Under Pressure: Controlling Factors Faced by Classroom Literacy Teachers as They Work Through a Professional Development Program

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Abstract

This critical constructivist inquiry was designed to understand controlling factors faced by classroom literacy teachers involved in a professional development program. Two guiding questions framed this critical inquiry: (1) how can I describe controlling factors faced by teachers in their respective school cultures and (2) what is the resultant impact of these controlling factors on the teachers’ classroom instruction. Findings indicated that participants felt pressure to conform to a particular school philosophy, but empowered themselves by solidifying their own philosophies of instruction.
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THERE IS A WIDE RANGE of literature on professional development for literacy instruction. This literature talks of changes teachers make to their classroom instruction through their involvement with professional development programs (Borko, Davinroy, Bliem, & Cumbo, 2000; Borko, Mayfield, Marion, Flexer, & Cumbo, 1997; Broaddus & Bloodgood, 1999; Lyons, 1991; Richardson, 1999) as well as the facilitations and impediments of these programs (Anders, Hoffman & Duffy, 2000; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Richardson, 2003). However, one aspect of professional development often does not receive enough attention. That is, how teachers deal with controlling factors within their school cultures and how these controlling factors impact teachers' resultant instruction.

Some research has indicated teachers can feel a lack of control over their teaching decisions when administration goes so far as to dictate type of materials to be used and how often these materials are to be used (Anders & Richardson, 1991). The school culture can also place pressure on teachers to conform to a standard (Harris, 1996; Scharer & Detwiler, 1992). This can be particularly problematic when teachers attempt to make instructional decisions based upon professional development experiences. Additionally, pressure to prepare for and achieve proper scoring on standardized testing can also compete with teachers' philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning (Richardson, 1997). While this body of research indicates that controlling factors are a barrier to effective professional development, none of the aforementioned studies were specifically designed to uncover these controlling factors.

Critical theorists have long believed that issues related to power, authority, and control manifest within classrooms just as within society (Carspecken, 1996). Wallerstein (1987) explains that “education is not neutral....[since] education starts from the experiences of people, and either reinforces or challenges the existing social forces that keep them passive” (p. 33). Therefore, it may be that the most appropriate lens for understanding professional development is critical theory. A major focus of critical research is to uncover issues related to power, authority, and control as well as disrupt and challenge the status quo (Carspecken, 1996; Freire, 2003; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Schwandt, 2001; Shor, 1987). However, the literature of professional
development for literacy instruction generally looks to social constructivism as a guide for both developing as well as evaluating programs (Richardson, 1997). There are two basic tenets of social constructivism essential in professional development for literacy instruction: (1) meaning is actively constructed, and (2) learning does not occur in isolation, there is a social interaction during knowledge construction (Driscoll, 2000; Richardson, 1997; Schwandt, 2000, 2001).

As a result, coupling social constructivist principles with that of critical theory into what I have called critical constructivism may be necessary when working with professional development programs. This is possible since critical theorists believe, like social constructivists, in the active construction of knowledge and the implications of social context in learning. However, critical theorists also want to understand potential power struggles and oppression in a given context (Freire, 2003; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Schwandt, 2001; Shor, 1992). Accordingly, careful attention is paid to everyday problems faced by educational constituents and how such problems can reduce teachers from professionals and intellectuals to implementers (Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

Therefore, this critical constructivist inquiry was designed to understand controlling factors faced by classroom literacy teachers involved in a professional development program through university affiliation. Two guiding questions framed this critical inquiry: (1) how can I describe controlling factors faced by teachers in their respective school cultures and (2) what is the resultant impact of these controlling factors on the teachers' classroom instruction.

Components of the Inquiry

Context and Participants

The participants for this inquiry were involved in a professional development program through university affiliation. This program, the summer reading institute, was comprised of three graduate level courses and included topics related to theory and research of reading instruction, authentic classroom assessment, and content area instructional strategies.
This program was designed by the University System of Georgia's Reading Consortium in conjunction with the Professional Standards Commission (Beatty, Feaster, & Many, 2000; Dixey, Many, & Lane, 2004) and results in the participants receiving a Reading Endorsement on their teaching license (for more information see the Consortium website: msit.gsu.edu/readingconsortium). The summer reading institute involves two main components. The first is an intense six-week summer experience where teachers learn about the theory and research of reading instruction. During the fall follow-up semester, the teachers begin the second component, classroom application supported by distance learning. Through this distance learning, teachers continue to have the support of the instructor and peers through WebCT (web-based classroom) while they experiment with new ideas and approaches to reading instruction.

The year of this inquiry was my third year serving as facilitator of the program. Each year, I worked toward a better understanding of designing and describing professional development (Wallace & Coleman, 2002; Wallace & Deming, in press). These experiences helped to shape each next experience from the content of the course and the method of content delivery to the intricacies of the research design. While I was refining my summer reading institute, though, I believed my past experiences potentially caused bias in agenda setting (Richardson, 1992) or influencing of participants (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). In order to minimize the effects of such biases, the content of the institute during this study was delivered through an inquiry approach (Egawa, 1996; Richardson, 2003; Short & Burke, 1996; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). An inquiry approach is aligned with critical constructivist theory since the participants determine individual and collective goals, choose their own materials, experiment with various perspectives, participate in open and trusting dialogues, and are encouraged to question. Further, a research assistant, Renee Mallard, not involved with the summer reading institute or Reading Consortium, was employed to further limit the influence of the researcher's bias and agenda setting. Renee observed each session during the summer and discussed potential agenda setting with me during daily meetings. We continued those meetings during the fall follow-up semester as well.
There were a total of six teachers involved in this institute. While all teachers participated in this and a larger study of understanding professional development, for this article, I focus on two specific teachers as a case. I chose these two teachers for a number of reasons. First, three of the six teachers were not regular classroom teachers (e.g. ESL, resource, technology). For this article, I wanted to focus on regular classroom teachers. The two participants were chosen since they worked at the same school, and although they had a similar teaching assignment, they had different backgrounds. This allowed for more than one perspective on the experiences at this particular school. Both teachers taught fifth grade and were responsible for the teaching of language arts. Cordelia had only been teaching two years while Kendra had been teaching more than 10 years. While Cordelia identified herself as a fifth-grade teacher who taught a number of subjects, including reading, Kendra was emphatic that she was a math teacher who had been forced to teach language arts. Both teachers were enrolled in the Reading Endorsement program as one part of their larger Masters program.

Data Sources, Collection, and Analysis

Data sources included more than 300 individual messages collected through reflective journaling, email, and discussion board postings of the two teachers via WebCT. While electronic data sources (i.e. web-based discussions, chat room transcripts, and email messages) are becoming more important to research in teacher education (Grisham, 1997; Howrey, Many, & Race, 2003; Many, Wallace, Stephenson, & Eickholdt, 2004; Turbill, 2001), there are both benefits and drawbacks of these types of data. For example, email and discussion board postings give the researcher flexibility in that each post or message is verbatim and hard copies can be printed or saved to specially created files on a computer. However, because such correspondence is asynchronous—meaning that much time can pass between each correspondence, which makes probing problematic—this method of collecting data must be combined with another data source that captures teachers’ perspectives. Therefore, both teachers were interviewed five times over the course of the summer. These semi-structured, open-ended informal interviews (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998) were designed to
delve further into the reflections from email or discussion board postings or to understand their thought processes as they worked through projects during the course. For example, in her first online posting, Cordelia talked about having a lack of support from her school and teammates. She did not elaborate on this. During a follow-up interview Cordelia was asked to talk more about what she meant by a lack of support and the dynamics of her team. (6/10/04).

During the follow-up semester, both teachers’ classrooms were observed twice and each observation included a follow-up interview. Such field work took place so that I could situate the teacher’s experiences within their school context (Merriam, 1998). This type of fieldwork was imperative since critical theorists in educational research pay careful attention to everyday problems faced by educational constituents and how such problems relate to issues of power and control (Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). On the other hand, I needed to be sensitive to issues of power and control within the professional development program. Therefore, classroom observations were not mandatory. Cordelia and Kendra (along with the other four teachers) were free to decide whether or not they were comfortable with my observing their classrooms, as this was not a requirement of the summer reading institute. All agreed. After both observations, I met with Cordelia and Kendra to conduct a follow-up interview. This was a way to understand how the observed class fit within their instructional vision, clarify my understanding of the observed class, and allow Cordelia and Kendra to reflect on their experiences, including previously identified issues such as Cordelia’s feeling of lack of support from her teammates.

Additionally, during the follow-up semester, the teachers both attended two focus groups (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In this case, the focus groups were to talk with all of the teachers in the program to better understand their experiences as they experimented with new ideas and developed instructional unit plans. Further, sample course work was collected as data throughout both the summer and fall semesters. Finally, data were member-checked both informally through a quick email via WebCT and formally by providing the teachers with transcripts of observations and interviews.
Data collection began on the first day of the summer reading institute (June, 2003) and was completed at the end of the fall follow-up semester (December, 2003). This prolonged engagement allowed for persistent observation of data where data were collected, coded, and analyzed concurrently (Charmaz, 2000). The process of analyzing data began with coding where I used selective, or focused, coding beginning on the first day of the institute. Selective, or focused, coding “uses initial codes that reappear frequently to sort large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 516). A constant comparative method of data analysis was employed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where I constantly compared new data with data already collected. This forced me to refine codes continually. At this point, I began a process of memo writing (Charmaz, 2000). “Through memo writing, we elaborate processes, assumptions, and actions that are subsumed under our codes” (p. 515). This process was repeated with each data set and category discovery.

All data collected, memo writing, and data displays were housed in a researcher’s notebook to serve as an audit trail. Further, frequent meetings with the research assistant helped to discuss emerging themes within the data. Notes were taken by the research assistant during these meetings and stored in the researcher’s notebook.

Findings

In describing the controlling factors faced by Cordelia and Kendra at their elementary school, I posit one word: pressure. Both Cordelia and Kendra felt this pressure. That is, pressure to conform to a particular philosophy – pressure to give themselves over as implementers of curriculum rather than professionals and decision-makers (Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). This ubiquitous teaching philosophy that besieged Cordelia and Kendra from parents, colleagues, and administration was simple: teach to the test (standardized testing) regardless of best practices in literacy instruction or the individual literacy needs of the students.

Cordelia and Kendra approached this teaching philosophy with trepidation, as this philosophy did not align with their existent and emerging beliefs about reading instruction. However, they remained
powerless to diverge from this philosophy in part because of a lack of confidence, and in part because of a lack of knowledge of how to exact change. This caused a power struggle within classroom instruction where competing philosophies played tug of war with Cordelia and Kendra’s classroom instruction decision-making. Figure 1 illustrates this power struggle. During the summer portion of the institute, it was clear that the school’s philosophy was ruling their classroom instruction decision-making (see figure 2). However, as Cordelia and Kendra redefined themselves as teachers of reading and solidified their personal philosophies of reading instruction, they began to challenge the school’s philosophy and use their own philosophy as a guide in classroom instruction decision-making (see figure 3). The following sections illustrate Cordelia and Kendra’s pressure to conform to the school philosophy, their solidified personal philosophies, and how their philosophies empowered them to challenge the pressure to conform.

Figure 1. Classroom instruction decision-making power struggle.

Figure 2. School influencing classroom instruction decision-making.
Figure 3. Teaching philosophy influencing classroom instruction decision-making.

Pressure to Conform

It was quite clear at the outset of the summer reading institute that Cordelia and Kendra felt pressure to conform to their school’s philosophy of instruction. In their reflective journals and interviews they used words like required, intimidated, norm, pressure, and forced when they talked about their school’s philosophy and their resultant instruction. This began on the very first day when I asked the teachers to reflect on their philosophy of reading instruction. Cordelia began this reflection by discussing, first, her school’s philosophy, “Reading instruction in 5th grade at my school is driven by tested skills. In fact, many times, it is suggested by the grade level chair that we do not support the new skills with any literature due to “lack of time”. We, as teachers, are encouraged to just focus on the tested skills” (6/10/03, message No. 8). Therefore, Kendra explained, “I have to tend to the details of reading instruction.” (6/10/03, message No. 11). In a follow-up interview, Kendra was asked to explain what she meant by the details of reading instruction. She said, “How we have to say if you’re doing guided reading and you have to stop to make sure they’re picking up the [that] this is a simile this is a metaphor – things like that” (Interview, 6/10/03). In other words, direct instruction of tested skills.

As Cordelia and Kendra provided details about this school philosophy, they questioned such a philosophy and also revealed that they were being pressured to conform to this manner of teaching. For example in Cordelia’s follow-up interview to her reflection on her own philosophy she explained, “I’m not saying those skills aren’t important
like with cause and effect [skills she is required to teach to prepare for standardized testing]. I was looking at a book in their [anthology] where it would just naturally fit with the story as opposed to picking a skill and just teaching that and simultaneously reading a story” (Interview, 6/10/03). Later in the summer, Cordelia wrote, “I guess the main problem I have is fighting the norm within my grade level of teaching the skills tested on Standardized Tests without incorporating other types of literature” (6/18/03, message No. 120). Kendra explained, “If left to my own devices I would have emphasized the aesthetic [reading for a lived through experience]... However, for the three years that I have taught Language Arts, I have been planning with peers who have forced me to focus on more efferent reading [reading for details; to extract information]” (6/19/03, message No. 153).

More and more “pressure” items emerged as the summer continued. For example, Cordelia explained, “I have felt pressure from my grade level chair and administration to have students take all written assignments through the entire writing process. [Therefore] I have felt myself putting an emphasis on quantity, and not quality” (7/1/03, message No. 342). Even on the last day of the summer reading institute, both Cordelia and Kendra talked about pressure. Kendra talked about wanting to be able to practice what she had learned through the summer reading institute without the pressure of being “evaluated and critiqued by other teachers” (7/17/03, message No. 560). Cordelia felt the same way, “I do feel pressure to conform to what has “worked” for other teachers... I am nervous that I will be told a “better” way to approach teaching by administration if my teaching appears to be too different from the school’s established norm” (7/17/04, message No. 551).

Overall, Cordelia and Kendra felt powerless to combat this mandated philosophy. This was clear from the beginning. Cordelia wrote, “I have tried to break away from the suggested mold, but as I have just completed my second year of teaching, I lack the needed confidence to teach reading effectively without teacher [colleague] support” (6/10/03, message No. 8). Later in the summer, she wrote, “I feel like because I don’t have much experience, I am in no position to show other teachers how to change their learning environment” (7/2/03, message No. 376). Kendra even said that for the last few years, “The reading
specialist...planned, she did a lot; she planned it [planned Kendra’s lessons] and told me what to do” (Interview, 7/17/03). She wrote, “Prior to this summer, I just followed along with whatever the other teachers on my team did in LA [language arts] for the most part. However, there were practices that I disagreed with, and found myself “sneaking” to change” (7/17/03, message No. 560).

A New Philosophy

Perhaps combating the pressure to conform was difficult for both Cordelia and Kendra because they had yet to solidify their own philosophy of reading instruction. They knew that they did not agree with what their school dictated, and they had an inkling of what they wanted reading instruction to look like, but were far from asserting a personal philosophy.

When the institute began, Cordelia explained that she wanted her students to be independent learners that knew “how to look for information, use a variety of resources, and find answers to their own questions” (6/10/04, message No. 8), but didn’t know how to do that within instruction. In fact, she said, “I have felt out of my comfort zone when certain students struggled with reading because I only had a few ‘tricks’ up my sleeve” (6/23/03, message No. 188). She began refining a philosophy of reading instruction as early as the second week of the institute (6/12/03, message No. 50). By the end of the summer, this philosophy could be summed up in two words: strategic instruction. Cordelia saw that instruction in both reading and writing came down to empowering students with strategies to be successful on their own. She talked about supporting readers with strategies for before reading, during reading, and after reading. She also believed that building prior knowledge and teacher modeling were key components to her philosophy. This was what Cordelia considered the focus for her classroom instruction once she returned to the classroom (7/21/03, message No. 119). She explained what this instruction would look like:

First, I do not plan to use the basal readers as the only book my students are exposed to. I will use a variety of print such as trade books, short text, magazines, newspapers, chapter books, and
songs to immerse my students. I will use each of these sources as a model to demonstrate to my students what readers do to make meaning. My instruction will not be as rigid (Monday = building background), but will be strategic instead. It is essential that my students are well equipped so that they develop the necessary strategies to make meaning. I understand that these strategies take time to develop. I will serve as a model for my students, and I must allow them time to practice in smaller groups before they work independently. The gradual release of responsibility and allowing my students sufficient time to practice without the pressure of a formal evaluation will create a comfortable and safe learning environment where my students are encouraged to take risks. (7/15/03, message No. 511)

Kendra began the summer by stating she wanted her students to "develop a love for reading, a love for words" (Interview, 6/10/04). However, she explained, "I was most intimidated by the fact that I would be required to teach Language Arts" (6/10/03, message No. 11) since she wasn’t sure how to achieve her goals believing that “learning to read came pretty much naturally in the primary grades” (6/10/03, message No. 11). By the end of the summer reading institute, though, she developed a similar philosophy to Cordelia’s: strategic instruction. She reflected on the change in her philosophy and how that had changed her attitude about reading instruction:

I guess the big part that has changed... is that I guess before I thought of a reading class as being something that was sort of tedious and sucked all the fun out of reading and now I can see that for instance especially when we talked about efferent versus aesthetic reading I can see how a reading class can really enhance...aesthetic reading which is what I really like. (Interview, 7/17/03)

She specifically intended to focus on two particular reading strategies within instruction: questioning and connecting. In addition, Kendra highlighted the importance of modeling, authentic assessment, and supporting reading before, during, and after reading instruction,
which would be the focus of her instruction when she returned to the classroom (7/17/03, message No. 120).

In addition to refining their philosophies of reading instruction, Cordelia and Kendra also began to develop a similar philosophy about writing instruction where students would be taught strategies for writing or writer’s craft using authentic literature (Kendra, 6/28/03, message No. 99). They felt so strongly about their philosophy of writing instruction that they wrote a proposal for a teacher research grant to implement writing workshop and focus on using authentic literature to teach writer’s craft. They explain:

In order for growth in writing to occur, students must be immersed in authentic literature and exposed to a variety of techniques, styles, and formats. With modeling, students have the opportunity to emulate the model and explore and experiment with their writing so that they can make consistent progress and develop their own style. Using the Writing Workshop format, it is our objective to use trade books to teach craft. We will collect quality trade books to use as models to demonstrate specific craft, such as strong leads, descriptive language, sentence variety, sensory images, comparison/contrast, point of view, strong endings, effective use of verbs, author’s viewpoint, and memoir. (Proposal: Teacher Scholar Awards).

When discussing their philosophies and plans for their classrooms, neither Cordelia nor Kendra ever refer to standardized testing, school requirements, or pressure from their team. Perhaps this is because they gained the confidence and knowledge they needed to shatter the shackles of their school’s philosophical demands. On the other hand, they weren’t at school. They didn’t have to deal, first hand, with the pressure of requirements and a team that criticized them. They did not have to justify their decisions, and, they did not have to carry out those decisions...yet, what would happen when they returned to their school environment? Would the empowerment they felt from defining their own personal philosophies of reading instruction be enough to help them deal with the pressure to conform? Would the administration, teachers, and parents support or condemn them?
The Pressure Intensifies

Although Cordelia was optimistic about working with her team during preplanning, she was also concerned about what the new school year would bring particularly in terms of her team members criticizing her teaching decisions and telling her “how” to teach (7/17/03, message No. 551). By the time I had completed Cordelia’s first observation, those fears had become a reality. In our interview after the observation, Cordelia talked about there being tension within the team: “Because I’m the newest and youngest member... my mentor [and also team leader] wants me to do it her way... I’m thinking about it [her classroom instruction] totally differently and I don’t like being told how to do it” (Interview, 9/24/03),

Kendra was also observed that day. Both teachers were interviewed at the same time due to their schedule constraints. After Cordelia reflected on the issue with her team, Kendra jumped in and talked about a member on her team who told her that writer’s workshop was not “worth it” (Interview, 9/24/03). For Kendra, writer’s workshop encompassed her new philosophy about writing instruction (see previous discussion). Kendra continued by saying their team leader was “flippant” with them, and she reflected on what was to come: “I think when we get close to testing time... there is going to be pressure to plan together and [do] the same thing... She says [the team leader] that next week we have to plan together” (Interview, 9/24/03).

When I returned for the second observation and follow-up interview, there were still tensions with regard to the team and planning together. The team leader had decided that the team, including Cordelia and Kendra, would focus on a few weeks of grammar instruction with no reading. But, Cordelia said, “I don’t buy into what they are doing.” Kendra interjected, “How wrong is it that we plan to this test [the grammar test within the required textbook program]? It drives three or four weeks of instruction” (Interview, 11/12/03). Things had gotten so bad with their team that Cordelia said, “I have nightmares about it” (Focus Group, 12/10/03).
Despite the pressure to conform to their team's method of instruction, Cordelia and Kendra did what they thought was best within their classroom, even when the team chastised them. Instead of focusing on skills to prepare for national reading tests, Cordelia said, "[I] focus on reading strategies" (Interview, 9/24/03). Kendra explained, "Our focus is different. She [the team leader] wants test skills" (Interview, 9/24/03). Cordelia and Kendra wouldn't accept this. They recounted how they would sneak in other materials and re-plan units that were planned as a team (Interview, 11/12/03). Cordelia went so far as to decide to leave the school: "I think I've out grown this... I want to go to a place [a school] where our ideas are valued" (Interview, 11/12/03). It seemed that Cordelia and Kendra were, in fact, empowered by their personal philosophies and were now making classroom instruction decisions based on those philosophies despite the pressure to conform (see figure 3). In the following sections, I highlight some of their decisions.

**Cordelia**

During my first observation of Cordelia's classroom, I clearly saw that she was adhering to her philosophy of strategic reading instruction. In this lesson, the students were building upon their knowledge of immigration. They had read a tradebook dealing with immigration in past lessons and now they were reading an article from a magazine, a nonfiction piece. Cordelia had students practicing their questioning the text where they generated questions that they would like the text to answer on one side of a piece of paper and then used the other side of the paper to answer questions learned from the reading. Cordelia modeled this process for students before they worked on their own (Observation, 9/24/03).

When I talked with Cordelia after the observation, she reflected on how this lesson was different than how she would have taught the same unit the previous year: "This is not how I would have taught it last year... [I would] throw a web on the board and [then] read it [students would read the story]" (Interview, 9/24/03). Her goal in this unit was to prepare students for a story that they would have to read in their basal.
She wanted to build their background knowledge by starting with a tradebook about immigration. She chose this book, a Caldecott award winner, because “it gave them [the students] a basis of immigration... and it’s so good about [for] making text to text connections” (Interview, 9/24/03).

Cordelia was also spending time working on the implementation of writing workshop in her classroom, sometimes merging the two. For example, during my second observation, Cordelia was working with the students to practice making predictions and link predictions back to the text. As students worked, though, there was evidence of carry over from other lessons. For instance, one student pointed out a text-to-text connection with another book, a strategy they had already practiced, and another student pointed out a “twist” in the story from their genre study in writing workshop. When the reading was complete and predictions revisited, Cordelia used this text as a model of a good ending in writing. The class reread the ending, and Cordelia prompted them to discuss what made it a good ending. Cordelia then instructed the students to think about this while they worked on their own writing. They could either revisit an existing piece or start a new piece (Observation, 11/12/03).

Cordelia explained her goals for this unit plan:

Through my... plan, I will expose students to authentic literature, and allow them the time and forum to practice their craft. In order for growth in writing to occur, students must be immersed in authentic literature, and exposed to a variety of techniques, styles, and formats. With modeling, students have the opportunity to emulate the model and explore and experiment with their writing so that they can make consistent progress and develop their own style. (Assessment and Instruction: Setting the Stage)

True to her design, she incorporated a number of trade books, allowed the students to choose which endings worked for their individual pieces, and provided time for students to experiment with a variety of endings (Assessment and Instruction: Reflections).
As early as September 7, Kendra updated me about how writing workshop was going in her classroom: “So far, I’ve been doing mini-lessons, taking status, and then letting the kids write” (9/7/03, message No. 182). I saw this process during my first observation. She began the class by talking with the students about papers that they had previously submitted for feedback. Kendra pointed out how excited she was that so many of the students were putting dialogue in their stories. Therefore, she decided to focus a mini-lesson around the use of dialogue. To do this, Kendra began by reading a picture book to the students. This particular book was rich with dialogue. Kendra stopped in the middle (assuring students she would finish the book next time), but put a copy of one page of the story on the overhead projector, a page consisting of all dialogue. Kendra used this page to generate a discussion with the students about how to punctuate dialogue. When they finished, the students had time to either go back to a piece of writing and work on dialogue or start a new piece including dialogue. Meantime, Kendra held conferences with individual students (Observation, 9/24/03).

Kendra also designed a unit plan project around writer’s workshop and collaborated with Cordelia:

For our... project our focus will be teaching craft through authentic literature. We will assess the types of crafts students are already using and what they start to use as a result of our mini-lessons. To assess we will use – student writing samples (before and after mini-lessons) – anecdotal notes (from peer revisions and individual conferences) – [and a] writing strategies interview.... (9/1/03, message No. 621)

After assessing her data, Kendra decided to focus on the craft of writing effective leads (9/12/03, message No. 651).

Even though she focused mainly on writer’s workshop, Kendra did not abandon teaching strategic reading. When I asked Kendra how reading instruction was going and whether or not she was sticking with her goals, she said that there were components that she was consistently
using: “One is the introduction of strategies to students before, during, and after reading in the reading class... I've also used the vocabulary development strategies with my science class, and have followed the gradual release of responsibility model in using those” (10/5/03, message No. 724).

A month and a half later, Kendra, again, reflected upon her instructional goals:

I have used the framework [a planning guide that mirrors her philosophy] both in planning and as a check. Some aspects of the framework such as Vocabulary Development, Making Connections, and Questioning have become routine in planning and delivering lessons... I have improved with the gradual release of responsibility, but I find that I don't give enough guided practice before assigning tasks as independent work. (11/22/03, message No. 827)

Kendra was working toward reaching her goals as a teacher of literacy.

Discussion

The findings of this inquiry indicate that professional development programs should not only take into consideration teachers’ beliefs and experiences (Richardson, 1994), but also factors that control or impact teachers’ ability to be professionals. If teachers feel pressure to conform, professional development programs should try to empower teachers to find ways to challenge this control and problem solve. Perhaps a problem-posing (Freire, 2003) method can be employed where teachers can identify problems they face within their schools and work toward taking action or solving those problems through the support of the professional development program. Freire (2003) explains, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83).
Further, this study illustrates the importance of adopting a critical perspective when investigating professional development programs and their resultant impact within schools. In this case, Cordelia and Kendra were not necessarily free to act on their beliefs about teaching and learning within their school contexts, especially at the onset of the summer reading institute. More inquiries understanding this type of control and ways teachers empower themselves to combat this control are essential within the professional development literature. In this study, fully understanding and developing a personal philosophy of reading and writing instruction was empowering for Cordelia and Kendra. However, other school contexts may require a different type of empowerment. Since critical theorists focus on positive social action (Carspecken, 1996; House, 1990; Richardson, 1990), research adopting a critical theorist perspective within professional development would seek to understand how to facilitate empowerment of teachers as well as help teachers overcome controlling factors within their school cultures. This goal is essential in a time when teachers are considered script-readers or implementers, rather than valued as knowledgeable professionals who can make a difference in the education of their students.

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