

“WE’RE NOT GOING TO DO THAT BECAUSE IT’S NOT RIGHT”: USING PEDAGOGICAL
RESPONSIBILITY TO REFRAME THE DOUBLESPEAK OF FIDELITY*

Doris A. Santoro
Department of Education
Bowdoin College

ABSTRACT. In this essay, Doris Santoro examines the discourse of “fidelity of instruction” to show how it is doublespeak for teacher compliance that is incompatible with democracy and education. Examining the distorted use of the term “fidelity” by market-based reformers, Santoro shows how it can be used as a weapon against teacher intelligence and moral response. She argues that John Dewey’s philosophy provides conceptual resources to reframe some teacher infidelity as intelligent response, the moral agency required for pedagogical responsibility.

If we speak out, we are reprimanded for not being team players: if we do as we are told, we are supporting a broken system.¹

— Pauline Hawkins

Jason is a high school English teacher with ten years of experience. He works in a high-poverty urban school in a mid-sized, former industrial hub of the United States. Self-described as an “NCLB teacher,” the bulk of his teacher education and all of his career occurred after implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that entailed unprecedented federal oversight of public school teachers’ work. Jason’s only experience is under a regime of high-stakes accountability in a high-profile district. He is no stranger to the climate of standardization, but he balked at implementing a “managed” curriculum (one that is paced and heavily scripted) with fidelity. How can Jason’s resistance to his district’s demands for fidelity be read as a form of pedagogical responsibility? In this article, I examine the ways in which the use of the term fidelity has been deployed as a weapon against teacher intelligence and moral engagement in their work. John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* reveals that teachers like Jason who are caught in the sticky moral web of fidelity are revealing their intelligence and moral agency through their resistance. I will show that fidelity, as used by market-based education reformers, is a flimsy substitute for the demanding moral and epistemic work of thinking and acting upon “what the known demands of us.”²

Even though, as I will show, market-based reformers have diminished and distorted the meaning of fidelity, its ability to affect teachers’ moral emotions remains. I contend that fidelity not only requires obedience, but it evokes affective responses, such as the shame articulated by Pauline Hawkins in the epigraph, and is used to discredit the moral impulses of teachers. Ubiquitous in market-based educational reform, “fidelity” appears 1,907 times in ERIC, the online library of education research and information, sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education.³ The bulk of the references (1,590 have been published after 2000) occur

¹ Pauline Hawkins, “My Resignation Letter,” *Pauline Hawkins* (website), April 7, 2014, <http://paulinehawkins.com/2014/04/07/my-resignation-letter/>.

² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916) in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985). This work will be cited in the text as *DE* for all subsequent references.

³ Although other databases may offer a stronger research base or a more global perspective, I selected ERIC because it reflects more closely what is happening in schools rather than the research conducted at colleges and universities.

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in the titles of the papers and are not incidental words buried in the text. Websites detailing “fidelity of implementation” are numerous. In a blog post, Paul LeMahieu of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching argues that the fidelity of implementation should be replaced with the integrity of implementation.⁴ While I agree wholeheartedly with the empirical issues LeMahieu raises, there remains more to be said about the moral and epistemic function of fidelity in the lives of teachers.

In the context of market-based educational reform, fidelity is doublespeak for teacher compliance. While the moral dimensions of teaching have been well documented,⁵ the ways in which teachers’ moral commitments have been manipulated to facilitate market-based reforms have received less attention. I argue that the term fidelity is deployed to morally manipulate and discipline public school teachers to follow the dictates of corporate interests.⁶ However, teachers’ resistance to demands for fidelity of implementation may reveal their determination to exercise pedagogical responsibility. Silvia Edling and Anneli Frelin warn that “teachers’ felt responsibilities are at risk of becoming more or less invisible in research concerning teacher professionalism in an age of measurement.”⁷ This article addresses the suppression of teacher responsibility under the regime of fidelity of implementation.

Pedagogical responsibility stands in stark contrast to the too-easy compliance associated with fidelity. Barbara Stengel and Mary Casey explain that the moral dimensions of teaching are interwoven with the epistemic demands of the work.⁸ Teachers’ moral agency is “intelligent response,” a term Dewey uses whenever an individual acts upon the world with the intention of fulfilling an aim. The intelligent response arises not from a distanced intellectual deliberation, but from an embodied and situated understanding of the likely responses to particular actions. Responses, in turn, become more intelligent as a greater storehouse of experience informs both the quality of the aim and the subtleties of the means.

Fidelity of implementation, in contrast, is an impoverished attempt to ensure that students engage in quality educational experiences. As Stengel and Casey emphasize,

[T]eaching is not merely a matter of adhering to prescribed strategies of instruction, nor is it merely enacting a predetermined philosophical vision in one’s classroom, nor is it merely exemplifying a set of pedagogical virtues — though strategies, visions, and virtues *are* among the teacher’s tools. It is the practice of pedagogical responsibility.⁹

Pedagogical responsibility occurs only in a relation between a teacher and student. The teacher is responsible for the quality of the relation in which each party is “seen, encouraged and challenged.”¹⁰

⁴ Paul LeMahieu, “What We Need in Education Is More Integrity (and Less Fidelity) of Implementation,” *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* (blog), October 11, 2011, <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/what-we-need-in-education-is-more-integrity-and-less-fidelity-of-implementation/>.

⁵ Matthew Sanger, “Talking to Teachers and Looking at Practice in Understanding the Moral Dimensions of Teaching,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 33, no. 6 (2001): 683–704; Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom, and David Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993); and Alan R. Tom, *Teaching as Moral Craft* (New York: Longman, 1984).

⁶ Cris Mayo, “The Uses of Foucault,” *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 103–16; and Frank Pignatelli, “What Can I Do? Foucault on Freedom and the Question of Teacher Agency,” *Educational Theory* 43, no. 4 (1993): 411–32. Teachers also face employment-related discipline

⁷ Silvia Edling and Anneli Frelin, “Doing Good? Interpreting Teachers’ Given and Felt Responsibilities for Pupils’ Well-Being in an Age of Measurement,” *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 19, no. 4 (2013): 419–32.

⁸ Barbara S. Stengel and Mary E. Casey, “‘Grow by Looking’: From Moral Perception to Pedagogical Responsibility,” *National Society for the Study of Education* 112, no. 1 (2013): 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

Yet that responsibility is undermined by demands for fidelity in market-based educational reforms. The dismantling of that responsibility negates the possibility of responsible and responsive pedagogical relations, thus leading to disastrous results for students and teachers alike. Pedagogical responsibility is ceded to curricular products that may offer valuable resources, but that cannot produce intelligent response.

FIDELITY IN A CORPORATOCRACY

When used outside of the context of educational reform, fidelity usually signifies faithfulness to a person; adherence to a religion, an ideology, or other allegiance; or truthfulness to the original. Almost always, the term fidelity carries a normative valence; to be unfaithful signals wrongdoing. To be unfaithful indicates that an individual has trampled upon an agreement that was previously set forth or understood implicitly. Infidelity denotes cheating. An infidel has turned away from his or her moral source.

In relation to political authority, Avihay Dorfman and Alon Harel outline two forms of fidelity: *fidelity as deference* and *fidelity as reason*.¹¹ In the case of the *deferential* type of fidelity, the individual actor “suppresses his or her own judgment” and leaves judgments to the state. The actor’s responsibility is to execute the plan as one could imagine the state would do if able to act as an individual.¹² In the case of the second type of fidelity, that of *reason*, the actor makes “impartial” value judgments “about the precise content of the concerns at stake and the best way to balance them against one another and decide on this basis what method” will fulfill the general good.¹³

In the case of public schools in a corporatocracy, it is unclear whom the actor should reference in his or her judgments. Christine Sleeter explains that a corporatocracy “includes linking three powerful institutions that are run by a small elite whose members move ‘easily and often’ across institutions: major corporations, government, and major banks.... [C]orporatocracy protects the rights of corporations as well as wealthy individuals to determine how resources will be used, by whom, and to what ends.”¹⁴ Who or what constitutes “the state” in the public school context, at least one as muddled as that in the United States? The local legislature? The appointed superintendent? The private foundation that provided a grant to the district to undertake a new initiative? The instructional coaches paid for by the corporation whose curriculum was purchased by the school?

Are either of fidelity options described above compatible with an intellectually and morally responsible vision for public school teaching? *Fidelity of deference* presents a problematic option: not only does it undermine a teacher’s intelligence and fail to align with democratic ideals (where those are still taught), the object of fidelity is contested. Can a corporate identity be the target of fidelity in public schools? While *fidelity of reason* presents an intuitively more appealing option, it cannot be supported by Dewey’s embodied vision of intelligence rooted in experience and social engagement. Furthermore, Dewey’s localism challenges the notion that a general good can be articulated absent the interchange of various publics.

¹¹ Avihay Dorfman and Alon Harel, “The Case Against Privatization,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 41, no. 1 (2013): 67–102. I borrow Dorfman and Harel’s definitions and terminology, but I do not take up their central question of whether some functions of the state can be privatized. There is rich material in this article for those interested in exploring distinctions between public and private in terms of schooling.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ Christine E. Sleeter, “Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Corporatocracy,” *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 1 (2008): 144.

Many curriculum developers and educational evaluators advocate the importance of teachers implementing a school district's adopted program with fidelity. A number of reasons pertain for asking teachers to follow the directives set out by a curriculum plan. For the purposes of assessing not only students but the effectiveness of the program, it is important that teachers implement the program consistently in their own classrooms and across the school or district. Furthermore, some districts hope to maintain consistency across schools in order to minimize academic disruptions to highly mobile student populations.

In the context of educational reform, the use of the term fidelity also imbues the curriculum and testing products of corporations not only with political power, but also with moral significance. Lisa Foster defines fidelity as "the extent to which delivery of an intervention adheres to the protocol or program model originally developed."¹⁵ Teachers are expected to follow lesson scripts and curricular maps with fidelity. Computer-based teaching programs must be used with fidelity. On its website the Los Angeles Unified School District describes fidelity to teachers as following the directions of the curriculum developers:

What is fidelity of implementation?

Fidelity of implementation occurs when teachers use the instructional strategies and deliver the content of the curriculums in the same way that they were designed to be used and delivered.

Why is fidelity of implementation important in teaching research-based curriculums?

Fidelity is critical to achieving the same results that were achieved during the research. When changes are made in how the curriculum is presented, it is unclear what the effects on the students will be.

Critical to the fidelity of the implementation of a curriculum is the importance of teaching the lessons in order that the publisher has presented them [sic]. Teachers are also to teach each lesson according to the publisher's recommended time. Furthermore, teachers are instructed to follow the recommendation of the publisher about how many lessons to teach per week. In addition, teachers are to make use of each publisher's recommended questions and homework pages or activity sheets that will give students the opportunity to practice the skill they are learning. In brief, all of the publishers have specific recommendations for their programs that teachers should follow.¹⁶

The Los Angeles Unified School District makes it clear *to whom* teachers must be faithful: teachers' fidelity must be attached to the publisher, a corporate entity.

With the implementation of NCLB, all curricula — especially in districts like Los Angeles, where schools struggle to demonstrate proficiency on high-stakes standardized tests — must be "scientifically based."¹⁷ Often, this requirement translates into states, districts, and/or schools adopting standardized curricula and lesson plans from publishers preapproved by the U.S. Department of Education. Much prescriptive pedagogical policy is justified on the grounds that it is "scientifically based" and has been proven to improve students' academic outcomes. Therefore, policymakers and educational leaders who advocate for scripted lessons, prepackaged curricula, and other "teacher-proof" materials do so on the grounds that the "evidence" shows its proven benefits.

¹⁵ Lisa H. Foster, *Fidelity: Snapshots of Implementation of a Curricular Intervention* (PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2011), 1.

¹⁶ Los Angeles Unified School District, "Fidelity of Implementation," <http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/offices/hep/news/fidelity.html> (accessed September 8, 2015).

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education, "Scientifically Based Research," <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/research/index.html> (accessed September 8, 2015). For more evidence on the global attention to "evidence-based practice," see Gert Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Won't Work: Evidence-Based Practice and the Democratic Deficit in Educational Research," *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007): 1-22.

With the focus on “what works,” teachers are instructed to enact their work with fidelity to publishers and other corporations, not to students, their communities, or even their subjects. In the case of the United States, scripted curricula are adopted most often in vulnerable communities (usually low-income black and Latina/o). These communities have the least cultural capital to push back on the corporate monetization of public schooling and also have the least political capital to influence or challenge pedagogical policy decisions. Corporations have the greatest potential for financial gain in schools and districts that enroll the poorest students. Jonathan Kozol quotes an ambivalent new teacher who shares a quip in circulation, “The rich get richer and the poor get SFA [Success For All, a scripted reading curriculum].”¹⁸ Some of the rich get richer, of course, by selling and supporting SFA and other school programs that teachers are mandated to use with fidelity.

THE STICKY MORAL WEB OF FIDELITY

The economic implications of demands for fidelity of implementation for curriculum publishers are obvious, but less obvious is the moral and intellectual impact of the demands for fidelity on teachers. It is well documented that many teachers enter the profession for moral reasons and are sustained in their work by the moral rewards of teaching.¹⁹ The term fidelity carries moral weight. Teachers who challenge or do not follow the plan may be characterized not only as insubordinate, but as traitors to the aims of equitable education. The threat of moral reprobation may be especially damaging to educators for whom teaching is a significant source of their moral identity.

I characterize the current pedagogical policy environment as morally constrained because it sets up a logic that limits how teachers’ criticisms regarding pedagogical policy are heard. Betty Achinstein and Rodney Ogawa explain that what they call “moralistic control compounds the stifling effect that technical control can have on teacher reflection, discussion, and debate of instructional practice.”²⁰ High-stakes accountability and other market-based reforms are cast as moral in that they purport to remedy unequal educational outcomes. However, this discourse also has the effect of rendering all resistance to and criticism of said policies as immoral.

Questioning the curricular product or program that they are supposed to implement with fidelity may place teachers in moral jeopardy. NCLB and Race to the Top are framed in language that renders critics morally suspect; for instance, critics of current policies may be viewed as favoring leaving children behind or settling for a slow walk toward mediocrity. A reasoned explanation for taking a detour from a scripted lesson could be met with the retort that the teacher is shortchanging the students by not following “what works” with fidelity. Teachers’ concerns about the means and aims of education are constrained within the current pedagogical policy environment that demands fidelity and rule-following over democratic engagement with principles, values, and ideals about teaching.

Good teachers, in this milieu, suppress their judgment and follow the dictates of the product or program that their school, district, or state has adopted. Teachers who do not do as they are told may be represented in popular media and educational research as insubordinate or unwilling to improve their practice; they are cast as morally deficient “bad teachers.”²¹ Teachers’ criticisms,

¹⁸ Jonathan Kozol, “Still Separate, Still Unequal,” *Harper’s* 311, no. 1864 (2005): 41

¹⁹ Erin Rooney, “‘I’m Just Going through the Motions’: High-Stakes Accountability and Teachers’ Access to Intrinsic Rewards,” *American Journal of Education* 121, no. 4 (2015): 475–500; Doris A. Santoro, “Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work,” *American Journal of Education* 188, no. 1 (2011): 1–23.

²⁰ Betty Achinstein and Rodney Ogawa, “(In)Fidelity: What the Resistance of New Teachers Reveals about Professional Principles and Prescriptive Educational Policies,” *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 1 (2006): 55.

²¹ Kevin K. Kumashiro, *Bad Teacher: How Blaming Teachers Distorts the Bigger Picture* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012). See also Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America’s Most Embattled Profession* (New York:

informed by daily evidence presented in their own classrooms and schools, rather than being recognized as an attempt to debate the purposes and practices of public schools, are often cast as self-serving and a form of obstructionist resistance rooted in an unwillingness to change their practices. For instance, New York State Commissioner of Education MaryEllen Elia said that it was “unethical” for teachers to support or encourage students to opt-out from standardized testing.²² Where conversations about what constitutes the moral path in an environment dominated by high-stakes testing could be taking place, instead teachers are cast as moral only if they follow the directives set by others and as immoral if they engage in behaviors or conversations that challenge the directives of their superiors.

Gert Biesta argues that prescriptive, “evidence-based” approaches to education fail on a significant criterion: democracy. He explains that “what counts as ‘effective’ crucially depends on judgments about what is educationally desirable”:

On the practice side, evidence-based education seems to limit severely the opportunities for educational practitioners to make such judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualized settings. The focus on “what works” makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions of what it should work *for* and who should have a say in determining the latter.²³

Biesta’s vision is prescient. Rebecca Noël Smith’s experience teaching elementary school with Success for All is emblematic of this problem. Noting her students’ boredom with repeating the assigned vocabulary words, she augmented the program by teaching her students to use a thesaurus and find synonyms for the deadening list to be covered. Even though she continued to address and expand upon the required material, she had “strayed from the SFA structure.”²⁴ There was no space to discuss the ways in which she was empowering the students to use new tools, expand their vocabulary, develop classroom community, or respond to student disengagement. Noël Smith says that her principal was unequivocal on fidelity of implementation. The teachers were “reminded numerous times each year by the principal, “SFA is not going anywhere. If you don’t like teaching it, I’ll help you find another job.”²⁵

Given demands for fidelity and unquestioning acceptance of the ends of education touted vociferously by market-based reformers in a corporatocracy, teachers may lose moral credibility when they criticize or resist pedagogical policy initiatives. While the attitude of the principal just described falls far outside a democratic attitude toward the school’s faculty, how the teachers are positioned in relation to their criticisms of the program is more significant to my argument. The principal strips the teachers of any epistemic or moral basis for concern regarding the scripted curriculum. The teachers’ criticisms are recognized merely as preferences, whether or not they “like” the program. This demoralizes the faculty, giving the teachers no moral ground from which to make

Doubleday, 2014); and John Kuhn, *Fear and Learning in America: Bad Data, Good Teachers, and the Attack on Public Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014). Goldstein describes various education reforms as responding to “moral panics” about teachers. Kuhn documents public discourse that characterizes public school teachers as selfish, greedy, and villainous.

²² John Hildebrand, “NY Education Commissioner Says Opt-Outs ‘Not Reasonable,’” *Newsday*, August 20, 2015, <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/maryellen-elia-ny-education-commissioner-says-test-opt-outs-not-reasonable-1.10759569>.

²³ Biesta, “Why ‘What Works’ Won’t Work,” 5.

²⁴ Rebecca Noël Smith, “The Moral Oppression of the Teaching Profession: Learning to Transcend (masters thesis, University of Central Florida, 2013), 82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

judgments about their work.²⁶ The effect is “morally oppressive,” says Noël Smith, and “encourages one to ignore and suppress her morality, her moral impulses, and her moral way of knowing.”²⁷

As in any workplace, some teachers may resist policy and curricular changes out of stubbornness or laziness. However, Achinstein and Ogawa argue that some forms of infidelity take the shape of “principled resistance.”²⁸ This resistance is based on “professional principles”:

Professional principles are conceptions about teaching and professionalism in which teachers view themselves as professionals with specialized expertise, who have discretion to employ repertoires of instructional strategies to meet the individual needs of diverse students, hold high expectations for themselves and students, foster learner communities among students, and participate in self-critical communities of practice.²⁹

While teachers may see themselves as engaging in principled resistance, it is difficult to make a convincing case for professional principles in an environment in which teachers’ moral ground has been eviscerated or is not recognized. Fidelity of implementation places teachers in a sticky moral web. Some teachers may find that fidelity of implementation harms children academically, socially, or psychologically. They may believe that it harmfully narrows the purposes of public education in a democracy. Nevertheless, teachers’ resistance to enact a program with fidelity can mark them as morally deficient because the “scientifically based” program has been positioned as the only moral response to educational inequity. Even though teachers possess and may articulate moral reasons to depart from demands for fidelity, their lack of fidelity renders them morally suspect. Once caught in the web of morally constrained logic where noncompliance signals moral transgression, their moral reasons may not be received or recognized as moral. What resources are available to teachers caught in this maddening situation?

LEARNING WHAT THE KNOWN DEMANDS OF US

Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* provides a necessary counterpoint to the impoverished and misleading use of the term fidelity in school contexts. Dewey’s thought enables teachers to reclaim moral and epistemic authority and agency in their work — that is, his book stands as a century-old advocate for pedagogical responsibility. I draw on Jason’s resistance to a scripted curriculum as a quotidian example of one teacher’s moral and intellectual engagement with his work. Jason’s actions, read from the perspective of market-based notions of fidelity, could be described as insubordinate or a failure to do “what works.” I argue that Jason, and the many teachers like him, enact pedagogical responsibility in the face of forces that demand transferring their authority to publishers of curricula and programs that are focused on the corporatization of public education. *Democracy and Education* provides conceptual resources to reframe some teacher infidelity as intelligent response, the moral agency required for enacting pedagogical responsibility.

I am informed by Dewey’s methodology as well as his philosophy.³⁰ I believe that in order to engage in philosophy, to think what the known demands of me, I must familiarize myself

²⁶ For more on teacher demoralization, see Santoro, “Good Teaching in Difficult Times.”

²⁷ Noël Smith, “The Moral Oppression of the Teaching Profession,” 84.

²⁸ Achinstein and Ogawa, “(In)Fidelity”; see also Doris A. Santoro with Lisa Morehouse, “Teaching’s Conscientious Objectors: Principled Leavers of High-Poverty Schools,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 12 (2011): 2671–705.

²⁹ Achinstein and Ogawa, “(In)Fidelity,” 32.

³⁰ See Doris A. Santoro, “Philosophizing about Teacher Dissatisfaction: A Multidisciplinary Hermeneutic Approach,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 171–80; and Terri S. Wilson and Doris A. Santoro, “Philosophy Pursued through Empirical Research: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 115–24.

intimately with the known. As a result, I conduct empirical research that enables me to test out philosophical concepts with teachers and to develop or revise concepts when existing vocabularies are inadequate to capture the experience of daily life in schools.

While Dewey is certainly concerned with the broad contours of democracy, he is also interested in the specificity of life in schools. Dewey highlights the intimate connection between philosophy and lived experience:

[W]hen philosophic issues are approached from the side of the kind of mental disposition to which they correspond, or the differences in educational practices they make when acted upon, the life-situations which they formulate can never be far from view.... The educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice. (*DE*, 338)

Drawing on an interview with Jason enables me to highlight philosophical concepts in action and to show how philosophical resources can make a difference in how we interpret teachers' lives and work.³¹ The interview enables me to learn how Jason understands his work and gives him the opportunity to provide reasons for the choices he makes as an educator. What such conversations reveal are the intelligent and moral work of teachers who are imperfect and fallible; my point is not to portray Jason as an exemplary moral actor.

My discussion of Jason's resistance will be explored through his criticism of what his district called a "managed" curriculum for English teachers. I will also show that Jason's resistance demonstrates a form of teacher intelligence that is tamped down by "teacher-proof" curricula. Jason encounters a moral double bind: According to his district, he is a good teacher only if he follows the directives in the curriculum. However, he can live with himself as a responsible teacher only if he uses his judgment to diverge from curriculum mandates so that he can see, encourage, and challenge his students.³²

DOING WHAT THE KNOWN DEMANDS OF US

Jason's resistance to the scripted curriculum does not hinge on acts of extraordinary thoughtfulness or heroic activism. In fact, his acts may seem commonsensical to other public school teachers. Given the attacks on teaching and teachers that undermine their intelligent action and moral credibility — in other words, their professionalism — I dwell on Jason's somewhat unremarkable experiences to highlight the everyday intellectual and moral agency of teachers who are expected to enact a commercially produced program with fidelity. What is remarkable in Jason's case is that he has taught for over a decade and has no plans to leave the profession. There are strategic lessons in Jason's story that have enabled him to remain working in high-need public schools.³³

Jason chose to enter teaching despite its low pay. He pursued the profession with a clear-eyed perspective, knowing that he would need to take on summer landscaping jobs in order to support his family. While a love of literature drew him to teaching, the students have kept him engaged and passionate about the profession. He relishes the challenge and dynamism of figuring

³¹ Jason (pseudonym), interview by author, [Please insert date (month and year is sufficient) of the interview.] All of Jason's quotations come from my transcription of our interview.

³² Stengel and Casey, "Grow By Looking," 126.

³³ Pauline Hawkins and Rebecca Noël Smith are also quoted in this article, but I did not interview either of them. According to their writing, both left teaching but are committed to protecting public schools through activism. While there is not space to address the matter here, I believe that there are issues of gender at play in accounts of teacher attrition and retention.

out who he needs to be each day in order to reach his students — whether it is drawing out the double entendre of a Shakespeare passage or finding ways boys can relate to Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. Jason finds moral rewards in enacting pedagogical responsibility. He aims not only to see, encourage, and challenge his students, but to have his students' work in school transfer into an educational relation with the broader community.

District leaders recognize Jason as an excellent teacher; he explains that his grade-level team is the highest performing academically in the district (based on standardized test scores), he mentors preservice teachers, and he serves on a team to assist students who are struggling with substance abuse. Likewise, Jason is well regarded by his colleagues: he is the building's union representative, and at the union's national level, he was selected as a teacher-leader to conduct action research. Through his countless service positions, he enables the school infrastructure to hum.

These various roles speak to Jason's aptitudes and priorities as well as his political savvy. He has found a way to make himself invaluable to the school's administration, to advocate for teachers, and to support students academically as well as emotionally. His students' performance renders him unimpeachable because they meet and exceed the academic benchmarks set by the district. Jason plays by the rules sufficiently so that he can focus his attention on engaging students and rendering schoolwork meaningful to their lives. He has positioned himself as a key player in the administration of the school through his service roles, but he has also found space to serve as an outspoken advocate for the rights of teachers and underserved students in the district. Although Jason regards himself as someone who doesn't feel hemmed in by rules, he has adjusted his behavior in what he considers to be superficial ways so that he can attend to more substantive matters. In the past year, he explains, he has worn a tie every day so as to meet the standards for professionalism under the new teacher evaluation rubric.

Understanding the ways policy is developed and enacted has become a new source of learning in Jason's professional life. He maps the influence of corporatocracy on his district and at the state and federal levels. For instance, he traced funding that spurred his district's new teacher evaluation system to a foundation that lobbies for the dissolution of unions and the promotion of charter schools. The foundation work is also linked to consulting provided by affiliates of a local university. Recognizing the complexity of the forces at play in a corporatocracy, Jason has developed collaborations with teachers in his building, his district, his union, and across the United States. Together, they formulate responses to policies that he believes undermine student learning.

Social media-based organizations such as the Badass Teachers Association (BATs) have contributed substantively to Jason's political and moral beliefs about public schooling. Jason has drawn on BATs' resources to better articulate a moral foundation for his decisions to conform, appear to conform, or resist outright. He explained that just around the time that BATs gained a following in his city, he and other teachers started to make moral claims about their work. They began to resist by saying, "We're not going do this, and we're not going do it because *it's not right*."³⁴ In contrast to the popular discourse that casts teacher resistance as a form of recalcitrance, Jason's resistance has a moral source.

Jason's district adopted a literature curriculum that he found mostly reasonable. He could accept the curriculum's purported aim to help students develop into active and invested readers of literature, but he believed that the prescribed means offered in its lessons subverted the end of student engagement. With the curriculum came a variety of high-quality books geared to ninth-grade students. In addition to the pedagogical strategies that each teacher was expected to employ, supplementary materials such as posters had to be displayed. Jason was pleased with the access to

³⁴ Interview with Jason, emphasis added.

new books and willingly tacked the poster up in his room even though he did not follow its enumerated strategies to the letter.

The curriculum materials expected teachers to use the language of “re-read” repeatedly in order to engage students actively in the texts. Jason identifies the aim of the curriculum as guiding students in repeated engagement with texts. He chose to vary the vocabulary in order to ask students to return to the texts for various purposes. Jason explains, “I could say read, re-read, re-read very differently to ninth graders and they’ll do it. If I say read, re-read, re-read, re-read, they’re going to say, ‘I already read this.’... That’s going to be a fight that’s just not worth it because I can use different language and say the same thing.” He does not reject the aims of the prescribed curriculum, but he reworked the means to meet the needs of his students.

Jason is unfaithful to the prescribed curriculum. He supports its purported academic aim of helping students to read actively. He incorporates this aim with pedagogical responsibility: he sees his students and where they are, he encourages them and employs the methods that will encourage them in order to challenge them to learn — not only about reading, but about literature, the human questions it poses, and the questions and concerns the students bring about themselves and their community. This broadest aim, his moral purpose in teaching, guides the means Jason employs and provides his rationale for straying from the prescribed methods outlined in the curriculum.

When Jason spoke to his subject-area supervisor about his dissatisfaction with the “managed” curriculum, he was assured that it was “like a recipe” and that there was room for small variations once he had mastered it as written. Jason’s response extended the metaphor. He said, “What you gave us was a recipe for vomit and so we won’t make that again. That’s what you do with a recipe that tastes like this curriculum, you just don’t make it anymore.” Jason explained that the “recipe” of the scripted curriculum did not engage his students in literature and it created a whole host of problematic ends:

The kids wouldn’t respond [to the curriculum] and it resulted in a litany of other problems: kids don’t sit in a classroom where they’re bored out of their minds, so you’re gonna have kids punching each other in the face. If you have literature you can actually read and teach, the kids can learn from it. They can be better readers, they can learn life lessons.

No script or recipe could achieve what Jason believes his students deserve and what teachers must do as educators: figure out what you want to “draw out of the material [and] mesh [that] with what the kids are capable of doing when you push them.

Like Dewey, Jason believes that there is a middle ground between prescribing the methods that teachers will use and letting teachers do whatever they please (*DE*, 177). He thinks English teachers need to “let the literature guide where the discussions go, but then also have some sort of assessment that’s real at the end.” The broad brushstrokes of the scripted curriculum were not responsive to his students’ needs and they were not respectful of the different kinds of literature to which the “recipe” was to be applied.

Knowing that there could be disciplinary consequences for not following the prescribed curriculum, Jason ensured that his students recognized the key vocabulary utilized in the program so he could incorporate it if a supervisor were to visit his classroom.³⁵ His is not an all-out disregard for the program, but a subtle work-around that enables him to meet the needs of his students and to protect his employability.

³⁵ Even teachers with tenure can suffer from disciplinary consequences for infidelity. They can be placed on “improvement” plans that are burdensome, unachievable, or farcical. Infidelity can also lead to other forms of retribution, such as building reassignment, change in teaching responsibilities, and loss of one’s classroom.

The demand for fidelity and unthinking acceptance of directives may continue as a phantom form of unquestioning obedience. Jason was startled and concerned that so many of his colleagues operated from a place of fear, even after the managed curriculum had been abandoned by the district:

In department meetings and grade-level meetings, people were beating their heads against the wall, and they were worried every day that if they weren't on the right page that somebody was going to come in and like, the police were going to hunt them down, and they were going to get an un-sat [unsatisfactory rating].... Our managed curriculum is gone, I was training last week where people were like, "If we're not on the right page, we're gonna get in trouble."

The disciplinary work of fidelity reverberated even after the actual directive was gone. It had been internalized and was policed by the teachers themselves. Jason viewed his coworkers empathically, but found solidarity in challenging the directives (real and phantom) through his alliances across the district and with the union. "They toed the line," says Jason, "which I don't blame them for, I get that. But I guess I figured that this is a big district and nobody's going to come find me. I can just teach the right way and teach my kids."

Beyond his own classroom, Jason articulated moral concerns about unequal access to a quality curriculum that enables students to explore the richness of literature and discover its significance to their lives. He was disgusted that the only students who received the "managed" curriculum were those in the mainstream and remedial classes while the gifted students who tended to come from the more affluent families were exempted. "These are the kids that needed more engagement," argues Jason, "but they figured they'd invest in buying crap for the needy kids." From Jason's experience in the district, he believed that the administration avoided imposing anything on students from more privileged families in order to skirt conflict with their politically savvy and culturally powerful parents.

INTELLIGENT RESPONSES TO FIDELITY

Even though the present pedagogical policy environment in the United States and elsewhere raises science to the level of idolatry, the scientific attitude is verboten for many teachers. The scientific attitude is comprised of the disposition that Dewey advocates for all members of a democratic society: intelligent response, which is the essential ingredient to pedagogical responsibility. Intelligent response is precisely what renders teachers morally deficient under regimes of fidelity of implementation.

Contrary to those who characterize teachers' desirable moral conduct as adherence to rules and fidelity to prescribed programs, Dewey's work demonstrates that teachers who question the relationship between ends and means are engaged in moral work. He says, "Aims mean acceptance of responsibility for the observations, anticipations, and arrangements required in carrying on a function — whether farming or educating" (*DE*, 114) and "acting with an aim is all one with acting intelligently" (*DE*, 110). As intelligent beings who are able to foresee and intervene upon action, we would be remiss if we took the attitude of mere onlooker or functionary.

Dewey's *Democracy and Education* reveals the moral privation involved in concepts such as fidelity while supporting initiatives that would provide teachers, from preservice to experienced, with opportunities to articulate and grapple with aims of education and the concrete means to reach them. While Dewey provides ample source material for analyzing the antidemocratic implementation of pedagogical policy today, this historic text also offers a way to reframe teachers' resistance to fidelity of implementation as intelligent and moral action, rather than as indicative of insubordination, recalcitrance, or mere preference. Many readers familiar with *Democracy and Education* are already well aware that Dewey's definition of slavery, the antithesis of democracy, is when one operates according only to ends determined by others (*DE*, 261).

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. As a first consequence, the intelligence of the teacher is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above. (*DE*, 115–16)

In the context of teaching, Dewey calls externally imposed ends a “vice,” a bad habit that is possible to change. Although as with most bad habits, while changing is possible, it is a demanding endeavor.

Intelligence, and the ability to use one’s intelligence, is the antidote to slavery and antidemocratic practices. However, intelligence is also the essential ingredient of a moral life. According to Dewey, no rule or list of virtues guarantees moral selfhood. Moral engagement in the world entails that individuals assess their embodied, situated condition and determine how to best align ends with means. This assessment requires that individuals use their own intelligence to draw upon, apply, and adapt the intelligence that has been established by others.

For there is a radical difference between even the most general method and a prescribed rule. The latter is a direct guide to action; the former operates indirectly through the enlightenment it supplies as to ends and means. It operates, that is to say, through intelligence, and not through conformity to orders externally imposed. (*DE*, 178)

Teachers’ resistance to fidelity is an area that deserves further investigation; it has the potential to reveal educators’ agency and their articulations of pedagogical responsibility. Just as teachers’ moral emotions may be manipulated by political forces, teachers’ moral emotions may reveal political forces that warrant further analysis.³⁶ From Dewey’s perspective, continually asking questions about the means, ends and aims of education is the proper use of teachers’ intelligence and the only moral stance for those living in a democratic society. The failure to use one’s judgment is not simply a failure of intelligence for Dewey, it is a failure to engage morally with the world. The suppression of others’ judgment is tyranny.

³⁶ Michalinos Zembylas, “Interrogating ‘Teacher Identity’: Emotion, Resistance, and Self-Formation,” *Educational Theory* 53, no. 1 (2003): 123.