

Investigating Teacher Voice Through Blogs: Policy, Practice, and Local Knowledge

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Abstract

Teachers, especially those working in high-poverty, urban school districts, are given little if any voice in contemporary policy formation. Prevailing policies often ignore teachers' professional experience, and instead place heavy constraints on teachers' classroom practice, squelch professional decision-making, and limit the possibility of effectively implementing pedagogies aimed at ensuring the success of all students. Educational historians posit that the absence of teachers' voice in the policymaking process is largely due to the traditional isolation in teaching. This paper asserts that blogs written by teachers offer a way to share expertise and local knowledge with policymakers. The main objectives of this paper are to 1) offer an alternative to the enduring, counterintuitive practice of educational policymaking, and 2) explore blogs written by teachers as a way to "see" into the classroom.

Keywords

teachers; education; policy; blogs; practice

Lost in the Shuffle: Locating Teacher Voice in the Blogosphere

K-12 public school teachers are provided little if any voice in the construction of education policy. Whether at the federal, state, or local levels, teachers' opinions, local knowledge, and expertise count for naught in the policymaking process (Apple, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003; Ravitch, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Rousmaniere, 1997). The absence of teachers' expertise in policy decisions can be attributed to several factors, among them the traditional isolation of the teaching work environment—which has historically provided practitioners with little opportunity to connect with other practitioners or policymakers—and the paucity of forums in which teachers can speak openly, without reprisal from administrators. Blogs, which have proven an enduring mode of communication for more than a decade, provide one forum in which teachers can share local knowledge. This paper reports the voices of some New York City teachers via blogs they write in order to understand 1) how K-12 teachers make sense of the conditions of their daily work, and 2) how their understanding of their daily work offers practical suggestions for future school reform and policymaking.

The alleged failure and seeming immobility of American public schools has been a focus of educational researchers and policymakers for the last century. From complex systems of accountability and testing to progressive teaching methods and the incorporation of technology, school reforms have presented endless prescriptions and innovations in schooling over the last several decades; however, the conditions of teachers' work have remained largely unchanged for the last near century (Apple, 2006; Spillane & Jennings, 1997; Elmore, 1980; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Rousmaniere, 1997; Spencer, 1996). As Cuban puts it, "the journey of school reform is a story of constant adaptation" (p. 453) that leaves a faint outline of the true story in its wake:

On a day-to-day level in the school classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, and yards, New York City teachers [in the 1920s] talked with each other about their problems and about their visions of how to create better-functioning schools. But they talked into an echoing silence, the validity of their perspective ignored by those who controlled their working conditions (Rousmaniere, 1997, p. 2).

For Ingersoll (2003), “teachers’ individual troubles in the workplace are neither unique nor isolated, but are really public issues, invisibly but indelibly shaped by the larger societal and organization contexts in which they lie” (p. 4). Despite research that points to the importance of practitioner input in the policymaking process, teachers still face the “echoing silence” of the 1920s (Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Rousmaniere, 1997), and traditional practices of schooling that often prevent reform success remain “remarkably durable” (Cuban, 1988, p. 341). As online connections in virtual spaces proliferate, so do the possibilities for data collection and research. This paper asserts that blogs can help reveal how teachers resist and reproduce these invisible, adaptive forces, and what implications there are in their daily experiences for future policy creation, implementation, and evaluation.

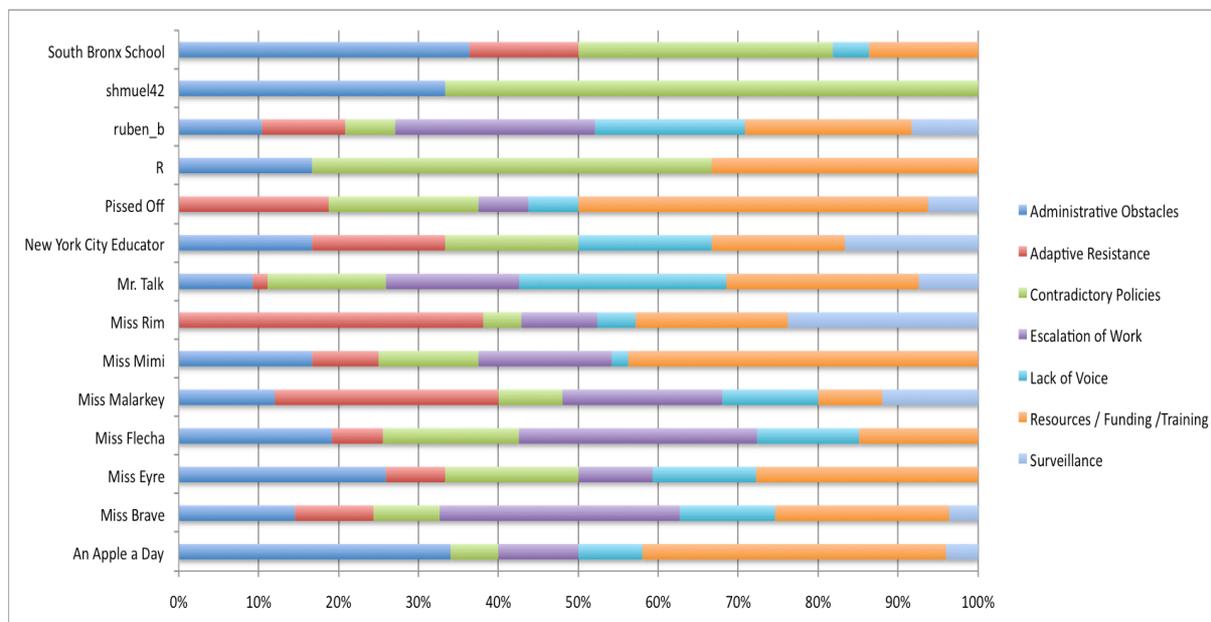
Methodology 2.0: A Thematic Analysis of Public, Anonymous New York City Teacher Blogs

As is often the case, web searches can “produce pages of results that need a final human filtering stage to remove spurious matches” (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011, p. 390), and indeed the initial stage of research required filtering through hundreds of blogs in order to identify ones appropriate by this study—authored by New York City teachers. While 154 blogs were identified as potentially useful for this study, 139 were eliminated for various reasons (i.e., authored by non-teachers, focused on content rather than daily experience, non-New-York-City teachers, etc.), the most important of which being lack of anonymity. The resulting 14 blogs analyzed in this study are anonymously written and publicly available. Due to the sensitive nature of the blogs’ content, only anonymous blogs were analyzed.

Using in-depth visual and thematic analysis as the main methodological approach, 14 blogs identified for the study were analyzed over the course of four academic years, fall 2008–spring 2012. Building on the work of Kate Rousmaniere (1997), who studied the conditions of New York City teachers’ work in the 1920s, the following themes were identified:

- adaptive resistance: teachers adapt to the conditions of their work, in order to meet the expectations of policies by any means necessary
- contradictory policies: teachers are expected to achieve professional goals without necessary supports
- administrative obstacles: teachers often find their work in contradiction to administrative decisions and directives
- surveillance: teachers write about being constantly watched, often resulting in punitive, rather than supportive administrative measures
- resources / funding / training: overwhelmingly, teachers write about a lack of resources, funding, and training that prevent them from achieving the expectations of their daily work
- lack of voice: teachers write about not being heard and having few outlets for professional question, concerns, and advice
- escalation of work: teachers point to an ever-increasing work load that prevents them from meeting the expectations of their daily work

The following table (figure 1) displays the distribution of the above themes across the blogs in the study:



Once themes were identified, the authors of blogs analyzed for the study were contacted for feedback on the major findings, in order to triangulate the data. At the time of this proposed paper, analysis for this second phase of the study is not yet available; however, it will be by the time of the conference in October.

Conclusions: Next Steps and the Need for Further Research

Based on this study, teachers have a wealth of information to share, and already do so electronically via blogs, when it comes to feedback around policy creation, engagement, and implementation. This study provides a foundation upon which to build future research that examines the voice of teachers in the context of policymaking and reform. Sturken and Cartwright, who write about visual culture theory, assert that “every day, we engage in practices of looking to make sense of the world” (2009, p. 9). As online communication proliferates, so do opportunities to stop, look, and listen, both alone and as part of a community: “we are increasingly invited to experience the mundane routines of our everyday lives through screens or information translated from those screens. Although we perform some of these activities alone, most involve participation with, or simply the presence of, other people” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 223). The record of these everyday activities and routines provides a record that is “frequently identical to the ‘actual experience’ studied” (Waskul, 1996, p. 137), and “narrative researchers need to confidently assert their contributions to, their interventions in, and their transformations of social science scholarship” (Chase, 2010, p. 231)

Over the years, few if any school reforms have addressed or sought to overcome the challenges that accompany working in a school environment that intensifies with each new policy for teachers to enact. Policy changes are often and mistakenly treated as isolated, neatly packaged events or entities, even though practitioners and participants live nested, interconnected, complex lives (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Berliner, 2006); and, as I argue, policies are chiefly the creation of one-sided, dictatorial dialogues in which teachers have little opportunity to share their expertise. This study supports the argument that as online connections in virtual spaces proliferate, so do the possibilities for data collection and research, and specifically, that blogs written by teachers should be considered in research on educational policy.

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