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Ten Years: Policy in 3-D

Sabrina Stevens

2006

“There is always a question of how much information the members of any culture may be permitted to have; and throughout history it has been assumed that most of the population should be kept ignorant. . . .”

–Jules Henry, as quoted by Herbert Kohl in *Stupidity and Tears: Teaching and Learning in Troubled Times*

Ten years ago, I enrolled in Swarthmore’s Education Policy seminar, then taught by Eva Travers. I was a year away from completing a Special Major in Educational Studies and Psychology, and deeply invested in looking at how school contexts worked—and didn’t work—for students, especially low-income students of color.

Though barely five years old at that point, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—and the A Nation At Risk-inspired “standards and accountability” movement that gave rise to it—was the dominant theme in many of our classes. In our field work in classrooms all over the Philadelphia region, we watched how high-stakes testing and longstanding funding inequities affected what teachers could do for their students. Perusing my notes, I can still see these different classrooms, from places as diverse as Swarthmore-Rutledge School (“This feels like elementary school as I remember it”), Russell Byers Charter School in Center City (where my observation notes are an angry record of Kindergarteners crying over Terra Nova practice tests), and Blankenburg Elementary in West Philly (where “No Excuses! Posters lined the walls, and I was shocked to see five-year-olds resign themselves to doing test-reminiscent drill and kill on computers, with far less resistance than I’d expected).

In our classes, we took it as a given that both the law and its implementation were problematic. I remember learning of Diane Ravitch and her

contribution to the standards movement, and thinking of her quite harshly for her service under the first Bush Administration. The latter Bush's decision to inject steroids into an already problematic "Standards" movement, making high-stakes testing the law of the land, was universally understood among us as a problem. We recognized this as the culmination of a stealthy shift from a social responsibility for *inputs* to one-sided "accountability" for outcomes—a move that would almost certainly undo any progress toward equity that historically oppressed communities had made between the Great Society era and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. Even outside of my policy courses, this law colored what we discussed. We discussed how standardization and high-stakes testing would affect educators' practice and day-to-day work, and talked about what teachers could do to try to subvert it.

While I started out imagining that I wanted to work in education policy, by the time I'd spent a year and change on my coursework, I'd read so many incisive, important critiques of current education policy and practice that I felt the most important thing I could do was to teach. I felt that simply by teaching differently from what I assumed was already happening in low-income public school classrooms, I would be making the most important contribution I could. All that needed to be written was written, I reasoned; what we needed now were the sort of teachers who would actually read those words and try to put them into practice.

After graduation, I went on to apprentice teach at a private school in Massachusetts, and then came back to Swarthmore to student teach at a Friends school in Philadelphia. In both places, we spent considerable time discussing what good pedagogy looked like, very explicitly in opposition to the current trends toward standardization. That's what these parents were shopping for, and that's what they expected for their children. I could hear the echoes of Jean Anyon's work in all of this.

2008

“However, she has been forced to become stupid in order to keep her job. She has to deny what she knows, pretend to supervisors that she is abiding by the foolish. . . mandates, and sneak her sound pedagogy into the stupid and demeaning programs being imposed upon her. . . These strategies of inauthentic conformity complicate her teaching life. The stupidity game is painful to play, but more and more teachers who are forced to teach against their conscience and pedagogical experience are playing it because they do not want to give up on their students”.

Herb Kohl, *36 Children*

I was hired well into summer vacation after deciding to move across the country to Denver. I arrived mere days before I and my colleagues were scheduled to report for professional development and to set up our classrooms, which was only a few days before students were expected to be in their seats. Yet by the time my principal handed me the keys to my classroom, he still wasn't sure if he wanted me to teach fourth or fifth grade.

In hindsight, I should have recognized this level of disorganization as a giant red flag, and a harbinger of the stress to come. But I was too excited about my new work to care. I ultimately ended up being assigned to teach literacy for my own fourth grade homeroom as well as a fifth grade classroom, in a “platooning” situation where we as a fourth-and fifth-grade team would specialize in a given subject area and share responsibility for teaching our respective subject areas to all of the students. I also became part of a special professional development team that would focus on rebuilding literacy practices throughout the school.

I was reduced to tears by day two. As I would later learn was the norm in this school and others like it, the plan, the schedule, the requirements of teachers were always changing. Every few weeks, our principal and assistant principal would leave the building to go to a new professional development presentation somewhere, and each time they'd return with some new curricular gimmick that was supposed to radically alter our capacity to “drive results” for our students.

It created havoc in the building. Children crave routine, especially students like ours, who had so little consistency in every other part of their lives. And it was hell on a new teacher, trying to keep up with the wildly different

expectations of building and district leadership, plus an increasingly distant vision of all the stuff I'd learned I was supposed to do when I learned to teach. After several months of attempting to do it all—teach to tests, jump through my principal's hoops, and find ways to preserve a sense of community and an authentic learning environment for my students—I collapsed from anxiety and exhaustion in my classroom, and had to be rushed to the hospital.

The only thing that stayed consistent was the drumbeat for Data. For “results.” The grumbles in the teachers' lounge stayed steady, too, as we tried one “intervention” after another, tossing curricular spaghetti at the wall in the hopes that something would stick.

What surprised me most (aside from the difficult realization, in my first truly “adult” role in life that no, the adults actually don't have it together as I'd always assumed) was that no one seemed to be thinking about why we were doing all the things they were asking us to do. The “strange girl in the cafeteria” feeling I'd felt from merely being new was quickly replaced by a sense of being a total alien, based on the looks I'd get whenever I stopped to ask about the research support for each new program, or the rationale for changing the schedule yet again, or administering yet another test. The conversation at Swarthmore and the private schools where I practice taught constantly linked practice to research or policy: “We do this in recognition of what we now know about human motivation and interest-development.” “This is going on here because of the push for standards, because of No Child Left Behind.” That kind of conversation was conspicuously absent at my school, and an insidious culture of fear made it difficult to cultivate it. I had never felt more alone in my life.

As I later learned, my colleagues had good reason to be afraid. Asking simple questions in faculty meetings, or asking my colleagues how they felt about what we were being asked to do, turned out to be shockingly subversive. While I'd gone my entire K–12 scholastic life only being summoned to the principal's office to receive awards, I became a regular in the hot seat as an adult. I now recognize how naive I was to think that teacher-administrator relationships had uniformly improved since Herbert Kohls experience in *36 Children* (especially in a weak labor state like Colorado), but at the time I assumed that critical conversations about research, policy, and practice were the professional norm. After all, they had been the norm in the private schools where I'd done all my practice teaching.

I was also still laboring under the misperception that when people know better, they automatically do better, as though simple knowledge is the only

thing that affects people's choices. As if getting the right answer, all on its own, is sufficient to change things in the real world. Not so.

By my second year, we were in the final year of the five-year timeline NCLB gives to turn a school around, so the pressure to make changes had gotten even more intense. But no one else in the building connected those two dots, while I could see the writing on the wall: If something didn't change, our school was going to be shut down and/or given to a charter school. Though it was a tough year, I did end up making some friends, as well as a reputation for rabble-rousing as a result of my continually questioning why Data was taking precedence over what we all agreed was best for our students. It struck me as silly to let our fear of being fired stop us from doing what was right for students, when we were probably going to lose our jobs in a mandatory turnaround, anyway.

2010

“Living with stupidity alienates teachers from their work and is perhaps one of the main causes of teacher turnover among people who love children and find teaching magical. It is certainly what motivates many young and gifted teachers, who want to teach in the most underserved public schools, to migrate to charter schools and private schools and to open their minds to working in voucher-based programs, or to leave the profession altogether. Many intelligent and caring teachers simply do not want to pay the price of making themselves stupid as the cost of teaching in public schools.”

Herb Kohl, *36 Children*

You know that old comedy bit, “Well you can't fire me, cause I quit!” I had the opposite happen to me.

I decided to resign at the end of the school year in order to take some time to figure out what had happened, and find a school where I wouldn't have to shelve what I knew in order to avoid trouble. I had seen the various cynical strategies some of my veteran colleagues had adopted to preserve their energy and keep their jobs, strategies that looked to any outside observer (and to me, before I knew better) like run-of-the-mill bad teaching.

I resolved that I didn't want to adapt to this level of dysfunction, because what it would take from me to become comfortable enough to stay long-term

in a situation like this was more than I was willing to concede. But my principal, aggravated by my questioning and attempts to embolden my colleagues, rejected my resignation so he could non-renew my contract instead, which at the time had the effect of banning me from working anywhere else in the district, and which I feared could hurt my chances to find a teaching position elsewhere.

I couldn't believe it. I honestly didn't think things like that actually happened to people in this day and age. (Again, naïve.) After unsuccessfully arguing in my own defense at a mass school board meeting where I met nearly a hundred other great teachers in the same unjust position, I started blogging about what was really happening in schools like ours, and telling the stories of students, parents, and teachers like me who were standing up to standardization and inequity. Still-novel tools like Twitter and other social media gave thousands of us in schools where these conversations weren't happening the chance to do what we couldn't always do in our offline lives: the chance to be something more than That Person, the lonely, odd one out who asks inconvenient questions. Through writing and speaking we found community, which gave us the courage to continue to resist.

After my own experience of being retaliated against, I realized that we really couldn't just teach our way out of this mess; we needed to organize and protest, too. We needed to change laws. All those great words in all those great readings we'd been assigned hadn't made much of a dent on the ground, where it mattered most. And without the proper workplace protections or social support, it is impossible to actually stand up for what's right and win. Being right is risky when you have no rights.

So that's what I did: Blog, tweet, organize, protest, repeat. I helped mobilize hundreds of school stakeholders to protest privatization locally (including an attempt to save my old school from a charter takeover), and mobilized thousands to march for equity and against over-testing nationally. Together, we started changing people's assumptions about the education policy conversation, if not yet policy itself.

2010

... “There are organizations and individuals who quite deliberately trade in the politics of division and deception in order to promote their political, ideological and economic agendas. They have taken advantage of a three-decades long head start in the mass media, using their platforms to spread misinformation about schools and teachers, and to promote education policies that bear little to no relationship to the ideas of actual public school stakeholders, or the best available evidence about what really works to improve schools. But we’re fighting back”.

—myself, writing at Huffington Post

After some increasingly high profile grassroots organizing successes, I was invited to join the communications staff at the American Federation of Teachers. There, I quickly learned that far fewer people than I’d expected within the unions—the presumed and much-maligned opposition to the policies in place—had any experience teaching under the conditions imposed by NCLB. The leaders were years removed from the day-to-day realities of teaching, and many of their staffers had never taught at all. They were ideologically aligned with the cause on some level, but didn’t have much (if any) on-the-ground experience as teachers, students or community members oppressed by the forces of privatization.

To be clear, there were and are lots of talented people working very hard within the union. But I knew from my own time organizing independently that members and their allies (self included) were working almost as hard to move their own union leadership on these issues as we were working to resist the policymakers and corporate interest groups directly responsible for them.

Once inside, it became easy to see why. If you haven’t learned how things are supposed to be (as you do in any decent school of education), then lived through how they actually are (as you do if you teach), it’s hard to appreciate just how painful and destructive bad policy really is. And if you spend enough time with many of the people responsible for those policies—as many of the union leadership have, at luxurious retreats, conventions, and so forth—it gets harder to see how the nice, well-intentioned philanthropist or policymaker you drink and dine with is the same person who is responsible for horrific destruction your constituency is facing, and that he needs to

be challenged accordingly. Their distance from the classroom, and their closeness to the folks in power, seriously threatened their ability to keep identifying with the people they are supposed to represent.

So once again, I thanked everything holy for social media, which gives people the ability to speak back. As the de facto “Twitter whisperer” to these leaders who didn’t know why their members were so angry with their own organization, I was constantly translating for them what the complaints they received meant, and what that should mean for the unions’ strategic efforts. I spent more than a year working to undo a deeply-entrenched fear of being seen as “opposing reform”—the highly effective default attack against union leaders in all policy conversations—in order to build an internal sense of urgency to publicly fight back instead of cooperating with what passed for “reform.” Before long, though, I traded that simultaneously satisfying yet arduous uphill battle for the opportunity to lead a parallel effort focused on changing the media narrative about ed policy, *Integrity in Education*.

Meanwhile, 2014—the year when we should have been able to answer “Yes!” to George W. Bush’s question, “Is our children learning?”—came and went. According to the test scores, they weren’t. But by then, a growing number of parents doubted those tests or the new national standards to which those tests were connected, and had started to let their kids opt out of taking them. At the same time, policymakers were years overdue to change or reauthorize NCLB. So after years of struggle, NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015. In some ways it’s a victory, but the law leaves some huge problems, challenges, and questions in place.

For starters, the culture of testing—of privileging a certain way of thinking, knowing, and doing over all others—is still very entrenched, even if it’s no longer the federal government that’s pushing for those tests. There is still an assumption, shared by many non-governmental national policy organizations as well as many state and local policymakers, that test score data is an important marker of what’s happening in schools.

More fundamentally, we’re still only just starting to engage practitioners as well as policymakers in a serious reckoning with the inherent racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and other manifestations of systemic oppression that animate every aspect of the schooling process. With or without these tests, we still have a curriculum that has very little to do with the real world, and which doesn’t reflect the lived reality of the students learning it. We still have a student body whose diversity isn’t reflected by their teachers, many of whom do not understand their own biases or their responsibility to

unpack them, and to help students do the same. EduColor, a collective I helped found, is working to spread awareness about this, but there is a lot of work to be done.

We are still just beginning to re-situate education issues in the broader context of social and economic policy, in a public policy arena where so many forces conspire to stop us from connecting the dots between who and what has impoverished our communities, immiserated our families, and undermined our students' and teachers' best efforts to make miracles in the classroom.

At every opportunity, we must organize and make common cause with everyone else who demands real efforts toward social and economic justice, while resisting efforts to treat education as an isolated issue/policy area. And though many great things have already been written, we need as many of you as possible to think more, write more, and bring that consciousness into classrooms, into school districts, into PTA meetings, into school board meetings, into the halls of power, and into the streets.

If there is one thing I've learned in the ten years since I sat where you are now, it's that having the right knowledge isn't enough. Those of us with that knowledge are a distinct minority, and we go out on a limb every time we dare to apply it. The connections you create with your community are the only things standing between you and the cold, hard ground when that limb breaks; do everything you can to make sure they're as strong as possible.



Jacobs, S. (2014, May 4). [Sabrina Stevens speaks] [Photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/NYSUTUnited/photos/a.661136640600047.1073741838.117270568319993/661138503933194/?type=1&theater>

Author

Sabrina Stevens is a teacher-turned-writer and education advocate. A proud public school graduate and an alumna of Swarthmore College, she originally intended to spend her career as a public school teacher. After an eye-opening experience teaching in a so-called failing school in Denver, Sabrina left the classroom to speak out against the abuses of the movement to privatize public education.

Through her writing and creative online presentations, Sabrina quickly established herself as a leading voice for a democratic, community-driven vision for education reform. In 2011, she helped organize the first Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action. Since then, she has worked with numerous education advocacy organizations and campaigns as an organizer, trainer, communications strategist and spokesperson.

Having witnessed and experienced the destructive effects of education policies driven by corporate interest groups unconnected to public school communities, Sabrina has dedicated herself to ensuring that the interests, needs and aspirations of real public school stakeholders are represented honestly in the education reform debate. She lives with her family in Washington, DC.