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from Five First-Grade Classrooms*

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Commentary

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Commentary by Marjorie Siegel

More than ever before, teachers have come under fire as overpaid public servants thought to be responsible for our economic decline and diminished international standing. The signs of this "war on teachers" (Darling-Hammond, 2011) are everywhere; state legislatures are eliminating the right to collective bargaining, newspapers are publishing (or attempting to publish) teachers' "value-added" ratings based on student test scores, and school districts are engaging in wholesale firings of teachers at schools deemed to be failing. It seems that, unlike financial institutions, schools are never too big to fail, and it is teachers who get the blame.

In the context of this hostile climate, some would read the teachers in Laura Kates' study as resistant and deficient. They appear to ignore the rich data about children's knowledge of and strategies for constructing meaning with print that can be gleaned from ECLAS, and assign a purely instrumental meaning to ECLAS, thus reducing it to a "technical tool" (p. 8) for labeling children in terms of their "reading levels" and sorting them into guided reading groups. Yet, as Kates so powerfully demonstrates, these teachers were astute readers of the accountability culture that had begun to take hold in the wake of No Child Left Behind legislation. Once the district chose to use ECLAS results as a tool for surveillance and control, the teachers' pedagogical criticisms and choices made perfect sense. They understood that context was the text that mattered, so they complied with the mandate by confining their use of ECLAS to those practices that met the district's accountability agenda. The paradoxical result is that the teachers' skepticism about a policy mandate designed to strengthen their pedagogical knowledge of teaching reading became a catalyst for strengthening their agency as critical and strategic readers and reading professionals.

The teachers' reading of the accountability context and their subsequent confinement of ECLAS for purposes of labeling and sorting young readers can serve as a cautionary tale for policymakers today. As Kates notes, the ECLAS mandate was "extremely mild" (p. 23) in comparison to No Child Left Behind, which carries the threat of progressively harsher penalties for failing to meet AYP (annual yearly progress). What I find most significant about Kates' study, however, is the privileged status the teachers gave to the assessment tools they had assembled and made their own over the years. These tools bore a strong family resemblance to ECLAS, and the fact they the teachers reported using these tools in exactly the ways ECLAS was meant to be used presented Kates with a puzzle that ultimately led her to shift her own reading of these teachers and the policy context within which they worked.

Anomalies such as this have always served as the generative pulse of my research, and, in this study, I believe they served Kates' inquiry well. Instead of throwing out the data that did not fit within her framework of initial assumptions about ECLAS, Kates worked to make sense of the teachers' disdain for ECLAS and embrace of the assessment tools they had assembled. In doing so, Kates steps away from a deficit view of the teachers and points to the nuanced way they read the world and the word (Freire, 1983).

Ten years after Kates' research was completed, her message is both timely and urgent. And if anyone needs to be convinced that the time for a new discourse about teachers and teaching is now, the first International Summit on the Teaching Profession may open a few minds. This summit, convened in March 2011 by U.S. Department of Education in conjunction with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSS), and the Asia Society, was the first global conversation about teaching as a profession. Both the structure of

the summit and the list of invited countries were unique. As described in the announcement, this was to be a conversation that included teachers and teacher unions, not just ministers of education from "countries with high performing and rapidly improving educational systems (based on the results of PISA 2009) <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/international/teaching-summit.html>.

In reflecting on this summit, Linda Darling-Hammond (2011) noted that the denigration and deprofessionalization of teachers in the U.S. was out of sync with the respect accorded teachers and teaching in high achieving countries such as China, Singapore, and Finland. She illustrated just how out of sync in the following story:

[T]he Finnish Minister of Education launched the first session of last week's [summit] with the words: "We are very proud of our teachers." Her statement was so appreciative of teachers' knowledge, skills, and commitment that one of the U.S. participants later confessed that he thought she was the teacher union president, who, it turned out, was sitting beside her agreeing with her account of their jointly-constructed profession.

I suspect the Finnish Minister of Education would not have been surprised that the teachers in Laura Kates' study preferred the assessment tools they had assembled for their own practice over the one mandated by the New York City Department of Education. No matter how similar in design and intent the two assessment tools may have appeared to the administrators and to the researcher, the teachers had confidence in their knowledge and were suspicious that the mandated assessment tool would be used to control and judge their teaching practices. And, as Kates shows, their suspicions were warranted.

The question that stays with me as I consider the implications of Kates' research for imagining a post-NCLB future is whether policymakers will hear the voices of teachers. Ethnographic case

studies of teaching, curriculum, and change are rich with the sounds of teachers' heteroglossic discourse (Bakhtin, 1981), but they have little status in the policy world which values research evidence that can be generalized and scaled up. There is a high cost to teachers and to students, however, when policymakers ignore research that takes seriously the meaning making of those who must "implement" policies. There is no straight path from policy to implementation; mediated meanings may be the only thing of which policymakers can be certain. Kates' research shows just what this process looks like in action, and, in doing so, offers hints of how things might be otherwise if teachers had a seat at the policy table.

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