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Introduction: Classroom Life in the Age of Accountability

Gail M. Boldt
Penn State University

Paula M. Salvio
University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

Peter Taubman
Brooklyn College

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INTRODUCTION

gail masuchika boldt
paula m. salvio
peter m. taubman

In the opening to her 2007 book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Shock Capitalism*, Naomi Klein renders a searing portrait of what she describes as the auctioning off of the New Orleans school system soon after Hurricane Katrina. Although most of the city's poor still lived in exile nineteen months after the storm, the public school system had been just about completely replaced by privately run charter schools. In a matter of a few months, New Orleans was transformed into what the *New York Times* described as “the nation’s preeminent laboratory for the widespread use of charter schools,” while the American Enterprise Institute enthused that “Katrina accomplished in a day ... what Louisiana school reformers couldn’t do after years of trying” (Klein, 2007, p. 6).

The ongoing educational experiment in New Orleans highlights some of the most salient issues facing U.S. educators today: the erosion of the public educational system, the systematic resegregation of public schooling, and the loss of teachers’ professional authority to make decisions about the quality of life and learning in their classrooms (Orfield, 2004). Students living in rural and urban high poverty areas continue to attend schools in dire need of sustainable infrastructures and are subject to some of the most restrictive interventions. The narrowing of the curriculum to test preparation or performance objectives aligned with high stakes standards has impoverished the intellectual, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of life in classrooms. Students’ interests, curiosity, and play, as well as teachers’ passions and questions fall by the wayside as they work together to follow directives and meet production quotas. Meanwhile, parents who can afford the costs can opt for private schools that support a wide range of inquiry-based courses, critical conversations, arts programs, and opportunities for community involvement.

For this *Occasional Paper*, we invited teachers to respond to the ways in which the proliferation of standards and testing combined with their own loss of professional control is altering the landscape of American education. *Classroom*

Life in the Age of Accountability carries a special urgency as schooling becomes privatized and federal support continues to decline. Our goal is to raise questions about whether and how educators are balancing the demands of high stakes testing, scripted curricula, and a focus on performance outcomes with the emotional complexity of classroom life. Is it even possible in today's climate for teachers to sustain their commitment to nourishing the aesthetic and psychic lives of children?

More and more, it has seemed to us that various reforms promising greater professional autonomy and status as well as student success are not only disempowering teachers and impoverishing intellectual life in schools, but are serving as a portal for the *marketization* of teaching and education. Teachers are increasingly told that the measure of professionalism is not the development of their own expertise and responsiveness to the individual children in front of them. Rather, it is bought through their fidelity to uniform, commercial and heavily scripted curricula that promise (but often fail to deliver) greater student success. For many of the teachers represented in these essays, the concerns raised about the logic of a new teacher "professionalism" are brought to life by the wry and impassioned observations of the British educational visionary Jimmy Britton. He writes that it is the space for play, conversation, private and shared passions, and simply mucking about with life that enables human passion for living. The critical importance of these things is precisely what is "lost sight of in the rush and greed of a consumer-oriented world, often sacrificed when resources of time and money are insufficient, and when the purposes of education are read off in terms of a market economy" (Britton, 1970, p. 316).

An approach to education that is driven by the desire to replace the idiosyncrasy of the daily life of classrooms with "the development of cognitive and practice skills, of problem-solving and data handling; of number work and environmental studies; scientific, historical or geographical" reflects what Britton names as the misguided and impossible desire "to produce men and women with the efficiency of machines. It must fail ... because a man is a poor machine" (1970, pp. 152–153).

That teachers and students are indeed poor machines – and determinedly so – is reflected in the essays by the teachers whose research and reflections we present in this collection. In "Squeezed, Stretched, and Stuck: Teachers Defending Play-based Learning in No-nonsense Times," Karen Wohlwend eloquently describes how playful and inquiry-based engagements in kindergarten and first-

grade classrooms eventually gave way to the demands of district-mandated teacher evaluation plans that called for targeted reading strategies, seat work, and instruction using basal reading materials. Wohlwend's description of the resulting impingement on children's emotional lives and the professional authority of teachers in these midwestern classrooms resonates across zip codes as teachers work to get through the day "juggling the paperwork generated by the need to document our compliance, and generating a range of compromise strategies to find more time for play-based learning." What emerges in this essay are a set of core concerns that challenge us to think differently about what cannot or refuses to be contained by rubrics and performance objectives.

"Invisible Ink: A Psychoanalytic Study of School Learning" by Lisa Farley and "Mouthy Students" and the Teacher's Apple: Questions of Orality and Race in the Urban Public School" by Alyssa Niccolini speak to how we might strategically put apparent excesses—excessive talking and the excessive rush of memories—to work in the name of creating a pedagogy that challenges the logic of control and the surveillance of learning. Writing about her high school students and their penchant for "mouthing off" and "contested desires," Niccolini observes that "schools are spaces marked by desire, and I have become a guardian of the mouth." While the mandates established in the name of No Child Left Behind claim to "nourish urban minority youth, and low income students in particular," they do so through discourses that medicalize and pathologize. Minority students are pushed to reach numerical benchmarks, held accountable for their talk, and master what is mistakenly understood to be standard English (Stubbs, 2003).

The pedagogical event, like any artistic performance, is a collaboration that calls for inquiry as all participants work toward animating the material. Whether a student is learning to read, speak a new language, or use an algorithm, what works to bring the subject alive is not always visible or apparent—and certainly, it is often not planned, as Farley makes evident. Teaching, she suggests, is a form of memory that calls forth the adult in the child and the child in the adult, and each intrudes in unsuspecting ways on the work of education and induces us to symbolize what our conscious memories cannot fully contain or comprehend. What would it mean for educators to respect that which cannot be possessed or understood? What might it mean to direct our attention to creating a curriculum that works according to a system of production and reproduction that cannot be replicated or easily measured, but that moves us emotionally and civically and directs us out into the communities that call for our substantive participation and commitment?

Peter Nelson locates this form of curriculum in the woods, twelve years ago, before accountability and testing measures had eradicated “subjects associated with playfulness: art, music, and physical education.” In his defense of playfulness, Nelson argues that the loss of play has unwittingly provoked a loss of critical thinking and civic engagement. Like Nelson, Gillian McNamee argues that play is in fact central to the development of a literacy that is both personal and socially responsive. She paints a picture of young children at work and play that is simultaneously utterly familiar to those of us who have been in education for a long time and utterly remarkable in that it has all but disappeared in contemporary classrooms.

McNamee’s championing of play and imagination and Nelson’s call for “playful world traveling” are in stark contrast to the disciplining ethos that emerges in Elizabeth Park’s essay, “English Language Learners and High Stakes Testing.” As her students prepare to take their tests to exhibit English proficiency, the atmosphere, writes Park, “becomes military at best, prison-like at worst. Regulations are distributed. Teachers are warned that state examiners may appear unannounced to look for infractions of the myriad rules...” Scare tactics are used to try to assure that the testing activity remains uncontaminated by human desire, fear, or simple boredom.

Each of our contributors offers us generous narratives that contain what matters most to them. In their portrayals, we too have found a repertoire of pedagogical methods and insights that illuminate what it means to be engaged—at times enraged—public intellectuals.

While we began our comments with the charter school experiments in New Orleans, we end with a different image, one of hope and integrity. Inspired by the “people-managed tsunami rehabilitation” in Thailand, a small delegation of hurricane survivors from New Orleans initiated waves of direct action in New Orleans and are working toward taking back their city and the public school system they so highly value. Rather than relying on government support, members of these delegations are restoring their lives and taking part in communal recovery. “Reopening our school,” announced the assistant principal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, “says this is a very special community, tied together by more than location but by spirituality, by bloodlines and by a desire to come home” (Klein, 2007). These words and the project of “people-managed rehabilitation” taken up by so many courageous, imaginative citizens, offer, we believe, one of the finest examples of how educators

might begin to consider reclaiming their own professional authority. We hope that *Classroom Life in The Age of Accountability* contributes to reviving our public educational system in ways that inspire the practice of a democracy that refuses to be tempered by the insidious grasping after efficiency, compliance, and uniformity that is the false promise of the age of accountability.

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