“I Am Not a Format”: Teachers’ Experiences With Fostering Creativity in the Era of Accountability

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This phenomenological study examined the experience of fostering creativity and creative thinking in the classroom under high-stakes testing conditions, as described by teachers at a magnet elementary school in Central California. The tensions between standardization and professionalism, as well as performativity and creativity, served as the conceptual framework for this study. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ten teachers. Phenomenological techniques were used to analyze the data. Significant statements were extracted from interview transcriptions to yield textural descriptions, and two structural themes emerged regarding fostering creativity in the classroom: connections versus disconnections and right fit versus lack of fit. The findings showed that teachers see creativity as an important component of teacher agency and highly value the role creativity plays in helping children learn and enjoy learning. However, high-stakes testing conditions inhibit their ability to foster creativity and teach creatively by diminishing teacher autonomy and professionalism, narrowing the curriculum, and leaving teachers out of reform discussions. The results of this study may inform future research and provide information for policy-makers and educators interested in reestablishing creativity as a critical element of teacher agency and an essential learning skill for children.

Keywords: creativity, teacher professionalism, autonomy, teacher agency, narrowing curriculum, high-stakes testing, accountability

A dichotomy has developed between what societies need from education and what the education system is providing. Globalization, technology, and competition have engendered an array of new challenges for societies and, therefore, for the individuals who work and live in these rapidly changing environments. The current climate of change is unprecedented and potentially overwhelming. From an individual perspective, knowledge and skills have diminishing half-lives (the amount of time within which 50% of what a person knows or is able to do will become obsolete). In fact, the knowledge and skills needed in the future may not be known at the time an individual is in school or college (Cropley, 2001). Florida (2002) cited Bureau of Labor statistics from 2001 showing that Americans change jobs on average every 3.5 years, and workers in their twenties change jobs on average every 1.1 years. Many of these changes involve not only jobs, but careers as well. As a result, Cropley (2001) argued:
(Educational institutions) cannot limit themselves to the transmission of set contents, techniques and values, since these will soon be useless or even detrimental to living a full life, but must also promote flexibility, openness for the new, the ability to adapt or see new ways of doing things, and courage in the face of the unexpected, in other words, the creativity. (p. 136)

However, research suggests the current climate is discouraging creativity and creative thinking. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and complementary state measures established a comprehensive framework of standards and accountability that have resulted in an unprecedented and ever-increasing wave of testing. Jones, Jones, and Hargrove (2003) found that high-stakes testing, with its emphasis on drill-and-kill skills, limits teachers’ flexibility and inhibits the creativity of teachers and students by detracting from opportunities to explore and discover, develop critical thinking, and further personal growth. Mock, Moorman, and Lewis (2006) found that the consequences for instruction in schools doing poorly on high-stakes tests included a focus on raising test scores instead of learning, an overwhelming emphasis on reading and mathematics, suppression of teacher and student creativity and critical thinking, a decline of at least one subject area, and a reduction of music and art activities. Firestone et al. (2002) concluded that even in a low-stakes testing environment, New Jersey’s 4th-grade test influenced the math and science curriculum by focusing teachers’ attention on low-scoring and new test topics. Guthrie (2002) argued that teachers of reading often restrict their teaching to specific test-like techniques, thus trivializing the reading process and resulting in a loss of creativity, imagination, and critical thinking in the curriculum.

In a study of the indirect consequences of accountability measures and high-stakes testing in urban school environments, Crocco and Costigan (2007) found that “new teachers believe this regimen undermines the little control they have over their teaching practice, personal and professional growth, and their ability to develop relationships with students” (p. 529). Their findings have particularly troubling implications for economically disadvantaged schools with higher percentages of at-risk students, where test pressures, scripted lessons, and mandated curriculum are most often to be found. Although some new teachers are resilient in the face of such conditions, others find these conditions are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. Such teachers leave underperforming schools for settings that provide greater scope for developing more satisfying and meaningful curriculum and pedagogy, and in which the stakes are not so high in terms of student failure on standardized tests.

These challenges can have a “deprofessionalizing” effect on teaching, which NCLB may have further exacerbated. Although acknowledging the importance of highly qualified teachers, NCLB appears to prioritize content knowledge over pedagogical expertise. Schoen and Fusarelli (2008) argued that NCLB’s call to employ science and math professionals suggests that pedagogical concerns such as instructional strategies are unimportant. The shift of locus of control over curriculum from the school district to the state or national level also reinforces the conflicted status of teaching as a profession (Fischman, DiBara, & Gardner, 2006). Based on a review of the literature, Tienken and Zhao (2010) reported that curriculum is most effective for improving student achievement when it is designed and developed by those who use and implement it.

Such trends, which can diminish teacher autonomy, are worrying in light of the extensive research that demonstrates how teachers deeply and profoundly influence students’ academic achievement and psychosocial adjustment (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Marzano, 2007; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). If teachers are deprived of
opportunities to foster creativity in their classrooms, can students learn to think creatively and be creative themselves?

Following in the footsteps of researchers like Crocco and Costigan (2007) and Burnard and White (2008), this study sheds further light on the impact that leaving teachers out of education reform discussions, narrowing the curriculum, and diminishing teacher autonomy and professionalism have on teachers’ ability to foster creativity in the classroom.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this research is based on the following, research-supported premises: that everyone is capable of being creative (Cropley, 2001); that fostering creativity can promote intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1983), academic achievement (Ai, 1999), and personal success (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995); and that teachers can play a significant role in fostering creative thinking, when allowed to do so, by modeling creativity and providing “congenial environments” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Acceptance of difference, openness, tolerance for change and ambiguity, challenging tasks and goals, risk taking, and absence of rigid sanctions for minor and harmless mistakes characterize teacher modeling and congenial environments for fostering creativity (Amabile, 1989; Isaksen, 1995).

The “counterpoint” to these premises is research suggesting that by narrowing the curriculum and diminishing teacher autonomy and professionalism, accountability measures and high-stakes testing mandates reduce teachers’ time and ability to foster creativity (Burnard & White, 2008). Wills and Sandholtz (2009) argued:

In response to state-level test-based accountability and the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school administrators increasingly view centralized curriculum and prescribed instructional strategies as the most direct means of increasing student performance. This movement toward standardization reduces teachers’ autonomy and control over their classroom practices. . . . High-stakes standardized testing is seen as moving public education away from teacher professionalism and toward the adoption of standardized practices that undermine or eliminate teacher authority over curriculum development and instructional decisions. (p. 1066)

Furthermore, high-stakes tests typically demand reproduction of a set of facts (in other words, novelty and ambiguity are rejected) in settings where only low levels of risk can be tolerated (i.e., failure is unacceptable); thus, they discourage the fostering of creativity.

Burnard and White (2008) framed the issue as a “complex interplay between performativity and creativity agendas” (p. 667), with teaching performativity conceptualized as “a regulated system of performances where the work climate and failure to perform successfully (perceived or otherwise) can have profoundly negative consequences” and as “the attitude of valuing the ‘effective’ and the ‘efficient’ in systems where the least ‘input’ produces the greatest ‘output’” (p. 674). Noting that creativity is “eminently suited to the multiple needs of life in the 21st century, which calls for enhanced skills of adaptation, flexibility, initiative, and the ability to use knowledge in different ways than has been hitherto realized” (p. 668), Burnard and White asserted that teacher agency (or autonomy and professionalism) is critical to effecting this kind of learning, whereas performativity, which is emphasized in the current education climate, reduces teacher agency.
Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences. In phenomenology, researchers describe the experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to those experiences to explore a particular concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, researchers seek to discover the essence of these experiences for the participants (Creswell, 1998). With this phenomenological study, I sought the essence and meaning of experiences with fostering creativity and creative thinking from K-6 teachers’ perspectives, thus making phenomenology the logical research method to employ. The question that guided this research was: What is the role of creativity and creative thinking in the current “high-stakes testing” educational environment?

Creswell (1998) recommended “long interviews with up to 10 people” (p. 65) for phenomenological studies. For the interviews, participants needed to meet three basic criteria: (1) be currently teaching in the school, (2) be interested in reflecting on their experiences with fostering creativity in the classroom, and (3) be willing to participate throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

The participants for this study were 10 teachers who are currently teaching in a central California elementary school (grades K-6), which comprises an arts magnet program and a science and math magnet program. Expanding on research by Wills and Sandholtz (2009), who found that teachers’ professional discretion is being constrained by high-stakes testing even when principals support teacher autonomy, I selected this site because it is a newly opened school in which the principal and teachers have been afforded some latitude to develop their arts- and science-based curricula in the face of and despite regional, state, and national pressure for accountability high-stakes testing. The teachers for this school were drawn from other schools in the area, where the curricula are more restricted because of accountability mandates. All have 5 years or more of teaching experience. Three of the participants teach in the math and science program of the school, the other seven teach in the arts program. There was at least one participant from each grade except kindergarten.

I conducted long, in-depth interviews that ranged from an hour long to 1 1/2 hours long with each of the participants. These interviews were audiotaped with the participants’ informed consent and were transcribed for analysis (Creswell, 1998). In the spirit of reciprocity (Patton, 2002) and for the purpose of member checks, I provided participants with copies of their transcripts. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, I assigned each participant a pseudonym.

In addition to the interview data, I used field notes and reflective notes to triangulate, allowing for corroboration of data, a better understanding of the data, and reduction of researcher bias. Field notes consisted of observational notes taken during the interview sessions, including notes about the setting, the participants’ mannerisms, and interruptions to the interview. I made reflective notes immediately following each interview and during data analysis.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the transcripts using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method advanced by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological research. First, I read and reread each interview transcript and extracted significant statements in the process. After extracting all significant statements from the 10 transcripts, I eliminated duplicate statements. I grouped the data into “meaning
units” and then wrote textural descriptions of the experience with verbatim examples. I developed meanings by reading, rereading, and reflecting on the significant statements in the original transcripts.

This resulted in an overall description of the meaning and “essence” of the experience. Reflection on these aggregate meanings and textural descriptions led to the development of structural themes that emerged from and were common to all of the participants’ descriptions. Using these themes, a distilled, composite description of the phenomenon was written.

Standards and Verification

Although most quantitative and many qualitative researchers use the terms reliability and validity to address issues of research trustworthiness, Creswell (1998) applied the terms standards and verification to qualitative research concerns. He described verification as “a process that occurs throughout the data collection, analysis, and report writing of a study” and standards as “criteria imposed by the researcher and others after a study is completed” (p. 194).

Creswell (1998) recommended that researchers engage in at least two of the following eight verification techniques: (1) prolonged engagement or persistent observation; (2) triangulation; (3) peer review or debriefing; (4) negative case analysis; (5) clarification of researcher bias; (6) member checks; (7) rich, thick description; and (8) external audits. For this study, I employed the techniques of member checks (or intersubjective validity); rich, thick description; peer review; and clarification of researcher bias.

**Member checks.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). With this technique, the researcher seeks the participants’ responses to the data analysis, findings, interpretations, and conclusions to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Following the transcribing of the interviews, I sent each participant a copy of her transcript and requested corrections and clarifications. I then provided each participant with a copy of the results and interpretations and asked each of them if the description validated their experiences. All of them stated that the description captured the essence of their experiences.

**Rich, thick description.** With respect to verification, Creswell (1998) noted that good description enables the reader to make decisions about transferability. Extensive use of quotes, along with descriptions of the participants and the setting, are used to allow others to more easily reflect on how the results relate to their own experiences.

**External verification.** For external verification, I asked a colleague with whom I worked closely for more than 4 years to serve as a peer reviewer. Her role was to serve as a “devil’s advocate”; ask probing questions about the research methods, meanings, and interpretations and act as my sounding board and empathetic listener (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Clarification of research bias.** To address possible researcher bias, I used the époche process to reflect on and clarify past experiences, prejudices, and personal orientations that might influence or bias my approach to and interpretations of the research (Creswell, 1998). Although I have not personally experienced the phenomenon of fostering creativity in an elementary school classroom, I was aware that my past and present experiences, as well as my knowledge of creativity and perceptions of the effects of high-stakes testing, could influence my collection and
analysis of the data; furthermore, I recognized that these experiences, understandings, and perceptions are what provoked my interest in researching this topic. Reflection on my childhood experiences in elementary school, and on my contemporary experiences as a university instructor, doctoral student, and mother of an elementary school child, enhanced my self-awareness and enabled me to contextualize and bracket out these experiences in relation to those of the research participants.

RESULTS

Research Question: What Is the Role of Creativity and Creative Thinking in Current High-Stakes Testing Educational Environment?

Teacher professionalism and creativity: “Teaching is an art in itself.” One of the main effects of the high-stakes testing environment noted in the literature has been the “deprofessionalizing” of teaching (Broadfoot, 1996; Fischman et al., 2006; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). The teachers in the study were acutely aware of and concerned about the erosion of their professional autonomy and the lack of respect for their judgment and qualifications. Furthermore, they strongly associated creativity with professional autonomy. These teachers viewed the fostering of creativity as a means of helping students use creativity to learn and feel successful. As Clark (1996) found, central to this perspective is the ability to utilize their own creativity as teachers to respond to the widely varying needs of their students. Cynthia asserted:

(Teachers) have to tap into their own creativity. That’s vital. They have to be willing to take a risk. . . . I have taught 6th grade for 12 years now and I never do anything the same. . . . I look at my kids too, and I say, “They’re not going to go with this. They are a brighter group.” Or, “They need me to slow it down,” or whatever or, “They don’t have a good handle on how to write an essay so I’ll need to do a lot more writing.”

Danielle stated:

I think if you can’t be creative with the kids and meet them in their own levels or in their own areas, or in their own needs, then you won’t be an effective teacher. . . . You have to be creative in how you are going to learn who your kids are and what they need and what they want and what they expect. And then you have to be creative in how you are going to reach that for them. . . . When you’re creative, you can differentiate for the kids so you are giving them what they need at their level so there’s less frustration with things being too high or too low for them and more feelings of success.

Patricia argued:

It’s getting to the point where a robot is going to do our job. There’s going to be no creativity whatsoever. “Here, take out this book, read this page, do this worksheet, take this test.” It’s getting worse; every year it gets more constrictive. “We want you to follow our pacing guide because you are not smart enough to have used this book for ten years and figured out that this is the way it should be taught.”

Responding to a question about what kind of support teachers need to foster creativity and creative thinking, Linda said:
Allowing us to be the professionals we are. We went to school for a reason. We all got our degrees and credentials, hopefully because we earned them. Let us use them. . . . Especially with things like the pacing calendars and I know with things like the API, AYP, they have to have ways of showing that they’re addressing the low test scores, but it’s really kind of shackled people’s hands. And there again, you’re stretched. How do I do it? Because the kids just roll their eyes, “Not another test.”

Carolyn felt that the benchmark tests had shorn her of the responsibility for assessing her students’ progress to no advantage:

In the past, I have tested children, I have found out where they are at and the problems (they are having), and I think now when I go through this benchmark, the children are no further than what that was at.

Laura agreed, noting, “Your best assessment is your own. You’re watching what’s going on.” And Kirsten remarked, “I can give a rubric on lots of different things, but they have to actually trust teacher judgment, which they don’t.”

Beth, who had previously taught at a low-performing, “program improvement” school, stated:

I would still be at (the low-performing school) if they hadn’t told me I had to teach scripted programs the same as the teacher in the room next door. Even when they knew the wonderful things I could do and celebrated it for a lot of things . . . they celebrate it on one side but chase you out of the cafeteria on the other side.

She later recounted how she and other teachers from her previous school had been sent to intensive trainings, where they realized:

There’s nobody else here except underperforming schools. And they don’t allow you to talk or share anything. Well, that’s always the best bit is when you learn from your peers. We quickly came to the conclusion that we are here because we are dummies and the fact that our school is underperforming is (because) we are hopeless and if we only follow their plan, we will become good teachers and that will affect the students. And we get that. We don’t believe it, but . . .

Danielle addressed the issue of teachers lacking “the power to regulate and enforce their own standards and responsibilities” (Fischman et al., 2006):

I wish that the powers that be, we’ll call them, would invest more time, especially, and money and resources into figuring out what those things are and not just pushing legislation on us without getting real teachers and real people with real voices involved in the decision making. Because that’s a powerful piece. And the people who don’t know what they are talking about are making a lot of the decisions for us and that’s harmful to our kids. And they keep wondering, “Why aren’t they doing better? Why aren’t we improving?” Well, dude, you took away all my creativity. I’m sitting in this room with 30 kids and I know how to reach most of them; there’s always a few that fall through the cracks. I can reach most of them but if you make me do all this and this, I’m losing all that valuable time where I could be teaching them, and I think it takes away a lot of their creative ability, which is what fosters successful people in the future. If you don’t allow them to be creative when they’re young and be the problem solver and figure out how they learn and think and interact, how will they ever become the Albert Einstein or the Wright Brothers? They’re not. They’re going to be the cookie cutter; you know, they can go work on an assembly line really well, but we’ve lost them. It’s tough. It’s very tough. . . . I think that the legislators need to involve creative teachers to help them create
something that’s worthwhile for everybody, because it’s out there. It’s out there and we just haven’t been given the time, money, opportunity, whatever, to find out what it is. And it’s always going to be a changing process.

Later in the interview, Danielle articulated a long-term concern about teachers’ increasing loss of autonomy:

I think that many teachers believe creativity to be important. I can’t say most because once you are stifled for too long, you tend to lose what you had, when you don’t exercise that portion of your brain or your body tends to, yeah, atrophy is the word they would use. But I think most teachers want to be creative and know that creative is best. They either don’t remember how (or) aren’t allowed to.

Curriculum and instructional strategies: “The program does not make the learning.”

As Danielle alluded, the teachers’ concerns about the time pressures and loss of professional autonomy associated with the high-stakes testing environment arise from an understanding of constructivist research and experience-based convictions about how children best learn, as well as their perceptions about the role of creativity and teacher agency in learning. Cynthia put it this way:

I think we need to go back to the research (on how kids learn best). . . . You’re dealing with human beings—30 little kids in here all with a huge range, not only in abilities, but emotions on a daily basis, home lives, everything. And you can’t peg them into anything. That’s why I could never survive at (scripted curriculum) schools. They are going to try to peg me into a little format. I am not a format, I am a human. . . . You don’t want robotic people. You want people who think, and that’s what our nation was founded on.

Wendy reflected:

If legislators or the powers that be or whoever it is made up these big tests if they let the teachers relax and let the kids relax and introduce some more creative ways of thinking to reach—we have, what, years of theory on the different modes of learning and Howard Gardner’s theory on all that. Why did we spend all this time to develop this and say this is the different ways people learn but we are not going to let you learn that way?

Theresa lamented the implications of focusing on and testing basic skills at the expense of other subjects:

I think it’s so sad that one of the first things that has to go, or they think has to go, is the arts and music. One of the programs they have to cut. And that, by far, is one of the things that is basic to any kind of creativity. . . . And by limiting your resources on that, we will become a very, very poor and under-nourished community of young kids who are coming up with no kind of appreciation.

Wendy poignantly gave voice to Lewis’s (1991) assertion that destructive conduct is often the result of the failure of the education system to help students feel successful and develop the ego-strength necessary for a productive life:

Because we have students at all different levels, the reality is that my little guy who is reading at a mid-first grade level, okay, he’s being exposed to all the 3rd-grade standards and even if I differentiate with him and bring it down to a level or have someone helping him, I bring it down to a level that’s his level, okay, he can understand this concept, then I hand him a 3rd-grade standardized test. I am
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setting him up to fail. That is probably the biggest thing that I hate about it. I feel like we do all these things to bolster their confidence and then we hand them something that they are mentally not capable of doing. It’s really disheartening as a teacher to see that and to see him when he’s so discouraged and puts his head down and says, “I can’t do it anyway, why do I try, I can’t do it anyway.” So he gives up and that’s frustrating. And it’s, “No, you’ve got to try, you’ve got to try.” And then he becomes a discipline issue. He’s on the floor; he’s under his desk. It would be like me sitting here trying to read Chinese. I’m not going to stay very interested for very long.

Testing: “I think it would foster (creativity) if they stop doing things that hinder it” (Beth). Critics of No Child Left Behind and state accountability programs have charged that such measures “force teachers to spend more time on test-prep and drill-and-kill exercises rather than on authentic teaching and learning” (Fusarelli, 2004, p. 79). The experiences of the teachers in this study lend credence to this criticism. As Wendy put it:

As far as the assessments that we’re doing, the ongoing assessments, the constant assessments, I don’t think they particularly foster any creativity. I don’t think they even foster learning. Seriously. We’re shoving information into the kids so fast and testing them on it . . . it’s more of a short-term memory thing. And that’s why I can ask kids to do something I know they had in their curriculum in 2nd grade and ask them questions about it and they will not remember what it was. It’s like they never heard it before. And I think it’s because we’re like, “We’re going to do this and then take a test. Then we are moving on to this and then take a test.” How do you have time to process it and work with it?

Kirsten pointed out that the current testing approach fails to account for students’ thinking processes:

They seem to want it to be a one-size-fits-all, bubble in the correct answer, you know. Not, “How did you get to this or why do you think this?” I mean, it’s nothing that’s open-ended or why a student chose this answer, because maybe it makes perfectly good sense when they explain why they chose this. . . . But, no, it’s all Scantron, fill it in the machine.

Beth also expressed her reservations about multiple-choice tests:

I think if you look at the history of them and how they were developed and what they are for and intelligences that seem to dominate them, why are they even in elementary school? I never had one until I was in high school. . . . And, sometimes, the way they test (the necessary test-taking skill) is higher than the skill they are testing.

Patricia went further, suggesting that testing not only inherently fails to promote learning, it is often unfair, “Some of the test makers are awful. They just try to trick the kids. That’s not finding out if they know what you want them to know or not, trying to trick them.”

Linda acknowledged the value of testing as one form of assessment, but on a much smaller scale than the current environment calls for:

I think testing is something we have to do, we should do, but on a very limited basis because the kids are all individuals. They might be having a bad week when they take the test, yet that’s what they base (progress on)—and kids too, they know. They think, “Oh my gosh, I’m stupid because my numbers were –.” But I do think we need some kind, but we need to keep it in perspective too that this is just one way of monitoring a general growth or lack of growth or whatever of the student population.
Similarly, Danielle stated:

Test taking skills are important, but one a week, two a week, big, full-on tests—that’s too much for me. I’m all about small assessments all along. That’s what kids need. Informal assessment is more than plenty on a weekly basis.

Laura acknowledged the need to assess student learning, but advocated for a more balanced approach:

I do think we need some sort of benchmarks—and that word’s become kind of a yucky word right now—but there are times of the year—well you need to assess always, so you need to have some benchmark to guide yourself by or some kids will never learn because it’s easier for them not to learn. But I don’t think it needs to be every week, and I don’t think that everybody necessarily has to be on the same page. I think it needs to be a little broader like it used to be where . . . we knew they needed to read so many words and needed to read so many levels in books and whatnot to be on grade level. That, to me, makes more sense. And how you get them there is the creative part of teaching.

Kirsten also advocated for a variety of approaches to assessment:

I am not saying every test needs to be a performance; you are going to have to have some paper-and-pencil, multiple choice, true/false tests. But you can also have portfolios and you can also have performance-based tests, and you can also have artwork or some kind of project.

The teachers in this study—particularly those who previously worked at “low performing” schools—recognized and appreciated that they have been afforded greater latitude and freedom in implementing their curricula at their school, in part because it is a magnet program, but also because the school’s test scores have been satisfactorily high so far. Perhaps because of this perceived relative autonomy, a few of the teachers still felt they could respond creatively to and continue to foster creativity through the tests. Cynthia stated:

Even though high-stakes testing is there, I think you can be extremely creative in those parameters. I don’t think there’s any way you should not. And I think teachers have a misconception. They think that because the test is paper-and-pencil, therefore they must teach paper-and-pencil. But that’s not true.

Linda also expressed the need to work creatively in the current climate:

Especially in this day and age when it’s so restrictive as to what they want kids to do or how you can present material, I think you have to be very creative to find a way around some of that because they get so tired, they just become parrots.

Nonetheless, all of the teachers have felt pressures related to the high-stakes testing climate, even at their current school. Recently, the school was mandated by the district to follow benchmark pacing calendars for the math, reading, and English language development standards, which the teachers have found inhibiting and constraining. In conjunction with the state testing schedule, this mandate exacerbated the teachers’ perceptions and reinforced Wills and Sandholtz’s (2009) findings that teacher and student creativity is being squeezed out of schools by increasing time pressures, the eroding of teacher professionalism, and a “one-size-fits-all” approach to learning.

**Time pressures: “I need time.”** Time requirements prescribed by pacing calendars and tests may diminish time available for other subjects, as well as other types of learning (Firestone
et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2003; Mock et al., 2006). Kirsten described the amount of time required simply for administering the tests:

We have the state testing and then we have six theme tests throughout the year that take up a whole entire week. So we have six weeks of instruction that’s gone. And then, now that we have the math pacing, we give basically a test a week for math. So it’s less teaching time for us and we’re supposed to be teaching more and more.

Under the pacing calendar, each teacher is expected to be addressing a particular standard on a given day, regardless of student progress, resulting in limitations to the teacher’s ability to respond to individual students’ needs. As Danielle pointed out:

Time is a factor in creativity also, actually—to figure out what each student needs to be able to offer them that thing. One kid might take a half an hour, one kid might take two days, and how do you balance that and make that work?

Theresa reflected on how test-driven strategies like pacing calendars negatively affect what Csikszentmihalyi (1996) termed creative flow:

I need time. I need time. Time is the most crucial. . . . And that’s something that once you get into this mode of thinking and taking things out, then its time to go. Time to stop. Freeze, everyone. How do you do that? And you can ask a musician or you can ask a painter, an artist, opera singer, or anyone, when you are in the mood, the mood strikes, and you keep going until it’s done, until you are tired or things are going bad.

A little later in the interview she commented:

Some of the students were asking me (about the pacing calendar). (Students) shouldn’t know about the pacing calendar. How do you teach kids, “Well, right now we have to . . . move on to chapter whatever. And I’m sorry if you don’t get it. We’re moving on. No child left behind. Just keep moving.”

Patricia agreed, noting, “They want every chapter taught in one week. So basically, you have three days to teach double-digit multiplication to 4th-graders. Not going to happen. Long division. Oh yeah, they can get that in three days, sure. No problem.”

Laura noted that the time constraints of the pacing calendar also negatively affect the high-performing students, “Because if we have to stay on page 131, well, the kids that have already done it or the kids that are bored, well, I give them other things to do but I’m not technically taking them further.”

Some of the teachers were working to comply with the benchmark pacing calendar, but bemoaned the effect it had on their teaching and the students’ learning. Carolyn noted, “I don’t have that free time (to teach more creatively) . . . because once you’re behind on the benchmark of the standards . . . it’s hard to catch up with the paperwork. It’s paperwork (and more) paperwork. It’s a different kind of teaching now.” Laura commented:

What they are doing right now is they are not allowing any time to practice. For instance, we taught money in chapter 16, which the kids had never seen before because I’m following the benchmark. Now, if this had been left up to me, from day one they’d be handling money because I have a store and the whole thing. And so (now) I’m doing what the benchmark say to. On chapter 16, they were supposed to be doing money for one week and then test. How good do you think that was?
Other teachers were simply not complying. Cynthia felt the benefits of non-compliance outweighed the risks:

I’m just saying that I think that to teach well you don’t have to worry about, well, I have to follow my benchmark. That is kind of hard because maybe you need to build on something that’s going to take longer than the time period the district deemed to do something. . . . If I have something that’s going to take a little longer, I am going to go with it. . . . If my students are engaged and if they’re with me and they’re learning and they’re challenging and they’re pushing and going up here, I am not going to cut it down because, “Oh my gosh, on day 13 I’m supposed to be on”—I’m not doing that. I’m student-centered, totally. And it’s got to be for their benefit. And that’s when they’re walking out of here and have the ability to take and create and build because I have given them that freedom to do that, hopefully.

**DISCUSSION**

The structural themes that emerged from reflection on and analysis of the results were connections versus disconnections and right fit versus lack of fit. These themes echo the tensions between standardization and professionalism (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009) as well as performativity and creativity (Burnard & White, 2008) described in the conceptual framework for this study.

Relevant to the theme of connections versus disconnections, the teacher participants described how fostering creativity developed connections in a variety of ways, but also described how the current high-stakes testing environment results in disconnections. Particularly distressing to them is their perception that high-stakes testing and related mandates disconnect teachers from teaching and, thus, students from learning. The time pressures imposed by tests and pacing calendars cause these disconnections by diminishing the time available for other subjects and limiting teachers’ ability to respond creatively to individual students’ needs. Testing-related mandates also disconnect the teachers from their sense of autonomy and professionalism, and thus their perceived ability to foster creativity, by emphasizing scripted curricula and regimented teaching strategies designed to improve test scores.

Social connections critical to teacher agency and creativity also suffer under the high-stakes testing mandates, according to the teachers. Use of worksheets and workbooks and, in some cases, scripted curricula decreases interaction and collaboration opportunities for students and teachers. Such practices also disconnect teachers from the intrinsic benefits and enjoyment they derive from teaching when afforded opportunities to exercise their autonomy and agency.

With regard to the theme of right fit versus lack of fit, teachers perceive the fostering of creativity as “fitting” with their teaching philosophies and styles and their sense of professionalism but experience “lack of fit” under current conditions that they feel pressure them or force them to alter their styles and surrender their autonomy. The teachers were very frustrated by their sense of a lack of fit between their beliefs about teaching and learning and the current high-states testing climate. They viewed the testing measures as constraining their teaching styles and strategies, and thus limiting their ability to foster creativity and creatively address the different needs of their students.

Even in this school that has been afforded a relative amount of freedom in implementing the curriculum, faced with the time constraints and other pressures associated with testing and pacing calendars, the teachers strongly sensed an erosion of their autonomy and professionalism
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Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). In light of the powerful intrinsic motivation and enjoyment teachers derive from being allowed the autonomy to teach creatively and foster creativity (Olivant, 2009) this finding is particularly troubling. Will talented teachers remain in the profession if their primary source of job satisfaction is eroded?

Fischman et al. (2006) offered another thought-provoking perspective on teacher professionalism:

Paradoxically, the close relationship of responsibility and creativity in teachers’ work may be one of the major factors that prevent teaching from being considered a profession. In established professions, good work is done by following tradition rather than resorting repeatedly to creative departures from established practices. When creativity is always at a premium, then the consolidation of practices and values intrinsic to a profession may prove elusive. Pursuing “individual creativity” in the “performance and delivery of expert services” is a real challenge. (p. 396)

In other words, legislators and school boards may feel they are ensuring “professionalism” and professional practices by implementing rigorous testing mandates designed to replicate “good work,” whereas teachers value the freedom more often associated with creative and artistic occupations. Looked at from another perspective, it could be argued that the transformational power of creativity poses a challenge to organizational systems and institutional frameworks that rely, sometimes necessarily, on compliance and constraint, as well as to approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment that promote strategic or surface approaches to learning.

To address the inherent tensions between standardization and professionalism and performability and creativity and to address what society needs from education, Burnard and White (2008) proposed a “rebalancing pedagogy” that places higher trust in teacher professionalism:

Professional pedagogical practices that foster and promote student creativity cannot be expected from teaching assistants and bureaucrats. Such practices are those arising from the professional artistry involved in valuing the process and outcomes of risk-taking, problematising knowledge, journeying from the known to the unknown, and sharing the process of education with students. (p. 677)

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn. Teachers perceive the current high-stakes testing climate to be negatively affecting their ability to foster creativity and creative thinking in the classroom through its emphasis on compliance and conformity at the expense of teacher autonomy and self-direction. Testing, scripted curricula, pacing calendars, and related mandates significantly limit the time teachers can devote to meeting the various needs of their students, whereas the tests themselves favor students with certain learning styles but disadvantage many others with differing styles.

In short, teachers experience “fit” with their teaching philosophies and styles and develop social and intellectual connections under conditions that encourage autonomy and teacher professionalism, and thus allow them to foster creativity in the classroom, but experience lack of “fit” and damaged or broken connections under the current high-stakes testing conditions.

Creativity is crucial to personal and cognitive growth and to academic success. It is a concept that continues to merit a central position in education but tends to fail to attain the appropriate attention and support of policymakers and education leaders. It is worth remembering
that teachers are deeply influential in students’ academic achievement and personal well-being. “Rebalancing pedagogy” (Burnard & White, 2008) to reinvigorate teachers as professionals and enable them to teach creatively and foster creativity in the classroom can potentially deepen students’ learning, broaden their higher level thinking skills, and enhance their enjoyment of learning and motivation to learn. As Patricia said, “Kids still want to learn and enjoy learning. They’re still excited and haven’t been beaten down yet. I can definitely flip my ideas around and go back to creativity.”

REFERENCES


