Riding the Line: A Qualitative Exploration of a Mid-Range School

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This research draws on conversations with teachers at a mid-range school in San Diego County. An exploration of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its impact on teachers produced a greater understanding of how teachers not only interpret such reforms, but how they apply to their everyday lives. An examination of schools at a mid-range is made and conclusions are drawn as to how educational practices such as creating community, looping and the village system all positively influences this mid-range school. Finally, this research offers a critical perspective on how studying mid-range schools can bring about a greater understanding of the challenges teachers face in the outcome-based reform era.

Keywords:
Mid-range
Standards
Outcome-based Reform
No Child Left Behind
Teachers' Experiences
Standardized Tests
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Master of Arts in Sociological Practice

Riding the Line
A Qualitative Exploration of a Mid-Range School

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Teachers and principals should not permit the beautiful profession they have chosen to be redefined by those who know far less about the hearts of children.

- Kozol 2005:32

Over the past several decades criticisms about the poor quality of American public education have led to numerous reforms. Such reforms have promised, among other things, to reshape the public school system, hold teachers more accountable, refocus the curriculum, allow parents to have a choice in the schools their children will attend. As these reforms have been enacted, researchers have focused their attention on the impact they have on the students’ academic achievement. What they fail to recognize is the impact these numerous reforms have had on teachers. The body of scholarly research that does address this issue tends to focus heavily on teachers’ experience in low-performing and high-performing schools.

As a sociologist, I argue that it is of great importance to research and understand how teachers experience such reforms in mid-range schools, as these teachers are able to create an environment where their students can be successful despite the latest reform mandates. Teachers who teach in mid-range schools are unique in that they teach students from a more diverse background than teachers teaching in higher performing areas. Moreover, they are not provided with as many resources as teachers who teach in higher performing schools, hence, it is of great importance to understand how they are able to produce adequate test scores that then defines them as a passing school, despite the challenges they face.
This study seeks to understand how teachers have experienced reforms in the United States. More specifically, my study focuses on the experiences teachers are having in “mid-range” schools. A mid-range school is defined as having an Academic Performance Index (API) of 700 to 800 on a scale of 200 to 1000. The current reform movement No Child Left Behind has implemented an accountability system whereby students are tested, and the outcome of these tests, which is the API, determines the success or failure of the school. Thus, on the scale of 200 to 1000, schools whose performance is in the 700 to 800 range is considered mid-range.

Narrowly focusing on mid-range schools allowed me to understand how teachers teaching in a mid-range school have encountered such reforms, and how they create success, in this case being defined by their test scores, despite the strict mandates of the current reform. To accomplish this I will provide an overview of myriad reforms that teachers have endured in the past several decades, in addition to addressing the issues teachers face specifically with outcome-based reforms. Finally, I argue that in order to fully understand the experiences of teachers in mid-range schools, it is necessary to study the differences among both low performing and high performing schools. This study will help to bridge the gap in the existing research between the experiences of teachers in low and/or high performing schools and that of teachers’ experiences in mid-range schools by providing them the opportunity to share their story. How have they experienced this new wave in educational reform? How are their struggles unique or similar to that of other teachers? What meanings
do they give to the use of standardized testing, and how do they cope with the new pressures of NCLB?

These questions were the focus and drive for my research, as I attempted to understand how it is that teachers navigate these issues. Through the use of qualitative in-depth interviews of teachers, I was able to document their stories. Thus, the exploration of teachers' stories has provided a greater awareness and understanding of the meanings teachers give to their experiences in the classroom.

The Genesis of this Study

My personal interest in researching teachers and their lived experiences with reform evolved from a position I held at this middle school. Working as a part time employee of the Boys and Girls Club, I ran a free afterschool program at San Diego Middle School. Having built a relationship and rapport with several of the teachers, I was able to see a different side of teaching I never knew existed. Many times, I would hear teachers discuss how the focus on outcomes has impacted their ability to effectively teach their students. They would openly express their feelings of frustration with the systematic issues they faced, however, they were still creating an environment in which their students could achieve at such a level that made them exempt from being sanctioned. It was then that I became curious as to how this school created and maintained its moderate success despite the sentiments teachers expressed relating to outcome-based educational practices and the performance of schools in the surrounding area.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The imposition of greater authoritarian and bureaucratic controls over teachers, in the name of even the best curriculum and pedagogy, won't begin to tackle the decisive intellectual failings of our schools.
-Meier 2004:18

Concerns that the educational system cannot adequately prepare students for life and work in the 21st Century have prompted people across the country to explore new ways of designing education. American public schooling has been under a microscope for several decades and debates among politicians, scholars, parents, teachers and the like have perpetuated the notion of a need for change within this system.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education declared us a “Nation at Risk” in 1983 due to the poor performance of our schools (Finn, Manno and Vanourek 2001). Since that time, as Finn et al. (2001:129) asserts, “we have sought to rectify that situation. We have asked who is responsible, and who should take the necessary steps to solve the problem.” This has lead to countless waves of school reforms. When the blue ribbon committee released the report, “A Nation At Risk,” it claimed that the mediocre performance of schools threatened the economic prosperity of the country (Finn et al. 2004). What was to follow were several attempts to rectify this problem.

With each new wave of reform comes a different set of rules to follow, a new approach. Finn et al. (2001:129) illustrates how “several different reform schemes
have been tried, driven by competing ideas about how to achieve improvement in K-12 education and boost pupil and school performance.” Essentially, these ideas are a reflection of the differing perspectives on accountability (Finn et al. 2004). With each new perspective, however, teachers, parents, administrators and students must follow a new set of rules. Much of the existing research focuses on how such reforms have influenced the lives of students, however, there is little research that documents how teachers have understood and experienced these reforms. Therefore, my study sought to understand the effect these constant waves of reform have on teachers’ everyday lives in the classroom.

Although there is a vast body of empirical data that exists relating to reform movements, much of it fails to contextualize the impact such reforms have on teachers. The small body of research that does relate to the impact outcome-based reforms are having on teachers only recognizes the experience teachers in low performing and/or top performing schools are having. This vast polarity in the research led me to believe that there is something missing. My focus aimed at exploring what the research has failed to account for, which is the experiences teachers in mid-range schools are having. It is crucial to study this perspective because these schools are able to meet the strict accountability standards with a moderate level of success. Hence, my examination of this issue attempted to understand how the teachers at these mid-range schools experience such reforms and how they are able to be successful, as defined by standardized testing measures, in relation to reform standards.
Therefore, my research centered on how the years of school reform, more specifically outcome-based reforms, has influenced the dynamics in and between teachers, students, and administrators, in schools that are performing in the mid-range. This was accomplished by interviewing 13 of the 53 teachers at a mid-range school located in San Diego County. Seeking to understand the mid-range experience, the questions that guided my research were: how do teachers make sense of reforms? How have reforms altered, if at all, teachers' personal philosophies on teaching? And, how has the high-stakes environment affected their everyday working lives? Gaining the perspective of teachers was crucial to my research because teachers are on the frontlines of education, having the most complex and intricate experiences with both the requirements of each reform and with the students' ability to adapt to such reforms. Because the current reform, No Child Left Behind, is the most extensive reform this country has experienced, much of the research focuses on this topic.

TEACHERS AND REFORM MOVEMENTS

To fully comprehend the experiences teachers are having, it is important to understand the multitude of reforms that they have been subjected to. For many decades, the educational system in the United States has endured several modifications to its policies and practices. At different times, politicians, teachers, administrators, and parents have had a range of expectations relating to what schools
should emphasize (Nieto 2005). Such views have lead to contradictory perspectives and perceptions of the characteristics of a good school. Fundamental questions concerning the purpose of education, who is to be educated, what learners should take away from their experiences, and how learners should be educated, have been grappled over by policymakers for many years (Nieto 2005). According to Labaree (1999):

At various times during the past 100 years, reformers have: issued high-visibility reports proposing dramatic changes in the curriculum (Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education in 1918, A Nation at Risk in 1983); created whole new subject areas (social studies, vocational education, special education); sought to reorganize the curriculum around a variety of new principles (ability grouping, the project method, life adjustment, back to basics, inclusion, critical thinking); and launched movements to reinvent particular subjects (“New Math,” National Council of Teachers of Mathematics math, phonics, whole language) (P. 1).

Hence, the goals of education are continually subject to change. What, then, does this mean for teachers? As teachers are on the forefront of education, how do they experience such dramatic shifts in the educational system?

Labaree (1999:1) concedes that this pattern exists because the curriculum continues to revolve around traditional academic subjects, “which we cut off from practical everyday knowledge, teach in relative isolation from one another, differentiate by ability, sequence by age, ground in textbooks and deliver in a teacher-centered classroom.” In this sense, education no longer becomes about what the students are learning, but rather how the subject matter is being presented.
Teachers, therefore, become the vehicle by which the prevailing ideologies of the time are accomplished. Their experiences with reform are perhaps the most intimate account that can be told. With every change in policy and legislation, teachers are on the frontlines, enforcing the latest policies and creating new, innovative ways of implementation. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the innumerable reform movements teachers have endured to gain a more thorough understanding of the role such reforms play in the everyday working lives of teachers.

The term “educational reform” has many different meanings today. With myriad reforms that have been enacted in the past few decades, the meaning, and certainly the context in which reform exists continually fluctuates. Conceptually, as there has been decades of reform, each new idea can be contextualized into one of three major categories: fundamental reform, research based reforms, and grand reform (Kliebard 1988). These categories however, are not exclusive. That is to say, typically, the types of reforms that have been proposed or enacted generally fit into one or more of the categories due to their complex nature. Fundamental reforms focus mainly on what and how students are taught. These types of reforms attempt to combine traditional methods of teaching and presentation of material with new, innovative methods. Research based reforms, the most diverse of the three categories, embody reforms that stem directly from some type of empirical research. This specific category could include the latest conceptualization of mathematics and how it should be taught to a more broad spectrum of how to educate the masses overall. The grand reforms, as their title suggests, attempt to restructure the
educational system entirely. This level of reform is possibly the most intricate of the three as it focuses on broad policies that are to reshape the way education is presented, from state and federal policies and laws, down to the restructuring of classroom activities.

Each of these categories has yielded very different ideologies of what educational reforms should encompass. These competing ideas can have many different implications for teachers, students, parents, administrators and the like. As a result, a purposeful discussion of such reforms that have occurred over the past several decades is necessary. As my research focuses on teachers, understanding the various reforms will provide a much needed foundation to understanding the multitude of changes they have endured, and how this has impacted their lives.

Reform Movements

From changing the student teacher ratio in a classroom to changing the face of education all together, reform movements are nothing new in the United States. Years of debate and competition over what should be taught and why have permeated the politics of reform. As Finn et al. (2001:244) describe, "'education reform’ has itself become a growth industry, as we have devised a thousand innovations and spent billions to implement them." As I have previously mentioned, these movements have been implemented on large scales, all the way down to changing the type of textbooks used in the classroom. In order to better understand these reforms, I will discuss them in the context of the three categories under which they fall.
One such reform that has occurred within the past several decades has been termed curriculum-based reforms. As a response to the increasing achievement gap, this reform attempted to alter the way in which curriculum was being presented nationwide. The idea, fundamentally, was that by having a standard curriculum the margin for error in teaching would narrow. By controlling the curriculum, this reform was intended to guide teachers in their decision making about course content and hold both the teachers and their schools accountable for the content and achievement standards (Archbald and Porter 1994). Thus, for teachers, accountability was directly linked to the curriculum and standardized tests.

In addition to curriculum-based education, the emergence of competency-based education is another such reform that teachers have endured. This format was enacted to respond to concerns that students were ill prepared to enter the workforce after graduating high school. Thus, the goal was to have students show proficiency in specific skills as a part of their graduation requirement (McNeir 1993). However, this reform was short lived because it only tested a very narrow spectrum of basic skills (McNeir 1993).

Currently we are among the outcome-based reform movement, also known as standards-based reform. This reform focuses specifically on what students can actually do after they are taught. Thus, outcome-based education’s instructional planning process is a reverse of that associated with traditional educational planning. The desired outcome is selected first and the curriculum, instructional materials and assessments are created to support the intended outcome (Spady 1993). The most
notorious and expansive outcome-based reform is NCLB. This reform is different from the others in that it has attached negative consequences to teachers and schools that are unable to meet the requirements (or outcomes) of the standardized tests.

*No Child Left Behind*

January 8, 2002, marked the beginning of a new era of school reform in the United States as President Bush signed into legislation the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Passed by overwhelming margins in both houses of Congress, NCLB was heralded as a turning point in the nation’s efforts to improve its schools (Goodwin 2003). This new legislation reauthorized and renamed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Anderson (2005:19) argues, “although the new law retains ESEA’s longstanding emphasis on improving the academic performance of disadvantaged (i.e., poor) students, it adds significant accountability requirements for all schools and school districts that receive federal funds, not just those schools with high concentrations of poor children.”

Although the No Child Left Behind Act is the most far-reaching attempt by the federal government to alter American public education in the last thirty years (Beaver 2004), it places a great deal of emphasis on the use of testing as an assessment tool, which translates to the funding, or lack thereof, of schools based on improvement of test scores. Beaver (2004:123) illustrates “the major aim of the legislation is to make public schools more accountable, and in this regard, there is
little doubt that the act goes well beyond any piece of federal legislation in recent history.”

Each of the aforementioned represents the competing ideologies within educational reform policies. As we are continually in search of the latest innovation in education, a better way to present the material, a different way of conceptualizing schools, it is becoming increasingly more apparent that one thing remains constant in education, and that is change. As policies continue to change, and innovations in education are being made, it is crucial to understand the impact such reforms have on teachers. It is their role and their presence in the classrooms that help to determine the success or failure of each new reform movement. Hence, in many ways, teachers can influence the fate of education reforms in important ways (Ferraiolo et al. 2004).

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH?

The Pressures Teachers Face in Outcome-Based Reforms

Teaching in the United States has had a long and unstable professional standing (Moore, Johnson and Birkeland 2003). When compared to professions such as law or medicine, the profession of teaching has been constructed as a “semi-profession” (Lortie 1969). Unfortunately, because teaching positions are not highly regarded in the public eye, the profession itself suffers greatly. As the new legislation focuses more and more on how to hold students, schools, and teachers accountable, the draw to this profession is decreasing. Moreover, as a great majority of teachers
As large numbers of public school teachers retire and enrollments rise during the next decade, policymakers and educators are facing a national teacher shortage that will require a projected 2.2 million new teachers within the decade. (Gerald and Hussar 1998). The shortage can be attributed to numerous factors including—"higher birth rates, increased immigration, changes in class size policies, the anticipated retirement of one half of the teaching force, and the likelihood that one in five new teachers will leave the profession within three years of entry" (Henke et al. 2000, Moore Johnson and Birkeland 2003).

These new teachers will begin their careers amidst the standards-based reform era when the "black box is open and what teachers teach and students learn is increasingly a matter of public scrutiny and debate, subject to direct measurements and inspections" (Elmore 1999:16). In light of all the research that has been conducted relating to No Child Left Behind and other outcome-based reforms, little research has been done to understand how teachers experience the multitude of reform waves in the public educational system. The strict mandates of this reform require teachers to ensure their students, of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds, are performing at the same level. This outcome is measured by standardized tests.

"The more that [test] scores are emphasized, the less discussion there is about the proper goals of schooling and the more educators are reduced to finding the most efficient means for what has become the de facto goal: doing better on tests" (Kohn
2000:18). As long as adequate test scores are being produced, “what happens in the classroom is irrelevant”; poor test scores, meanwhile, are viewed as indicators that change is needed, “no matter what happens in the classroom” (Dorn 1998:39). This dichotomy creates an environment for teachers that deny them autonomy in their classrooms. The controlling, ‘top-down’ push for higher standards may actually produce a lower quality of education, precisely because its tactics construct the means by which teachers most successfully inspire students’ engagement in learning, and commitment to achieve (Ryan and La Guardia 1999).

Thus, as one of the main objectives of NCLB is to provide highly qualified teachers in every classroom in order to improve students’ performance, teachers entering the industry are doing so among the strict mandates of NCLB. Advocates of this accountability system argue that greater specification and systematic alignment support teachers by providing them with greater certainty than their predecessors about what to teach and how to teach it (Kauffmann et al. 2002). New teachers entering the industry will do so with specific guidelines that must be met, and the curriculum with which to meet such standards.

Unfortunately, however, the high-stakes environment of classrooms is creating an unwarranted burden on teachers as they are forced to comply with the accountability system (Kohn 2000; Kozol 2005; Neill 2003). Conversely, as McNeil (2000:274) suggests, “detractors of standards-based reform complain that detailed prescription and scrutiny constrain teachers, compromising the intrinsic rewards of teaching.” As a result, the “accountability system discourages the best teachers from
working in the schools with the largest shares of low-performing students” (Clotfelter et al. 2004:1). Hence, “the accountability program could ultimately undermine the ability of [schools with low-performing students] to raise the achievement of their students” (Clotfelter et al. 2004:1).

Boyd et al. (2008:89) imply that accountability systems will additionally cause good teachers to “avoid teaching situations where the pressure that accompanies the scrutiny and sanctions is greatest, for example, teaching in tested grades in low-performing schools.” In their study of New York State public schooling system, Boyd et al. (2008) used data from New York State Education Department to analyze the impact of assessments and accountability. They found the probability of teachers leaving their jobs higher for first-year teachers, and teachers in schools with higher proportions of Black, Hispanic, and low-performing students (Boyd et al. 2008, Ingersoll 2001).

Furthermore, in their study of North Carolina’s Public Schools, Clotfelter et al. (2004:9) illustrate how “the higher departure rate of teachers from low-performing schools associated with the accountability system means those schools have greater vacancies and must hire new teachers.” Hiring new teachers however, is problematic for schools that are trying to increase their API. What is created by this accountability system is a cyclical pattern by which new teachers entering the work force must typically take positions in low-performing schools due to lack of experience (Clotfelter et al. 2004). Then, because the funding of such schools is
already in jeopardy, the means to provide the proper instructional materials is minimal at best, and the new teachers find themselves unable to increase test scores.

A possible explanation of the successes in mid-range schools may be attributed to the quality of teachers attracted by such schools. As previously demonstrated, teachers are more likely to take positions in schools that are not being sanctioned. As the No Child Left Behind Act is punitive towards low-performing schools, schools with a passing Academic Performance Index (API) – a system which ranks schools on a scale from 200-1000, where below 700 is considered failing (ed.gov) – have the means to provide a competitive salary for teachers.

_Focusing on the Outcomes: Teachers’ Experiences_

Part of the challenges most new teachers face is feeling unsupported both by their colleagues as well as by their administrators. When teachers are not given the tools to succeed, it is difficult for these educators to create an environment where their students can achieve success. In their study of 50 first and second year Massachusetts teachers, Kauffinan et al. (2002) found that new teachers grappled with accountability system of outcome-based reforms. In one of their interviews, a participant was noted as saying: “you want me to teach this stuff, but I don’t have the stuff to teach” (Kauffman et al. 2002:276). For many new teachers entering the field, knowing what to teach and how to teach it can be difficult. However, when compared to studies relating to teachers’ autonomy, research has suggested that “reforms using new curriculum control policies are predicated on the assumption that
there has been too much discretion at the local and classroom level” (Archbald and Porter 1994:22). Hence, as more experienced teachers are leaving the work force due to retirement, new teachers are faced with a new challenge of having less control over the content and curriculum.

As standards in education rise, and experienced teachers retire, new teachers enter the classroom with less support than ever. As detailed in their study, Kauffman et al. (2002:279) found that “today’s environment of high standards and accountability created a sense of urgency among many new teachers but did not provide them with the support they needed to teach effectively.” Moreover, as the state department of education determines the curricular framework of academic standards for students, “new teachers reported that many districts and schools relied on these frameworks as the curriculum, rather than as the basis for developing a curriculum” (Kauffman et al. 2002:279).

This accountability mandate often leads to negative changes in the curriculum, and teachers and school systems become dishonestly creative in testing due to the lack of instructional support and guidance, and many schools find “creative ways of pushing out low-scoring students to boost average test scores” (Neill, 2003). As described by Kohn (2000:58), “high-stakes testing has radically altered the kind of instruction offered in American schools, to the point that ‘teaching to the test’ has become a prominent part of the nation’s educational landscape.”

When assessing the larger issues that might contribute to such unethical testing practices, it becomes evident that new teachers feel lost. Kauffman et al.
(2002) found that most teachers in their sample had no curriculum at all, which meant they were left to figure out what and how to teach, or they were simply given a list of topic and skills to be mastered by their students. In these instances, teachers reported feelings of angst and/or anxiety as it related to their teaching experiences (Kauffman et al. 2002).

An additional pressure teachers face relates to the accountability practices of NCLB, which makes it even more difficult for schools to reach AYP targets. As denoted by Karp (2003:17), “the law’s punitive preoccupation with high-stakes testing will narrow curriculum focus and impoverish educational experience for all children.” As the research has demonstrated, teachers are experiencing an overall lack of support from the state, the very institution that requires them to show adequate yearly progress on their state-mandated standardized tests. “Without more specific curricula or adequate guidance and resources to translate the curriculum frameworks into curricula, state standards and accountability only served to frustrate new teachers” (Kauffman et al. 2002).

Unfortunately, as more and more new teachers become disenfranchised by the educational system, the retention rate of teachers, both novice and experienced, is dropping. According to Olson (2000:16), “Nationally, one in five new teachers leaves within the first 3 years.” This suggests that the dynamics of the profession has drastically changed, however, little has been done to document teachers attitudes and feelings towards this change.
In relation to outcome-based education, mid-range schools may fare better because they have an adequate support system within the school. That is to say, mid-range schools, because they may attract the more experienced teachers, may have a greater support system in and between the teachers, thus, establishing an environment whereby students can achieve success as measured by the standardized tests.

TEACHING TO THE TEST

The tests, like it or not, are hanging there like sharpened swords above the heads of principals and teachers, and since the scores, when they are finally released, are widely publicized in press accounts and on TV, educators live in terror of the day the scores come out - Kozol, 2005:19

As testing has become an integral part of the educational system, and because nearly every reform enacted has relied on testing as a means to measure success and/or failure, it is important to understand how these tests have impacted teachers’ lives. Additionally, because accountability measures are becoming more prevalent within the school system and standardized tests are the tool by which accountability is measured, teachers are fearful of not having their students pass state mandated tests. Kohn explains, “high-stakes testing has radically altered the kind of instruction that is offered in American schools, to the point that ‘teaching to the test’ has become a prominent part of the nation’s educational landscape” (Kohn 2000:14). Teachers are already beginning to tire of the pressures and skewed priorities of NCLB and standardized tests (Kohn 2000). Moreover, when scores on the high-stakes exams are
low, there is a very real pressure placed on teachers to prove that the sub-par scores were not their fault.

More strikingly, teachers often feel obligated to put aside other subjects (subjects not found on standardized tests) for days, weeks, or even months, in order to devote more time to boosting students’ test scores (Kohn 2000). “Indeed, both the content and the format of instruction are affected; the test essentially becomes the curriculum. For example, when students will be judged on the basis of multiple-choice tests, teachers may use multiple choice exercises and in-class tests beforehand” (Kohn 2000:15). One such study conducted in Ireland illustrates how the phenomenon of teaching to the test can become cyclical. Maduas (1988:37) demonstrates, “how the test first distorts teaching and the teaching subsequently distorts inferences made from the tests.” Maduas (1988:37) describes the requirements of the Irish Primary Certificate (IPC) examination (the high-stakes test given in Ireland at the end of elementary school), he recounts the following example:

Because the IPC [essay] was considered very important in the lives of students and teachers, teachers taught generations of Irish children to memorize a series of stock sentences that could be used with any prompt (e.g. “I awakened early, jumped out of bed and had a quick breakfast. My friend was coming to our house at nine o’clock as we were going for a –fill in the prompt- “). As a result of this type of test preparation, a high score on the writing exam was no longer a valid indicator of well-developed writing skills, but only of the students’ ability to memorize, recall, and use the stock responses with that year’s prompt.
Madaus’ account of the IPC is not unlike the experiences both teachers and students are having here in the United States. An extensive body of research documents the ways in which teachers “teach to the test” (Airasian 1987, Cizek 2001, Kauffman et al. 2002, Kohn 2000, McNeir 1993)

Once students have taken the tests, the data, under the accountability mandates of NCLB, must be reported to the public by district and by school. These reports include information pertaining to student academic achievement on statewide tests disaggregated by subgroup, a comparison of students at basic, proficient, and advanced levels of academic achievement, high school graduation rates, the number and names of schools identified for improvement, the professional qualifications for teachers and the percentages of students not tested (Gingerich 2003). Because the data from these tests are widely reported, it is easy to see how some teachers may experience anxiety over test scores. There is a tremendous social pressure on teachers to see to it that their students do well on the high-stakes tests (Madaus 1988).

Teachers, now more than ever, are subjected to the hostile environments created by standardized tests. Part of what this research seeks to understand is whether these hostile environments affect mid-range schools. Kohn (2000:52) illustrates, “the choices are grim: Either the teachers capitulate, or they struggle courageously to resist [the legislation], or they find another career.” A possible explanation for the moderate level of success at mid-range schools may relate to teachers’ ability to resist such reform movements. As increasing numbers of teachers are reporting symptoms of anxiety related to standardized testing and the outcome of
their students' scores, teachers at a mid-range school may not feel the pressures as much. This, once again, may be the product of the schools' ability to attract the more experienced teachers who feel more secure, both in their career and in their teaching skills, to ultimately make the difference between passing and non-passing test scores.

LOW PERFORMING VERSUS HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS:
THE CASE FOR STUDYING MID-RANGE SCHOOLS

Part of what NCLB has done is create a further separation of high and low performing schools. As the discussion of reform continues, it is important to recognize the structural factors that contribute to teachers' experiences. Beyond the constantly changing policies, teachers also face additional factors in the classroom that seem to perpetuate inequalities.

NCLB and Funding

Supporters of NCLB focus heavily on the financial assistance that the Act brings to schools in low-income areas. According to Gingerich (2003:124), "Title I supplies over $10 billion in financial assistance to schools educating low-income students." In addition, "NCLB allocates almost another $10 billion for teacher recruitment, professional development, educational technology, after-school programs, and more" (Gingerich 2003:124). Although the federal government sets the actual amount of monies allocated each year, states are required to "establish a
statewide system of support for districts and schools in need of improvement” (Gingerich 2003:125). Thus, states are empowered to decide how the funding is distributed.

A vast body of empirical data suggests that this is problematic for numerous reasons. First, the amounts allotted for internal improvement of “failing schools” are unclear and uneven (Karp 2003). For example, “in New Jersey, 274 schools will share $3 million in new federal aid targeted for improvement – less than $11,000 per school” (Karp 2003:73). Karp (2003:73) further illustrates, “in Chicago, 179 schools will share $35 million which yields a more significant average of about $195,000 per school.” This unequal allocation of funding further demonstrates how financial assistance under NCLB is not equitable.

As resources are unevenly distributed, more schools become disenfranchised and thus labeled as “failures” and their funding continues to decrease. Such schools are notoriously located in areas with high concentrations of minority students. Likewise, schools that are able to meet and exceed the expectations of the parameters set forth by NCLB are significantly rewarded. Thus, the lines of inequality are clearly drawn between low and top performing schools, however, right in the middle of this polarity are the mid-range schools.

It is important to give context to the schools existing in the mid-range. Because funding is tied to test scores, as mandated by NCLB, mid-range schools then must produce an API score above 700 in order to keep their funding. Illustrated by the previous section, achieving, and certainly maintaining such scores may be an
overwhelming task. Teachers, who struggle with the lack of resources for teaching
standards, who feel obligated to teach to the test, and fight to gain the support of the
state in order to see their students succeed, do so in mid-range schools with similar
difficulties experienced by schools below the mid-range. Because the composition of
mid-range schools are most closely linked to that of lower performing schools I will
examine the ways in which low performing schools are disenfranchised by the NCLB
to help provide a context for what mid-range schools endure.

*Structural Factors Contributing to Low Performing Schools*

Information about schools performing below the 700 API range may help to
provide a framework for schools performing just above that mark. Because mid-range
schools have not been studied in previous research, we can only presume that schools
whose performance is in the middle are best compared to those schools on the lower
end of the spectrum. This is due to the fact that mid-range schools are located in
districts that have similar characteristics to that of schools performing in the low
range. Furthermore, mid-range schools are typically located in districts where other
schools around them are teetering on the cusp of mid to low range tests scores as
opposed to mid to high range scores. Therefore, although the demographics at mid-
range school may differ slightly from those of low performing schools this may help
to account for mid-range schools’ ability to perform on test scores.

Historical and institutional discrimination may have made minority race a
major factor in school achievement as well as achievement on standardized tests. For
example, Black children may suffer from unconscious stereotyping, from the belief that racial discrimination will deny them the potential benefits of education, or from cultural patterns developed to cope with the psychological stress of racism rather than to achieve upward mobility (Bankston and Caldas 1998). Therefore, as argued by Bankston and Caldas (1998) minority races may be associated with lower achievement because minority youth may decide that education will not pay off for them in a racist society. Mickelson (1990) found that although African American secondary school students valued education, they became discouraged because they believed that even with high levels of education they would not receive fair treatment in the workplace.

Additionally, as found by Solorzano and Solorzano (1995), there are major differences in the educational achievement and attainment of Chicano and White students as well. Research has shown that one factor that highly correlates with students’ educational attainment is the availability of high-quality academic curriculum in elementary schools (Solorzano & Solorzano 1995). However, as Levin (1987) discovered, Chicano and other predominantly minority elementary schools are more inclined to stress academic remediation and slowing down of instruction rather than academic enrichment. Moreover, a vast body of research has shown that elementary schools with greater concentrations of minority students are more likely to be larger in student population, more segregated, and provide fewer educational dollars per pupil than nonminority White schools (Donato et al. 1991; Orfield & Monfort 1992; Solorzano 1987; Solorzano & Solorzano 1995).
Additionally, as other research has suggested, teachers who are situated in schools located in low income areas structure the day-to-day activities differently than schools in higher income areas. In one such study of low, middle, and high income schools, researchers observed the classrooms in addition to interviewing teachers and students at five different elementary schools. This study revealed the glaring difference between schools with limited resources and that of schools with more resources at their disposal. One example from this research illustrated how teachers in lower income areas would rarely call on students to give their interpretations of assigned readings, but rather the teachers would summarize such readings and student would copy down what the teacher was saying (Anyon 1980). This, in contrast to schools in more affluent areas where teachers continually ask students to express and apply ideas and concepts from readings and other course materials. Moreover, they encouraged students to express their individuality within their work (Anyon 1980). These two examples of low income classrooms versus higher income classrooms illustrate the polarities that exist for students attending such schools. Hence, the case for studying mid-range schools becomes even more necessary as we seek to understand how this example differs from teachers’ experience in the mid-range.

Scholarly research has also pointed to other factors that contribute to low performing areas such as higher concentrations of minority students in addition to fewer overall resources. According to Legters et al. (2004:223), “Poverty rates nearly doubled in many large cities since the early 1980s, making urban students more than
twice as likely to attend high-poverty schools (schools in which more than half the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch) than their nonurban counterparts.” They further illustrate that schools located in urban districts are caught between an increase in poverty rates and an eroding tax base, which leaves them with fewer resources to serve a needier population (Legters et al. 2004). While schools in the mid-range may have a slightly higher income base than those of lower income areas, their composition is still most closely tied to low range schools. That is to say comparing the demographics and income rates of mid-range schools to those on the higher end of the spectrum would clearly demonstrate the disparity in resources between the two categories.

Hence, when we consider the lack of funding in addition to structural inequalities schools in low-performing areas receive, a cyclical pattern of inequality begins to emerge. This is problematic because NCLB, as some scholars have argued, does not account for the inherent differences among low and high performing schools. Although the system fails to recognize the inequalities between such schools, teachers in underrepresented areas are still accountable for raising their students’ test scores regardless of what structural factors they may be up against.

As my research is centered on teachers’ experiences in a mid-range school, it is important to make a distinction between low, middle and top performing schools because, under the strict mandates of the current reform, mid-range schools are able to reach a moderate level of success, however they are unable to achieve the levels high performing schools reach. What differentiates mid-range schools from higher
performing schools is the fact that mid-range schools may be situated in a much more diverse area with a higher minority population. As the previous discussion illustrated, areas with higher concentrations of minorities struggle to perform well on standardized tests. Furthermore, schools that are considered top performing are located in more affluent areas, thus have less diversity among the student body. Hence, what is lacking in the existing research overall, is an understanding of the composition of mid-range schools and how teachers are able to produce passing test scores, yet are stifled in achieving the levels of success their higher range counterparts achieve.

THEORY

In attempting to discover how the everyday lives and experiences of teachers' have evolved through several reforms, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) will provide the critical framework for this analysis. Fundamental to SI is the idea that the self is socially constructed in relation to social forces and structures and is additionally the product of the ongoing negotiation of meanings (Sadovnik 2004). SI purports that understanding the individual must be done so by accounting for the larger social context in which the individual exists. Thus, as Sadovnik (2004:13) suggests, “the social self is an active product of human agency rather than a deterministic product of social structure.” Central to this perspective are the works of theorists Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman.
Blumer, who became a major interpreter of George Herbert Mead’s work, first used the term symbolic interactionism in 1937 to explain how active involvement in the life of a group affects the social development of an individual (Farganis 2004). This perspective recognizes the individual located within a social life which is fluid yet complex, juxtaposed to the more prevalent schools of thought within sociology that view social actions in the action of society or in some unit of society (Blumer 1969). Correspondingly, “Blumer views symbolic interaction as a uniquely human process in that it requires the definition and interpretation of language and gestures and the determination of the meaning of the actions of others as well” (Farganis 2004:349).

Blumer further concedes, “from the standpoint of symbolic interaction, social organizations [are] a framework inside of which acting units develop their actions. Structural features, such as ‘culture,’ ‘social systems,’ ‘social stratification,’ or ‘social roles,’ set conditions for their action but do not determine their action” (Blumer 1969). In other words, individuals are acting towards situations and not culture, social systems and the like (Blumer 1969).

Following in Blumer’s theoretical frame of SI, Erving Goffman is recognized as one of the most influential interactionist theorists. Of great interest to Goffman was discovering “how everyday taken-for-granted patterns of interaction serve to hold society together” (Sadovnik 2004:13). In “[h]is early work, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959),” Farganis (2004: 350) explains, “Goffman focuses on the individual as an active and reflective self capable of making a wide range of choices
in determining how it should be presented in the varied social spaces in which it must perform.” Thus, the objective becomes to take common, everyday happenings and behaviors, and turn them into the focus of the study. Sadovnik (2004) argues that Goffman’s approach is of great relevance because it attempts to develop and understand the micro-sociology of everyday life and the functions of interactions and behaviors that hold society together.

Hence, the perspective of SI is an essential framework to understanding the lived experiences of teachers. In relative terms, a main objective of SI is to take the “commonplace” and make it “strange,” thus, the micro-level of analysis is useful and necessary in understanding how schools have evolved through the years of school reform and how this evolution has affected teachers’ experiences within the classroom. In this theoretical tradition language is viewed as an important system of significant symbols that aids in facilitating communication and shaping self-awareness. Accordingly, then, the ways in which teachers talk about reform, and how it has shaped their feelings, attitudes, and behaviors within the classroom will help us to better understand their everyday experiences.

METHODS

Because I was interested in examining the experiences teachers in moderate performing schools were having with school reforms, I selected a qualitative approach to gain this insight. The opportunity to employ exploratory in-depth interviews provided a unique vantage point into the everyday lives of teachers. In
addition, utilizing this specific method, the information gathered from these interviews produced rich and full data as well as access to information that other methodologies would not allow for.

Qualitative methods were the most appropriate for this study for a number of reasons. Because my focus was to understand teachers' experiences in relation to reforms, quantitative methods would limit the participants' responses. Although teachers' attitudes towards their jobs can be quantified from survey information, their express reasoning for such attitudes cannot be known without allowing the teachers the opportunity to tell their story in their own words. This approach provided a forum where the participants were able to convey the complexities of their experiences in and through our face-to-face interactions.

The research for this study was conducted at a middle school located in San Diego County, which, for the purposes of protecting the identity of the school, will be referred to as San Diego Middle School (SDMS). Out of the 53 teachers at this school, I interviewed 13 teachers. These teachers were selected on a first come, first serve basis. In other words, due to time constraints, I was only able to interview the first 13 participants who responded to my study. Each interview took place in the individual teacher’s classroom. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and were all digitally recorded with the teacher’s permission. During each interview, I used a set of open-ended questions as my general guide for the conversation, allowing for impromptu and further probing questions as they arose.
SETTING

Entrée into SDMS

Setting up interviews with the teachers at this school was not as easy as I initially thought it might be. My preliminary correspondences with the staff at this middle school informed the teachers of my intent to interview them about the success of their school, and to gain their perspective on teaching. Several emails and calls were made in attempt to line up interviews, however, I was met with an unexpected response. No response. After 6 months of attempting to make contact, I had to come up with another plan.

Having volunteered and worked on the campus of this school, I thought it might be in my best interest to get back in touch with a few of the contacts I made during the time I worked there. I contacted the Superintendent of the schools in this area and told her about my research. I told her I was interested in talking with teachers at this specific school due to their successful API. The Superintendent assured me that she would work on getting me entrée into the school. It was not but a week after I spoke with the Superintendent that I received an email from the principal of SDMS. The principal congratulated me on my studies, and offered his full support in getting teachers to participate. Once the principal offered his support, teachers began emailing me to set up interviews.

When I was building my research plan, I had initially intended to interview teachers off campus. I thought teachers might feel more comfortable sharing their experiences if they were in a “neutral” place. When I suggested an off campus
meeting place, teachers overwhelmingly responded that they would prefer to conduct the research in their classrooms. One teacher even mentioned in an email conversation that the school was like her home, and that she would be “honored to host me in [her] classroom for the interview.”

SDMS Campus Description

When I walked onto the campus as a researcher, I began to see things in a different light. As I entered the main office through the double doors, I noticed the large yellow banner with bold black lettering, which touts: “Comprehension Experts: Every Classroom, Every Student, Every Day.” When I walked up to the front desk, the woman behind the desk was just wrapping up a phone conversation in Spanish. She hung up the phone, greeted me, asked me to sign in, fill out a name badge for myself, and place it visibly on my person. I promptly followed her instructions as she notified the teacher I was going to interview that I was on campus. I was instructed to have a seat, and that I would be notified when the teacher was ready for me.

While I was in the waiting area, I noticed a clear plastic wall organizer to the right of the nurse’s office. In this organizer were several informational brochures and pamphlets, so I wandered over to see what was there. One pamphlet in particular caught my eye. It was a pamphlet about test taking anxiety. In this pamphlet was information about what test taking anxiety feels like, why it happens, and what parents and students can do to minimize such anxiety. When I reflected back to
when I was a student, I could not recall my school providing any such literature, or even that there was a need for it.

The woman at the front desk notified me that Mr. Hamilton was ready for me. I thanked her and began to make my way to the teacher’s classroom. The bell had just rung, and the hallways were instantly crowded with middle school students. Making my way through the masses, I could not help but reflect on what it was like to hear that final bell after a long day of sitting in classes. It was almost as if the school was enveloped in a large bubble, and when the bell rung, the bubble burst. The students were full of energy, running up and down the hallways, gathering with their friends, laughing, joking, and being playful. An overall sense of relief was what I gathered as I made my way to room 218.

When I walked into room 218, I was eagerly greeted by Mr. Hamilton. I peered around the room to take in my environment. On several of the walls were historical figures, posters from Mr. Hamilton’s students, a “Word Wall,” among various other educational decorations. Although this was my first interview at this school, I would soon learn that my experience walking into Mr. Hamilton’s room would become the norm. Most of the classrooms had decorations of student projects, “Word Walls,” and concepts from math, science, history or language arts, depending on the subject matter the teacher taught.
San Diego Middle School Demographics

San Diego Middle School was selected for numerous reasons. Primarily, SDMS is of great interest because it is located in an area where seven of the nine middle schools are considered failing by measure of their Academic Performance Index (API). Because the current reform, NCLB, states that schools with API's below 700 are subject to sanctions, a mid-range school is defined as having a score between 700 through 800. San Diego Middle School was appropriate for my study because its API of 761 is in the mid-range. Top performing schools, as well as schools close to being sanctioned were not considered for this study. Additionally, according to the California Department of Education, whereas the other passing middle school in this district is comprised of approximately 72 percent white students, San Diego Middle School is comprised of 55 percent white, 33 percent Latino, 3 percent African American, and 17 percent other, hence, a greater diversity among the student population exists at this school.

Another unique characteristic of this school, and further rationale behind selecting SDMS, relates to the demographic of the city in which the school is located. Per capita, the average income in this city is approximately $21,000, in comparison to the national average of $25,000 (www.census.gov). Thus, while the majority of people are not living below the national poverty line, a great number of families can be considered low income. This alone makes the city and more specifically San Diego Middle School an interesting case study.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Standards, Standardized Teachers, Standardized Tests:
How Mid-Range Schools are Comparable to Low and High Range Schools

Understanding the experiences of teachers at SDMS is crucial to understanding the ways in which teachers navigate their everyday lives. Teachers at SDMS are amidst a time in education when they are required to teach in ways that, as previously demonstrated in the research, have become highly prescribed (e.g.: teaching to the test). This next section will provide a framework for the experiences teachers are having at a mid-range school, and draw parallels to experiences documented in existing research on teachers' struggles with reform movements.

Standards: Pressure and Changes in Teaching

Standards for teachers at SDMS play a very significant role in constructing teachers' realities. Many teachers, when asked about their experience with standards, had mixed responses. In most cases, teachers stated they agree with having standards, however, the amount of standards they are required to teach in relation to the amount of time they are given to teach them is where the disconnect occurs. That is to say, teachers feel that the standards are too rigorous for their students. As Ms. Kent describes, “I think that the standards, which I believe in standards, I just think that the way standards are written, and what we have to teach within one year pushes kids a little fast.”
The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required states to develop content standards in both reading and mathematics. Each state specifies their own standards, and it is the districts responsibility to ensure schools are adequately teaching these standards. These content standards are measured by assessments such as benchmark tests and the state standardized tests. Because the state only mandates content standards in reading and mathematics, the two subject areas that are tested on the state tests, districts create their own content standards and benchmark tests for science and history. Therefore, all teachers are subjected to the pressures created by the content standards to have their students perform on the standardized tests.

The rigors associated with teaching standards leave teachers feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. Additionally, teachers feel as though they are doing a disservice to their students by covering the amount of standards required within a year, and not having time to assure each student has adequately learned the standards. When asked about her experience with content standards, Ms. Reid responded:

There is something like 170 to 190 standards that we have to cover. And if you think about 180 days of teaching, you know, the idea is that you could teach a standard a day, except it doesn’t work that way. And, so, I think that in striving for higher standards, I think it’s important to strive for higher standards, but, you know, we’re teaching a mile wide and an inch deep. [The standards] don’t really say that the kids have to learn [the material]. The expectation is there, but there’s a little bit of a reality check that it’s just too fast and too furious.
Ms. Reid’s experience exemplifies the challenges teachers face in trying to teach the content standards. Teachers feel as though they have been given an unrealistic task in trying to teach their students the amount of information required by the standards. Because they feel this overwhelming sense of urgency related to teaching the amount of material within the six week time frame between benchmark exams, they often resort to only teaching information that is on the tests.

As previous research has demonstrated, the notion of teaching to the test constructs a very real reality for most teachers. In asking teachers about their experience with standardized tests, one commonality amongst participants was the idea of having to teach only the information found on the test. As a result, teachers find themselves teaching students “how to take standardized tests,” according to Mr. Hamilton. Moreover, teaching, in most participants’ experience, has become a “drill and grill” process, whereby, students are rapidly fed the information, and then required and expected to know it thoroughly for testing purposes. This, according to the teachers at SDMS, has changed the way teachers teach. Ms. Kent expressed very strong emotions when asked about whether or not the standardized tests change what she teaches by stating, “Everything is geared towards what’s on that test. And that’s all there is to it. You just teach what’s on the test, and test what you’ve taught.”

Along with the notion of teaching to the test, teachers described how testing has impacted the way they are able to teach. On the day that I went to interview Ms. Kent she had just met with a student of hers from several years ago. The following excerpt is from our interview where she describes how a visit from a former student
has forced her to recognize how teaching has changed in the years she has been in the profession:

I was just visiting with a former student of mine from several years ago, and he asked if I still do Hamlet. And I said I can’t because it’s not in the 8th grade curriculum. And he said, “What?” Because we used to do Hamlet, and rewrite it, and then film their version of it. And our school was a ‘Cool School’ because we were doing Hamlet in 8th grade. But, now I can’t do that because it’s not 8th grade curriculum. We used to do Phantom of the Opera, and he was asking all these questions about that and he said, “What’s left? What do you teach?” And I said, “well, you know, we have our short stories, and we just have to base everything on the standards.

In the 19 years that Ms. Kent has been teaching, she has witnessed a dramatic shift in education. A shift that has stifled her creativity as a teacher, and no longer allows her to do activities that thoroughly engage students. Not unlike Ms. Kent’s experience in teaching language arts, Ms. Greg has encountered the same issue.

Having taught math for over 30 years, Ms. Greg also indicated that teaching has changed. She explains, “I’m not teaching understanding, I’m teaching how do I fill in the blanks.” As our conversation continued, Ms. Greg provided me with an excellent example of how teachers have been forced to forego their creativity in the interest of teaching the overwhelming quantity of content standards. As I asked Ms. Greg to describe for me how standards based reforms have influenced the way she teaches, she stated the following:

[Reforms] change what I teach, I just have to teach more things than I did before the reforms. And the other thing is that I’m not able to do more in-depth learning, project-learning, application-learning, because
I have to move on to another topic. For instance, I have to teach volume. I have one day to teach the volume of a cylinder and the volume of a prism. One day. Now, a really good learning project, is you take a piece of 8x10 paper, you take two pieces, and one you fold lengthwise like a hotdog, and one you fold like a hamburger. And then, you’ve got cylinders, you’ve got two different cylinders made with the same piece of paper. And to measure the volume, I have the kids first predict the volume, you know, which is going to hold more, which is going to hold less. And then you actually use the little popcorn I’ve got up here (motioning to packing peanuts) and you measure that. Well, that’s an activity that would take a whole period, and I never get down to the nitty-gritty of how to calculate it. But the understanding there is what the state wants us to understand, is that, you know, there’s a reaction… a dependence, between your base and your height in anything in determining your volume. And so, that activity gets at that, but if I’ve got to teach both of them in one day, I can’t do the activity. So, that’s what I’m talking about. We don’t get to have that hands on, that experience learning, that discovery-learning because we’re so pushed. So that’s how it’s affected my teaching. I don’t get to teach the way I really know kids learn.

In many cases, teachers at SDMS had stories similar to that of Ms. Greg’s account. Stories about how standards and tests have become the focus and students have become secondary to that drive. The required amount of standards teachers must get through in one year no longer allows them to teach in ways that generate a thorough understanding by the students.

Pacing of Teaching
In the case of SDMS, most teachers expressed issues of feeling too rushed by the pacing guide. Pacing guides have become a mechanism by which the standardization of teaching is implemented. A pacing guide stipulates that all teachers in like disciplines are required to be on the same page in their text books at the same time. The logic behind pacing guides is to minimize variation in instruction and to assure that teachers are only teaching what will be on the standardized tests. In many of my interviews, teachers shared stories of how students were falling behind and not absorbing the material, yet, because the pacing guide mandates that teachers be on the same page at the same time, teachers are forced to leave students behind. According to Ms. Reid, “the pacing guide doesn’t allow for re-teaching. And our biggest complaint is, is with the schedule we have. If the kids don’t learn [the material], what are we supposed to do? And, there’s no real answer. And if you look at the pacing guide, we’re pushing so fast that even the gifted kids struggle.”

Standards were created for teachers to provide them with an outline of how to get from the beginning of the school year to the end of the year, and what to teach in between. They were meant to be used as a general guideline for what their students were expected to know by the time they completed each grade level. Since the inception of NCLB, standards have taken on a completely new meaning. They have become something that has taken away teachers creative freedoms, undermined individual teaching styles and prescribed undesirable methods of educating students. Through the vice that is NCLB, teachers are now forced into teaching in standardized ways so as to reduce variation in and between the presentation of material to the
students. Existing research illustrates the many ways in which teacher autonomy is being minimized by NCLB (Ryan and La Guardia 1999). The use of pacing guides is yet another tool teachers are required to use, however, as teachers at SDMS indicate, they do not benefit their students.

**Standardized Testing**

In an effort to gain teachers’ perspectives on what it means to teach in the standards based reform era, it was important for me to understand the meaning they assigned to the standardized tests. Interestingly enough, much of the existing research refers to such tests as “high stakes” testing, however, when asking teachers about their experience with high stakes testing, only four out of the thirteen teachers knew what the term “high stakes” was referring to. Once I explained the term to them, there was no shortage of information provided by the teachers’ personal experience with such tests. Ms. Greg illustrates what high stakes testing means to her as a teacher:

The way the testing is done in this state is very high stakes. And the way our district does it, especially with the benchmarks, because it’s very clear, if one was looking for it, not only could you see how the kids are progressing...of course, that’s the whole idea, but you could also compare one teacher’s productivity to another teacher’s productivity. So, for teachers, that makes it even more high stakes. I think though, that really has filtered down from the state, and from the No Child Left Behind thing, where schools are penalized if they’re not reaching a certain proficiency level. All I can say is somebody from business must have set the whole system up. Because in business, if you have
material. Because every activity in the classroom is virtually based on what is going to be on the tests, teachers must teach to the tests.

Outlined in the review of the literature, standardized testing has become a normal educational practice for schools today. Whereas once the success or failure of a student’s performance was measured by assessments made up by teachers, today, students are subjected to a battery of standardized tests. Part of the new discourse that supports mandates of NCLB is what is known as benchmark assessments. As defined by the U.S. Department of Education a benchmark assessment is:

An interim assessment created by districts that can be used both formatively and summatively. It provides local accountability data on identified learning standards for district review after a defined instructional period and provides teachers with student outcome data to inform instructional practice and intervention before annual state summative assessments. In addition, a benchmark assessment allows educators to monitor the progress of students against the state standards and to predict performance on state exams.

The district where San Diego Middle School is located requires benchmark assessments be given every six weeks. These benchmarks are used for various reasons. First, the assessments serve as a tool for identifying any issues the students may be having with the standards. Second, the benchmarks are used to compare the productivity of teachers. That is to say, teachers are compared to one another by way of their test scores. Should a teacher produce a lower score in a certain content area, the scores of the benchmark tests are used in such a way that will allow the teachers to make the adjustments in their teaching for the next time they
someone that is not performing in your business, you
fire them. We can’t fire anybody here, I mean, as far as
students go, and we have to teach everybody, regardless
of family life, regardless of motivation, regardless of
capability.

In Ms. Greg’s analysis, she points out that testing is something to be feared by both
students and teachers. Because there are negative consequences associated with
testing for teachers, they strive to keep up with the standardization of teaching by
following the pacing guides. This, however, as Ms. Greg points out, is unrealistic for
the simple reason that it implies that all students are the same. As she continued her
analysis on high stakes testing, Ms. Greg states:

It makes it very high stakes when you think that all
children can learn to the very same level. That doesn’t
sound realistic. People aren’t made that way. Some of
them have really good talents in math, or in reading, or
in writing, and some of us can do much….can fix a car
(jokingly). I mean, don’t ever ask me to fix a car, you
know, but when we expect all kids to go up to a certain
level, and be able to test proficient at that level, it’s not
humanly possible. And it just makes the whole testing
thing high stakes. So then, not only are the NCLB
having these proficiency levels, the district and the
state, in math, expect very high goals. We’re having a
lot of schools show that they’re not meeting those high
expectations because it’s just too high. Therefore, if
you don’t, for several years in a row meet those high
expectations, then you’re put on a list, and that list is
published.

As several of the teachers at San Diego Middle School have illustrated, testing
has created a climate of fear for both teachers and students. For teachers, however,
testing has had a significant impact on the ways in which teachers present their
teach that specific subject. Finally, benchmark assessments serve as “practice” for the students. They are fashioned in a way that mimics the state tests students will take at the end of the year. In their analysis of standardized assessments, Glacer and Silver (1994) purport:

> Externally mandated assessments can also affect classroom-level activity in other ways. Teachers often create or use multiple-choice and short-answer assessments, thereby evoking and evaluating performances from their students only in forms identical to those used on external assessments. The widespread use of multiple-choice assessments has contributed to a “dumbing down” of instruction, in which skills tend to be taught in the form required for performance on the assessment rather than for more realistic or natural applications.

This section illustrates how teachers’ experiences at SDMS are similar to that of teachers’ experiences in both the low and high performing schools. It exemplifies the demands NCLB has placed on teachers thus altering how our youth are educated. Today, teachers struggle with the loss of autonomy, frustration with reform policies, and an overall discontent for the top down structure of education. The subsequent section goes beyond existing research to demonstrate the ways in which teachers at SDMS not only make sense of the current reform, but how they negotiate their everyday working lives in spite of reform policies.
The Mid-Range Experience: How it Varies

After conducting 13 interviews at San Diego Middle School, I discovered a complex relationship that exists in and between the teachers, their administrators, the district, and state mandates. As the prior section alludes to and previous research supports, teachers feel disenfranchised by the mandates passed down from NCLB. They experience the loss of autonomy, having to teach to standardized tests, and new teacher burn out, however the following findings and discussion tells the story of one mid-range school, and how it has negotiated the very issues that affect teachers' everyday lives.

Teacher Expertise

Sitting down with each of the 13 teachers I interviewed, one of my first questions inquired how long each teacher had been teaching. I discovered that only two teachers had a minimum of five years experience, while the others had between 11 and 36 years of experience. Darling-Hammond (1998) suggests that the knowledge and skill of teachers can have a profound impact on the academic performance of students, which is seemingly the case at SDMS. Of the 13 participants in my study, the average number of years teaching was 19. In a study conducted by Greenwald et al. (1996) on teacher expertise, they found that issues relating to teachers' education, abilities, and experience all contribute to student achievement.
Teachers at this school have a uniqueness relating to the number of years in the profession. Although NCLB is a relatively new reform teachers have been grappling with, reform for experienced teachers is part of their everyday lives. In Ms. Greg's experience she explains:

Because I'm an experienced teacher, I can take what we have in the textbook and. (pause). I already know where the kids are going to have some difficulty or know where they really don't need to know this particular thing, so I'm able to monitor and revise before I teach, or even as I teach.

In this instance, her years of experience have demonstrated her ability to adapt to new reforms. She is comfortable with the material she teaches, and is able to filter it for her students in such a way that enhances their understanding of certain concepts. To exemplify her claim, Ms. Greg describes the following activity where she used her discretion to teach her students the area of a parallelogram.

I think it would be very difficult for a new teacher to know where the pitfalls are. For example, we're teaching the area of parallelograms. Well, in some parallelograms, the height is not the side, so, I know to point out and make a big deal out of it, but if you're not an experienced teacher, you wouldn't necessarily make a big deal of that and point it out to the kids so they don't get that as well. And, new teachers that are just following the text might not put as much emphasis on that, so their kids will miss it on a test.

Here, Ms. Greg's experience is beneficial to her students because, as she points out, "the textbook tries to include everything for everybody, which includes your slower students and your GATE students. So, while a textbook has all of this in it, it isn't necessarily what you need to be giving a kid for understanding." Hence, as is the
case for many of the teachers I interviewed at SDMS, their years of experience have allowed them to dissect the material, both in the texts and otherwise, and present it in ways that their students understand.

Moreover, teachers at SDMS, because of their expertise, feel comfortable enough and secure enough in their jobs to “push the envelope.” In many instances, teaching has become “very prescribed,” as denoted by Ms. Kent, a language arts teacher of 19 years. This concept of a standardized method of teaching will be discussed later in more detail, however, it is important to note that with the teachers’ expertise at SDMS, more often than not, teachers instruct in ways that go beyond the “prescription.” For example, Ms. Reid, who has been teaching history and social studies for 16 years describes a time when she went against the district mandates of how this particular subject should be presented:

...They had us teaching Islam before middle ages, and I went to my principal, and this came down from the district. And I said, “look, Mohammed wasn’t born until after Christ. I can’t teach 7th graders who are only just reaching abstract thinking, I can’t teach them about Mohammed and then go into the Medieval power of the church, and have kids understand that Mohammed was born after.” She (the principal) said, “will you be able to take the benchmark by the end of the semester?” and I said, “yes.” So, she told me to teach it however you want to. So, when you’ve been around a little bit longer, they’re not going to fire me for it. And if I feel real strongly that something is not good for my kids, I’ll kind of push it. I think our last principal did a really nice job of picking teachers that, are not rebel rousers, but they’re pretty strong in their convictions and what they think good teaching is, and best practices and so forth. And we follow those things. We’ll push a little harder if we think something is wrong.
Here, Ms. Reid demonstrates how her years of experience have lead to her feeling secure enough with her job that she is able to go against the way the district prescribes teaching, and teach her students in the way she feels is best for them. This is especially significant considering research on the experiences new teachers are having with mandates of NCLB exemplifies the exact opposite. New teachers, as Kauffman et al (2002:292) demonstrates, feel as though they are “left to choose the content, devise strategies and prepare materials, but they had to do so knowing that their failure to get it right from the start could compromise their school’s ranking and lead to public embarrassment. The stakes are high and the supports are few.”

Through my research, I discovered that the veteran teachers at SDMS are more willing to share their years of experience with newer teachers on how to devise classroom activities, present material and instruct. This, ultimately, contributes to the sense of community teachers spoke of during their interviews, which will be discussed in subsequent sections.

*Teaching Philosophies*

In addition to asking how long participants have been teaching, I also requested that they share their personal teaching philosophies with me. By doing so, I felt that I was able to gain a better sense of who the teachers were and how they operated in their classrooms. Mr. Hamilton, for example, has been teaching history and social studies for 36 years. When he described his personal teaching philosophy,
he indicated that he wanted his students to “learn as much as they can, but more importantly, to learn how to learn.” Through Mr. Hamilton’s years of experience, as he described to me, he wants to provide his students with a safe environment in which learning can take place.

Ms. Greg, who has taught math to middle school students for 30 years, described her personal teaching philosophy as only being geared towards middle school kids. In our conversation, she recognized the fact that, “you have to understand where they are in their developmental process.” In her compassion towards her students, she understands that learning math can be difficult at times. Describing her personal teaching philosophy, she states: I want kids to become engaged in their learning, and get excited about their learning. Even though I teach a very hard subject, which is math. And, it’s hard to make it relative sometimes, although it’s one of our more relative subjects. So, I do whatever it takes to be able to teach it to kids.

Here, Ms. Greg’s student centered approach is driven by the desire for her students to succeed. Although school reforms have stripped teachers of autonomy (Ryan and La Guardia 1999), with 30 years of experience, Ms. Greg understands what students really need to be learning beyond what the reforms say the students need to be learning. Comparing her experience with that of her peers, Ms. Greg is not alone in her student-centered ideologies.

In Mr. Day’s case, he believes that providing students with a space where they feel both comfortable and challenged is the key to his students’ success. He asserts that a fundamental aspect of their learning is the students’ ability to make their own
choices. Having been a middle school science teacher for 33 years, Mr. Day describes his philosophy in the following way:

Ultimately, you give them ways to make the path that you’re taking them down to be their choice. It has to be somewhere they want to go. Sometimes, giving them choices that don’t go very far, but just the fact that they got to make the choice...a or b...both of them are basically going where you need them to go and they don’t get to choose everything else but just the feeling that, “oh, I got to have a choice on this,” makes a big difference for them.

These are just a few examples of the philosophies behind the veteran teachers at SDMS. Using SI as a framework to understand teachers’ experiences, the way in which they make meaning out of their everyday teaching lives is to be compassionate for this age group (ages 11 to 13), understand their developmental processes, provide a safe environment where learning can take place, teach to multiple learning modalities, make the kids feel important, successful and engaged. Although the aforementioned are all common approaches to educating students, in many cases these philosophies went beyond normal classroom hours. Teachers mentioned making themselves available to their students before class, after class and on breaks. When students are struggling with the content, the teachers make themselves accessible to the students in any way they can.

In the context of this mid-range school, issues pertaining to both teacher expertise and teaching philosophies are an important part of understanding how it is teachers navigate reform movements. SI would suggest that teachers’ ability to
manipulate their actions in order to achieve their desired outcome is relative to the arena in which such actions transpire. Throughout my interactions with teachers, one of the most prevalent themes they spoke of related to their school having a great sense of community. In several instances, teachers defined this unity as being between both the teachers and the administrators at SDMS. As a result, the next section describes the many ways in which the teachers are able to achieve this sense of community.

Creating Community

Utilizing Symbolic Interactionism as the foundation for understanding how success is created and maintained at a mid-range school, I thought it important to draw attention to the structural and spatial details of San Diego Middle School. Because SI aims to understand everyday patterns that exist in one’s reality, it is crucial to have a context for the location in which such patterns emerge. Thus, I will be discussing not only the structural layout of the school, but also the way the school is administratively structured.

The Pod

After conducting my first few interviews, I realized there was something unique in the way this school’s classrooms were set up. In every classroom, inevitably, there were student desks arranged to the teachers’ specifications, white boards, and the teacher’s desk, however, at the back of each room was a large picture
window framed in blue and a blue door. Through the window, not only was I able to see a smaller room which contained a table with four to five chairs around it, but I was also able to view two other classrooms on the opposite side of the small room.

Through the interview process, teachers would refer to these rooms as the “pod.” They would talk about meetings with other teachers, parent teacher meetings, meetings with the students, or doing any kind of preparation work for their classes in the pod. According to several of the teachers, these pods are what allow them to stay connected to other teachers as well as to their grouping of students. The pods are worth mentioning because it is a space in which teachers are able to be adjoined with other teachers from their village, which will be discussed in the next section.

Villages

San Diego Middle School is unique in that it runs on what the teachers and administration refer to as the “village” system. Essentially, students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade are grouped by grade into a village, which is given a name that relates to the school mascot. These groupings of students will all have the same teachers for each subject. For example, students in the “Balboa” village will have the same teachers for every subject (math, science, social studies, physical education and language arts) throughout the course of two years.

Each of the teachers I interviewed had positive reactions towards the village system. Ms. Kent, a 7th grade language arts teacher who has 19 years of experience in the profession explains:
Village is awesome. 180 kids have the same teachers. All my kids have the same math teacher, the same science teacher, and the same social studies [teacher]. And the kids are so much better supported because of it. If we have a village meeting and there is a child that seems to be struggling, we can call the parents and talk to them. It’s like having a family. It really is a collaborative effort. There’s less opportunities for kids to slip through the cracks. When you’re in the village, everybody is keeping an eye on each kid, times five or six teachers.

What makes the implementation of the village especially unique in the case of SDMS is that teachers in four of the core content areas, with the exception of the physical education teachers, are adjoined by the pods. Hence, as described by Ms. Kent, teachers are readily at one another’s disposal if and when an issue arises with a student. Additionally, because the pods serve as an informal lunch room for teachers, they regularly meet during lunch to discuss any student related issues. According to Ms. Logan, a math teacher of 22 years, “we meet together pretty regularly, about every lunch, and we share student concerns.”

Looping

Looping is a concept whereby a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level, rather than starting a new school year with a new set of teachers. In the case of SDMS, looping has been implemented for the past five years. Studies have shown that looping has had an overall positive effect on students, teachers, and parents who participate (Grant, 1996). In their qualitative study about looping, Cassidy and Hegde (2004) interviewed teachers and parents about their experiences
with this new approach to education. Their results indicated that both parents and teachers felt looping positively contributed to students’ educational experience (Cassidy and Hegde, 2004). Moreover, Cassidy and Hegde (2004) discuss how looping has enhanced teachers’ ability to anticipate the needs of their students in addition to creating a stronger parent/teacher bond.

Although looping has many positive attributes, according to Mr. Day, a science teacher of 33 years, there are some difficulties associated with looping. As he asserts:

For me, it would just be more efficient if I could just teach one [grade] or the other. Funny, now that I’m back teaching both, I’m not sure which I’d prefer, life science or physical science. The problem is, when I do a lab now, I’m not going to be teaching it for another two years. The stuff I use is going to disappear and go to another teacher. So, trying to find materials, keep track of things. (pause). You know, when you haven’t taught a lab in two years, it’s hard to remember the details of it.

With traditional methods of schooling in middle grades, teachers teach the same subject year after year. As Mr. Day describes, looping can be difficult when the teacher is required to go back and remember the activities associated with teaching different concepts from two years prior. This becomes especially relevant in the context of NCLB, as test scores associated with teachers are compared across years. In other words, teachers attempt to present material in similar ways, albeit with some variation from year to year to maintain a balance in their test scores. When there is a
two year gap between the presentation of an activity and/or concept, teachers struggle to maintain congruency.

Teachers at SDMS however, seem to generally like the idea of looping. When I asked Ms. Kent her thoughts on looping, she commented:

You start off in the 7th grade and then you keep [the students] for 8th grade. Which, I love because you know exactly what you’ve taught, you know exactly what they know, and you know them well enough when you get to 8th grade that you can start teaching on the first day of school. Instead of having kids come from all different teachers that may have covered some things and not others. So, I love looping. And you know the parents, and you know the child so well that there’s no lost teaching time when you get them back in 8th grade.

Ms. Kent’s experience with looping is supported in much of the existing research on looping. That is to say, studies on looping have shown that overall, anxieties in and between students, teachers and parents are greatly reduced when students have the same teachers for a given number of years (Grant 1996: 10).

Mid-range schools may greatly benefit from looping. As research has shown, both teachers and students are more supported when looping is implemented. This finding suggests that schools who are riding the API line may possibly be able to boost student test scores if they participated in a looping program.

Support

Since the era of NCLB, many teachers struggle with the number of mandated changes they are required to implement in their classrooms. Now, more than ever,
teachers struggle to teach the amount of information required by the state. Through my 13 interviews with teachers at San Diego Middle School, one theme mentioned in all of my conversations dealt with the amount of support they receive. Interestingly, teachers did not focus on the support, or lack thereof, provided by the state or the district, but rather, their focus was on the level of support provided by their peers and administrators.

As a result of the panic teachers experience in trying to meet the standards of NCLB, teachers must devise new methods of coping with such strict mandates. Through my interviews, it became apparent that the ways in which teachers at this mid-range school accomplish this is by supporting one another in all aspects of teaching. This is directly reflected in the programs teachers implemented at this middle school. Programs such as Content Area Team (CAT) and Whatever It Takes (WIT), were employed to not only support their pupils, but also to maintain a sense of unity amongst their peers. In her analysis on teachers’ experience with standardized test preparation, Smith (1991) notes:

> Whatever the actual consequences of test results might be, teachers act according to their beliefs that low test scores contribute to negative evaluations of their efforts on the part of the public and school administrators and lead to decreased teacher autonomy over curriculum and teaching methods. For teachers, the stakes are high, and they react by doing what is necessary to prepare children to take the external tests.

Because teachers are concerned not only with their students’ performance on test scores, but also with the perception of their own performance as a teacher, what
my study revealed is that teachers and administrators devise alternative methods to creating a culture within the school that supports teachers in their efforts to support their students. The first example of such efforts is the Content Area Team (CAT). The CAT meets twice a month, broken down by grade level, to discuss where each teacher is in his or her teaching. Additionally, teachers use this time to discuss where each of their classes are having difficulties with certain concepts. Ms. Jones who has been teaching math for 21 years asserts, “...we meet, and we look over student work. We did this already with exponents. We looked at their student work in $7^{th}$ grade on exponents, on multiplying and dividing, and then in $8^{th}$ grade, and then we discussed what their misconceptions were. How we can help them, why are they creating these errors, and those types of things.” For teachers, meeting in the CAT not only becomes an opportunity to discuss student work, but it becomes an avenue for resource sharing among teachers.

In several cases, teachers shared with me the positive characteristics of having the Content Area Team in place because it allows them to gain another teacher’s perspective on how to present a difficult topic. For instance, Ms. Thompson, one of the less experienced teachers at SDMS, stated, “We talk about things that we’re doing in class. Things that are working, things that aren’t, and it’s awesome. I get so many ideas from people I work with, and I think that’s the most beneficial part of it for me.” In her case, Ms. Thompson has only been a teacher for five years, so having the CAT in place provides her with the opportunity to ask questions of her more
experienced counterparts. In this sense, although CAT is meant to focus on the students, inadvertently, it also serves as a mentoring program for the teachers.

This example directly conflicts with research about the experiences new teachers’ are having in the classroom with NCLB procedures. As denoted by Kauffman et al. (2002:275), “New teachers might be expected to welcome explicit guidance about what to teach and how to teach it. Past research has indicated that most teachers rely heavily upon commercial curriculum materials such as text books and teachers’ guides.” In comparison then, it is evident that teachers at SDMS, although still adopting somewhat traditional methods of educating, reach out to their peers as a resource rather than strictly adhering to the texts.

The second program that several teachers mentioned is called Whatever It Takes (WIT). Ms. Kent describes WIT as:

Every Thursday before the staff meeting, we focus on kids for half an hour. We have success contracts, where if someone is really struggling, they sign a success contract with rewards and consequences. We review our success contracts, and dedicate that time just to kids. ‘Are there any concerns in your class? Who do we need to watch for? Let’s make a list.’ And that’s a school wide thing, every Thursday before we go to our meetings, we say, “ok, it’s WIT time,” and the focus is on the child in our village. And it feels good as a teacher to be supported. It’s like, “oh, that child is sleeping in all of our classes? It’s not just mine.” So, I love that. It’s a great connection. We always think, what can we do for the kids?
As denoted above, WIT also acts as another avenue whereby teachers focus is on the students, however, a collaborative effort is required to help the students succeed, thus strengthening the sense of community between the faculty members.

According to Mr. Day, both programs, CAT and WIT, are unique to San Diego Middle School. Most schools have programs in place to help their students succeed, however, the programs at SDMS recognize that a collaborative effort is required by all the students’ teachers. In many cases, teachers described scenarios where students are not able to “get away with anything” because all the teachers are keeping a close watch on each student. Additionally, by putting each of the programs into a timeline, it becomes evident that virtually every spare second teachers at SDMS have is spent concentrating on their students’ success.

Creating a culture of support among teachers is relative to the schools’ ability to perform on standardized assessments. According to Lee and Smith (1993) a correlation exists between teachers’ collaboration with one another and student learning. Thus, as we try to understand how NCLB’s focus on outcomes discourages collaborative learning and teaching styles due to the narrow focus on testing, empirical data suggests that collaboration between teachers and administrators only serves to benefit students.

Schools in the mid-range may feel the impact of NCLB’s dissent for collaborative learning more so than that of other schools because the emphasis is on test scores, standards and pacing guides with little reverence to how to navigate these issues. The vulnerability of mid-range schools to slip below the pass/fail line would
seemingly indicate that collaborative learning is not encouraged and/or does not take place in mid-range schools, however, this is not the case for SDMS.

*Resisting Reforms: Reinforcing Community*

Although careful measures are taken to ensure that a fully student centered ideology exists at SDMS, teachers’ negative experiences with reforms has created another avenue whereby community is reinforced. Inherent to SI, is the notion that meaning is created in and through a day to day process. That is to say, because SI focuses on the micro level of analysis, understanding the meanings teachers assign to their everyday lives is at the forefront of understanding of the greater impact reform movements have on teachers. One way in which teachers create meaning is by resisting reforms. In the case of SDMS, resistance is measured by the ways in which teachers stray from the prescribed path of educating their students. For example, teachers described how pacing guides mandate that teachers should be on the same page at the same time in their textbooks. One way a teacher might demonstrate resistance is to not follow the pacing guide exactly as it is prescribed.

This resistance transpires in a unique way. In many instances teachers felt as though reforms, especially NCLB have created an environment where their performance is subject to public scrutiny due to the test scores their students produce. This, however neglects to account for the context in which the test scores come to fruition. As Mr. Day describes:

> The biggest frustration is that it so much depends on the raw material, the students that you have. And, there are excellent teachers who improve some of these students,
and they work *really* hard at it, and do an excellent job with some growth, but may not be as much growth as what the state is looking for. And of course, in public, you just trot out the test scores, and it seems to come down to the teachers. Not that the teacher doesn’t have a huge impact on that, I mean I have to believe that, or you wouldn’t do anything. But there’s sure a lot more to that equation than teachers.

Mr. Day’s dissatisfaction with the way NCLB emphasizes teachers’ impact on test scores is a common critique from teachers. However, he assists in establishing community by sharing these feelings with other teachers. When other teachers meet and talk about their difficulties with pacing guides or standardized tests, it creates an environment where one teacher’s resistance is reinforced by another teacher’s resistance, thereby establishing community. Several of the veteran teachers expressed their frustration about how reforms that come from the state have many “rules” on how the process of educating students should be accomplished, thus creating a tumultuous relationship in and between teachers and bureaucracy of education. “The more impact standardized tests have on instruction, the more teachers resist their use” (Darling-Hammond and Wise 1985:321).

This resistance however not only allowed teachers to seek out support from their peers, but also provided them with a way to “rebel” against such mandates. When teachers described their experiences with reform, and their willingness to teach in ways they knew were best for their students, it became a secondary form of resisting reform movements. Understanding their stories in the context of SI allows me to infer that teachers’ nonconformity is as a cohesive unit. In other words, as the
following passages will demonstrate, most of the teachers would act in ways that put their students learning first, regardless of the consequences.

In Mr. Anderson’s case, he believes that allowing the kids to learn at their own level is one way in which he shows respect towards his students, while inadvertently protesting against the rigidity of the standards. Having taught middle school children for 11 years, Mr. Anderson describes his philosophy in the following way:

[I try] to reach each student as an individual, knowing that not all of them are going to be A students, and some of them are actually going to be on the lower end of the spectrum. I just try to make them feel important and try to make them realize that they can still be interested in the things they’re interested in, and learn at their own level, and not to make them feel like they’re competing with any of the other kids so they’re turned off in learning.

Mr. Anderson’s teaching philosophy is in direct contradiction with the mandates of NCLB, which states that all students will be “proficient” by the year 2014. He acknowledges that this is a virtually impossible task, yet he uses his years of experience within the classroom to adapt to the educational climate. However, his philosophy demonstrates that he recognizes that just as students are from diverse backgrounds, so too are their learning styles diverse. Thus, in his approach to teaching, Mr. Anderson is continually varying his methods of presentation in an attempt to reach all of his students in ways that work best for them.
When teachers resist reform movements, they run the risk of lowering their test scores, being ostracized by their peers, or even losing their jobs. In this mid-range school, however, the exact opposite is true. Because teachers at SDMS have so many avenues where they support one another, banding together to teach outside the constraints of NCLB is another way in which community is created and maintained.

In mid-range schools, the implications of this are many. Because schools existing in this context are at risk of riding the API line, resisting reforms may prove to be detrimental to student test scores. The resistance needs to occur in a space where it is a common and agreed upon reaction otherwise the sense of community is lost, which, as demonstrated, directly correlates with student learning. Additionally, teachers who teach in other mid-range schools may not typically have the expertise of the teachers at SDMS, thus, resistance may not be an option.

District Assistance and Intervention Team

In 11 of the 13 interviews I conducted, teachers mentioned an external support team from the district. The team, referred to by the teachers at San Diego Middle School as DAIT, is comprised of a group of former teachers who are currently at the administrative level. Reactions about DAIT were very unlike the reactions teachers had towards CAT or WIT. Unfortunately, the DAIT presence at San Diego Middle School is met with a great amount of objection. Although teachers describe a great sense of community in and between their peers and administrators, the outside influence of DAIT is seen as “demeaning,” as one teacher notes.
Paraphrasing from several of the interviews, DAIT is a team from the district that comes to the school and will visit certain classrooms. The team is looking to see if the teachers have adequately followed instructions from the district to have certain items present and in plain view, such as a “Word Wall.” Teachers described their experiences with the DAIT as lasting no longer than five to seven minutes per visit to their classroom. Additionally, teachers were aware of the fact that a DAIT member may pull a student out of class to inquire about the lesson being presented by the teacher. DAIT is looking to see if the student knows what standard the teacher is teaching to, and what the lesson is about. Furthermore, according to the teachers’ accounts, the DAIT is grading the teacher and their classroom environment on a rubric from one to five in several different content areas. For example, DAIT is looking for evidence that the standard being taught is on the board, that there is a word wall and the students are aware of the standard to which the lesson is geared towards.

DAIT - After the Interviews

As I began piecing the story of this mid-range school together for my analysis, I decided to dig deeper into what the DAIT team was. Because teachers could not tell me definitively what the acronym stood for, I was forced to research it online. Only one teacher was able to provide me with the answer to my question, “what does DAIT stand for?” Turning back to his interview, I looked up DAIT based upon his answer.
I came up empty handed. I decided to search for just the acronym DAIT, and discovered something that turned my research upside down.

The DAIT team is actually a part of a sanction that the school is required to go through. In 2008, when I was interviewing teachers, the proverbial bar for standards was raised. In other words, as demonstrated by the vast body of research on NCLB, teachers are in a constant state of uncertainty (Gingerich 2003) when it comes to what is required by them and thus are subject to being sanctioned without notice.

During such time when I was constructing my analysis of San Diego Middle School as a mid-range school, their test scores and their API qualified the school as a mid-range school. After data were collected, it was discovered that SDMS, their test scores and API not having changed in that short time, became sanctioned. Part of what NCLB has created within the educational system is an atmosphere of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration. Although SDMS’s test scores and API have remained unchanged, supposedly freeing them of any possibility of being sanctioned, the requirements for what makes a “successful” school have shifted. Now the focus is on schools’ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), rather than their API. For this reason, in 2008, SDMS did not meet their target AYP, and became sanctioned.

Understanding how education, as a policy, is constantly being revised and redefined from the top down is critical to understanding how teachers make sense of such restructuring processes. During such time when I was interviewing teachers, the DAIT team had been formed and had already visited the school on two separate occasions. As the previous section on DAIT illustrates teachers’ frustration with the
team, it became apparent once I researched DAIT that teachers were not aware of the sanction. From their perspective, they processed the team’s presence as a district requirement, rather than a sanction. Never once did teachers state that this team was there as part of a sanctioned measure to provide the school with further instructions on how to reach their AYP.

Teachers’ lack of awareness of this sanction is of great significance when considering the implications it has for mid-range schools. In the case of SDMS, this finding led me to believe that, for teachers, regardless of their years of experience in the classroom, of their extraordinary ability to establish and maintain a community that supports their peers, these factors seemingly have no influence on schools’ success and/or failure, because the definition of success or failure shifts without school scores changing. Thus, in the context of reform movements, this finding indicates that no matter what teachers do they always run the risk of being sanctioned.

Beyond the DAIT’s influence however, teachers’ convictions about their sense of community were still very strong. In most cases, teachers described how having the DAIT visit caused them to collaborate with one another on what lessons to present, how to present them, and what to have prepared for the team when they came in. Teachers, although they did not vocalize it in so many words, counted on their peers for support when the DAIT visits were announced.

*Riding the line: The Mid-Range Experience*
Mid-range schools exist in a space where the definition of passing and failing is so finite they run the risk of “riding the line,” or slipping below a 700 API, thus subjecting them to sanctions. Although SDMS became sanctioned in the process of my research, it has great implications for understanding what reforms mean to schools existing in the mid-range.

Teachers who teach at a mid-range school are arguably under greater pressure than those teaching at a high and/or low performing school to maintain passing test scores. When test scores fall below passing, teachers are subject to greater public scrutiny by parents, the district and the state. Because becoming a “failing” school has an impact on the amount of funding received, teachers are at the forefront of the schools’ ability to maintain test scores. This, too, has implications for the way in which the public perceives the school. If teachers are unable to have their students produce adequate test scores, parents, with the availability of school choice options, can opt for their student(s) to attend different schools.

Additional factors that prove to be difficult for mid-range schools in maintaining their test scores relates to the demographics of such schools. As previously established, mid-range schools are typically situated in areas that are not highly affluent, thus, their student population may be more diverse. In her experience with this, Ms. Greg illustrates, “just having somebody else come into your school from the district or state trying to run these schools, it’s not going to change the population that your trying to teach.” This exemplifies how being a mid-range school may place an added pressure on teachers to teach underrepresented populations, and produce passing test scores. In their eyes, teachers feel as though such mandates do not take into account the diversity among
their student population and the impact such diversity has on their ability to maintain their mid-range status.

SIGNIFICANCE

The study conducted at San Diego Middle School has important implications for the vast body of knowledge that exists on No Child Left Behind. Existing research highlights the experiences teachers from both poor performing and high performing schools are having, however, mid-range schools have been left out of the discussion. The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism has given me a unique lens in which to view this study. The qualitative microanalysis of this mid-range school has allowed me to gain perspectives on what it means for teachers at a mid-range school to be amidst the constant waves of reform. Although SDMS is now under sanctions, it is significant in demonstrating how the systematic pressures of NCLB disenfranchise teachers. Additionally, I learned how cohesiveness among teachers and their administrators actively contributes to student achievement despite the changing definitions of success. Finally, as education as a practice is becoming more prescribed, teachers with years of experience are able to meet these challenges in spite of the push towards an overall standardization of education.

Disenfranchisement of Teachers

Through the course of this process, SDMS became a sanctioned school. This, however, is relevant to my analysis of the educational system for a number of
reasons. First, as previously discussed, the numerous reforms teachers are subjected to leave them in a constant state of bewilderment. Especially in the instances of schools that are in the mid-range. Schools that are under-performing and/or over-performing can be certain of where they are on the proverbial yardstick that is used to assess education. However, schools performing at the mid-range may have a more difficult time keeping up with current changes, restructuring and redefining of the reforms. As demonstrated by this research, education, as a policy is subject to change without notice.

This notion can help account for overall contempt expressed by teachers when referring to reform policies. As teachers disclosed their stories of DAIT visits, it became clear that top down policies, or in this case sanctions, are a source of frustration. Moreover, as teachers are on the front lines of our educational system, they feel as though such top down policies are incongruent with their experiences in the classroom. In other words, teachers feel as though they should have a voice in issues relating to assessments and standards and how they are implemented rather than relying on political discourse to determine educational goals.

The disenfranchisement of teachers is significant to a number of stakeholders in education. As already described, teachers suffer the greatest consequences of reform movements because not only are they required to implement reforms they do not fully understand, but the public nature of their job places them in a position to be scrutinized. What is further, teachers are at risk of losing their jobs for not producing
passing test scores. This, however, occurs in a space where the definition of success and/or failure is subject to change.

In a broader sense, the disenfranchisement of teachers may have a great impact on the teaching profession as a whole. As teachers indicated, education is becoming much more prescribed, which, in turn may make it difficult for new teachers to come into the profession willingly. That is to say, if teachers are no longer granted creative freedoms, are required to teach to tests, and ordered to be teaching the same material at the same time as other teachers, the draw to the profession may significantly decrease.

*Newly Sanctioned and Unaware*

One of the most prevalent themes that emerged from my research was the way teachers spoke of an overwhelming sense of community. Although existing research on teachers narrowly focuses on negative experiences they are having in the classrooms, in this case, teachers' first instinct was to talk about all the ways in which they felt supported by their peers and administrators. This, consequently, has great implications in understanding the dynamics in and between teachers, their administrators and their district, now that the school is sanctioned.

The turning point in my research arose when I discovered SDMS was under sanctions. Although teachers spoke of this sense of community, I began to realize that the community in and between the administrators and teachers may not be as strong as what I was presented with. That is to say, teachers spoke of putting great
faith into their administration in terms of being able to push the envelope, and go beyond the scope of the recommended course of teaching. However, administrators, while granting their teachers permission to “teach outside the box” failed to fully inform their staff members of the newly sanctioned status. This directly conflicts with the sense of community described by teachers.

The significance of this relates to a breakdown in communication on many levels. Using SI to understand this miscommunication, Blumer, a SI theorist, would concede that social life is a process, a complex web of collaborative actions in which participants are constantly reflecting, negotiation and fitting their actions to others in order to achieve common objectives (Farganis 2004). The administration may not have been directly aware of the fact that the school was under sanctions. This may have happened because the definition of success/failure was a very recent change in educational policy, and the administration may not have had time to fully absorb and understand what this meant for their school. However, it is unknown at this juncture whether or not the administrators at this school were aware of any sanctions.

Having SDMS under sanctions has the greatest significance for this research. SI argues that meaning is created in and through micro-interactions, however, we must consider the context in which these interactions come to fruition. These interactions exist in a space where rules and regulations are seemingly in a constant flux. This means that teachers may continue to teach, to create community, to support their peers, and to do “Whatever it Takes” to help their students succeed,
however, because the rules are subject to change, it indicates that their hard work and dedication to education was irrelevant.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings from this study provide me with a great opportunity to make recommendations for other schools, districts and teachers. Although my study was framed in the context of a mid-range school, I think it is important to recognize that the recommendations are broad enough to be implemented on various levels.

Because SDMS had several teachers with more than 15 years of teaching, their experience allowed them to negotiate the various reform movements with less trouble than that of newer teachers. Therefore, I would suggest schools implement a mentoring system for teachers with more experience to help mentor the newer teachers. This suggestion would work well within the context of the next recommendation.

One issue that had a great impact on teachers and the way they spoke of teaching at SDMS was the sense of community created in and between their peers and the administration. A possible recommendation would be for other schools to implement both the village system along with looping. At SDMS, teachers' feelings towards these two methods of education seemingly made the teachers more cohesive. As suggested by my findings, when teachers collaborate, in addition to having the same group of students for more than one year, a more positive learning environment
is established and student learning increases. Moreover, the when the village system and looping are implemented, it becomes an easier avenue for the mentoring program to be implemented due to the collaborative nature of both programs.

Although a vast body of empirical data exists on the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is important to study schools at various levels of “success” to determine where changes need to be made. Unfortunately, as this research has shown, mandates and guidelines are continuously changing, thus, it is difficult to fully understand the NCLB as it is implemented today. Evidenced through my interviews with teachers at SDMS, policies, by the time they reach their targeted populations, become so diluted they virtually get lost in translation.

Further research is needed to explore the relationship between demographics of mid-range schools and the implications such demographics might have on their ability to maintain sufficient test scores. By doing so, a greater overall picture of the educational system might emerge. In other words, if the focus is shifted from highlighting the dichotomy between the low and high performing schools to focusing on experiences across the spectrum, it may have a significant impact on new reform movements. Furthermore, as my research highlighted, it is important for schools, whether they are low, high, or mid performing, create a culture for teachers within the school that is based on collaboration in and among teachers and their administrators. By doing so, as established by this study and others, it improves student outcomes.
CONCLUSION

As educators struggle with the constant waves of reforms, change is the only thing that remains constant. Teachers exist in a world where policies are continually changing, definitions of success and failure are redefined without notice, and being scrutinized by administrators, districts and the state are all normal practices. This type of environment proves to be a very difficult place in which to thrive.

Reform movements in education have become a common and expected practice. This research sought to illustrate the experiences teachers at one mid-range school were having with such reforms and how they were able to maintain an environment whereby students achieved adequate test scores. From my qualitative analysis, two common themes emerged. First, when teachers establish a sense of community among their peers, an environment more conducive to student learning transpires. Second, as teaching is approached from a top down perspective, teachers struggle with understanding reform policies, however, the strict mandates of such reforms are still contributing factors to the ways in which teachers teach within the classroom. In other words, as the specifics of NCLB may not be understood by educators, the presence of this reform has indefinitely altered the way educating our youth is accomplished.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions

✿ Before I get to specific questions, I would like to get a general sense of your experience. How's it going?

✿ How was it that you decided to become a teacher?

✿ How long have you been teaching?

✿ Can you describe your personal teaching philosophy/pedagogy?
  o What inspired this specific philosophy?

✿ From your experience, how do students learn best?
  o In what setting/environment
  o Examples?

✿ Some studies have shown that educational reforms have had a significant impact on what teachers teach and how they teach it. What has been your (or your colleagues) experience with this?
  o Do you have a specific curriculum that you are required to follow?
  o If NO-
    ▪ How do you decide what to teach?
  o If YES-
    ▪ Does anyone check to see that you’re following the curriculum?
From your experience, is it a good curriculum? Why? (depth, structure, support, ideas, resources, creativity, results, consistency). Do you like using it? Does it work well for your students?

- Is there anything specifically that has altered the way you teach in the classroom?
  - How do you feel about these changes?
- Can you tell me a bit about high stakes testing?
  - How closely are the tests tied to what you teach?
  - Does it change what you teach?
  - And what about students? Has high stakes testing, in your experience, had any sort of impact on students? Examples?
- Your school is considered a “successful” school in that it has not been sanctioned, in your opinion, what factors contribute to this success?
- What are the challenges you face in trying to maintain this success?
- Is there anything else you might like to share about your experiences as a teacher?