

## STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT AND POWER

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### **Abstract:**

Social and economic changes have altered the traditional view of the teacher as the primary power holder in the classrooms making way for a reciprocal power relationship with students in which students and teachers share control of the learning environment. This study examined four urban high school teachers' and their students' perceptions of power. Data were collected through class observations and interviews and were analyzed via constant comparison. Teachers and students attempted to resolve the perceived conflict of interest over preferred class focus by using the power resources available to them. Students reported using non-participation, personality power, disruptions, and teacher rewards to influence the class. Teachers felt their power had eroded, yet they were pressured by administrators in their schools to maintain order. They used strategies of strategic withdrawal and student rewards to pursue their values. The mutual influence on one another resulted in a negotiated curriculum of order, rather than education.

### **Article:**

Power is not simply a matter of getting people to do things (or not do things), but a relation of human attitudes and activities against a background of conflicting interests. Burbules, 1986, p. 104.

The primary task of teaching is to gain and maintain the cooperation of students (Doyle & Carter, 1984). Without that cooperation, the school or individual classroom cannot function. Traditionally, student cooperation was attained via the moral authority held by teachers. Although teachers still hold power in their classrooms; changing educational, social, and economic conditions have disrupted the traditional power equations making those equations less applicable in today's schools (Marolla, Williams, & McGrath, 1980).

In the past, a teacher's power was based on two primary assumptions. First, there was an exchange system of valuable subject matter knowledge for proper student behavior. The opportunity for students to have access to valued knowledge led to student compliance with the schools' demands for appropriate behavior in class (Willis, 1977). Relatedly, because of their status as expert knowledge givers, teachers held role authority (Dworkin, 1987). Role authority was important to a teacher's power because the position of teacher, regardless of the personal characteristics of the individual filling the position, received automatic respect from students.

This perspective served as the basis for a common "belief system which was taken for granted" in which teachers were the primary power holder in the classroom (Marolla et al., 1980, p. 80). Although some evidence suggests that a teacher's class control has always been tenuous (e.g., Waller, 1932), in general teachers did frequently hold moral authority and therefore power in schools. Today, however, some students are increasingly unwilling to accept the teachers' traditional moral authority to make educational decisions (Ennis, 1995).

Traditional power relationships in many schools in the United States are no longer in place, or at least are greatly weakened, due to several changes. Formerly, a student's respect for a teacher's authority was based in part on the value of a high school diploma. Brantlinger (1991) suggested that some low-income students and their parents may no longer believe in the traditionally held assumption that success in school is related to

economic success after school. As a result, the student may perceive the teacher's authority is of little consequence in the student's life. Grades, essential to the traditional basis of the behavior-for-reward exchange system, may be seen as meaningless by poor students living in communities with few economic opportunities and options.

Additionally, the increasingly multicultural composition of many United States schools has altered the traditional belief system upon which a teacher's power was often built. Delpit (1988) proposed that with the increasing cultural diversity of students, more students enter school with diverse beliefs about the nature of authority. For students from the dominant European American culture, authority comes with the role that a person fills. The role of teacher, for example, comes with "built in" authority for the teacher. A student from a different culture, however, may believe that authority is earned and will not respect automatically the teacher's role authority. Although these students are willing to respect the authority of those individuals who earn their respect, teachers from the dominant culture may not recognize this difference and continue to operate under the automatic authority rules of their own culture.

An additional change that has altered the traditional power equations is the increasing disengagement and alienation of students. Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, and Cusick, (1986) suggest that, overall, high school students are "...less committed to high school, and less engaged in academic activities. They appear to care less about their educational experience and have come to invest their time, effort, and attention elsewhere" (p. 2). A great deal of their time, effort and energy appears to be channeled toward social concerns. For example, Allen (1986) found that a majority of the high schools students in a small American high school described learning-related goals as less important than social goals. Similar results were reported for both suburban (Wentzel, 1989) and urban (Ennis, 1995) students in high schools in the United States. When non-educational rather than educational goals motivate students, teachers may be seen by students as less influential and important than social aspects of school. This conflict of interest between non-educational and educational goals creates a tension in classrooms that influences school effectiveness.

The purpose of this research was to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions of conflicts of interest, and relatedly, examine their awareness and use of power in resolving those conflicts. This study was part of a larger investigation of participants' values in secondary schools. The specific research questions that guided this study were: (a) What value do students and teachers assign to educational and non-educational aspects of their classes? (b) If the values are inconsistent, to what extent are teachers and students successful in persuading the other to adapt or adopt their values for the class? and (c) What are the educational implications when student-teacher values are consistent or inconsistent?

This study is significant because the results provide insights and additional information into the participants' perspectives on conflict and power. Examining the specific strategies that students and teachers use to influence each other within the class ecology provides information to aid educators' understanding of the teaching-learning process. Additionally, by identifying particular areas that may contribute to the conflict of interest, educators may plan more effective curricula that address participants' valued interests.

### **Conflicts of Interest and Power Relationships**

The interactive nature of the teaching process is built on a social relationship between teacher and students. Social relations reside on a continuum that extends from consent to domination (Burbules, 1986). Consent is the ideal relation because it is based on a commonly recognized purpose on which all members agree, resulting in few conflicts of interest as the group interacts. At the other end of the continuum, domination has a very high degree of conflict with little concern for group relations. Consent and domination rarely occur at the school level. Instead, a range of compliant behaviors is manifested in schools.

Compliance relies on the willingness of participants to act cooperatively despite their conflict of interest. Since cooperation must be given, it can also be withheld. Rather than comply, participants can resist. The challenge

for persons involved in a relationship thus becomes obtaining compliance rather than resistance from others, despite a conflict in interest. Burbules (1986) described the complex interplay between participants:

Resistance is often expressed as part of a relationship in which conflict, compromise, and eventual compliance ebb and flow. The tension between compliance and resistance is the form of most human interaction. Often this tension is not expressed directly. It may not be a face-to-face struggle. (p. 101)

Although it may not be a face-to-face struggle, the teacher-student relationship can be and frequently is a battle to manage the conflict of interests. If the conflict of interest is not managed, the school "could erupt into visible and intolerable signs of disorder" (Sedlak et al., 1986, p. x). Instead of disorder, however, schools are commonly sites of few direct confrontations and often run quite smoothly. Sedlak et al. (1986) suggested a process of bargaining occurs that allows for the release of tensions created by conflicting interests.

The recognition that negotiation occurs in the classroom implies that all participants, and not just teachers, have power. Rather than the traditional conception of the teacher being the sole source of classroom power, a relationship of reciprocal power between students and teachers now exists. Pauly (1991) suggested that, "Reciprocal power exists in a group when each member achieves a degree of control over the others and is simultaneously subject to control by them" (p. 57). Understanding reciprocal power and class negotiations is essential to understanding current classroom practices.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and Setting***

The participants in this study were four physical education teachers and their students from three high schools in a large urban school district, Grant County, in the United States. (All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.) All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and agreed to participate. Grant County served over 115 000 students, a majority of whom were minority students (70% African American) from lower to middle class socioeconomic families.

Physical education teachers were chosen for study because: (a) The course is required for graduation and does not offer ability grouped classes, therefore the classes have a wide range of student abilities, interests, and perceptions of school, and (b) Due to the infrequent use of standardized tests and textbooks, physical education teachers may have extensive pedagogical flexibility in curricular and instructional choices thereby maximizing their ability to adjust course content to meet their own and their students' values.

The four teachers were recommended by the district physical education supervisor for the relative quality of their programs. They taught at three high schools: Apollo, Jefferson, and Eastwood. Ms. Treas had 23 years experience in the district and taught at Apollo. Ms. Elkins, at Jefferson High, had 18 years experience teaching. Both Mr. Wilson and Ms. Thompson had 29 years teaching experience and taught at Eastwood High. All four teachers were European American.

All students were required to take one semester of daily physical education. Students could choose also to take physical education as an elective course. The 51 students who participated in this study were members of these four teachers' physical education classes. Nineteen students, 10 boys and nine girls, were from Apollo High. Five girls and 10 boys, for a total of 15 Jefferson High students, participated as did 17 students, seven boys and 10 girls, from Eastwood High. The students reflected the overall demographic trends in their schools with 89% of the participants reporting African American heritage. The remaining 11 % of the students were non-African American, primarily European American.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The methodologies used to collect data were field observations and interviews with students and teachers. To maximize the number of student participants involved and to examine the potential differences in teacher and

student interactions over the course of the year, data were collected during a fifteen week period that covered two semesters.

To identify participants' interactive behaviors in the school setting, the first author filled the role of a participant observer (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) for class observations. Each school was observed for a minimum of 40 hours and the class observations were recorded as field notes. The contents of the field notes included class procedures, participants' actions and responses, and the content of informal conversations with participants.

Data were collected during the Fall semester via class observations and student interviews. Thirty students, 14 males and 16 females were interviewed. The interviews with the Fall semester students were held in the last week prior to the semester break, after 6 weeks of class observations. In addition to continued class observations, the Spring semester data collection involved interviews with the four teachers and 21 students, eight boys and 13 girls. The Spring semester interviews occurred during the final two weeks of a nine week period. Student participants were selected to represent the school's demographics and also represented a variety of participation levels in class. For these interviews, a general interview guide was used (Patton, 1990). All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed.

The data collected via the field notes and interviews were analyzed using a constant comparison process to identify and extract common themes across participants (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). To insure the trustworthiness of the data, a variety of measures were taken, including triangulation of data sources and regular meetings with a peer debriefer. Additionally, the data were continually re-examined to search for negative cases that could serve to disconfirm an emerging theme or to provide an alternative perspective.

## **Results and Discussion**

Both students and teachers believed that there was a conflict of interest in class. The primary conflict was related to the value of an educational focus for the course. Teachers valued an educational focus while students placed more value on non-educational aspects. The teachers also appeared to value class order even more than educational goals. Both parties attempted to use their resources and power in class to achieve their valued goals for class.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

Class observations and interview data revealed a conflict between teachers and students over the most valued aspects of class. In discussions with teachers and students, both groups often spoke from an "us-versus-them" framework. When asked to compare what teachers and students valued about their class, each group perceived a conflict over content and behavior preferences. Sharonda described the difference in values between teachers and students, "If the students were interested in the education like the teachers are then this would be a good school. But most people don't come to school for that. People got other things on their mind." When asked what other things were on students' minds she replied, "Some people come to school to see their friends. Some come to see their boyfriend or girlfriend. Some people just come to school to get out of the house. They don't come to school for an education per se." Similarly, Tamara believed teachers and students valued different things, "Teachers want you there to make sure you can graduate. The kids are there to have fun and be with their friends." A few students believed that students and teachers did agree on the importance of grades. Jamal said that grades were, "the big one that we agree on. They want us to pass and we want to pass. That's basically the only thing though." Similar to results reported by Allen (1986), the students valued school opportunities to socialize with friends and have fun, but infrequently mentioned a value for educational aspects of school. In contrast, the teachers placed primary focus on educational aspects of school when compared to social aspects.

A conflict existed between teachers and students over the preferred focus for the course. In the past, if such a conflict arose, teachers frequently determined the resolution by invoking their moral authority and power. Increasingly, however, students are more likely to question teachers' authority and selection of content. Student questioning is due, in part, to the low value many students assign to educational outcomes (Ennis et al., in

press). As a result, in today's schools a complex relationship exists between teachers and students wherein both hold and share power resources.

### *Students' Perceptions of Power*

A majority of students felt they had little power and influence in class. Although all four teachers reported making decisions with students' interests in mind, the students did not believe their perspectives were represented in the courses. Despite Ms. Treas' comment that, "They [the students] know we give them input," students in all four teachers' classes frequently reported that they had no influence on class processes and decisions. Ryan, a student in Mr. Wilson's class, complained that, "Kids don't feel like they have a choice in what they do. It's like we're forced to do something we don't like." Janna explained, "Teachers don't care what we want. We just got to do it if we want to pass."

Despite Ryan's, Janna's and the other class members' protests to the contrary, class observations and further discussions with students revealed they did in fact have power in controlling the pace and work of the class. As Pauly (1991) noted, the absence of recognition of power by participants does not mean that power does not exist. In fact, students did not have any formal power or authority in the school and class; however, their informal, unsanctioned power was clearly present in class observations.

### *Student Strategies*

Students were aware that teachers valued and needed their compliance. As a result, they withheld or rewarded their teachers with compliance to influence the class content and conduct. The awarding/withholding of compliance was accomplished via a range of student strategies. Specifically, they used strategies of non-participation, personality power, disruption, and rewards to encourage their teachers to alter the class focus from educational demands.

**Non-participation.** The most commonly cited strategy by students was the decision whether to participate or not in activities. The school system required students to change into a standard physical education uniform prior to class participation and students who did not dress out (change clothes) were not allowed to participate. Consequently, not dressing was the most obvious way for students to voice their displeasure to teachers. Since teachers needed students to dress and participate in order to conduct class, students could influence the teachers' ability to teach by not participating. In particular, the first week of an unpopular unit was likely to result in student nonparticipation. For example, Samson said that if students did not like a unit then teachers could expect their students to "get attitudes and not dress all week long at first. But then it won't be so bad if you [the teacher] stick with it. Eventually they'll finally play it if you keep giving them zeros."

As Samson noted, the non-participation strategy was problematic from a student perspective, because participation in class activities was clearly linked to the class evaluation policy. Continued non-participation in class meant that the student would likely fail and a majority of students were not willing to fail the course. Donald described his willingness to cooperate with Ms. Elkins despite the fact that he did not value a majority of the tasks she presented to the class, "Even if I don't like it, I'll work with her. No game is worth an E. My grade is more important." Students also had alternate strategies that were not as closely related to class evaluation.

**Personality Power.** Some students believed they could influence class practice by building a social connection with other class members or the teacher. These "powerful personality" students, often popular or skilled class members, encouraged classmates to present a united front to the teacher. Barbara, a senior in Ms. Elkins's class, said that to influence a teacher's decision:

I try to convince everybody to agree with me. Like if it's just me then I can't do nothing. If I can talk everybody into doing it then she might go along with us. She'll listen and sometimes she gives in to us.

Or as Theresa put it, "Majority rules so if we can stick together then they might let us do it." Similarly, Lori also tried to build a consensus with her classmates, but she suggested that building a social relationship with the teacher was also a productive strategy:

You joke with them [the teacher]. You have to get to know people that know the teacher and then you can sit there and joke around with them and then you can tell them what you like and what you don't like. The teacher has to be open toward you and then you can tell them certain things.

The success of the personality power strategy relied on the ability and popularity of a student to persuade others, whether that be fellow students or the teacher.

**Disruption.** The non-participation and personality power strategies were often mentioned by a range of students as a means to influence class processes. A small, but influential number of students also mentioned much more aggressive strategies of class disruption. These students seemed more aware of their power in class and were more willing to use it in order to pursue their own valued goals in class. As Erik noted, "If we're not interested, you [the teacher] can't get it done." To keep the teacher from getting "it done," the students stopped short of the full insubordination that would jeopardize their continued presence in the class, but they did not comply with teachers' requests. Walter described what he and his friends do when they are not happy with a unit or the day's lesson:

Well, when Ms. Treas tells us to do our exercises we take a long time to get organized and she'll have to say it three or four times and tell us she's getting ready to take points off if we don't get moving. Or if she asks for help like to be a demonstrator then we just all say we don't want to and she has to do it herself.

In addition to the slow down tactics, students also intentionally disrupted instruction. Disrupting the class might involve "bugging" the teacher, or actually interfering in the class activity. Elliot mentioned one way to "bug" a teacher was to keep asking questions without really caring about or listening to the answer, "Like in volleyball, we just kept asking him "Why you be calling that?" and he told us but we kept asking him because it was stupid." Brett suggested that whining bothered teachers and it was a good way to change the teacher's mind, "We just all groan and usually the teacher doesn't want to hear it so they keep changing it until people shut up."

Disruptive strategies were not limited to verbal interruptions of the class. In the tennis unit that was disliked by many students at Apollo High, Joseph explained that his group of friends, "won't follow directions. Something petty like we'll hit balls over the fence in tennis when we're supposed to hit it back and forth. Or maybe we'll use the equipment some weird way and goof off." Even more confrontational, Devon described what his friends do, "We'll get our friends together and be loud and obnoxious and disrupt the class. We'll just keep talking until eventually the teacher will change cause they can't do nothing."

Although these aggressive strategies were mentioned by a minority of the students, the power of these strategies was nonetheless, a very influential factor in the class. Lelia described how a few students could disrupt a class, "They [the teachers] try to teach the class to the ones [the students] that want to learn but then others are talking and disrupting then they can't really teach. They have to stop the class for those few people." Sedlak et al. (1986) also discussed how a few disruptive students can undermine the authority of "even those teachers who are strongly committed to academic learning" (p. 101). Because it only takes a few openly resistant students to disrupt class, teachers may choose "to emphasize social relations in order to make everyone's life more bearable. Therefore personal interaction between teachers and students, and among students themselves, can be allowed to shape or even control access to knowledge" (Sedlak et al., 1986, p. 101).

Only a small number of students verbalized these disruptive strategies, but the whole class by some unknown mechanism often acted together to resist the teacher's planned activity. On the first day of a floor hockey unit, Ms. Thompson's lesson focused on the skills of passing and shooting using an educationally sound content

progression. Students moved slowly to get in lines and walked through every task despite her continuous encouragement to move at game speed or "as fast as you can and still control the ball." There was no apparent pre-class strategy or clear student leadership on what to do or not do in the lesson, yet the students acted together as a unit. When asked about that day, Ms. Thompson replied, "Oh, they just didn't want to do it so that's how they showed it. They moaned and groaned but I made them do it so they walked. They just wanted to play." The students remembered the day as having to do what the teacher wanted and despite repeated probes during the interviews, never mentioned a decision to move slowly or control class. They explained their behavior in general terms, like this comment by Julie, "We just didn't like it, so we weren't into it."

**Rewarding Teachers.** When students "weren't into it," the class period became a struggle for teachers to get students to participate and cooperate. Conversely, students also used their compliance as a strategy to reward teachers for offering preferred units or lessons. Annette described what the class looked like if Mr. Wilson picked something the class liked:

They'll [the students] be happy and they can't wait to play and get their turn and sometimes when there's not enough people for an even team then people will be volunteering and raising their hand to play on that team so they can play.

Similarly, Ricardo said that Apollo students would, "be all excited. They'll be willing to participate and listen," if Ms. Treas offered a lesson or unit the students liked.

By using their compliance as a powerful resource to reward or withhold from teachers, the students actively shaped the course. Ms. Thompson commented on changes she made in her teaching because students would no longer participate in many activities, "I teach much less theory and technique than I used to. If I go back and look at what I used to teach and what I do now. I don't do nearly as much." Ennis (1996) reported similar changes in content for teachers across many subject matter areas. Similar to the New Zealand secondary students described by Jones (1989), these students "systematically encouraged the teacher to participate with them in certain activities and discouraged her from doing others" (p. 24). Although the students did not have enough power to determine the specific nature of the course content or make rules, they did hold the power to determine at what pace the class would proceed, and to a large extent influenced the teachers' planning for class.

The teachers recognized that the students held a different agenda for the class and that students likely would resist teachers' attempts to pursue an educational focus. Ms. Treas suggested that, "They [students] do things that are passive aggressive. They'll try to tie you up time wise." Ms. Thompson was more specific in her description of students' strategies to influence class:

They'll pester you. They'll ask what we're doing today even though it's on the board. They'll move slow. A lot of them will just voice their opinion. They'll find some real minor excuse or problem to try to get out of it or to disagree on it.

Just as the students attempted to use their influence to resolve the class conflict of interest in their favor by lessening educational demands, the teachers also used their power to pursue their values in class.

### ***Teachers' Perceptions of Power***

Despite many of the students' perspectives that teachers held ultimate power, the teachers felt their influence and power in the class had been weakened over the years by changes in the demographic characteristics of the student body and by an increasing lack of administrative support. All four teachers believed it was much harder to teach now compared to when they began their careers. Ms. Thompson commented on changes in the student body, "These kids don't want to do anything. They don't listen. They aren't responsible. It's so much harder to teach now than it was when I started 20 something years ago." Because students were no longer willing to comply unquestioningly, as many students had done in the past, the teachers felt students were disrespectful and very difficult to teach. The potential that students would question the teachers' decisions or refuse their requests

was perceived by the teachers as a constant threat to the classroom order necessary for teaching.

**Eroding Power Base.** While at the same time student non-compliance was increasing, teachers felt more isolated and pressured to handle their own discipline problems because they believed the administration no longer adequately supported them in conflicts with students. During one observation period, a vice principal brought a student back to class within minutes after Ms. Treas had sent him to the office for refusing to sit down. After class she said with frustration, "I'm not going to make any more decisions. They [the administration] just overturn it any way."

Relatedly, teachers thought that students no longer feared going to the office and that a referral to the administration probably would not lead to a satisfactory resolution. One day at Eastwood High, a student began disrupting the lesson. He cursed at Ms. Thompson when she asked him to sit down. As she tried to guide him back to his seat he pushed by her and walked out the door. After class I asked what would happen to him:

I'll write him up for insubordination, skipping, and disrupting a class. They'll call me into the office for a meeting and the kid will get a slap on the wrist. This is the kind of thing you have to deal with. It's not worth the paperwork to send someone to the office so you might as well deal with it yourself since nothing will happen anyway.

**Little Perceived Reward for Educational Focus.** Although frustrated, all four teachers were relatively successful in managing their own problems. As a result the administrators left the teachers alone and were infrequent visitors to the gymnasium, further reinforcing the teachers' perception that they were alone in dealing with problems. Ms. Elkins thought that her principal, Mr. Ray, "Probably can't find the gym. We take care of everything down here and they're glad we do. I'll get an outstanding evaluation like I do every year and they won't even have seen me teach." It appeared that the administrators at these three schools held similar views to those described by Cusick (1983). He found that the school's administration thought that good teachers were those who, "keep students in a state of moderate order, maintain some cordial relations with them, and do not send for administrative assistance" (Cusick, 1983, p. 60).

Since teachers were encouraged to and rewarded for handling their problems alone, there was little perceived reward for teaching an educationally based curriculum. A curriculum of order would suffice the teachers' supervisors and the students did not desire an educational focus. Additionally, maintaining basic safety and order took so much of the teachers' time and energy that there was little remaining for teaching. Ms. Elkins said that a good day at her school was when, "I get them to school, get them to dress, and there's no fights. It's not teaching like it used to be." Similarly, Ms. Thompson was frustrated with her struggle to teach in her current setting, "It's the trying to get them there and on time. You wish you could just get them in there and get going, but there's always problems every day." The perceived lack of administrative support and disciplinary options was a primary consideration in the teachers' willingness to negotiate with students over the content and methods in class.

### ***Teacher Strategies***

The teachers reported that students were increasingly difficult to teach and they felt they had limited resources from which to draw in resolving conflicts with students. Willis (1977) described the teacher's dilemma, "The teacher's actual power of direct coercion in modern society is very limited. The kids heavily outnumber the teachers and sanctions can be run through with frightening rapidity" (p. 63). Since coercive sanctions were very limited and often ineffective, teachers were forced to find alternate strategies to gain student compliance. They dealt with the problem with a two pronged approach of strategic withdrawal from potential areas of conflict and an exchange system of rewards for compliance.

**Strategic Withdrawal.** Class observations revealed that the courses had a minimal educational focus. There was very little instruction, few developmental learning tasks, and no formal assessment of student progress in



skills. In physical education, learning frequently occurs via involvement in planned movement experiences. These class movement experiences, however, did not generally qualify as educationally focused due to the lack of specific learning goals, feedback, or assessment. Ms. Treas admitted that although she valued student skill and knowledge development, her daily goals for her classes were to "get kids involved and participating" because, "With these kids now-a-days if you don't just try for that you'll drive yourself nuts." Although she personally valued an educational focus for the class, she did not teach in a consistent manner with those values. The students' low value for traditional learning activities meant that any attempt to emphasize an educational focus likely would be met with resistance (Cothran & Ennis, 1996), and the teachers were not willing to struggle with student resistance when the conflict could be avoided.

An educational focus, although valued, did not appear to be a realistic possibility to the teachers. All four teachers were shown an educationally focused unit plan prepared by a preservice teacher for an university teaching methods class. [The plan included unit objectives and learning tasks to support mastery of those objectives.] Teachers were asked what would happen if the pre-service teacher tried to implement that unit in their schools. Ms. Elkins and Ms. Treas, although interviewed separately, both laughed and offered the same response, "They'd [the high school students] eat them [the pre-service teachers] alive." Ms. Treas added, "You can't do that here. Maybe somewhere in sunny wherever you can, but not here in the real world." Mr. Wilson believed that he could teach the unit plan, at least for a little while, "I can get kids to do whatever I want, but it's hard to hold it. I could probably do the skills for maybe the first week of a four week unit but I'd lose them after that." As Mr. Wilson noted, it was still possible to get students to comply with an educationally focused curriculum, but it was perceived as a battle that was very difficult and would likely be lost eventually. Rather than possibly lose at their attempt, the teachers withdrew into a curricular zone of safety similar to that described by Rovegno (1994) wherein student compliance was maximized and resistance minimized.

The curricular zone of safety in these classes was offering familiar content that the students liked. Because they doubted their ability to maintain student compliance, the teachers' selection of course content was influenced more by what teachers thought they could get students to do, rather than on what students should do to achieve educational outcomes. Ms. Treas described her method for resolving the conflict between what she wanted and what the students wanted:

You try to make everybody happy. I throw in the choice days. I throw in the activities they're interested in, basketball and football. They like those things and you can get them out to play softball, if it's not too hot, without much effort. If I tried to do a track unit with my team sports I'd have a mutiny. You don't stay in things too long so that kids know that something else is coming up next.

To avoid a "mutiny," student preferences drove the curriculum. Mutiny was a very real threat that the teachers had to avoid in order to retain their tenuous control over the class. If a majority of the students decided not to cooperate, the teacher was left with almost no options. They could not realistically send an entire class to the office. John described what happened in his physical education class the previous year:

Last year she [another teacher] tried to get us to play volleyball to start off with and we didn't want to do it so we didn't. She finally let us play football and basketball all year. That was good. She tried the volleyball, but no way. We just told her we wouldn't play. We did football and basketball and everybody had fun and we participated, so that was better so she let us keep doing it.

The investigator asked him if he thought the teacher did the right thing by letting students decide what would be taught and he replied, "Yeah, we were happy. ,We never got tired of it so it was good. As long as we do what we want, we'll dress and it'll be good." By accommodating student preferences, the teachers reduced their ability to meet their personal educational values for the course, but in return, gained students who would comply with their requests.

What few educational expectations the teachers did retain were often flexible enough to allow for a wide range of acceptable student response. They were similar to the teachers described by Marks and Hersh (1990) who often, "specified a performance without specifying the conditions or criteria for successful completion" (p. 15). By setting very minimal expectations with few specific criteria to be met, there was little for the students to resist against. Tracy, a student in Ms. Elkins's class described what you had to do to get an "A" for the course, "You have to dress. You have to play something. She don't care so much what you play as long as you're playing something." Tracy's description was very similar to that provided to the class by Ms. Elkins, "All I ask is that you participate and try. That's all I want you to do. It's the world's easiest "A." We'll have fun so just participate." Cooperation and movement of any kind, whether it be of quality or not, were the standards for the classes. Like the social studies teachers described by McNeil (1986), these teachers were able to "control students by making school work easy" (p. 184). Ironically by asking less and less, it became more and more difficult to truly engage students in activities because the minimal class tasks were so meaningless. By only offering familiar content and by asking for minimal involvement, dissonance, both behavioral and cognitive, was avoided.

**Exchange System.** In addition to a strategic withdrawal from potential conflicts, teachers used an exchange system strategy to gain student compliance in their classes. The traditional exchange system of valued knowledge for respect and compliance was problematic in these physical education classes due to the low value assigned to the subject matter by a majority of students (Carlson, 1995; Goodlad, 1984). Instead, the teachers relied on the power to exchange other resources to reward students for appropriate behavior.

The primary exchange system in all of the classes was that of a grade for proper student behavior. Since a majority of students did value grades, the power to control grades gave the teachers a means to control student behavior that otherwise might have been directed to achieving more personal goals. For all four teachers, evaluation was based almost entirely on the students' demonstration of cooperative, respectful behavior. Ms. Thompson explained her grading system, "They get 10 points each day as long as they participate. If they don't dress then they lose five points for not dressing and another five for insubordination." As long as students valued grades, this exchange system was effective in motivating students to comply. For example, John's advice about how to get students to participate in class was, "You threaten them with a zero. That will get most kids to do it." Ms. Treas agreed that grades were the most effective way to get students to cooperate:

I know what I want and I'll persist until I win. I just flunk them and go on with it. Like in this next class [fourth period] I gave out 12 E's and 4 D's the first quarter because they didn't believe I was serious. Now this second semester shouldn't take as long. The word's out now on my classes. They'll resist a little while, maybe 2-3 weeks, and then they'll see I'm serious and we'll be fine.

Just as Ms. Treas saw grades as a way to "win" the student resistance game, Brett acknowledged that grades were a powerful resource that teachers held. He commented, "They [teachers] just hold that grade over you. It's like they're saying, It's what I say or you fail. Do what I say, not as you please."

Although grades were valuable to many students, not all students were willing to comply in exchange for a grade. When academic achievement is not a priority for students, teachers "...may not be competitive with suppliers of the things students really want" (Muir, 1983, p. 10). Rebecca said that grades were not important to most people, "People don't really care about a grade. You just have to get a credit. It's not like you need a good grade." Mr. Wilson agreed, "Some of them don't care about their grades so you can't even motivate them with that. They know they can flunk the first quarter and get a D second quarter and still pass the class."

Since grades alone were not always of enough value to elicit student cooperation, the teachers also exchanged access to favorite activities or free time to achieve desired student behaviors. This alternate exchange system worked because most students enjoyed the class and at least some of the activities. Tammy discussed the difference between physical education and her academic classes:

Yeah, but it's like when you [the teacher] threaten them. If you tell them that if they don't sit down they can't do something for three weeks then they'll sit down. Everybody wants to do it [PE activity] so they'll sit down. But if a teacher was to say that in another class they'd be like, "So what?" But in PE you sit down cause you want to do it.

Ms. Elkins described how she used the promise of free time to convince students to follow her directions, "Like today [a volleyball lesson], they had 5 minutes to shoot ball [basketball] at the end of class. If they do what they're supposed to do all week then we give them Friday as a free day." Similarly, Mr. Wilson explained to his class, "We're going to do skills for about 15 minutes. You fool around and don't concentrate then we'll take longer to get through the skills and you won't get to play." If the students cooperated with the teachers' momentary educational focus, in return they could pursue their valued noneducational goals of playing and socializing later in the class.

This exchange system was most evident at Jefferson High. Ms. Elkins used a lengthy basketball unit, the students' favorite activity, and frequent free choice days to encourage students to cooperate. She described her decision to rely on basketball so heavily, "I know everybody thinks you can do more than basketball. Maybe we could do a little more, but I tell you what—with basketball we have control of the class. Without it I'm not sure what would happen." The investigator asked her if the administration ever pressured her to offer a more varied curriculum and she replied:

The administration knows what goes on down here. I'm not sure they like basketball all the time but they don't like the alternative. Without basketball we'd have a lot more students written up and people sent to the office and they would rather not deal with anything else. They're happy that we don't give them any problems.

The teachers too were happy if the students did not "give them any problems." By utilizing a strategic withdrawal from potential conflicts and an exchange system in which students could easily and frequently attain their valued interests, teachers were able to attain student cooperation. They were unable, however, to move beyond cooperation to attain more distal goals such as student learning.

### *Reciprocal Power and the Negotiated Curriculum*

Both teachers and students held resources desired by the other, and consequently both held power that they used to influence the nature of the class. For example, students knew that teachers needed their compliance, and they used that knowledge to negotiate for the opportunity to engage in their favorite content and spend time with friends. In turn, the teachers knew that students valued grades and did not value an educational focus as much as other aspects of class. Teachers used that knowledge to plan class and reward or withhold rewards in order to prompt desired student behaviors.

Since neither group held absolute power, a negotiated compromise of values occurred. Although never formally negotiated, the daily interactions with each other nonetheless served as a negotiation process in which a "deal" was struck by the teachers and students that defined the nature of the work that each was responsible for in the class. For students, their work was to be on time, participate, and cooperate. If they fulfilled those responsibilities, they were rewarded with good grades, access to favored activities, and time to spend with friends. All three rewards were controlled by the teachers. The teachers' primary work was to maintain student order without relying on the administration for help. The easiest way to gain the student cooperation that teachers needed to accomplish their work was to offer a program with few educational demands. Erickson and Shultz (1992) suggested that both teachers and students benefit in some ways from this type of negotiation, "Collusion develops in which teachers do not press students to learn what may be meaningless or face-threatening for them and students do not press the teacher by disrupting the class." (p. 471).

The negotiated curriculum did in fact give the illusion of class success, because students were active and cooperative. Although the teachers reported valuing an educationally focused curriculum, they were not rewarded by the students or the administration for pursuing those values. As a result, they settled for a

curriculum that maintained order, rather than one with an educational focus. The teachers did not believe it was possible to have both order and an educational focus in their current school settings. These results are similar to those found by Cusick (1983) across departments in American high schools where a curriculum based on a formal body of knowledge was replaced and:

The agreed upon body of knowledge (if indeed there ever was one) got shunted aside in favor of maintaining order and appealing to students. Cordiality or "liking and getting along with kids" was more important than any agreed upon body of knowledge. (p. 71)

As in the classes described by Cusick (1983), the teachers' value and need for order appeared to be the primary consideration in their decision to forego their personal value for an educational focus.

### **Changing Relationships: Consent Rather Than Conflict**

These findings suggest that teacher curricular freedom is a double edged sword. While these physical education teachers had the freedom to design curricula that could be responsive to both their professional and students' values, they were unable to do so. They continued to operate within curricular frameworks that were in place when they were students in public schools and teacher education programs. Those curricula, however, frequently were not valued by students.

When teachers were questioned by students as to the value of the class content, the teachers had minimal external authority (e.g., a national curriculum, standardized tests, textbooks) from which to draw curricular credibility. This lack of external validation may be a particular problem in non-academic subject matter areas like physical education that suffer from a marginal status in most school programs (e.g., Stroot, 1996). The teachers' choices had to "stand alone" on the content's value as perceived by participants. As a result, when students questioned the value, the teachers had to either force students to engage, persuade the students of the value, or alter the content to meet students' values. The final choice, meeting student values, was the path of least resistance and perhaps the most viable option in their current setting.

The conflict of interest between students and teachers was primarily related to the value each group assigned to an educational focus for the class. The reciprocal nature of the power relationship allowed each group to use its resources to negotiate for more or less educational involvement. Since teachers held dual, and at times, competing values for order and learning, they appeared more willing to give up one goal, learning, to attain their second goal of order. Because they were rewarded by administrators and students for that choice, they were able to view the conflict of interest resolution as at least a partial victory. The students also resolved the conflict with a victory—perhaps a solid victory with few real compromises to their valued goals. The negotiated curriculum looked very much like the students' most valued interests with a class focus on friends, good grades, and favorite content.

For change to occur, administrators can help teachers renew and refresh the educational perspective in their classes. They can demand that students and teachers focus on educational goals and then provide the support needed to meet those goals. Additionally, university teacher education programs can provide teachers with curricular development skills and alternate models. With improved university preparation and administrative support, teachers can use their curricular freedom to develop culturally responsive educational curricula that contribute to student learning while simultaneously maintaining appropriate levels of school order.

Perhaps it is this last item, the development of culturally responsive educational curricula, that holds the most promise for altering the pattern of conflict (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students may not have been resisting engagement in education, but rather were resisting engagement in a curriculum in which their heritage, values, and future were not considered. These four teachers valued the transmission of the traditional knowledge base of physical education, which is centered on a male, heterosexual, European American, middle class model (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993). This is a heritage that the physical education teachers shared, but a vast majority of their students did not.

When students' needs, values, and interests are excluded from the curriculum, perhaps it is only logical that they in turn, exclude themselves from engaging in knowledge for which they see little value or recognition of their personal worth. If current curricula and teaching practices remain in place, so will the conflict. The result will be a need for more coercive strategies by educators or a continued de-emphasis on the educational focus in the class. In contrast, the implementation of a curriculum of knowledge valued by both teachers and students may have the power to change the relationship among teachers and students from one of conflict to one of consent and mutual involvement in a common educational goal.

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