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Amy Orange

University of Houston-Clear Lake, orange@uhcl.edu

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Abstract

With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act, an unprecedented amount of pressure has been placed upon schools to increase student achievement. During the 2009-2010 school year, Evergreen Elementary School was in Year Four of school improvement for failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in both reading and math. Drawing on observational and interview data from upper elementary school teachers, this paper will explore how striving to make AYP impacted teachers including increased workloads and stress, and how these factors led to teachers leaving the school, with a focus on a single teacher's experiences.

Keywords

NCLB, accountability, school reform, policy implementation, qualitative

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What They Left Behind: A Case Study of Teachers' Experiences with School Improvement at Evergreen Elementary School

Amy Orange

University of Houston-Clear Lake, Houston, Texas, USA

With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act, an unprecedented amount of pressure has been placed upon schools to increase student achievement. During the 2009-2010 school year, Evergreen Elementary School was in Year Four of school improvement for failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in both reading and math. Drawing on observational and interview data from upper elementary school teachers, this paper will explore how striving to make AYP impacted teachers including increased workloads and stress, and how these factors led to teachers leaving the school, with a focus on a single teacher's experiences. Keywords: NCLB, accountability, school reform, policy implementation, qualitative

With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), an unprecedented amount of pressure has been placed upon schools to increase student achievement. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, sanctions are imposed on schools that are considered underperforming for more than two years even though previous high-stakes accountability systems were unsuccessful in increasing students' performance (Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). These "failing" schools enter into program improvement (referred to as "school improvement" in Virginia), where improvement options include providing tutoring to students, creating school improvement plans, and planning for alternative governance of the school. Failing schools tend to have higher rates of teacher turnover and often employ larger numbers of teachers working with emergency certification. Higher rates of turnover are reported for administrators in failing schools as well. Schools may have insufficient resources to address their needs because they tend to be located in high-poverty areas (Meyers & Murphy, 2007).

Research has found that high-stakes accountability systems, such as NCLB, serve to create an environment of fear that stifles innovation and creativity. "The greater the consequences for not attaining testing goals, the more threatening and high pressure the school or district becomes as a work environment. High-stakes environments create a single-minded focus on avoiding sanctions, accompanied by a fear to attempt anything new or untried" (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008, p. 192). As teachers attempt to meet accountability demands, the curriculum can be restricted to rote learning and a focus on content. Students in sanctioned schools need their teachers need to take risks and try innovative techniques and curriculum (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

The literature shows that failure to make annual yearly progress (AYP) as required by NCLB impacts teachers in multiple ways. We know that increases in teachers' workloads, increased stress from testing pressures, and changes in the environment result from NCLB and factor in to teachers' decisions to resign from schools that are in improvement or to leave the teaching profession altogether. In order for change to be successfully implemented in schools, teachers need to find the reforms meaningful and the changes need to align with their personal beliefs.

However, there are fewer cases in the literature that illustrate teachers' experiences with school reform and school improvement. The majority of studies on NCLB and improvement

focus on statistical outcomes, not teachers' experiences and how the implementation of NCLB affects them and their students. My study seeks to provide voice to teachers whose experiences go largely unheard by policymakers. With NCLB currently overdue for reauthorization, this research contributes an important piece to the debate over the effectiveness of NCLB by providing stories of personal experiences rather than test scores.

During the 2009-2010 school year, Evergreen Elementary School was in Year Four of school improvement for failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in both reading and math. Schools across the nation find themselves in similar situations as more schools enter improvement based on their failure to make AYP.

Drawing on observational and interview data from upper elementary school teachers, this paper will explore how striving to make AYP impacted teachers including increased workloads and stress, and how these factors led to teachers leaving the school. One teacher's story of his decision to leave is highlighted.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is fluid, ranging from a passive observer to an active participant observer. However, as the instrument, the researcher also brings her own interpretations and experiences to the work. In my study, I initially began data collection as a passive observer and I took field notes during classroom instruction. As the study progressed, I took a more active role in two of the classrooms, working with students as needed. As a participant in the research, my presence may have affected classroom behavior, particularly at the beginning of data collection, but students seemed to become accustomed to my presence quickly.

I bring my own biases to this study after working as a teacher for several years. I went into teaching for rather idealistic reasons: I wanted to share the fun of learning with students and expose them to new information. During my first year of teaching, in a private school, my kindergarten students were subjected to standardized tests. A few of them cried through the tests; they couldn't read well, yet were expected to in order to complete the test. I was told that I couldn't help them, but I did anyway.

The following year, I was hired at a public school. There were many more restrictions in place here and talk of something called No Child Left Behind was beginning. Teachers felt pressured to teach the standards. However, there were fewer tears among my fifth grade students when testing time came.

As I continued to teach, there was an increased emphasis on using test scores to direct our instructional practices. Our district provided inservices to teach us what we should be doing with the test scores. As I spent time looking over student test scores from the previous year, I started to notice that they often didn't match what I saw in the classroom. Sometimes a student would have great test scores but average class performance. More often, students had average test scores and above-average class performance. I wondered if I was expecting too little of the students, but as more of us began to discover the same thing and have conversations about it, we started to think that maybe the tests were the problem. These experiences motivated me to conduct this study.

Ethical Concerns

The most difficult ethical issue in this study was how to maintain the participants' anonymity. At the beginning of the study, I assured the teachers that they would be given pseudonyms to protect their identities and that any information that made them easily identifiable would be altered or removed. By the end of my data collection, several of the

teachers felt that remaining anonymous was not important, though I assured them I would do my best to keep their comments anonymous.

Validity

The relationship between the role of the researcher, the data collection strategies, data analyses, and the conceptual framework are all critical to establishing validity. In his investigation of exemplary case studies, Yin (2009) found that evidence should be collected from multiple sources. This strengthens the validity of the study by allowing for consistency across sources (Erickson, 1986; Yin, 2009). Using multiple sources within a case study enhances internal validity through consistency and “corroboration about implementation events and interpretation”. External validity is strengthened when various sources of evidence from multiple sites are included, extending the scope of the study. In-depth information collected from the sites provides the needed information for interpreting the implementation process. In this study, I collected data using multiple methods in multiple classrooms.

Erickson (1986) focuses on making low-inference judgments and having the reader serve as the co-analyst. He sees that the purpose of qualitative research is to come to an understanding of what human interactions mean, not to measure something, as in the traditional view of validity. Validity is established by having assertions that show patterns across events. The search for disconfirming evidence (and the subsequent revision of the assertion, if needed) also establishes validity. Therefore, I searched my data for disconfirming evidence and refined my assertions as needed. I also present quotes from my participants, allowing the reader to serve as co-analyst.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger study that examined the linkages of policy maker actions across levels of the policy system and including document review, interviews, and observations. This case study examines the interpretations of policy mandates by teachers in a purposefully sampled rural elementary school in Virginia. IRB approval was granted for this study and I collected all of the data.

My study primarily consists of observation and interview methodologies, though I also conducted some document analysis. I intended to survey teachers and students, but that was not possible based on a lack of time in the classrooms and during staff meetings. Using multiple methods of data collections allows for triangulation of methods and a more complete understanding of the policy problem (Yin, 1994). Data collection took place between April 2009 and May 2011. I detail these methods in the following sections.

Observations

I conducted classroom observations to better understand how teachers are interpreting and implementing policies in their classrooms. Teachers were selected from grades three through five with an emphasis on language arts and math instruction. I selected these subjects and grade levels because NCLB holds schools accountable for student achievement in math and language arts; in Virginia, the assessments begin in third grade.

My observations focused on teachers’ curriculum implementation, types of curricula being used in the classrooms, teaching styles, and student responses to classroom activities. Approximately 15 observations were completed for each grade level. I observed in one third grade class, one fourth grade class, and two fifth grade classes. Each observation lasted between one and three hours, depending on the lesson. For the first two or three observations, I took

field notes throughout the entire observation period. However, once I had a sense of the classroom procedures and a broad idea of classroom occurrences, I made jottings during some of the observations instead of taking detailed field notes. This usually occurred when I worked with students and could not take extensive field notes. I wrote up field notes with inferences, methodological notes, observation notes and observer comments added as soon as possible after leaving the site.

Interviews

Interviews with school staff members were conducted between April 2009 and May 2011. Interviews were conducted with the teachers I observed to triangulate data and were also held with teachers, and other staff members who did not participate in observations. Attempts were made to interview all third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers, the school math and literacy coaches, and the administrators. While not everyone responded to my interview requests, I was able to interview at least two teachers from each of the grade levels, the principal, both school coaches, and two specialists.

I conducted interviews with 13 participants with each interview lasting between 30 minutes and one hour; the majority of the data from this study comes from one teacher's interviews. Interview questions (Appendix I) stemmed from the literature on NCLB and my observations; I conducted the majority of interviews as I was nearing the end of my observations.

Data Analysis

Analysis was an inductive process. I coded, combined, and interpreted the data, resulting in a narrative. During the process of data collection, I conducted preliminary analysis as I wrote up my field notes and transcribed interviews. Once data collection was complete, I read through my field notes and interviews several times. As I read, I created analytic notes and themes began to emerge. Once I had my initial themes, I began coding using NVivo. Several new codes were added and others were refined as I worked.

I did not anticipate that one of the emergent themes would be why teachers resigned from Evergreen, but at the end of the 2009-2010 school year, I realized that three of the four teachers I observed with had quit. I attempted to contact all three, but only two were available. I scheduled follow up interviews with Mr. Parker and Ms. Murphy to understand why they resigned from Evergreen at the end of the year and incorporated this new data into the existing corpus. I coded and interpreted the new data in light of my previous analysis. Next, I made assertions, then looked for evidence to confirm or disconfirm these assertions (Erickson, 1986). I present an overview of the reasons that contributed to teachers leaving Evergreen, then focus on why Mr. Parker and left, allowing him to tell his story in his own words as much as possible.

Validity

To establish validity in this study, I draw on Creswell (2013). Participants reviewed their interview transcripts prior to analysis to ensure that I accurately captured their thoughts and comments; they offered clarification as needed. Prolonged engagement in the field gave me time to learn the culture and establish trust with my participants. Using multiple forms data sources (observations, interviews, and documents) allowed me to triangulate participants' actions and words to reveal complexities and inconsistencies. When inconsistencies occurred, I contacted participants for further clarification.

Results

While Evergreen made AYP based on their test results from the 2009-2010 school year, the pressures placed on teachers to raise students' test scores led to increased stress, which ultimately resulted in some teachers resigning or changing grade levels. Most teachers report that they feel stressed due to Evergreen's improvement status. Administrators and school coaches focus on student scores and using benchmark assessments and released-item SOLs (the Standards of Learning, Virginia's end-of-year tests) to predict student performance on the SOLs. Many teachers say that if they don't make AYP this year, they don't know what they will do the following year since they are already doing everything they can. There is a sense that this is their last year to make AYP and that they cannot sustain this level of effort much longer.

There are several conditions at Evergreen that may affect the rate of teacher turnover including stress from an increased workload and the pressure to increase student achievement and a narrowing of the curriculum. The following sections illustrate how these areas may have influenced teacher turnover at Evergreen and take an in-depth look at why Mr. Parker left Evergreen Elementary.

Evergreen Elementary School

Evergreen Elementary is a K-5 school located in central Virginia. The school serves approximately 500 students. The setting is a mix of rural and suburban, though the majority of students live in rural locations. At the time of data collection, Evergreen Elementary School was in year four of program improvement school-wide and for English improvement and in year three for math improvement. Evergreen Elementary is fully accredited. Approximately 43% of Evergreen Elementary's students qualify for free and reduced lunch, qualifying them for whole school Title I funding.

Teacher turnover at Evergreen

Teacher turnover impacts not only the school, as new teachers need to learn the culture and expectations, but grade level cohesiveness, as collaboration needs to be rebuilt when turnover occurs. Teachers new to a grade level spend more time learning the curriculum and lesson planning, perhaps taking time from working with students during their preparation time or after school. Losing members of a team that helped Evergreen to make AYP for the first time in several years means the loss of teachers who were capable of increasing student performance on the SOLs.

Three of the four teachers I observed during my research left the school at the end of the year. Ms. Richards and Ms. Murphy were laid off due to proposed state budget cuts, though both were offered their jobs back over the summer; neither chose to return. No one is in contact with Ms. Richards, though a few teachers have said they believe she is no longer teaching. Ms. Murphy currently teaches at Madison, an elementary school that has never been in school improvement and is a School of Excellence. Mr. Parker also left Evergreen at the end of the year; he now teaches at a private school in the same county. Ms. Reynolds is currently employed at Evergreen.

Increased stress

Most of the pressure to increase students' test scores rides on third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers. While skills learned in the primary grades impact student achievement in upper

elementary, students are not directly assessed using the end-of-the-year SOLs in kindergarten through second grade. Ms. Hudgens, currently a kindergarten teacher, has taught upper elementary in previous years. She remarks, “It’s a lot more pressure (to teach upper elementary grades). I feel like it’s a little bit easier to teach in the younger grades” (interview, May 11, 2009). But she doesn’t discount the role that primary teachers play in getting students to a point of independence so they can take the SOLs, saying:

Especially in this school system...I know my second grade teachers here always tell me they try to get their kids to be independent, but there’s no independency (sic) in K through One. And I think that’s a strategy that we’re really lacking. Because when you hit third grade and take that test, it’s all independent. (Interview, May 11, 2009)

While Ms. Hudgens believes that teaching the lower grades is somewhat easier, it also seems that testing pressure is trickling down to the lower grades as teachers try to insure that their students will be ready to test independently by third grade. By preparing them to take assessments on their own, teachers hope their students will be more successful.

Fifth grade teacher Ms. Richards feels that the level of pressure from the administrators has been taken too far and that the NCLB legislation is created by and implemented by people who are too far removed from the day-to-day classroom activities and demands. She discusses how policy is handed down to her and the impact it has on her and her students:

Has anyone who actually writes the legislation ever been in a classroom? I always want to ask because all these things handed down to us... I mean, sometimes it’s things from our principal and we think, ‘What? Have you? When’s the last time you were in the classroom?’ Like tomorrow, we have half a day before Christmas break. We have to have Language Arts instruction. What?! Language Arts instruction? I mean, it sounds like we don’t have a day to lose. Yes, you have a half a day we can afford to lose and they [the students] deserve it. They work so hard and we push them and we can’t even give them half a day before Christmas break. It just seems a little crazy, it seems like, out of control, like we’ve lost common sense. That’s common sense to me, that last day. We can’t get anything accomplished. Give me a break! (Interview, December 17, 2009)

She believes that legislators and administrators are out of touch with classroom practices and that the administrators pass on policy demands to teachers who must pass on these demands to students, despite teachers’ professional judgments that these are developmentally inappropriate practices.

Mr. Parker, a fourth grade teacher, reports fear from the threat of punitive state action and a subsequent increase in the level of stress amongst the teachers. He comments:

I guess things have just been sorta ratcheted up now with, I guess... I think the school’s like in second or third year of AYP and you know, it’s getting to the point where the state might come in and take over and stuff. I mean, I see a little bit of just, a little extra stress among the teachers because I think we’re doing everything we possibly can and it just sorta gets to the point where we do as much as we can and you know, some of the students just aren’t motivated for the test indicates SOL curriculum and testing are artificial and negatively impact on student motivation. We know that they know the

material, but, they're like, 'eh' (indicating that students don't care about the tests). (Interview, May 29, 2009)

He also feels that there is only so much that the teachers can do on their own and that there needs to be an increase in parent and administrative involvement if Evergreen is to exit improvement:

I would say that the teachers do feel a little more stress and, like a lot of stuff has been put on us which we're happy to do what we can do. But there comes a point where it's going to take the parents and the administrators to really come in and try to change some things or..." (Interview, May 29, 2009)

He implies that if parents and administrators do not increase their level of involvement, teacher stress will continue to rise and they will feel overburdened by the additional demands placed on them due to Evergreen's improvement status.

One cause of stress for teachers is the dissonance created by thinking that they are doing their jobs well while their school is labeled by policy makers and the media as "failing". Not only is the school staff informed that Evergreen is "in need of improvement", but parents are notified as well, per NCLB requirements (school document, October 13, 2009). The school literacy coach, Ms. McDonald, believes that the staff is good at what they do, saying, "And I'm very protective of these teachers. I mean, I love 'em to death, I know how hard they work, and I will not let their names be tarnished. I feel that they do a good job and give it their all..." (Interview, March 22, 2010). Due to her perception of the public's lack of understandings about how NCLB works, Ms. McDonald becomes upset with how Evergreen and its teachers are portrayed in the media. As she discusses the subject with me, she becomes impassioned, her voice raising and increasing in volume as she says:

I think our county and the way that reporting gets done, it highlights how people don't understand NCLB. And that's very frustrating to me. I take it personally because these teachers are my friends, they're my colleagues. I know how hard most of them work. And I'm going to use the word 'most' because there are some that don't push it. But I really feel for them when they see an article in the newspaper that says, Maplewood Elementary, shining star. Guess what? What they don't say is that if Maplewood had had certain subgroup numbers and they had over 50, they wouldn't have passed either. We're the only school in the entire county that has the subgroup numbers. (Interview, March 22, 2010)

She obviously takes Evergreen's labeling as a failing school personally and it places stress on her. For some teachers, working in a school that is in improvement may contribute to their desire to work elsewhere, as it did for Mr. Parker and Ms. Murphy.

An increase in staff workload also affects the level of stress felt by teachers and administrators at Evergreen. School staff report many areas where their workload has increased due to being in school improvement: they are required to do more paperwork and documentation; spend their preparation time and lunches working with students; and have additional meetings to attend.

Since Evergreen entered school improvement, the amount of documentation they are required to do has increased for both teachers and administrators. The principal, Mr. Carter, explains how this increase has impacted students:

It just seems like there's more and more paperwork and different things I have to do which then turns in to, I'm not here. I'm not able to be in classrooms, I'm not able to assist and help and make sure these kids are getting a quality education. So, you know, just because someone wants to see something on paper, you're taking away from all these things. (Interview, August 3, 2009)

Ms. McDonald also comments about the increased paperwork and stress due to being in school improvement. She shares her impressions about being in Year Four of school improvement:

I mean, it's really like, it's very stressful. I'm telling you, if I could work all day and all night, I would and I still don't know if there's enough time. I really don't. Just the amount of paperwork and the amount of just mental...it's just a lot of mental stress that goes along with being a Year Four literacy coordinator, but um, we're going to do whatever we can. (Interview, March 22, 2010)

Due to Evergreen's improvement status, Ms. McDonald's workload has increased and her stress level has risen. She feels stress both from the quantity of work she is required to do as well as the mental stress that accompanies her job. This type of pressure placed on teachers in "failing" schools often contributes to their leaving the schools altogether.

Ms. Richards also believes that there is more paperwork since Evergreen is in school improvement. She says, "...and the thing with school improvement is that now we have all this extra paperwork and all this data we have to collect, well, how is that helping what's really going on in the classrooms?" (Interview, December 17, 2009). Her comments echo Mr. Carter's--increased paperwork takes time, pulling teachers and administrators away from activities that could actually help students increase their learning.

As Evergreen Elementary continued to fail to make AYP over the course of the previous three years, the number of required meetings increased. Frequent professional development is required for the teachers because of Evergreen's AYP status. There are Monday faculty meetings held after school. Every other Wednesday is a School Improvement Committee meeting where staff focus on monitoring Evergreen's improvement plan and learning new strategies to help students pass their SOLs; about one-third of the teachers attend on a rotating basis. Response to Intervention (RtI) meetings are held once a week per grade level during teachers' preparation time. These meetings focus on tracking individual student's data and determining interventions for struggling students. There are also weekly grade level meetings, parent nights, IEP meetings, parent conferences, and monthly PTO meetings. Fifth grade teacher Ms. Reynolds explains the purposes of the various meetings at Evergreen:

The faculty meetings after school are just a necessity because we need to know what's going on at all times and we just have one of those a month. And then the math meeting and the reading meetings, they're going to start something different. They did make and takes before, try to make something, come back and use it in your room. Now they're going to do videotape and we have to watch teachers teaching and see what's good, what's working well, what's not working well, so that we can help benefit the students and our teaching styles. So, some of them, yes. And grade level meetings are always a necessity 'cuz we need to know what's going on with the grade level, just to make sure everything's up and running. (Interview, October 30, 2009)

In a single month, Ms. Reynolds had 16 meetings. "I had 14 meetings," she tells me after she

counts them all up on her desk calendar. I ask her if that includes RtI and IEPs. She replies, “Yes, that includes RtI, IEPs, um, grade level meetings, things like that. But it’s not including, parent meetings at night and PTO and I also went to those” (Interview, October 30, 2009). In all, Ms. Reynolds spent nearly 20 hours in meetings during a single month.

While teachers can see value in at least some of the meetings, they still take time away from other teaching duties such as lesson planning, grading, and tutoring students. When combined with the increased paperwork resulting from being in school improvement, teachers are faced with more work, leaving them with less time to accomplish their duties.

This section offered an overview of teachers’ perceptions of the additional duties placed on them due to Evergreen’s improvement status and the resulting stress they feel. The following section will explore one teacher’s reasons for leaving Evergreen Elementary School. He shared many of the same attitudes expressed by teachers above, yet some unique factors contributed to his decision to leave the school at the end of the year. These are discussed below.

Why He Left: Mr. Parker’s Story

Mr. Parker taught fourth grade at Evergreen Elementary School during the 2009-2010 school year. He started his career as a special education assistant while he got his Master’s in education and has been teaching for 16 years. The 2008-2009 school year was his first at Evergreen, though he previously worked for a K-2 school in the same district.

All of the previously discussed factors contributed to Mr. Parker’s decision to resign from Evergreen. Mr. Parker became increasingly disenchanted with teaching at Evergreen throughout the year and quit after he found a new job at a local private school.

Shortly before he resigned, Mr. Parker contacted me, asking if I could write a recommendation for him. He felt that the administrator observations did not accurately reflect his teaching, but believed that since I spent more time in his classroom, I would have a more complete view of his teaching. He was concerned that the administrator observations would be used against him. I politely declined on the advice from my advisor who suggested I stay out of school politics while in the field, but I offered to provide him with a copy of one of my observations. I did not hear back from him, but later saw in the school board minutes that he was granted a leave of absence and later, resigned. He was hired by a private school in the same county as Evergreen.

While the majority of the teachers at Evergreen Elementary School discussed the additional stress they felt from the pressure to make AYP, the stressful atmosphere increased for fourth grade teachers in particular when it became clear to Mr. Parker that the principal, Mr. Carter, was focusing his attention on them and their classroom activities. He feels that Mr. Carter targeted fourth grade because as a team, they were the most outspoken of the grade levels: We actually stood our ground and questioned him and that is kinda his M.O. As long as you say, “Yes, sir, yes, sir” and just blindly do what you’re supposed to do, you’re fine. If you question him or bring up something else, then, well, watch out. And there were some strong personalities on the team. But for me, it was, I would rather fight the good fight and lose than sit down and not say anything, just go along with it.

And he blew up that (the fourth grade) team, too. On that team now, let’s see, Martha is teaching first grade. Gail’s still teaching fourth but she’s downstairs. Kari Thompson is teaching fourth but she’s upstairs and then Susan Martin is teaching third grade and then I’m not there. So there’s only two people out of the five who are still on that team. (Interview, April 20, 2011)

The fourth grade team's outspokenness and willingness to question him caused Mr. Carter to single them out, eventually splitting up the fourth grade team despite their ability to work collaboratively and effectively. These difficulties with the principal increased the amount of stress placed on Mr. Parker and the other fourth grade teachers.

In addition to feeling targeted by his principal, Mr. Parker felt that he could not implement good teaching practices in his classroom due to the pressure to teach to the tests and raise students' SOL scores. It got to that point where I was being forced to, to just compromise my beliefs and what was good teaching. I kinda base everything I do on what's best for kids and it just became really evident that that wasn't the focus of the school at that point. It was just, "How can we do really well on SOLs?" And it's all on the teachers and no matter what happens, you're held accountable for anything. It just got to the point where the principal...I just knew he was looking for some scapegoats and he targeted the fourth grade, so...

The biggest thing was we were taking just a practice test, which is supposed to be totally practice, the kids are just gonna get to see the format of the SOLs. And then the kids took the test and they bombed it. And the reason they bombed it was... I mean, we analyzed the test and we'd only taught them 30% of the material at that point in the year 'cuz they took it the middle of January. But the principal saw the scores and he just, he lost it. He sent a really threatening email to the whole fourth grade team and copied it to some of our colleagues at the same time and just was like, "No, I'm putting you all on teacher improvement plans and you can get fired if you don't do this, this and this." And we called him on it. We were like, "Wait a second. What was the purpose of this test?" (Interview, April 20, 2011).

The problem continued to worsen. Two of Mr. Parker's fourth grade team members went to their union representative for assistance. The union representative told them to talk to the superintendent. Following his advice, they turned to the superintendent, who told them to meet with the principal and that they needed "to work it out". Mr. Parker says, "And that was a very interesting meeting. And after that meeting, I mean, you could just tell things were totally different". The relationship between Mr. Carter and the fourth grade team continued to deteriorate, with no additional advice from the superintendent or union representative.

Mr. Parker speculates about the reasons why Mr. Carter may have acted the way he did, including the increased focus on test scores and resulting stress. He shares: And part of it too was that he (Mr. Carter) was so focused on doing the SOLs that... He came in to my class a couple of times and just had no idea what was going on. Like one lesson I was doing this pancake lesson. But it wasn't just that. They were making pancakes but then they were reviewing fractions and they were comparing and contrasting and doing four different things. I had everything listed on the board. So he came in with the state coach. They (Mr. Carter and Dr. Peterson) came in, saw that we were making pancakes, looked around for a few minutes, and left. And then he called me into his office later and was like, "You know, you can't just be making pancakes." And I was like, "We weren't just making pancakes." And I went through and...and he still didn't have, he just didn't get it. And I met with the state coach (Dr. Peterson) 'cuz I saw her the next day and she was like, "Well, what was going on?" and I explained it to her and she got it. She was like, "Oh, okay. That makes sense now." So just a few other incidences like that.

Then with my math group, it was getting close to SOL time and I had a challenging group. They needed some improvement on their math skills. So we had our pacing guide. You had to be on this lesson at this time. And he (Mr. Carter) had gone to the central office and they were sending in someone from the central office to make sure that we were toeing the line and doing what we were supposed to do. So, I talked to the principal after and was like, "I'd like to just, you know, come off the pacing guide for two weeks." I said, "I'll cover everything except for maybe one thing at the end. But the kids will have it, they'll understand it, they'll know it. At this point, I don't feel comfortable going on because they're not going to remember it". And

I was basically told, “No, you need to just stick to the pacing guide.” And I don’t remember his exact words, if it was, “I don’t care if the kids learn the material, you just have to cover it all”. And at that point, I just, I knew. (Interview, April 20, 2011).

Ultimately, Mr. Parker left Evergreen because he did not feel that he could teach the way he needed to and he felt that what was happening at Evergreen was not good for students. Administrators misunderstood some of his teaching strategies. He dislikes the focus on passing the tests at the expense of students.

This focus on the SOLs drove all instruction at Evergreen, according to Mr. Parker. The final month before the tests, he says new instruction stopped and teachers engaged in review of previously taught material and test preparation with the students:

And then the last three weeks before the SOLs, basically what we did was we stopped teaching math and then they had the students who knew the math really well being tutors for the students who didn’t know the math that well. For me, I had a big problem with that too. ‘Cuz that’s not their job. And if I was a parent of one of those kids...and I did have a lot of complaints that, “Hey, it’s not my child’s job to tutor these kids.” And I could totally see their point. (Interview, April 20, 2011)

The administrators’ decisions to focus on review rather than teach new content had two negative consequences for students who knew the material well: they were denied the opportunity to continue learning and became tutors for students who had not mastered the material. Some parents became upset with this scenario, feeling that it was not the responsibility of their children to tutor others.

As the SOLs neared, Mr. Parker also found that the level of stress felt by students increased. He describes the atmosphere at Evergreen leading up to the SOLs:

Oh, it was high stress. I mean, it was, “You guys are gonna be taking these practice tests. The administration and everyone is going to analyze and go over the practice tests and you will target these”. So, they started this new program, I forget exactly what it was called, but they take the test on the computer and then you have the results broken down by test, by curriculum area. And the next year, they were going to institute that district-wide as well. And for me it just, there was this atmosphere at the school, and pervading around the district, that it was the teachers’ fault, that we’re blaming it on the teachers. And when they passed AYP, it was interesting... In the paper, you know, they thanked the parents, they talked about the administration, they talked about the students doing really well, but there was no mention of the teachers, which I found, you know, interesting. Maybe it was just an afterthought. But, you know, it wasn’t there. It wasn’t, “Wow, great job teachers!” (Interview, April 20, 2011)

Not only were teachers held accountable for everything that happened in the classrooms and for students’ SOL performances, they were also not credited when improvements in SOL scores did occur. Placing all of the pressure on teachers while not rewarding their efforts when they are successful may cause them to look for jobs in less-stressful atmospheres or to feel that their efforts are not appreciated, as Mr. Parker did.

Mr. Parker believes that students also felt increased pressure and stress due to the increased number of practice tests they were given and the incentives offered to them for performing well on these released-item tests. I ask him if the students were aware of the high-

stakes tests, Mr. Parker says:

Oh, yeah, they were totally freaking out. I mean, I made a point of just doing some things that just cut the tension. I'm like, "Guys, you know, the stuff, you're going to do fine, you're going to be okay."

They (the administrators) also did some big incentives thing, too. When you took a practice test if you passed or improved by so much, then you'd get pizza or you'd get an ice cream party. They dangled a bunch of carrots, he laughs. (Interview, April 20, 2011). However, he says there were no carrots for the teachers, again showing that while teachers are held responsible if students' SOL scores do not increase, they are not rewarded if they do improve and are not offered any positive incentives.

The increased emphasis on SOLs, the lack of good teaching at Evergreen, and the atmosphere all contributed to Mr. Parker's decision to leave Evergreen and teach at a local private school. He explains how he came to the decision to leave Evergreen at the end of the year:

So at first I applied for a leave of absence and that was granted. And then the opportunity came up here and walking into the school... I was in here for two minutes and I just...you could just see that it was what teaching used to be, you know, 12, 13 years ago when I first started out. So, it was a no-brainer. It was definitely a pay cut, but at that point, it wasn't teaching anymore, for me. It was just spewing out information and if the kids get it, great. If they don't, keep going. And that's not teaching, to me. (Interview, April 20, 2011)

He believes that other public school teachers are feeling similar frustrations and are ready to leave when opportunities present themselves. He says, "People are looking for other options, too. I know there's a kindergarten opening at this school next year and a lot of public school teachers applied for the job. And I mean, it's a significant pay cut, but they just are like, 'I've had enough.'" (Interview, April 20, 2011).

Despite the pay cut, Mr. Parker is very happy with his decision to leave Evergreen Elementary. He explains his contentment with his new job and his renewed joy in teaching, saying: Just being here (at his new school) has been just amazing. It's at least an hour and a half of planning time a day. And just, the expectations here are that you are going to be doing stuff that is hands-on, getting these kids to be critical thinkers and you know... Like last week, we did an Egypt day where we studied this unit on Egypt and did all this stuff. And then the kids picked specific things, did some research on it in groups and then we had the school, all the different classes come in, and they presented the different aspects of it. And it's just what learning should be. You find a topic and get the kids interested. It's just what teaching should be. You're hitting all the aspects of Bloom's taxonomy where at Evergreen Elementary, you hit the first two or three and after that it was like, "Uh-oh, you gotta stop. That's not on the SOLs." And then the writing here, too. I mean, it's amazing the amount of writing that we teach. And just a night and day difference between the creative writing here and writing wasn't on the fourth grade SOL, so you barely touched it. So it's just the difference between teaching to a test and teaching what needs to be taught.

It has renewed my joy in teaching again. And I can see myself staying here and retiring here. And we had to make some adjustments at home, but I mean, it's well worth it because I can get almost all of my work done here. It's huge. So yeah, I went into teaching knowing that

I'd never be rich, but just the quality of life and that changed. (Interview, April 20, 2011)

By leaving Evergreen Elementary, Mr. Parker rediscovered happiness and joy in teaching. His current school encourages him to engage his students in activities requiring critical thinking and exploration, things which he did not often get to do at Evergreen. Teaching at a private school also frees him from testing pressure, which he feels is the main reason he can teach the way he wants to, not merely to cover material that will be tested.

Discussion

The results of this study illustrate why some teachers may resign from schools that are in school improvement and explains the factors that contribute to their decisions to resign. Ultimately, Mr. Parker left Evergreen due to the implementation of policies that went against his personal and professional beliefs. These newly implemented policies resulted from the push for Evergreen to make AYP. Mr. Parker left Evergreen because he felt that the relationships between teachers and Mr. Carter had become too adversarial and he no longer felt that he could teach in a manner that best served the students. He disliked the emphasis on test preparation and did not feel appreciated by administrators. He became disenchanted when his principal told him that he did not care if students were learning or not as long as the pacing guide was followed. Ultimately, all of Mr. Parker reasons for leaving stem from Evergreen's Year Four improvement status.

In addition to causing teachers to resign from "failing" schools, NCLB has had other impacts on school staff and students. As Schoen and Fusarelli (2008) found, high-stakes testing environments stifle creativity and lead to a single focus on passing the tests. At Evergreen, this was certainly the case, as multiple new programs were implemented to attempt to increase students' performances on the SOLs. Teachers were asked to spend additional time documenting their classroom activities and students' performance on classroom assessments and attending meetings. This supports Amrein and Berliner's (2002) findings that an increase in teacher workloads may lead to teachers leaving their schools or the teaching profession entirely. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, nearly half of the teachers at Evergreen in third, fourth, and fifth grades were new to the school or grade level. The teachers that left either left Evergreen or switched grade levels.

Teachers resigned from Evergreen for multiple reasons, including stress from preparing students for the SOLs, difficulties with administrators, the inability to teach the way they wanted to, an increase in their workloads, and the pressure to make AYP. All of these factors stem from Evergreen's improvement status. According to Davidson (2009), the top reasons for teachers leaving are: increased workload, interactions with students, and the exacerbation of these problems due to NCLB. In the case of Evergreen, interactions with students were a minor issue.

Datnow and Castellano (2002) and Schmidt and Datnow (2005) found that in order for changes to be supported by teachers, the changes needed to align with teachers' ideologies about teaching. If the reforms match teachers' beliefs, teaching styles, and personalities, they are more receptive to the reforms. Mr. Parker had ideological differences with most of the newly implemented programs at Evergreen, believing that scripted programs are not always the best solution, and he mentions that he could no longer teach in ways he wanted to due to Evergreen's improvement status. Imposing change on teachers has rarely been successful (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Snow-Gerono & Franklin, 2006), so it is not surprising that the mandated changes at Evergreen contributed to some teachers' decisions to resign.

Imposed reforms may also create a culture of compliance. When teachers are faced with a new reform, they seek the least painful way to implement it (Datnow & Castellano, 2000).

While teaching at Evergreen, Mr. Parker implemented the mandated policies, such as test preparation and testing students using multiple-choice formats. However, these sorts of strategies did not align with his teaching beliefs, and it contributed to his resignation from Evergreen at the end of the school year.

Limitations and Future Research

The nature of the study presented limitations to the study. My findings cannot be generalized due to the small sample size and the context. Limited data was collected providing students' viewpoints; future research would explore how students experience the sanctions placed on schools in improvement and their perceptions about the process and how it impacts them.

For this study, I have used teachers' descriptions of student reactions to testing. I was unable to gain access to classrooms during their end-of-year testing, so for future research, I would like to observe during testing to better understand how the process works and witness teachers' and students' reactions to testing. Also, the majority of my data was collected during the first half of the school year, when test preparations are being implemented, but not to the same degree that they are in the spring as testing nears. Additional research would include observations in classrooms in the months leading up to testing.

For future research, I would like to increase my sample size to include more teachers' perspectives. Mr. Parker had interesting stories to tell about why he left Evergreen. Other teachers would likely have equally compelling stories and add to the body of research on this topic. I would also like to understand why some teachers elect to stay: if the conditions at a school such as Evergreen cause some teachers to leave, why do others choose to stay?

Due to time constraints, the majority of participants in this study were interviewed once. If additional interviews had been possible, greater insight into teachers' experiences working at Evergreen Elementary would have been possible. Participants who were interviewed more than once offered greater detail into their experiences with school improvement and how it impacts them and their students.

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Appendix I: Teacher Interview Questions

General Teaching/Background

- How long have you worked at this school?
 - Have you taught the whole time?
 - Have you worked in other schools in this division?
 - Have you taught in other schools anywhere?
- What grades have you taught?
 - How long have you taught each grade?
- When did you start teaching?/How long have you been teaching?

School Improvement at School/District

- Describe any changes you have seen in your classes since your school entered improvement.
 - Changes in: work load, curriculum, teaching style, time spent on subjects, etc. Can you explain the changes in detail?
- How have these changes affected you?
 - In the classroom?
 - Personally?
- Have you seen any changes at the school level?
 - Describe.
 - What's your sense for how any changes have impacted other staff members?
- Have you noticed any changes with your students since your school entered improvement?
 - Describe.
 - Changes in: stress level, attitude towards school, behavior, grades, etc.
- Do you have students who attend afterschool remediation?
 - Which one do they attend?
 - Have you noticed any improvement in their skills?
- Describe the Response to Intervention meetings.
 - Are they useful for you?
 - If so, how?
 - If they are not, please describe how they could be more helpful.

Author Note

Amy Orange is an adjunct professor at George Mason University, where she teaches a course in Qualitative Research methods. She received her Ph.D. in Education Research, Statistics, and Evaluation from the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia. Her research interests include school accountability, education policy, and school improvement.

Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly with Amy Orange at Email: Orange@uhcl.edu

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