroom described. An additional five hours of informal conversation and document collection contextualize this core information. Each classroom visit was spaced approximately a week apart. Observations and interviews were audiotaped and notes were taken to supplement later transcription. In addition, during the observations, a scan of the classroom taken every fifteen minutes provided insight into the types and frequency of activities that are part of Lisa's instruction (Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2002). Two semi-structured interviews and multiple informal conversations further

inform the study (Seidman, 1998)**.** Related documents, including lesson plans, student handouts, seating charts, and classroom sketches were also collected.

Data Analysis

Drawing on grounded theory design, analysis began with data collection (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995). Audiotapes used during observations and interviews were transcribed between visits and used to help frame subsequent observations and interviews (Creswell; Merriam).

Once all data were collected, transcriptions were imported into N6, a qualitative analysis software program. Digital folders were used to keep interviews, observations, and documents separate from one another and organized sequentially. At the conclusion of each visit, a researcher journal was used to minimize bias and bracket out preconceived notions of literacy instruction.

Each of the data sets was read between visits and several times at the conclusion of data collection. The initial categories emerged while the researcher was working with Lisa. These categories included beliefs and practices of literacy instruction, management, struggling students, grouping patterns, teacher/student interaction, changes in beliefs and practices, and physical environment (Creswell, 1998). Using the constant comparative method of analysis, these initial codes allowed the data to be reduced and organized according to each visit and each source. The research investigator then looked across the data to see how these categories related to one another. Initial categories developed into the larger themes of beliefs and practices about literacy instruction, organization and management, and building relationships. Considering these themes concurrently frames the case description and allows for a richer understanding of Lisa's literacy instruction.

Documents, which included lesson plans, student handouts, and classroom sketches, were not imported into N6 but considered in the coding alongside the transcriptions. For example, while Lisa's description of management in an interview was coded as management, her formation of groups written in a lesson plan was also coded as management. In the later development of themes, these different sources offered a richer view of Lisa's instruction. At times, discrepancies between sources allowed the tensions between Lisa's beliefs and practices to be considered.

Validity

In keeping with case study design, multiple measures were used to ensure validity (Yin, 1994) including (a) member checks, (b) triangulation, and (c) a researcher journal (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995).

Member checks. Lisa reviewed transcriptions of the observations and interviews throughout data collection. Lisa was provided with a copy of the transcribed data weekly and asked to verify the information. In addition, upon completion of the project, Lisa was

provided with a case description and given the opportunity to respond to any perceived inaccuracies. Lisa generally felt comfortable with the description, but believed there were more weaknesses in her instruction than reported.

Triangulation. Use of interviews, field notes and audiotaped observations and documents collected in the field provided a comprehensive account of Lisa's beliefs and instructional practices. During analysis, using all three sources helped to ensure that interpretations were well supported. Using lesson plans as well as classroom photographs and sketches allowed the researcher to explore how the environment contributed to the students' literacy development.

Researcher journal. A journal documenting the researcher's reactions and observations during data collection helped inform analysis. The journal also allowed reference back to key incidents and thoughts during collection. In addition, reported accounts of reactions to specific incidents helped frame the interpretation for the reader of this study so he or she can begin to draw his or her own conclusions.

Case Description

Throughout the case description, the data sources are organized according to three themes: literacy instruction, organization and management, and relationship with students. For the purpose of discussion, each theme will be described in isolation, but it is the relationship among the three that offers a rich picture of Lisa's effective instruction. Interview segments are paired with observations throughout in an effort to more fully explore the relationship between Lisa's beliefs and practices while providing a rich illustration of her work. In an effort to allow the reader to understand the data in context, a description of the source and, where relevant, the timing of the data collection are offered throughout the case description.

Literacy Instruction

Lisa's literacy instruction included the following components: (a) students were introduced to a variety of reading, writing, and word study activities; (b) direct instruction, group inquiry, and independent activities were utilized; (c) planning was responsive to students' needs; (d) establishing structured management techniques was critical to maintaining student engagement and maximizing instructional time; (e) building strong interpersonal relationships was a key component to motivating individual learners; and (f) external requirements were balanced with purposeful literacy activities. Lisa's instruction was generally reflective of her beliefs. Lisa offered multiple literacy opportunities for her students and reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing were frequently woven throughout meaningful activities. The district and state pressures of test performance, however, also played into Lisa's instruction, as the tension she described in her interviews was realized in daily practice.

Lisa's beliefs. Lisa believed that literacy instruction is more than reading and writing. During our initial interview one February afternoon, sitting surrounded by

student work in her now empty classroom, Lisa painted this picture of what she believed effective literacy instruction involves.

> I think about the word "literacy" and I think about the opportunity for kids to be exposed to as many different areas of the language arts as possible. Through that exposure I want them to grasp onto something that is going to bring meaning to them. If you talk about the five areas of the language arts, you're talking about reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. Incorporating all those areas into the classroom instruction so that if someone's strength is reading, they pick up on that. If someone else's strength is writing, they pick up on that area and hopefully integrate those areas, so some meaning can come out of the goals you have intended.

Lisa believed that in order for students to find something meaningful, it was her job to offer multiple types of literacy experiences so that every student can succeed. She explained during an informal conversation between classes that in order to reach this goal, she needed to constantly "…observe, look, and listen. You hear them talking back and forth, you watch their habits."

It is clear that Lisa believed in setting high standards for her students. In talking about how to handle the different needs of her students, she underscored the importance of exposing all students to quality literature and having the opportunity to engage in meaningful literacy experiences. In our final interview, Lisa described feeling frustrated by the current trend of assessing learning primarily through standardized tests.

> …the emphasis is on the scores, whether I agree with that or not, and I don't. There's such conflict right now because what I think is important for these kids to be doing isn't even measured on a standardized test. They should be reading rich literature and analyzing, they should be writing wonderful pieces and learning the writing process, but that's not what the tests measure. And here we are caught in the trap. We need to make sure those students are successful on those tests and the scores go up because goodness knows that's what it's all about this year. No Child Left Behind is the phrase.

This tension between what was expected of Lisa's students and what she valued about their learning emerged as a recurring theme in both our discussions and in classroom observations.

Reading instruction. In Lisa's classroom, students engaged in multiple reading experiences. They read books independently and maintained weekly reading logs while investigating multiple genres**,** including essays, science fiction, and plays.

Lisa scaffolded her students' reading by modeling effective strategies and making use of visual organizers. Lisa began a discussion of *I Am a Native of North America* (George, 1994)*,* an expository essay, by asking students to look for supporting

details within the larger piece. Lisa provided a visual framework during the lesson to assist the students in their task.

> Now I would like you to think back to your text. I want you to think about a specific example that provides the supporting detail that Native American society supports love whereas white culture often creates hate. You can underline as you read; do whatever you need to find support for that point.

While the students worked in groups, Lisa circulated, clarifying the activity with her students and offering encouraging feedback. Lisa then asked the students to delve more deeply into the piece and look for further support of other main ideas identified. Finally, as illustrated in the excerpt from the observation below, the class regrouped and Lisa asked the students to become reflective, not only of the essay, but of the reading process itself.

> Lisa: As readers what happened to your understanding of this essay when we went over this summary and visual organizer? What happens now as readers? Ryan?
> Ryan: I understand it more now.
> Lisa: You did? Are you just saying that? Because I was wondering. I don't know. I never used this before, but I wanted to try this technique to see if this would help you as a reader. So you are saying it does. Mark, what about you?
> Mark: When I read this last night, I really didn't get it, and then when we did this, it really cleared it up.

This balance between whole class instruction, small group discussion, and independent practice was characteristic of Lisa's reading instruction. Lisa frequently invited her students to offer feedback about instructional approaches in order to monitor their effectiveness.

Lisa also invited students to make real world connections to their reading. As the lesson progressed, the students' discussion about tensions between Native Americans and white culture turned to one of tension among cultures in general. During the whole class discussion, Lisa used this opportunity to discuss tensions in the Middle East.

> Lisa: Are you talking about America being friendly to other countries?
> Kate: Yes, and to others in our country.
> Lisa: So we are talking about in and outside of the country. Erol?
> Erol: America needs to treat others better.
> Lisa: And hasn't that come to the forefront with the conflict with Iraq and other nations?
> Kate: Can't we accomplish this thing with Iraq?
> Lisa: They have been making progress, but I think we should all be very carefully watching and reading about the process.

This discussion not only helped students to comprehend what they were reading, but also enabled them to more fully consider world issues.

Reading aloud was also an important component included in Lisa's reading instruction. Lisa frequently shared excerpts of interesting books and reading assignments to pique students' interests. Lisa attempted to motivate her students to become better readers by providing these multiple models, other resources, and a variety of activities to meet the needs of the various learners in the classroom.

Writing instruction. Lisa maintained that reading instruction and writing instruction were inextricably linked. Lisa and her students were immersed in reading multiple types of essays. Drawing on these reading experiences, Lisa introduced her students to writing persuasive text. Lisa encouraged their engagement by broaching an issue involving one of the greatest fears of middle school students, the prospect of lengthening the school day. During this observation, Lisa proceeded to model how to present a persuasive argument.

> We are going to go step-by-step and learn how to write a persuasive essay about this topic. Think about how you really feel about this. Now, before you start thinking about which position you are going to take, remember you want to get your point across but you don't want to ignore what another person might think.

Lisa then directed the students to begin brainstorming for ideas both in favor of and against lengthening the school day. As the students worked, she circulated, prompting students to consider specific points of view. Students were then asked to share their ideas with a partner and finally the class. After the class shared an exhaustive list, Lisa modeled the next step.

> All right, here is your assignment for tomorrow. On the back of this page I want you first of all to decide whether you are for or against. And then I want you to pick out the 3 best reasons that you can think of, both logical and persuasive, to support your opinion. Understood?

Then Lisa modeled completion of the assignment for the class.

Lisa's writing instruction paralleled her reading instruction as she infused whole class modeling, small group discussion, and independent practice into writing instruction. While a greater focus was placed on reading instruction in Lisa's classroom, she maintained that good writers are first good readers, and used their reading to mentor their writing.

Vocabulary study. The curriculum required that students use a separate vocabulary book for instruction. During multiple informal conversations after class, Lisa shared that she did not value this approach for development of her students' vocabularies. Lisa was observed minimizing the time spent on this activity by asking

students to evaluate their work in pairs or small groups. Lisa assessed understanding by circulating during this sharing time. In addition, Lisa placed a lot of responsibility on the students because it was through discrepancies about shared answers that questions arose. Lisa also divided each vocabulary unit into smaller components. While the activity itself was not challenging for some, the peer interaction made the work engaging for the students.

Organization and Management

In Lisa's classroom effective literacy instruction was contingent upon making purposeful management decisions both about the *content* of what students learned and the *context* in which this learning occurred.

Planning for instruction. Lisa believed that flexibility was critical when planning for instruction. While she completed weekly lesson plans to satisfy school requirements, she maintained that true planning happened during the actual teaching of the lessons. Lisa described this during our initial interview.

> I don't really rely on lesson plans. I write things down for the week and then by Monday the plans are different. I just think it is really difficult to have a sense of how much you are going to accomplish, whether what you have planned is the best idea, something may come up. It is a shuffling and rearranging kind of game based on what the students need.

Evidence of this flexibility was found when written lesson plans were compared to observed lessons. During a morning language exercise in the first observation, it became clear the students were struggling with semicolons, so Lisa put aside the planned drama activity and the students spent the remainder of the period investigating different uses of semicolons in small groups. When asked about this shift in instruction after class, Lisa simply responded, "That's what the kids needed." Lisa maintained throughout the study that this kind of flexibility allowed her to better understand what her students needed to learn and how to help them.

While Lisa maintained the importance of flexibility throughout her instruction, she also recognized the curricular demands and pressure of district testing on student performance. Lisa described this in our initial interview.

> In planning instruction I truthfully have to tell you those kids who are in the advanced classes whose standardized test scores are up there, I'm not worried about. For them my instruction is based on what I think is going to fulfill them as readers and writers. With others whose scores are not as strong, surely I want them to be enriched, but I have to focus more on the skills on that test because that's what we're measuring their success by.

When teaching the use of higher level questioning techniques while reading, Lisa reflected about how well her struggling students responded to questions that went beyond identifying elements in the text.

> They really had to think. As we went over those questions some of them said, "I don't have an answer for that." So I said, "all right, let's look at the questions," and I really had to give them time to think. With that time all of a sudden ideas began to pop up. It's not that they aren't capable of it, I think so often it's not expected of struggling students. And that's so true of the type of questions they get on the standardized test. How much thinking do you have to do about "What would be a good title for this selection?"

Lisa believed that time for student reflection and modeling led to student success. In practice, however, Lisa contended that testing often drives instruction for weaker students because so much of their success in future years is based on the test scores rather than her feedback.

Managing instruction. A recurring theme throughout Lisa's instruction became the various management techniques she used to maintain student engagement and class control. Lisa incorporated various phrases and procedures to organize students in order to maximize instructional time. This was noted throughout the observations. For example, during each observation when Lisa wanted to get students' attention, she simply said, "Class call" and they respond with, "Thank you." Students then knew to wait for directions. In addition, in the classroom sketches taken throughout the observations, students' desks were clustered in groups of four, and each desk within the cluster was numbered. When Lisa wanted to assign student roles she simply called out their numbers and students understood what was expected. Students had also been taught to "circle up," which meant to bring their chairs into a circle in the front of the room when that phrase was called. Lisa also incorporated "clock partners" into her routine. For example, when Lisa said, "Find your 2:00 partner" students immediately identified their partners.

Lisa believed incorporating these structures into her classroom was crucial to maximize the use of the limited time she had with her students and to ensure that she could provide engaging activities. Lisa discussed these management systems during our final interview.

> The biggest problem I have is trying to use the time as efficiently as possible. I'm just so conscious of the time element. Some of this is from cooperative learning classes that I've taken, some of it is just how it happens, just makes sense for me. The class call was from the musical theater camp, we did company call there. Using your time efficiently is one of the most important things we as teachers can do.

During each of the observations, Lisa made use of multiple strategies to maintain student engagement. Lisa believed that students need to learn in a variety of

contexts and situations and these management structures allowed her to move back and forth between whole class, small group, and independent work.

In addition to these structures, Lisa also made use of a variety of grouping practices in order to provide multiple opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities. Students were always given time frames in which to work and reminded of remaining time throughout. In order to reduce noise during transitions, tennis balls were attached to the legs of the desks and chairs to move the furniture around easily. This enabled group work to occur without creating distracting noise. When asked about the implementation of these practices during our final interview Lisa commented,

> With "circle up" what I initially did was to run myself around the room and say "I want you in a circle in that position" and that was it. After they have done that once or twice then they just know. The same thing with rearranging the desks, gosh, there is so much change in here all the time; we are always doing something – "all right, put them back in groups" - and they know. If it is expected then most of the time they follow through. With the numbers, I love the numbers, instead of saying somebody at your table; there is no arguing about it. Nobody has to say "will you exchange with me?" So if I say number one collect the work there is no arguing. It's just efficient.

Lisa believed it was as important to model the management structures as it was to model literacy activities. These structures allowed Lisa and the students the freedom to incorporate multiple activities into the classroom because all students understood their roles, freeing them to become more independent learners.

Relationship with Students

Lisa believed successful middle school teachers must have strong relationships with their students. In Lisa's classroom this was achieved by creating a positive physical environment as well as building relationships with individual students based on their unique personalities.

Physical environment. Lisa's classroom was a warm and welcoming environment that immediately focused students' attention on literacy. Sketches taken during each observation offer insight into the value Lisa places on environment. Student work was evident throughout the classroom. The walls featured carefully constructed displays of students' literacy experiences. The classroom library occupied one corner of the room, where students' independent reading interests were encouraged. In addition, large charts provided reminders about reading and writing strategies as well as classroom rules and routines.

Interpersonal relationships. During the observations it became clear that Lisa personalized instruction by understanding the personalities of her students. Lisa joked with some students; some she nurtured; and others were provided with clear boundaries. When asked about this during an informal conversation after class, Lisa

attributed these differing relationships to the different learning needs of her students and the unique personalities of developing adolescents.

In addition to recognizing the unique needs of each student, Lisa believed that all students need to be encouraged to find answers for themselves. In Lisa's view, the process that leads to learning is more important than the product. Lisa discussed this during our initial interview.

I think the *why* is so much more important than the *what*. I want them (my students) to delve into what they are really thinking because what they think and what they express are often very different. But you set a standard of what is an acceptable answer and you keep working on it until you get to that point and provide the steps to get there throughout.

Lisa continued to scaffold learning experiences for students, but ultimately held them responsible for comprehending the task. It was a balance that Lisa contended took a lot of time and was critical for student success.

Discussion and Implications

The ability to be a reflective and responsive teacher is consistent with the findings of effective teaching in the primary and intermediate grades (Morrow & Casey, 2003; Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor, Pressley & Pearson, 2000). In addition, incorporating structured management techniques is a theme that runs throughout the literature (Morrow et al., 2006; Pressley et al.). These structures, however, look different in Lisa's seventh grade classroom. They are more focused on showing students *how* to act and react than *what* they should be doing at a given time. In addition, the importance of building interpersonal relationships with students is not a central focus in the primary or intermediate grade research (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pressley et al.). This could be attributed to the unique developmental stage of adolescents, who are learning independence while typically feeling heightened insecurity (Piaget, 1955/1995).

Lisa's effectiveness is not defined specifically by her literacy instruction, management structures, or relationship with students, but is instead understood as a rich integration of all three of these factors. The unique personal relationship she builds with each student allows her to engage a classroom of students while monitoring individual learning. Lisa believes that good instruction requires a level of "structured flexibility" in order to be truly responsive to the individual needs of her students. To meet this end, Lisa constantly reflects on her instruction and the needs of her students, most noticeably during the lessons themselves, as students' needs**,** instead of written plans**,** often direct the course of each class meeting. To facilitate this responsive model of instruction, Lisa incorporates a variety of structures that does not limit instruction, but instead frees her and the students to shift approaches and activities with minimal disruption. Opportunity for choice within this structure is critical in Lisa's classroom.

The tension of curricular demands and the pressures of district and state testing limit the degree of flexibility that Lisa enacts in the classroom. Lisa expressed on numerous occasions frustration that "the tests", which were scheduled two months after this study was completed, often required her to design student learning activities that she did not feel were as important as other literacy events. Lisa clearly believes these tests do not measure literacy development or the effectiveness of instruction. Knowing that test scores determine access to educational opportunities, Lisa struggles to choose between implementing meaningful literacy activities and those activities that will help the students "pass the test." With the introduction of increased federal legislation, this tension is mounting. Lisa's beliefs, then, do not always inform practice. It seems that instruction is often a compromise between the two. It is this compromise that allows Lisa to develop meaningful activities for students while also attending to outside requirements.

Literacy research that documents effective practice focuses on the classroom and the classroom teacher. There is little documentation of the relation between these described beliefs and practices and the external demands of large-scale assessments and sweeping policy initiatives (Afflerbach, 2005). In Afflerbach's critique of high-stakes assessments, he questions whether the complex systems that define literacy teaching and learning can be narrowly defined according to single assessment measures. Instead, Afflerbach argues for more responsive assessment measures that offer multiple snapshots of students over an extended period of time using multiple sources of data such as writing pieces, informal reading inventories, and documentation of oral discussions and exchanges. Afflerbach, who in this policy brief is representing the National Reading Council, offers documentation for much of the tension Lisa describes as she reflects on her practice and her students' learning.

Multiple studies of effective teaching have focused on teachers constructing classrooms in ways that are representative of research-based best practices and responsive to the unique needs of students (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Block, 2001; Morrow & Casey, 2003; Pressley et al., 2001). The current climate of regulated and standardized education may transform the ways in which effective teachers can operationalize beliefs. In Lisa's case, these outside elements force her to compromise her professional beliefs and are a constant source of tension, particularly for the instruction of those students who did not perform well on previous large-scale assessments. As literacy educators, we need to think critically about our systems of assessment. Are we assessing what middle school students' need to know in order to help them use literacy to navigate their world? While this single case study cannot offer a generalizable paradigm for teaching, it does suggest the need to reflect on current assessment practices and, in turn, consider how better to support teachers and students in middle school settings.

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