

# Acquiescence, Accommodation, and Resistance in Learning to Teach within a Prescribed Curriculum

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*Any color you like, as long as it is black.*

—Henry Ford

**T**he Dartmouth Seminar in 1966 served as a summit meeting in which English educators from the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. met to discuss the English curriculum. In summarizing the ideas from the meeting, John Dixon (1975) wrote that in times of societal change, “there is a tendency to panic, to define an external curriculum—a system into which teacher and pupil must fit—instead of helping teachers, in departments and larger groups, to define for themselves the order and sequence that underlies their best work” (p. 84). This observation, made long before most current teachers had entered the classroom, seems quite fresh and appropriate for today’s schools. President Bush (2001), determined to leave no child behind, has instituted an accountability system that would require standardized assessments in grades 3-8 with high-stakes consequences. Many other states have created graduation exams, centralized curricula, and other measures in the hopes that all students meet a designated educational standard. Presumably, not only will no child be left behind, all children will run the same course and keep the same minimal pace or else, along with their teachers, be deemed unfit.

While such efforts have encountered much opposition and indignation among educators—see, for instance, the website of The National Center for Fair & Open Testing at <http://www.fairtest.org/>—they remain popular with politicians, policymakers, school administrators, and much of the public as a way to standardize education in an era celebrated in other quarters for its attention to diversity. The trend appears to be part of a longstanding

battle between what might be termed conservative and liberal views of society and education. A conservative view wishes to protect and perpetuate what has traditionally been practiced. This view is well expressed by Hirsch (1987), Bloom (1987), and others who argue for a common base of formal knowledge grounded in Western heritage. A liberal view would stress the need for diversity of practice and direction. Gardner (1985), The New London Group (1996), and others have argued this perspective with the goal of allowing for greater access to success and broader definitions of how one might negotiate school more successfully.

Lortie's (1975) observation that schools tend toward conservative practices remains true over a quarter-century later, as indicated by many studies of school practice (e.g., Borko & Eisenhart, 1992; Ritchie & Wilson, 1993; Smagorinsky, 1999). Meanwhile, as many conservative critics (Gross, 1999; Stotsky, 1999) have argued, new teachers are trained in schools of education that tend to espouse more liberal pedagogies. This chasm between university and school has often created a tension for education students who are immersed in a liberal culture during their university coursework and must practice in conservative school environments. Our goal in this article is to focus on one teacher who experienced this tension.

We aim to explore how her teaching identity was affected when she attempted to enact a student-centered, i.e., liberal, pedagogy in a school district that was in the process of introducing a heavily scripted language arts curriculum tied to district standardized tests. Our notion of identity is relational, borrowing from Lave and Wenger's (1991) view that "Learning . . . implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled

by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities" (p. 53). For teachers, these relationships include, among other things, developing a conception of the subject matter—including the curriculum—and how to teach it (e.g., Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994), developing a conception of teaching and learning and their role as a teacher (e.g., Cook, Smagorinsky, Fry, Konopak, & Moore, in press),

learning to manage student behavior (e.g., Bullough, 1989), and learning to work with colleagues (e.g., Smylie, 1994). We view these factors as relational because each involves either immediate involvement with others (e.g., student behavior, work with colleagues) or engagement with human works such as a curriculum or a concept (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia,

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## **Method**

The teacher, Andrea (this article’s second author), participated in a study in which she and five other preservice teachers from her university cohort volunteered to be observed and interviewed over a two-year period by this article’s first author (hereafter “Peter”). This period encompassed her student teaching and first year of full-time teaching. The observations were conducted in “observation cycles” consisting of two to three days during which several classes were observed. Peter took field notes on a laptop computer during each observation and Andrea provided interviews both before and after each observation cycle to discuss her instruction and the thinking behind her teaching decisions. She also provided lengthy interviews at the beginning of each year. In addition, Peter interviewed her various supervisors (mentor teacher and university supervisor during student teaching, mentor teacher at her first job) about their approach to mentoring and their views of Andrea’s teaching. Finally, Andrea shared curriculum documents, planning books, and other pedagogical tools that influenced her decisions about teaching. In addition to these school-based observations and interviews, Andrea and the other participants in the study constructed two group concept maps to depict their understanding of teaching and learning, one before and one after their student teaching.

The data were then read and analyzed by Peter and third author Tara Johnson, using the Atlas/ti qualitative data analysis software to code each observation and interview. The interviews and field notes were analyzed to identify the pedagogical tools that were emphasized in the different settings of Andrea’s university program and student teaching. (This coding system and the research design as a whole were originally developed by Pamela L. Grossman, Peter Smagorinsky, and Sheila Valencia for research conducted through the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement.) Each tool was coded in each of the following categories:

- › *Name of tool*: This category included dozens of tools, including collaborative learning, the district learning objectives, freewriting, portfolio assessment, literary autobiographies, and many others, particularly the coping tool that we labeled *accommodation*, which

Andrea used frequently to make compromises between her own beliefs and the requirements of the curriculum.

- › *Type of tool*: This category described whether a pedagogical tool was *conceptual* (i.e., capable of being abstracted to apply to many circumstances, such as instructional scaffolding) or *practical* (i.e., more immediately applicable, such as journal writing).
- › *Area of teaching* in which the tool was emphasized, including student diversity, classroom management, teaching, learning theory, assessment, writing, speaking/listening, reading, and language.
- › *Attribution* that Andrea made regarding where she had learned of the tool, including her apprenticeship of observation, her teacher education coursework, her mentor teacher, her colleagues, curriculum materials, mandates (e.g., district-mandated skills and objectives), and so on.
- › *Problem* toward which the tool was applied: student learning, identity, context surrounding classroom (e.g., policy), relationships, motivation, perception of students, control, classroom logistics, and classroom interactions.

For instance, during an interview that followed an observation during her first year of full-time teaching, Andrea said,

To pass that part of the [district] test you read the story and then answer it. But I've been reading it with them and then talking with them about it. That's what I've been doing. Other people [teachers] will like have them take the test and then they'll give back the test, however they did, and they'll give out the answers. And if they can explain how they—why they should have given the other answer, then they'll give them more points on their test. But I don't want to do that because I don't want the kids to look too closely at the questions because, like I said, they're bad questions and I don't want them to—I don't want to present it to them like—I don't want them to think that there's only one right answer and they have to figure out why their answer was wrong.

In this statement we identified two tools, the *practical tool* of the *standardized test* and the *conceptual tool* of *accommodating* her beliefs about assessment to the correct responses required by the district test. The *areas* in which she used these tools were *reading* and *assessment*. Andrea *attributed* the standardized test to the *mandate* provided by the district; the tool of accommodation was one that we attributed to *Andrea herself*. She used these

tools to solve a set of *problems*: to promote *student learning* about the tests, to address problems presented by the *context* of her instruction (i.e., the state mandate), and to contribute to her evolving *identity* as a teacher. Each “quotation” (Atlas/ti’s name for any circumscribed segment of text) in each interview and field note was coded in this manner.

From our analysis of the interviews and field notes, we were able to study the tensions Andrea experienced when making the transition from her liberal teacher education program to her first teaching job, which required her to teach within a prescribed district curriculum designed to make instruction uniform across 12 high schools that varied in their demographic makeup. Ultimately, Andrea agreed to participate as a co-author of the study to contribute additional insights to the analysis. In this capacity she verified the interpretations of Peter and Tara, maintained contact for several years after the study, and produced a coda that appears at the end of the article to reflect on her experiences both during and following the study.

## Andrea

We next describe Andrea and her circumstances and then discuss the themes we found in her evolving early-career teaching identity. Our goal in presenting her case is to illuminate how she experienced the transition from preservice coursework to the workforce, focusing on the unique characteristics of the settings in which she learned to teach and how she negotiated them. We see Andrea as being typical of a type of teacher who goes through teacher education programs and then enters a particular type of school environment, rather than representing the field as a whole.

Andrea had lived her early years in a Southwestern state and had moved to a Southern state as a second grader. In both states she lived in large, prosperous suburbs of major cities. The Southern school system she attended had the traits of many affluent suburban districts: SAT scores were 72 points higher than the state average and 27 points higher than the national average; half of the county’s 24 schools were state Schools of Excellence, with 2 recognized as National Blue Ribbon Schools. During high school, Andrea had been placed in enrichment and gifted programs, even in a district where 94% of students attended postsecondary schooling, 87% at colleges or universities.

Andrea had thrived within what she called the district’s “traditional” or “old school” approach, which she described as follows:

Traditional and old school is a specific method of teaching that I admired as a student because I worked well under it. It is very direct, very straight-

forward. It allows the student and teacher to feel as if there is a great deal of control involved in the process of education.

Her apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) in grades K-12 had conditioned her to accept traditional schooling as the norm for how to teach. Her college education had been little different. Andrea moved from this district to the state's comprehensive research university where she became an English major, including a semester of study abroad at Oxford. She described her English studies as largely canonical, a consequence of the department's emphasis. Her professors' approach to the topic was to lecture in their areas of expertise, a method that met Andrea's expectations:

I feel that when you come to college you have accepted a certain path of education, saying you are more willing now to be a receptacle and more independent. When I showed up to those classes I got and expected lectures. . . . The student at that point chooses to study a subject that they are better able to study, and therefore they can deal with the fact that it is not presented to them in an easy, or not an easier format, but isn't tailored to striving to help them understand it.

Her writing for her college English courses consisted entirely of literary criticism, which she wrote "well enough so that I was never really asked to rewrite it or to think about it. . . . I never felt attached to what I wrote."

Following graduation, Andrea decided she wanted to teach. From among the in-state universities that offered master's degrees plus certification, she decided to attend the same university from which she received her B.A. She entered her certification program with traditional ideas about how she would teach:

I was just bound and determined, I wrote on my application, "I am going to teach grammar. I am going to teach diagramming." I don't know why that didn't make them throw me out to start with. . . . I had an argument with my mentor teacher. I said that people were too soft on grammar and that more hard grammar needed to be taught and I had arguments with anybody who would stand still long enough for me to debate the issue with them. I sat on those front steps and cried because somebody challenged my ideas and then finally after four months of resistance to the inevitable conclusion I went ahead and decided it was true they didn't need that kind of grammar and it just broke my heart because I was so ready to give it to them. That was definitely one of the most painful ideas for me to give up.

As described by Andrea, her early teaching identity was based on the models she had been exposed to in both high school and college English

classes: the traditional taskmaster steeped in canonical literature and dedicated to imparting proper conventions of language and writing to her students. This identity began to change through the relationships she developed in her teacher education program, which we describe next.

## Teacher Education Program

Andrea did not expect to have a quality experience in the college of education: “People told me it would be awful, so I just assumed it would be awful, so I got ready for awfulness.” As her experience in having her ideas about grammar instruction challenged reveals, she found her teacher education program to be more challenging than she anticipated. Andrea was part of a cohort group of 20 preservice teachers, consisting primarily of undergraduate students but including a small group like Andrea who sought a master’s degree with certification. Her two English education professors (neither of whom was involved in the conduct of this research; their role was to provide access to their students and interviews about their program values and design) required each member of her cohort group to take a year-long field experience under the guidance of a mentor teacher. During this field experience the cohort group members would spend 12 hours a week in the school throughout the fall semester and do their student teaching during the spring semester, all in the classroom of their mentor teacher. Furthermore, all mentor teachers who supervised these professors’ student teachers joined the professors in a group that met year-round, enabling the mentor teachers to stay in touch with the university’s perspective on teacher education and to inform that perspective through their input.

In addition to the year-long field experience, in the fall the cohort took three team-taught campus-based courses in instructional planning, adolescent literature, and teacher research. Because the courses were team-taught by the two professors and their teaching assistants and offered in consecutive time blocks, they typically overlapped rather than being taught as separate courses. In the spring they took a campus-based intensive reading course and attended a campus-based planning seminar during which they discussed their student teaching experiences. The group was further able to discuss their school experiences through a class listserv.

The underlying philosophy of her professors’ approach to teacher education was *making connections*. This philosophy had several emphases. In terms of teachers and their students, the stress was on understanding students’ interests and teaching toward those interests. In terms of school/university relationships, the stress was on making connections between the

schools and the university program. The university program thus used extensive field experiences and the mentor teacher group as a way for university-based students and faculty to stay connected to what was happening in the schools.

The course readings presented a combination of teaching narratives and instructional ideas in literature, composition, and language: Christenbury's *Making the Journey*; Hynds's *On the Brink*; Kirby, Liner, and Vinz's *Inside/Out*; Purves, Rogers, and Soter's *How Porcupines Make Love III*; Smagorinsky's *Standards in Practice, Grades 9-12*; and Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context*. On the whole these texts presented teaching in a student-centered, process-oriented way that stressed the importance of reflective practice.

The projects and activities on the syllabus were designed to help the preservice teachers learn more about their students and to help them make connections with their school and with their students. To this end the professors required "Fall Activities," a menu of activities designed by each teacher candidate to help them find information about their new schools, English departments, and communities. In addition to the "Fall Activities" project, the teacher candidates maintained a dialogue journal with their mentor teacher, wrote a learner autobiography where they tracked their development as a reader and writer, conducted collaborative research projects, visited a middle school for two weeks, "shadowed" a student for a day, wrote "think pieces," compiled a portfolio at the end of fall and spring semester, and taught three mini-lessons and a three-day unit at their high school.

Andrea contrasted the program philosophy with the traditional/old school instruction she'd had as a student. She described her professors' approach as follows:

The other way, progressive, liberal education is the kind of education that I have learned about since I have come to graduate school. It is the kind of education that I now realize that most of the world needs. One that doesn't necessarily let you feel like you are in control because in real life you are not. It allows for more exploration, connection of education with experience and building scaffolding of various concepts.

Her professors' use of a progressive pedagogy extended to the ways in which they taught their methods class. As Andrea explained,

They try very hard to keep things general. Generally they want us to base education on experience. Generally they want us to create a diverse and accepting classroom. . . . They are all very general ideals and they try very



hard not to tell us how to apply them, to give us opportunities to apply them for ourselves, but not to tell us how to, necessarily. They will show us examples, maybe, but all in all we have to draw some of our own conclusions.

Prior to student teaching, Andrea discussed the way in which her thinking about teaching had changed through her involvement in the teacher education program:

I feel like a lot of times by trying to structure and direct you sort of get in the way of what would naturally have happened and have been more beneficial for them if you would have let it happen the way that it was going to happen for them. I feel like in a classroom where you are not trying to constantly interfere with each student, students of different levels of ability could naturally coexist and feel challenged in one classroom.

Her beliefs about teaching were thus different from those she'd held as a student, when she had performed so well in traditional lecture formats that stressed formal knowledge. She recognized that "there is not just a class of little me's somewhere. That would work if it was just a class of little me's." Through her teacher education program her identity began to shift away from the traditionalist and toward the "progressive, liberal" educator who emphasized personal connections with learning over detached analysis of texts.

## **Student Teaching**

Andrea did her student teaching in a small, rural high school. The school was the only high school in an agrarian county that also provided one middle school and five elementary schools. Eighty-nine percent of the district's 3,803 students were white and 10% black, with 19.72% living in poverty (roughly equal to the state average and above the national average of 17.84%). Per-pupil expenses amounted to \$3,527 per student, well below the state (\$4,604) and national (\$5,154) levels.

During student teaching Andrea taught both the "general" (i.e., lowest) track seniors and an Advanced Placement class. Andrea felt that "the classes were not tracked by ability. The classes were tracked by the willingness to play the school game. This general class means these are all the students who are not willing to play the school game." Her mentor teacher, Stella, had reached a point of great frustration with the general track students that illustrated a philosophical difference with Andrea's university professors. Andrea said, "I would say that there is a wide difference between

what is viewed as a good teacher [at the university] and what is viewed as a good teacher [where I'm student teaching]." Stella "would believe that the theory is good if it would work [the way her professors believed] but it doesn't."

To illustrate, Andrea discussed "the theory that maybe you should have students write each day in the classroom. Stella would say, 'But, they don't like to write. They get frustrated. They don't like my topics. I don't have time to grade all that.'" One major area of dissonance Andrea faced, then, was in accommodating the ideals of the university program with the pragmatics of daily life in schools, a theme that would continue into her first job.

Andrea's student teaching was further complicated by the fact that Stella's mother became quite ill and ultimately died during the semester. Stella missed a great deal of school to care for her mother, arrange for her funeral, and clear up her estate following her death; even while present she was clearly distracted by her family's circumstances. Andrea was thus left on her own during much of her student teaching, a problem compounded by her university supervisor's infrequent visits to her classroom. She had two main sources of feedback during her student teaching. One was the daily 25-minute car ride from her college town to school and back that Andrea made with two other women from her program cohort, where they talked about their teaching experiences and personal issues such as the weddings that Andrea and one of the other women were planning for the summer after student teaching. The other was the scaffolded reflection provided by the interviews conducted through the research.

Even without intensive supervision from a mentor teacher or university supervisor, Andrea often felt handcuffed by requirements and at odds with the curriculum she was required to teach. Although Stella was a member of the mentor teacher group organized by Andrea's university professors, her instruction lacked the integration that Andrea believed marked a strong curriculum. When discussing a vocabulary lesson she'd taught, Andrea said, "I feel like they're getting a potluck teaching approach, kind of a little bit of this and a little bit of that, which I just—I don't know what to do, to be honest, to remedy that." Andrea's view of this curriculum foreshadowed the dim view she would take of the curriculum more specifically outlined and stringently reinforced the next year when she took her first job.

### **First-Year Job**

From among three job offers, Andrea accepted a position at CHS, one of 12 high schools, and 75 schools total, in a large and diverse district in a major

metropolitan area. Andrea felt that the community in which CHS was located was similar to where she had grown up: an affluent suburb of a large city. CHS served a rapidly growing suburb in which the 1999 population included more than 29,000 residents, almost ten times the population from twenty years before. In only its eighth year of operation when Andrea began teaching there, CHS had received a number of honors: Named by *U.S. News and World Report* as An Outstanding American High School, recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School, and ranked as one of the nation's 500 best schools by *Newsweek*. In addition to its national recognition, in its brief history its faculty and students had been recognized by numerous awards within the state: 1997 Georgia School of Excellence; Excellence in English; Governor's Honors; state Social Studies Student of the Year; District STAR Student & Teacher; Junior & Senior Academic Bowl champions; national marketing award; Georgia Citizen Bee winners; All-American diver & rower; state Latin, Health, and Physical Education teachers of the year; meritorious ratings at state Media Festival; state debate champions; state championships in golf, swimming, tennis, and cheerleading; Georgia High School Parents, Teachers, Students Association (PTSA) of the Year; and Georgia PTSA of the Year. Ninety-seven percent of its graduates went on to college.

The school's enrollment figures, seen in Figure 1, show the following demographics (note that the CHS figures only include grades 9-12, while the county and state figures include grades K-12): The city's families were predominantly upper-middle class, as evidenced by statistical data on income and poverty levels. The city's median household income in 1999 was \$73,867, nearly double the state median of \$39,433. The percent of residents living below poverty level, 4.9%, was also much lower than the state's 12.9%. The district's affluence was further revealed through data on students eligible for free/reduced lunches (0.7%, compared to the district's 32.9% and state's 43.4%), dropout rate (1.3% compared to the district's 6.5% and state's 6.5%), enrollment in gifted programs (23.2% compared to the district's 10.6% and state's 6.5%), and enrollment in vocational labs (39.6% compared to the district's 47% and state's 55.5%). CHS had no Title I program, no ESOL pro-

**Table 1**

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Native Amer.</b>	<b>Multi-racial</b>
CHS	5.4%	78.0%	2.3%	13.0%	0.0%	1.2%
County	39.8%	49.3%	4.7%	4.3%	0.1%	2.1%
State	37.8%	55.7%	3.3%	2.0%	0.1%	1.0%

gram, no students enrolled in remedial education, and only 4.2% of its students in special education, compared to county and state averages of 13% and 14% in remedial education, 10% and 11% in special education, and an abundance of ESOL and Title I program participants. CHS's standardized test scores also compare favorably to the state and nation. Their 1999-2000 SAT average was 1103, compared to the county's 1016 and the state's 969.

We present these school data in some detail because they have great implications for the district curriculum. The dilemma for the district curriculum developers was that the district was large and diverse and included both affluent suburban schools like CHS and urban schools with greater poverty and cultural diversity among the students. In order to avoid creating disparities in expectations for the district's less advantaged students, the curriculum developers were asked to prepare a centralized, standard curriculum for all students. We next describe that curriculum.

## The Curriculum

The year before Andrea was hired at CHS, the county instituted a pilot program for a county-wide curriculum. According to Andrea's mentor teacher, Janet (a pseudonym), who had served on district curriculum committees in the past, the county's administrators were sensitive to the lack of uniformity of what was taught among its secondary schools and concerned about the lack of accountability of its lower-performing schools. Under the assumption that these schools' poor test scores were caused in part by instruction geared toward lower expectations, the district attempted to create a more unified and democratic system of instruction in the form of what it called a "tightly-held" curriculum designed by county teachers.

This curriculum specified what instructional and assessment materials that all teachers should use, and in what order, for each course in the program. The district issued each teacher a two-inch thick 3-ring binder that scripted the teaching for each language arts course offered in grades 9-12. The design assumed that when teaching with the prescribed commercial anthology, all teachers in all schools would read the same literature on approximately the same day, ask the same questions, use the same assessments, and otherwise provide each student in the district the same instruction. This uniformity meant that all students, whether living in an affluent suburb, in the inner city, or on a farm on the fringe of the county would receive the same instruction at the same time for all four years of high school.

The curriculum was further tied to standardized county-wide tests that assessed students after each unit, further pressuring teachers to follow

the curriculum guide faithfully. In addition to conforming assessment, and thus instruction across the various schools within the district, these tests mirrored the format for the SAT and thus served as preparation for tests that were a source of pride among district administrators, parents, real estate agents, and other stakeholders in the community. Andrea described what “PSAT Week” was like at CHS: “We have to all wear a t-shirt on Monday that encourages them to study for the PSATs. Every student in every class, okay? English and math has to—on Monday has to spend their whole class period administering a test for it. And every single class period has to spend a minimum of twenty minutes doing prep exercises for the SATs for the rest of the week.” Test-taking hints ranging from study skills to what to eat were given as part of the daily announcements. Whether a test was approaching or not, the daily announcements included a word of the day, for example, *sagacity*, which the administrator would spell, define, and use in a sentence (“The teacher had sagacity. . .”). Even the freshmen were required to participate in PSAT week; the school district paid for them to take the test. In addition to this preparation, Andrea dedicated class time to preparing students for the district- and state-mandated tests. Competition for high test scores was great both within and among the metro area school districts, contributing to a curriculum that was both centralized and assessment-driven.

To help their acclimation to their new circumstances, new teachers taught only one preparation if possible. Andrea’s first-year assignment was five classes of regular-track ninth-grade English. The ninth-grade curriculum itself was, in Andrea’s words, a “potluck teaching approach, kind of a little bit of this and a little bit of that” in seemingly random order. For instance, the first unit of the year included a study of appositive phrases; not until the sixth unit did the students study the nouns and pronouns that make up an appositive. Meanwhile, the aspects of student writing that Andrea felt needed attention, such as sentence fragments and run-ons, were not included in the curriculum.

In addition to questioning the cohesiveness and appropriateness of the curriculum, Andrea felt that many of the literature selections, particularly the prescribed novels referred to as “choices,” were unappealing: “I find myself very frustrated because this curriculum does not resemble what I want to do in my classroom. . . . The awful part is that the curriculum is boring in addition to everything else. The stories are mostly unchallenging. The students don’t connect with them. . . . this curriculum does not care if the students have a love of reading.” The problem was compounded by the limits that the curriculum placed on what regular track students could read. The curriculum designers felt they had to differentiate between the honors

track and the regular track as a means to justify the weighted grades of the former, and their manner of distinguishing them was to select certain stories that only the honors students could read. Andrea felt that the regular students were then limited to reading many of the anthology's least engaging stories.

In general, Andrea felt that the curriculum was distant from the interests of the students; difficult, that is, to establish the kinds of connections that she'd learned to value in her university coursework. The grammar items she was required to use, for instance, had a didactic quality: The sentences used in the exercises provided facts about famous writers, history, and other topics that, as Andrea noted to the students in one lesson, might come up on forthcoming standardized tests. Doing well on these tests was a prime concern of the curriculum, much to the detriment, felt Andrea, of students' interests in reading, writing, and other strands of the curriculum.

The centralized, test-driven curriculum is increasingly the rule rather than the exception. The state of Georgia's Quality Basic Education Act requires

the Georgia Board of Education to develop a statewide basic curriculum, including the competencies that all students must master before completion of high school. This uniformly sequenced core curriculum, known as the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC), forms the framework for accomplishing the competencies. Each local system must include the QCC as the basic curriculum provided for all students. The local system may expand or enrich as it sees fit. (<http://www.glc.k12.ga.us/qstd-int/homepg.htm>)

To assess students' competencies, the state administers the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program—Revised, Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests, the Georgia Alternate Assessment, the Georgia Basic Skills Test, a writing assessment at three grade levels, Georgia High School Graduation Tests in core subjects, the Georgia High School Writing Test, and the Stanford Achievement test series. Hardly anomalous, the district's approach mirrors the Bush administration's proposals for reforming U.S. education (see, e.g., <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/edu/>). Andrea's district, then, serves in many ways as a good site in which to study the teaching careers of teachers who emerge from college prepared to teach a liberal, progressive pedagogy.

## **New Teacher Orientation**

Andrea, like other new teachers in her district, was paired with a mentor teacher. Her state-certified mentor, Janet, met with her regularly on an informal basis and was also a part of her evaluation team later on in the year.

They met monthly as well to discuss management techniques or other concerns that are common to all new teachers. Andrea and Janet taught in each of the two rooms in a portable trailer in the school parking lot, a concession to the school's rapidly expanding student population. The drab and flimsy trailers stood in dramatic contrast to the splendid facilities of the main building. Their isolation in this building allowed them to develop a close relationship where they could talk confidentially without concern for being overheard.

Janet was a twenty-year veteran of the county school system. Her experience with the county school system and specifically her last nine years at CHS gave her a perspective on the curriculum unavailable to a new teacher. She remarked that "I have been in this system long enough that I know to just hold on because if enough people chafe and disagree, it is going to evolve. . . . Unfortunately for Andrea and those people just coming in, they don't have that experience that says just hold on, just hold on."

## Themes

Our analysis of the interviews and observations revealed that Andrea approached her teaching of the tightly-held curriculum with three different stances. As we analyzed the data of Andrea and other participants in the study, we were struck by the preponderance of *accommodation* codes (133 occurrences) as teachers moved between the ideals of their university programs and the realities of their schools and classrooms. We defined accommodation as a grudging effort to reconcile personal beliefs about teaching with the values of the curriculum. Accommodation indeed emerged as the main theme of Andrea's first year at CHS. Andrea also described a stance among her colleagues, and occasionally exhibited it herself, that we labeled *acquiescence*: acceptance of, compliance with, or submission to the curriculum. As the year developed, Andrea also began to go beyond accommodation and engaged in *resistance*, that is, opposition to the curriculum, either overtly or subversively.

We next review how each of these stances worked in Andrea's evolving identity as a teacher, moving from least to most oppositional.

## Acquiescence

The faculty think the curriculum's ridiculous. Everybody thinks it's ridiculous. It's amazing to me that basically the county office can say you must teach naked every Thursday and I think everybody would come to school naked on Thursday and just say, don't worry, this will wear off.

To Andrea, most of her colleagues were reluctant to challenge, if not question, administrative policies. When the new curriculum went into place, she was surprised at their acquiescence. Andrea did not have the patience in her first year of teaching to “just hold on,” as Janet believed experienced teachers had learned to do, until the curriculum either morphed into something more palatable or was replaced by something new from the administration. While they might complain about the curriculum privately, they exercised decorum in the public arena of the school. Even if her colleagues thought the curriculum ridiculous, they thought that complaining publicly would not contribute to productive change. Andrea described her frustration in addressing the curriculum’s shortcomings with her colleagues one day:

I feel like I really am a minority opinion and [if I were to] say a lot of what I think, people would think I was just crazy. Or worse yet, they would do the famous teacher response, which is they would listen to absolutely everything you have to say and then go, I know, isn’t that awful?

Our view of the whole faculty is quite limited, coming only from Andrea’s nascent forays into the social world of her school. Isolated in a temporary trailer, she had limited access to the school’s large and undoubtedly diverse faculty (there were 25 teachers in the English department alone, one of 10 departments in the school). Our inference is limited to the probability that acquiescence was a type of response to the curriculum, perhaps not as pervasive as described by Andrea but present nonetheless. Indeed, as we describe later, it was a stance adopted by Andrea herself when worn down by the weight of the curriculum.

## Accommodation

Though loath to acquiesce, Andrea found that she continually accommodated her beliefs about good teaching to the requirements of the curriculum. As we have reviewed, these beliefs were developed in her preservice education course work and its liberal, student-centered values, and endured through her relatively unregulated student teaching. She described her conflict as follows:

The preservice program that I was in was based very much on an ideal classroom where you might create a very organic environment. Then you would work to have individual goals for your students, particularly tailored to their strengths and weaknesses and something that they could even apply within their own self-motivated assignments, which I think would be an ideal way to teach it and would be the way that I would want



my child to be taught. But that having been said, I don't have that kind of classroom and I'm not under the illusion that I do. So I think one of the most dangerous things that I see is that there's this hybrid classroom being created that does not achieve the goal of either school of teaching. And so ends up someplace in between.

This place in between, this hybrid classroom, was the result of accommodations Andrea made between the curriculum and her own values. An observation in late March illustrates how Andrea's accommodation to the curriculum affected her teaching. The lesson was a discussion of the poem "Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde:

***Hanging Fire***

I am fourteen  
and my skin has betrayed me  
the boy I cannot live without  
still sucks his thumb  
in secret  
how come my knees are  
always so ashy  
what if I die  
before morning  
and momma's in the bedroom  
with the door closed.

I have to learn how to dance  
in time for the next party  
my room is too small for me  
suppose I die before graduation  
they will sing sad melodies  
but finally  
tell the truth about me  
There is nothing I want to do  
and too much  
that has to be done  
and momma's in the bedroom  
with the door closed.

Nobody even stops to think  
about my side of it  
I should have been on Math Team  
my marks were better than his  
why do I have to be  
the one

wearing braces  
I have nothing to wear tomorrow  
will I live long enough  
to grow up  
and momma's in the bedroom  
with the door closed.

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Before the students read the poem, Andrea asked, "What do you think are normal concerns for a 14-year-old? How many of you are 14?" Students responded with a variety of their concerns: Are your parents going to believe you? School and grades and stuff. Money. Friends. Is my boyfriend going to dump me? Girlfriends. Prejudice. Peer pressure.

After several minutes of student comments, Andrea said, "In this poem, we're going to see how her concerns match what you feel are concerns for you." She then instructed the students to take out a piece of paper and fold it in half, and then to write "Hanging" on one half and "Fire" on the other. After reviewing the terms connotation and denotation, she had students work with a partner to make a list of connotations they had for each term. Students then read their connotations: for hanging, lynching, killing, suspense, waiting, falling, suicide, many others; for fire, hot, flame, smoke, barbecue, roast, passion, spicy, holidays, fear, perseverance, fireplace, ashes, phoenix, Latin dancing, firemen, and others. Andrea then asked the students to guess what the poem would be about based on their associations for the title. Students made such inferences as having a need for something you have a passion for, losing a place in society, losing something important, losing something bad so you become better, wondering about something important, being scared something is going to happen, and having a bunch of stuff bottled up inside.

Students then read the poem and discussed what it was about. As students offered their interpretations, Andrea would offer comments and invite students to respond to one another's ideas. She would occasionally point to particular lines and ask students what they thought they meant. One line, for instance, describes a boy the narrator can't live without who sucks his thumb in secret. Students thought this image might be her inner self, her little brother, a neighbor, her crush she thinks she's in love with, a crush on an immature boy, a crush on someone who's not open to her, her inner self who's shy and can't tell her feelings, and a crush on someone who's too

nervous to talk to her. (Not surprisingly, the Jennifer Paige song “Crush” was receiving heavy airplay at the time of this discussion.)

Andrea then asked the students to reread the poem. Following this second reading they discussed it again, with students increasingly attentive to details such as the repetition of the word *mom* in each verse. Following this discussion Andrea had them repeat the activity of folding a piece of paper and working with a partner to consider the title and to come up with an interpretation of the poem. This activity then formed the basis for a final discussion of the poem. Just before the bell, a boy asked, “Why is this in the mystery, lies, and deception part of the book?” Another student responded, “She’s trying to find herself.”

Given the struggles experienced by many first-year teachers in leading discussions, Andrea’s class was impressive in many ways. She began with two pre-reading activities, one based on students’ personal knowledge (their discussion of concerns of 14-year-olds) and one text-based (their generation of connotations for the words in the poem’s title). The ensuing discussion drew on both sources of knowledge, requiring attention to the text and reflection on their own parallel experiences. The move to repeat both the connotation activity and the discussion showed remarkable patience and pedagogical acumen; instead of moving to the next poem in the prescribed unit, they reread and reconsidered their interpretations with greater attention to the poetic conventions and greater insight. Indeed, it appeared as though Andrea was not accommodating to the curriculum but rather teaching the student-centered classroom idealized in her preservice courses.

Our follow-up interview revealed that Andrea was less satisfied with the discussion. She said that she had chosen the poem “because it’s the poem that they ask the county questions about on the test . . . and I wanted our discussion of it to be fresh in their minds as they sat down to take the test. So I left it to the day before the test.” Teaching the poem at this juncture seemed at first to be a mild accommodation to the curriculum. Andrea explained, however, that her role in the discussion was less facilitative than it first appeared:

**ANDREA:** Sometimes it can get sort of bad because the county questions will ask a question and will give an answer that I don’t necessarily agree with. But in the course of the instruction I will attempt to purposely convince them all to believe that this would be the answer to this kind of question.

**PETER:** Oh, really? Could you give me an example of that?

**ANDREA:** I wish I had my actual assessment folder with me because there were several of them last time. I'm trying to think, what was the—they asked—there was a question on—it was a poem also last time. It was, "Ithaca" was the title of it. It was actually part of our "Odyssey" unit and the poem talked about Odysseus's journey and one of the questions asked what values—or what themes does this poem emphasize. And the answer that they wanted you to choose from the multiple choice questions was Odysseus's—or the importance of home and family. And—but in the process of reading the poem, the poem really talked a lot more about the value of the journey. And so I thought—oh, I really hated that that was the answer to that question. But in the course of the discussion I attempted to convince the students that were they ever asked that, they should answer that it was the importance of home and family.

**PETER:** Really?

**ANDREA:** Yes. Pretty pathetic, I know. Sorry. What else am I supposed to do?

Andrea's insights reveal here the way in which her accommodation to the district curriculum led to the hybrid classroom that she found so frustrating: at once both student-centered in service of enriching literary experiences, and test-centered to help students score higher on standardized tests of achievement. By this point in the year Andrea was growing more experienced with making these accommodations less of a strain, remarking that the curriculum "is kind of pervasive but I'm getting a lot better at trying to minimize it. It's there in a lot of broad organizational ways but I'm even beginning to think that there would be ways to reorganize that." By and large, however, accommodation, like the curriculum itself, permeated Andrea's experiences during her first year of teaching.

The lesson also reveals why, in a hallway discussion with a school administrator, Peter was told that Andrea was one of the best new teachers that CHS had hired; why her mentor teacher Janet believed that "Andrea's a very gifted, natural teacher. She has presence. . . . Morally and ethically she was really ready to be a teacher." "Pathetic" might describe Andrea's feelings about the compromises she made but not the lesson she taught, which impressed Peter for both the series of techniques she used and the sensitive manner in which she helped students make personal connections through their close reading of the poem. The different evaluations of the lesson by Peter and Andrea reveal a quality that characterized Andrea

throughout the study, the way she viewed teaching as a serious career. Andrea's identity was that of a teacher, a sense of self so strong and consuming that she found any compromise to her integrity to be a betrayal of principle.

## Resistance

As the year progressed Andrea learned that some of her more experienced colleagues, while giving lip service to the curriculum, were going about their business as usual after shutting the classroom door. Andrea too found ways to resist the mandates that constrained her efforts to teach a student-centered curriculum. In November, she reflected on how she had accepted the need to accommodate her view of the ideal classroom she'd learned at the university to her new situation: "I've realized that—and I appreciate the fact that what they were teaching me in the program was a certain ideal that I may not attain this year or next year or the year after. That part of what you do is try to incorporate as much of that ideal as you can into what the current educational reality is." She still wished to

come back to fighting for room for the student in the classroom, student voice and choice and direction of their education, as well as just keeping them interested instead of subjecting them to their own education. So that's sort of what I think of as my philosophy of education. You know, consider the student, which doesn't sound like such a dramatic philosophy statement but if you were at school every day—I mean, you know what I'm talking about. Sometimes you think that maybe people don't notice that there are students in the classroom.

Yet making this effort was difficult for Andrea within the confines of the district curriculum. During this interview she reflected,

The only way I got through the first few months of teaching was saying, well, I'm going to quit next year, so just have to make it through this year. And I think now I'm feeling a little bit more like okay, well, I don't really want to quit. I just want to, you know, rewrite the curriculum, which may not really be an option either. But at least I can—I am beginning to feel like well, I can have some influence and I can practice some rebellion and I can see what I can shake up.

Here Andrea reveals a transition from accommodation to resistance, a belief that she can act out against the curriculum. As a first-year teacher in an established faculty, she did not yet have the capital to do so overtly. At this point her rebellion was practiced more quietly. Andrea made these observations in the context of a discussion of projects that her students had

done in response to reading *Fahrenheit 451*. Students were given four genres—art, video, drama, and music—within which they could produce collaborative interpretations of the novel. Andrea noted that “they seemed to really enjoy it, a lot more than they enjoyed reading the book actually. They hated the book but they enjoyed doing the project. I got a lot of neat video projects that ended up being really fun. And several musical interpretations. One group even brought their whole band over.” When asked whether these projects were part of the district curriculum, Andrea replied,

**ANDREA:** No. They sure weren’t.

**PETER:** So how did you get to go outside the curriculum?

**ANDREA:** I just did it. And curriculum be damned.

She later revealed that for the next required unit in the curriculum on The Family she intended to teach Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman*. Asked whether the book came with the prescribed curriculum, she said,

**ANDREA:** It didn’t, no. It was one of the books lying around discarded in the book room. And it’s basically not even on the list. So—

**PETER:** Really? So how did you decide to—

**ANDREA:** (whispering) I just did it.

Resistance, then, became a way for Andrea to use instructional practices that met her goals for teaching in ways that engaged students with the curriculum and made their interests and interpretations come alive. These occasions of resistance came when other priorities, such as preparing students for standardized tests that impacted both their success and the school’s, were not compromised. Andrea found herself meeting two seemingly incompatible sets of goals: the district’s that seemed to erase the students from the classroom, and her own that foregrounded the sense that students made of their experiences. By accommodating these competing goals, Andrea created a hybrid classroom that provided a full commitment to neither. Only when the concrete demands of the curriculum receded could she resist its values and teach the kind of class that she and her students found satisfying.

## Identity

Andrea’s engagement with the curriculum contributed to her evolving identity as a teacher. This identity was mediated over time by relationships developed in her apprenticeship of observation, her preservice education, her

student teaching, and her first year at CHS. The main conflict she experienced was between the ideal notion of a good teacher she had learned through her preservice course work and the beliefs about good teaching that formed the expectations at CHS. In spite of the optimism she expressed in November, by late March she felt immense frustration over who she had become as a teacher:

I never feel like what's supposed to be happening is happening. It's making me feel bad and I'm not doing a good job and lots of times I don't really like who I am in the classroom very much. I feel very controlling and authoritarian and when the kids say they don't want to do it and they're bored and it's obvious and I just feel the same way. I would just rather say, okay, you're right, let's not do this. Let's do something else. I have to be constantly telling them no, don't do that, stop talking, listen to me, turn around, sit down, hush. I have just been bitching at these kids all day and I'm tired of bitching. I feel like a big grump.

Many first-year teachers feel the same conflict about their need to exercise control over students, particularly those whose course work has stressed student-centered ideals. Here, Andrea linked their behavior to boredom with the curriculum, both the students' and her own. She did not feel incompetent as a classroom manager but rather felt that the curriculum made it difficult to teach a class interesting enough to engage students and keep them focused on academic work.

Her feelings of frustration led to occasional feelings of acquiescence, much like those that she had criticized in her colleagues earlier in the year:

My dad said at the beginning you were just so distraught and you seem still upset but not as if you're just crazy anymore. And I was like, well, you know, if somebody just keeps hitting you and keeps hitting you day after day, you just get to the point where you're not surprised anymore. It still hurts but, you know, you're not offended.

This acquiescence came at a cost. At this early point in her career, Andrea had not yet developed "that experience that says just hold on." Her desire to teach well led to a bleak outlook that again had her considering leaving the profession. Among her final comments of the last interview of the year was her feeling that

I'm not a good teacher. I'm an awful teacher. But I'm also not allowed to try to be a good teacher so there you go. But now at this point I'm feeling so frustrated that I don't even know if I could be a good teacher if they gave me the freedom to try.

## Discussion

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) describe curricula such as Andrea's as "Fordist," that is, taking on the production-line qualities of Henry Ford's automobile factory:

From the point of view of teachers, schools, of course, are workplaces as well. In the era of Fordism, the state determined the syllabus; the teachers led their students through the textbooks; and the students were assessed against the correct answers, centrally determined. And from the point of view of students, the classroom is mock workplace, a site that prefigures the world of work. In the era of Fordism, the teacher took the systematically divided-up component parts of the curriculum, transmitted them to students bit by bit, and then assessed knowledge as "discipline." (p. 127)

Though effective in its efficiency, say Cope and Kalantzis, such a system inevitably produces a "crisis of motivation" among its participants that follows from "demeaning conditions of work" (p. 127). While this crisis of motivation might be at work among Andrea's acquiescent colleagues, we see a different crisis in Andrea's early-career experience. Some other teachers we observed in her cohort would have been very happy to have worked

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under this system because it removed from their lives the demanding task of instructional planning and the need for professional growth. Teaching was, to them, a job; their identities were bound up in life after school, which instructional planning would impinge on. For Andrea, teaching was a career that she believed in strongly; her identity was that of a teacher. Because she identified with her work, she wanted it to involve her life both within and beyond the boundaries of the

school day bells. The frustration that Andrea felt was that the curriculum took over the role of planning and did not let her work enough. As a result she did not like the person who was teaching her classes, feeling distant from the teacher she had become and fearful of the teacher she might become.

## Andrea's Epilogue

I have just begun my third year of teaching, and when I look back on the person I was during that first, terribly difficult year, I feel great tenderness for the person who struggled so intensely to make sense of what was going on around her. Janet, my mentor teacher, showed wisdom of experience



when she told me to “just hold on,” but it was a wisdom I could not yet understand. As a first year teacher, I was disappointed about having to abandon my idealism and was preoccupied with issues of control: How can I teach for my county, teach for my students, and still maintain the ability to affect what’s going on in my classroom? When and why do I acquiesce, accommodate, and/or resist? What is my role in this classroom?

In the past year and a half since my first year of teaching, I feel that I have become a competent, if relatively inexperienced, teacher by learning how to dance the “acquiescence, accommodation, resistance” waltz. Professional development opportunities have challenged me to revisit the educational ideals instilled in me in my teacher education program, and to continually experiment with how a seemingly static curriculum can become dynamic when introduced to a classroom. This is part of what Janet was telling me when she was saying “just hold on.”

Of course, what she could also see, that I could not, was that the restrictions would soon loosen. In my second year of teaching, the standardized exams were reduced across the board, a couple of novel selections were added to the pitiful selection previously offered to the ninth graders, and more room for creativity and freedom was introduced to the writing program. This year, things have again loosened up a little bit more. Although the changes have been far from “progressive” so far, I am optimistic and believe that, with the right leadership, they could be.

When Janet was telling me to “just hold on” I believe she was attempting to communicate two very important ideas about being a teacher. The first was “things will change.” Nothing ever seems to stay exactly the same for very long. You must learn to float along with the changing tide. This will be your acquiescence. This will be what enables you to keep a job, good or bad. The second was “learn to dance.” The rest of your job will be a waltz with two different partners: accommodation and resistance. As your teaching ability improves, so will your ability to dance. Although Janet retired from teaching this year, I still think of her daily and appreciate the complicated message she was trying to give me when she asked me to “just hold on.”

### **Authors’ Note**

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