

The Realities of Reconstitution: A High School's Tale

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Abstract. During the first decade of the 21st century, the number of US schools required to restructure according to the policies of the No Child Left Behind Act increased annually. In response, educational researchers worked to identify best practices for school restructuring; however, they were unable to find a single set of effective strategies. Instead, they recommended that strong school leadership and sustained school improvement reforms are used. To illustrate the multitude of challenges restructuring schools face, this article uses narrative to chronicle Tyson Douglas High School's experience. The narrative takes readers through the school's first year of restructuring and provides them with test score data for the following two years to show the effectiveness of its restructuring. Because Tyson Douglas High School's restructuring did not increase student achievement significantly, the author concludes by presenting a research-based alternative strategy for school restructuring.

Keywords: School Restructuring; Education Reform; English Teachers; Education Policy; Reconstitution

Introduction

There were 3,558 U.S. schools required to restructure during the 2009-2010 school year because of low student achievement on high stakes accountability tests (Hassel et al., 2010; US Dept. of Commerce, 2011). Two years later, that number more than doubled to 7,643 schools required to restructure (US Dept. of Education, 2012). Were it not for the federal government issuing state waivers from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's (ESEA) accountability system (US Dept. of Education, 2013), that number would have continued to grow annually (Alexander, 2006; Hess & Gift, 2009).

During the accountability era of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that preceded the issuing of accountability waivers from ESEA, a school that posted low student achievement marks on high stakes accountability tests for five or more consecutive years was required to restructure, and researchers have spent a considerable amount of energy working to identify best practices for school

restructuring (Center for Comprehensive School Improvement and Reform, 2009). Though time, effort, and money have been used to analyze best practices, researchers are yet to identify a specific set of strategies that will guarantee a school successfully restructures (Brady, 2003; Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Scott, 2006). Rather, they have identified that using multiple, sustained reforms to restructure a school will likely be more effective to improve student achievement quickly and significantly than employing a single, comprehensive strategy, so long as there is strong leadership to guide the restructuring (Arkin & Kowal, 2005; Brady, 2003; Hess & Petrilli, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Steiner, 2005). However, the education policy proposed in the Blueprint for Education Reform (BER) and supported by President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan through their Race to the Top competitive grant program and issuing of accountability waivers from ESEA does not reflect these findings (US Dept. of Education, 2011). Instead, the BER continues to support NCLB-era school restructuring strategies (Cherner, 2011), and one of these strategies educational stakeholders oppose is the school “turnaround” model. In what follows, I first explain the process of school turnaround and offer critiques of it. Next, I present a case study of school turnaround to exemplify why it is such a layered, complicated, and overall ineffective school restructuring strategy. I then close by offering an alternative school restructuring strategy.

Background: The Process and Critiques of School Turnaround

The concept that a low performing school can be “turned around” to improve student performance is not a new idea (Hess, 1991; Newman & Wehlage, 1995), and Brady (2003) outlined four common steps schools take as part of a turnaround process. First, a school must be identified as underperforming based on its student achievement as documented by students’ high stakes test scores. Second, decision makers at the state and district levels select the school turnaround strategy and grant permission to begin reconstitution. “Reconstitution is the term generally used for the school restructuring approach that features the removal of incumbent administrators and teachers (or large percentages of them) and... [replaces them] with educators who presumably are more capable of improving school performance” (McKeon, 2009, p. 2). As reconstitution starts, the entire school’s staff – including teachers, administrators, and support personnel – is given notification that they no longer have jobs at the school once the school year ends. However, if they would like to remain working at the school, they are invited to reapply for their jobs. Third, the school’s leadership team is usually replaced, and new school leadership is recruited. Finally, once in place, the new leadership team begins selecting the teachers and other staff members they want to return to the school and hires replacements for those who were not asked to return. At this point, the school’s new leadership team begins implementing other school reforms – such as revising the curriculum, overhauling the school’s governance structure, and providing professional development (PD) to teachers among other possible reforms – with the goal of increasing student achievement. Notable school turnaround attempts during the last decades of the 20th century that informed NCLB’s school restructuring policies include the experiences of Chicago Public Schools, New York City Department of Education, and San Francisco Unified

District Schools (Kowal & Ayscue, 2005; Mintrop & Papazian, 2003; Rudo, 2001). However, in each of these instances, there is little consensus about the effectiveness of using the strategy, and much criticism of it exists.

From a legal standpoint, Spitzer (2007) critiqued NCLB's school turnaround policy because its wording is not exact. "The language of NCLB itself leaves a great deal of room for interpretation – for example, while schools may replace staff 'relevant to the failure' of the school... the Act contains no definition of or standards for defining 'relevant.'" (p. 1342). In his argument, Spitzer cites the lack of definitive language in NCLB as problematic because it does not define a method for evaluating teachers or prescribe a method for administrators to evaluate a teacher's contributions to their school's achievement. Should an administrative team solely use test scores to evaluate a teacher's worth, or would it be fairer to incorporate classroom observations and consider the professional service a teacher provides to the school as well? Spitzer stated "it is unclear what evidence a school district would be able to muster to show that the teacher was relevant to the failure of the school" (p. 1353). Because of these ambiguities, NCLB did not provide clear guidelines about how teacher evaluations should be conducted when a school reconstitutes its staff.

Additionally, hiring released teachers' replacements is cumbersome. NCLB required that schools hire only highly qualified teachers. Highly qualified essentially means teachers have earned a bachelor's degree and passed a rigorous state test in their field (Steffan, 2004). Therefore, requiring administrators to hire released teachers' replacements is challenging because a ready supply of highly-qualified teachers waiting to be hired by a school going through restructuring is seldom available (Bardy, 2003; Spitzer, 2007; Rice & Malen, 2010). Subsequently, administrators struggle to make all their needed new hires by the start of the academic year (Levin & Quinn, 2003), which results in them hiring inexperienced teachers who are unprepared to teach in challenging schools. These teachers spend their first years in the classroom "surviving" and not contributing to reforming the school (Mac Iver, et al., 2003).

Next, the use of standardized test scores to evaluate teachers working in low-performing schools is problematic because of possible cultural biases (Kohn, 2000; Menken, 2008; Visone, 2009). Standardized tests are written from the perspective of White, middle class Americans who are native English speakers (Spitzer, 2007; Kincheloe, 2003). As such, schools identified for restructuring are typically urban schools that enroll significantly higher percentages of minority and low-income students than suburban schools (Center on Education Policy, 2008). These elements combine to disadvantage teachers in lower performing urban schools because the schools where they teach are predominantly populated with minority students and non-native English speakers who traditionally score lower than their peers in suburban schools on high stakes assessments (Anyon, 2005; National Center for Policy Analysis [NCPA], 2004). When comparisons between suburban and urban schools are made, teachers in urban schools are more likely to lose their jobs because of reconstitution.

Fourth, because NCLB required schools to achieve adequate test scores for two years before being released from its restructuring policies, teachers in restructuring schools are pressured to narrow their curriculum to tested content (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Mac Iver, et al., 2003). This instructional practice is not developing 21st century skills students need to be ready for college or a career (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2007). Instead, students are largely learning only how to pass high stakes accountability tests. Therefore, as long as a maximum is put on test scores, it is likely teachers will continue to narrow their curriculum, and school turnaround reinforces this cycle (Mintrop & Trujilio, 2005; Zena, 2001).

After being federal law for over a decade, researchers oppose and express severe caution when employing the turnaround strategy to restructure a school. In their review of school reconstitution literature, Rice and Malen (2010) stated “evidence to date suggests that school reconstitution is a risky strategy... [and] calls for restraint in the deployment of this strategy until we have a stronger theoretical and empirical understanding and justification of this reform” (p. 9). Brady (2003) stated school turnaround “can work and has worked in some instances, but its success rate is limited” (p. 29), and Stuit (2010) concluded “it is easier to close a low-performing school than to turn one around” (p. 10).

To illustrate the challenges that concern researchers about school turnaround, I will present a case study of the strategy in action. This case study of Tyson Douglas High School’s (TD) restructuring experiences will help fill the void created by a dearth of qualitative narratives about the experiences of school structuring. Through this case study, I illustrate the multiple reform strategies and challenges a school faces when using the turnaround strategy to restructure.

Methodology

I used qualitative research methods for this project because it allowed me to use my participants’ words, emotions, and perspectives to study their lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As I analyzed TD’s restructuring, I found that it affected teachers in multiple ways, and it was important I used their words to describe their experiences. Central to my work, then, is that humans live “storied” lives, meaning humans use stories to share their lived experiences (Bell, 2002; Carr, 1986; Reissman, 2001). For example, when people are asked how their day was, they are likely to tell a story about their experience and not just respond with a simple “good” or “okay.” In this way, the stories humans tell become a phenomenon that can be studied, and stories can be used to deconstruct a person’s experience with a specific phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In my work, the phenomenon I studied was teachers’ experiences with school restructuring as chronicled by my participants’ stories.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect and triangulate data, I conducted in depth interviews with five participants, studied historical documents about TD, and analyzed TD’s test

scores and student demographics (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glense, 1996, Merriam, 2009).

Interviews. I conducted interviews with each of my participants that lasted 60-90 minutes each and centered on my participants' experiences working at TD while it restructured. Due to the political nature of my study, it was challenging to recruit participants to be interviewed. Many teachers I asked to be part of my study told me that they did not want to make their story public for fear of potentially losing their job. However, because I had spent considerable time in TD supervising English interns from a local university who were completing a teacher licensure program, I was able to use the relationships I built mentoring pre-service teachers to recruit participants. The participants who agreed to be interviewed individually included three English teachers who taught at TD (there were seven in the English department), TD's assistant principal, and a teacher who was released due to the reconstitution. (The other released teachers I contacted were either not geographically accessible or they would not allow me to interview them.) I conducted the interviews with TD's three English teachers in their classrooms, and I interviewed the assistant principal in her office. The teacher who was released by TD was interviewed in her home. Because TD was on the 4x4 block schedule, each teacher taught three 90-minute periods a day, had a 90-minute planning period plus a 30-minute lunch break. Their average class roster was between 15-20 students. Understanding who my participants were at the time of their interview is essential to understanding their experience with TD's restructuring.

Carmen was the administrator who the county made responsible for planning and implementing TD's school restructuring. Carmen is a White, middle-aged woman with over 15 years of experience in public education. Carmen was a high school English teacher during the 1990s in a high performing Southern high school before being promoted to assistant principal. For personal reasons, Carmen moved out of state in 2004 and was hired as an administrator at a school in the same school district as TD before being transferred to TD in 2006. In her interview, Carmen disclosed that she was personally recruited by the county's superintendent and director of curriculum to lead TD's restructuring and welcomed the professional challenge.

Pat, a White woman in her sixties, had over thirty years of experience in education, and she came to TD in 2001. Pat holds advanced degrees in education, but she did not want me to provide a detailed description of her to protect her identity. Pat taught senior English at TD, and she said "I specifically wanted to work with seniors to prepare them for college level English." I included Pat because she lost her job due to TD's reconstitution, and she explained she was still confused about it even three years after it happened.

Floyd, a White male in his forties, was included because he worked at TD before and during its restructuring. Floyd served a dual role for the school, teaching junior English half of the day and serving as a Lead Teacher for the other half. As a Lead Teacher, Floyd was responsible for mentoring early career teachers and tracking student achievement data. To mentor teachers, Floyd would wait

until a teacher approached him for help and he would meet with the teacher individually to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. Next, Floyd would observe the teacher's instruction for at least two classes before providing feedback about strategies he thought could increase that teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. To track student data, Floyd made detailed spreadsheets of students' performance on practice assessments modeled after high stakes accountability tests. Floyd would analyze student performance and then report to teachers where they should focus their instruction

Marie and *Gwen* were both White females in their mid-twenties. Both women had just earned their graduate degree in English education from a large university in the spring of 2008 and were hired by TD the following summer to replace teachers who lost their jobs because of TD's reconstitution. Marie taught junior English classes and Gwen taught sophomore English classes. At the time of their interviews, Marie and Gwen were close friends and were both completing their second year teaching at TD.

To guide my interviews, I used a protocol that featured three open-ended questions to ensure I addressed the same topics with each participant (Glense, 2006). The questions from my interview protocol included:

1. What are your beliefs about school restructuring?
2. How have you been impacted by TD's restructuring?
3. What reforms did TD use to restructure and how effective were those reforms?

Interviews were digitally recorded and I took extensive notes during them (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). After each interview, I transcribed the recording and emailed it to participants for member checking purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, I included any clarifying questions based on my notes and interview transcription (Glense, 1996). After each participant reviewed my transcription and answered any clarifying questions, I began my data analysis procedures.

To code the data, I used three layers. My first layer involved reading each transcript to identify *in vivo* codes, which were significant words and/or phrases my participants said about their experiences (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Next, I applied my own sociologically constructed codes to label my understanding of the interviews (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Because analyzing interview data is an interpretive act, my own experiences as a high school English teacher, as a researcher who studies school restructuring, and as a mentor of student teachers in TD influenced my conceptualization of my participants' comments (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore, when a participant referenced, for example, having to "sit through" a PD session, I thought of my own experiences with PD sessions and how I found myself enduring them opposed to learning from them. In this way, these connections and conceptualizations framed how I moved from *in vivo* codes to sociologically constructed codes. For my third layer of coding, I grouped the *in vivo* codes with the sociologically constructed codes into categories that included (1) *Reconstituting TD*, (2) *Providing Effective Classroom Instruction*, (3) *Fallout from*

School Reconstitution, (4) Adding Rigor to the Curriculum, and (5) Structural Reorganization. These categories became my narrative's themes.

Historical Documents. Because I sought to understand what happened to result in TD being required to restructure, I needed to put together a historical context of the school since it was founded in the late 1800s (Miller & Dingwall, 1997). To do so, I gathered newspaper articles, visited local libraries, searched the internet, and explored TD's storehouse where it keeps its memorabilia from yesteryear. Overall, I found hundreds of newspaper articles about TD starting in the 1920s and continuing through modern day. The topics of the newspaper articles reported on TD's athletic teams, parent nights, club activities, racial tensions, school reforms, parent and community involvement, and academic achievement. The local libraries had indexed reports on TD's academic achievement and minutes from the school board meetings. Additionally, the libraries had books that chronicled historical happenings in the local community, which included information about TD. Using search terms such as "history of TD," "community of TD," and "legacy of TD," I was able to find three websites that described what it was like attending TD throughout the 20th century and information about how TD was founded. One of the websites was created by a TD alumnus, and the other two websites listed encyclopedic information about TD. Finally, investigating TD's storehouse where TD houses memorabilia it no longer has room to display, I was able to touch trophies that TD's past athletic and academic teams had won, read graduation announcements, and peruse decades old yearbooks. Visiting the storehouse allowed me to physically interact with TD's past and I gained a sense of the pride its graduates felt.

Student Demographic and Test Score Data. I used the Tennessee Department of Education's (2013) website to analyze TD's test score and student demographic data from 2005-2012. Data provided demographic information about students who attended TD, student performance on the high stakes math and reading/writing tests, and graduation rates. Evaluating test score data allowed me to see trends in student achievement that warranted TD having to restructure and assess if TD's restructuring resulted in any increases of student performance on high stakes tests. The student demographic data allowed me to make comparisons between students who attended TD, its county, and Tennessee using students' race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and special education status.

Ensuring Validity

I used three different data sources - interviews, historical documents, and test score and student demographic data - to methodologically triangulate my data (Guion et al., 2011). Having diverse data sets allowed me multiple lenses to study TD's restructuring (Chenail, 1997; Denzin, 1978). To build interview validity, I used member checking (Glense, 2006). After conducting and transcribing each interview, I sent it along with any clarifying questions back to the corresponding participant. Once my participant confirmed I correctly transcribed the interview and answered any clarifying questions I had, I analyzed the interview data using the previously described process. Once the interview was analyzed, I then weaved together the data from the interviews,

historical documents, test scores, and student demographics to tell the story of TD's restructuring. To member check at this stage, I emailed the completed narrative to each participant, and pseudonyms were used in the narrative to add a layer of confidentiality for my participants and to my work. At this point, my participants confirmed that I accurately represented their experience.

Context of Tyson Douglas High School

TD is an urban high school located in the southern city of Henley (pseudonym) that was required to restructure beginning in the 2007-2008 school year. Originally, TD was two separate schools: Tyson High School and Douglas High School. Tyson High School served predominantly African-American students since the late 1800s and was an active member of its local community, and Douglas High School served predominantly White children since the 1950s and was founded by the county because of a population boom following World War II. To be in compliance with federal school integration laws, the two schools merged in 1968. After the integration, TD served predominantly Black students because the White students chose to transfer to other county schools, and by the 1980s TD was labeled a low-performing school. The county responded in the mid-1990s by spending millions of dollars to renovate TD's buildings and established it as the county's performing arts magnet school for dance, music, and theatre. However, even with the new buildings and magnet program, TD did not attract a significant amount of new students and the school continued posting low student achievement. There are no records to suggest that new teachers were recruited to TD or that its current teachers received PD to support them effectively teaching in a magnet school. As such, these renovations seem to be cosmetic and not programmatic.

In the spring of 2007, NCLB required TD to restructure after not posting adequate test scores for five consecutive years. Table 1 displays TD's 2006 and 2007 test score data in math and reading/writing and its graduation rates.

Table 1. Comparing TD's 2006 and 2007 Student Achievement Data in Math and Reading/English Language and Graduation Rates by Student Subgroup against State Target and Average Scores*

Criteria	2006 Math	2007 Math	2006 Reading/ Writing	2007 Reading/ Writing	2006 Graduation Rate	2007 Graduation Rate
State Target	75%	75%	90%	90%	90%	90%
State Average	83%	85%	91%	91%	-	-
TD Average	72%	79%	85%	76%	68.7%	67.8%
African- American	71%	77%	84%	76%	-	-

White	81%	86%	84%	84%	-	-
Low SES	71%	75%	84%	74%	-	-
Special Education	32%	66%	46%	42%	-	-

* Data retrieved from Tennessee Department of Education (<http://tn.gov/education/>)

The data in Table 1 displays that as an entire school TD did earn the test scores needed to satisfy NCLB's test score requirements in math but not in reading/writing in 2007. Moreover, because NCLB required that all student subgroups demonstrate proficiency on tests, the low test scores in math made by TD's special education student population prohibited TD from meeting NCLB's testing requirement. Additionally, written into NCLB is a "Safe Harbor" clause that allowed for schools to bypass some of NCLB's testing requirements if certain criteria are met:

A school that falls short of the... [test score requirement] for a subgroup of students will avoid being identified for improvement under the safe harbor provision if (a) the percentage of students who score below the proficient level [on one assessment] has decreased by at least 10% from the year before, and (b) there is improvement for the subgroup on other indicators [other indicators includes metrics such as graduation and attendance rates] (Linn, 2003, p. 17).

TD's students did not earn the scores necessary for the school to qualify for safe harbor when comparing TD's student achievement data from 2006 to 2007. No student subgroup experienced the necessary gains on the math or reading/writing exams to qualify for safe harbor. When comparing TD's student achievement and graduation rates from 2006 to 2007, student test scores in reading/writing and graduation rates dropped in every category. Therefore, TD did not post the student achievement scores required to meet NCLB's testing requirements or safe harbor provision and subsequently had to restructure.

As compared to its county and state, TD has a significantly larger African-American and low socioeconomic (SES) student populations and a significantly smaller White student population than its county and state, and Table 2 displays the TD's student demographic in the year it was officially required to restructure.

Table 2. The Demographics of TD's Students for 2007 as Compared to its County and State*

<u>Student Subgroup</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>State</u>
African-American	90.6%	14.7%	24.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.2%	1.9%	1.6%
Hispanic	0.7%	2.8%	4.6%
White	8.4%	80.3%	68.8%

Low SES 90.4% 41.2% 54.7%
 *Data retrieved from Tennessee Department of Education
 (<http://tn.gov/education/>)

These statistics reflect the migration of White students away from TD that occurred following the 1968 integration of Tyson High School and Douglas High School. TD's demographics also reflect that schools with large populations of minority students are more likely to be required to restructure than schools with large majority student populations (Anyon, 2005; Center on Education Policy, 2008; NCPA, 2004; US Department of Education, 2012). As such, TD began its process of school restructuring following the 2006-2007 school year.

The Story of Tyson Douglas High School's Restructuring

When NCLB required a school to restructure, the school had to select and implement one of NCLB's outlined strategies. However, education researchers strongly suggest schools use multiple reforms because there is no "one-size-fits-all" silver bullet for school restructuring (Brady, 2003; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995), and TD implemented multiple school restructuring strategies. The restructuring strategies TD selected included NCLB's school turnaround option combined with replacing TD's principal and administrative team, providing teachers with PD, realigning course offerings, and overhauling the school's structural organization. The following is a story of how TD implemented these restructuring strategies and how TD's English teachers reacted to them.

Over the summer of 2007, county officials decided TD would implement school turnaround. The literature about school restructuring strongly supports changing school leadership to ensure a dynamic and innovative principal and administrative team are in place to effectively lead the school through the reconstitution and restructuring processes (Hassel, et al., 2010), and the county changed TD's leadership during the 2007-2008 school year. To make the leadership change, the county's superintendent and director of curriculum first recruited Carmen to be TD's curriculum principal charged with planning and leading the restructuring effort in the fall of 2007, and the county replaced TD's then head principal with Principal King in the spring of 2008. During these leadership changes, Carmen explained TD's teachers had "no idea what we are doing [about restructuring the school]... there was a lot of anxiety, a lot of anxiety." Carmen commented that the teachers were not informed about the county's plan to change TD's leadership; rather, the county just made the changes. Carmen said, "On a Friday he [the former principal] was removed and on the Monday Mr. King was here." However, once TD's leadership was changed, Carmen and King began working to reconstitute TD's faculty and staff.

Reconstituting TD: The First Layer of School Turnaround

NCLB's description of school turnaround does not give any specific guidelines or procedures about how to reconstitute a staff. Therefore, Carmen and King had to develop their own process, which Carmen described.

We had to give letters to everyone on the staff... that they were being let go eventually, but that they had the opportunity to reapply for their job. There was no guarantee that they would get it, but they could certainly reapply. So, at that point, it was the first of May, the middle of May, Mr. King and I started interviewing, and we interviewed 100, approximately 100, people within a three-week period of time. It was just boom, boom, boom.

According to the teachers, the rush to reconstitute the school, and to interview the staff, affected their interview experiences. Pat, an English teacher not asked to return, said it was “one of the most bizarre interviews I’ve ever had. I showed up on time, the people who were interviewing [me] were not present... when they finally showed up, they brought their lunches and they ate lunch while they talked to me.” Floyd, another English teacher who was asked to return, said, “It [the interview process] was strange. Um, you know, just because everyone knew what was going on, and everyone had their interviews scheduled, and you’d go down, and it, it just had a weird, uh, feeling to it.”

According to Pat and Floyd, when the reconstitution process was implemented, it did not feel respectful or genuine. Rather, it felt awkward and rushed, likely because of the hurry Carmen and King were under to reconstitute the school. In fact, Carmen questioned how effective she and King were in evaluating teachers when she said, “I knew nothing of the existing teachers other than test scores.” In no way could Carmen and King acquire a realistic estimation of a teacher’s worth based on a quick interview and a glimpse of his or her students’ test scores, especially since both Carmen and King had been at TD for less than one year. However, to help her better assess each candidate she interviewed, Carmen asked each interviewee to define term *rigor* as it related to teaching. In response, Carmen made determinations about the teacher. Carmen said:

‘To give more work,’ [or] ‘To give extra homework,’ most of the people that gave that response didn’t get rehired. Then there was some who said, ‘It doesn’t mean to give more work, it means to go deeper. It means to create more critical thinking opportunities.’ You know, people who clearly knew what rigor was.

From Carmen’s perspective, teachers’ conceptualization of rigor was the key point if they would or would not be rehired. Carmen felt this way because her belief was that the academic rigor across the entire school had to be raised if student achievement on the high stakes accountability tests was to increase.

Following the interviews, Carmen and King had the responsibility to inform teachers if they were rehired or released, and Carmen described that process. “I think, [it was] the second to the last day of school, and they [human resource personnel from the district] gave them all [TD’s faculty and staff who had reapplied for their job] envelopes, manila envelopes in the [school’s] library that said ‘you’ve been rehired’ or ‘you’ve not been rehired’.” About how the released teachers responded to finding out they no longer had a job, Carmen said, “some people were pretty upset. Uh, some people had nasty things to say. Others were like, ‘Great, I didn’t want to come back here anyway.’” Pat, who was released,

said the whole process and news was “simply demoralizing.” In fact, Carmen concurred with Pat and expressed remorse about how the teachers were informed. “If I knew then what I know now, I would have never allowed that kind of process to happen in a building I was in. I felt like it was very impersonal, very, um, it didn’t sit well with me.” Overall, Carmen reported that she and King released 40% of TD’s staff, and she said the reason they did not release everyone was because “no one is going to know the nuances of this school, the culture of this school.” In this instance, Carmen paid respect to the history of TD and its culture, but her decision to retain 60% of TD’s original staff caused her and TD’s new staff problems. In retrospect, Carmen said, “If I knew then what I know now, I would have reversed that. I would have kept 40% and hired 60% new.”

During the summer of 2007, Carmen and King recruited replacements for the released teachers. Gwen, an English teacher who was hired at this time, said, “They didn’t tell me a lot about that [TD being restructured]. They told me they were hiring a lot of new teachers and that they were more interested in hiring the new teachers because they knew they could shape them to become what they needed.” According to Gwen, Carmen and King withheld important details about TD and its restructuring process. The only details Gwen reported receiving was that Carmen and King were interested in new teachers because the new teachers would come into TD without any experience, which would allow Carmen and King to form them into any type of teacher they wanted, and Carmen corroborated that in her interview by explaining new teachers would give TD what she “wanted, a fresh start.”

Providing Effective Classroom Instruction: Training TD’s Teachers

Following the summer, King and Carmen opened the first year of TD’s restructuring by having its teachers attend 10 days of mandatory PD. This PD required TD’s teachers report back to school 10 days before teachers in any other school in TD’s county reported back. The reason King and Carmen could make this PD mandatory was because the reconstitution required all of TD’s teacher to sign new contracts containing an extended time clause that added 15 more working days to their school calendar. (Teachers were monetarily compensated for their additional work.) This entire time was reserved for PD. During the 2007-2008 school year, teachers spent 10 of those days in PD sessions before the year began, and they spent five additional days in PD sessions during the school year. Carmen explained that the county outsourced the PD to an educational management organization (EMO). Teachers did not provide input about the PD’s topics, but the PD focused on instructional techniques aligned to the work of Marzano’s (2004) *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Carmen said it was a “huge relief” to have the EMO responsible for the PD because “there needed to be a tremendous amount of PD done here.” Plus, Carmen explained that she and King still “had to learn the culture of the school” and did not have the time to facilitate the PD, and Floyd made very positive comments about the PD.

It [the PD] made me even more excited and from that standpoint I left... really fired up because they were teaching the whole staff new

strategies... [including] gallery walks, gosh, all of Marzano's strategies, I mean, we just started tearing them up. They modeled for us at PD and then we talked about how we can apply it to our classroom.

However, Floyd's excitement was not reflected by the newly hired teachers. Gwen said the PD facilitator "just had a few methods that were just how to get kids engaged, or how to encourage kids to think about what they are learning, to communicate or share what they are learning... he acted like think-pair-share was the newest and hottest thing." Marie, another new English teacher, said:

It [the PD] really was, a flashback to grad school, so everything that the other teachers were learning for the very first time, I had just finished in graduate school. So, I, I was trying to walk on eggshells and not seem bored because I was trying to not give the impression that I was not above this or anything.

Even though Gwen and Marie had a negative impression of the PD, Floyd said "I saw immediately a difference in the students because [when] they came into class, first of all, they would know how to do the strategies already because they had done them in three or four classes, so they knew the process and the protocol." However, as the school year progressed, teachers stopped using what they learned in the PD sessions. After having spoken highly about the quality of the PD and the effect it was having on TD's students, Floyd lamented that a walk-through initiative begun by TD's administrators to ensure teachers were using the strategies taught in the PD session was not sustained. About the walk-through initiative, Floyd said:

They just walked through [our classrooms] and looked at what strategies we were doing. We were hanging our lesson plans on the door, we had to put which Marzano strategies we were going to use those days, and they would come and look and check, and I mean, it was amazing. I was like 'yes, this is the change, this is it' ... um, but, there was just enormous backslide after the first few months.

One reason for "the backslide" may have been the pressure Carmen and King were under to improve TD's student performance. Although Carmen said no specific deadline was put on them, they "were expected to really transform this school quickly," and that required them to attend multiple meetings with the superintendent, plan how the school would be reorganized into small learning communities (SLCs), and monitor students' assessment scores. As such, these tasks took time away from TD's administrators being able to monitor teachers. Additionally, they had the obstacle of mending together a staff that had been torn apart by the reconstitution. Moreover, this division was a challenge that TD never conquered during its first year of restructuring, and it affected TD's new teachers and school reforms.

A Divided Staff: Fallout from School Reconstitution

As all of TD's teachers returned for the open of the 2007-2008 school year, my participants reported there was an obvious staff divide. Gwen said, "There was certainly an old staff-new staff kind of thing... it was kind of apparent that we all

[the newly hired teachers] had something to prove I guess. You know, we were supposed to come in and save the school, and that we are supposed to save it from them [the teachers who survived the reconstitution]." The idea that the new teachers were hired to "save the school" likely developed from the perspective that the old staff's incompetence resulted in TD having to restructure, and it was the new staff's responsibility to ensure that did not happen again. Marie said about the staff divide, "It's older [teachers] against younger [teachers]. It's 'new to the building' against 'been in the building a long time'... I mean, it's a very clear, clear divide." To further explain, Marie made a verbal comparison of TD's Old and New teachers in her interview as represented in Table 3.

Table 3. A Comparison of Old and New TD

Characteristic	TD's Old Teachers	TD's New Teachers
Motto	"We get by and no one bothers us"	"They are going to do whatever is thrown at them, and they are going to try to make the school successful however they can"
Race	"African-American"	"The majority of us are White"
Age	"45-50"	"Younger, under 35 for the most part"
Teaching Experience	"Most have over 10 years experience"	"Relatively new to teaching, with five or less years experience"
Education	"Do not have master's degrees and have not been through a [traditional] teacher education program"	"Everyone that was hired after the reconstruction had to have a master's degree"
Route to Certification	"Certified through an alternative license program"	"Came in through a traditional college of education teacher program"
Emphasis	"Athletics"	"Academics"

According to Carmen, having a divided staff resulted in Old TD teachers being "very resistant" to implementing school reforms, including her decision to "collapse the tracks."

Adding Rigor to the Curriculum: Reforming the Academic Tracks

"Collapsing the Tracks" is a term Carmen used to mean TD went from offering fundamental, regular, college-placement (CP), and honors courses to only offering CP classes. Carmen explained that it was not because the kids in the

lower-tiered tracks were less intelligent; they were just unmotivated because “they just had never been expected to do anything. So we eliminated all fundamental classes.” By collapsing the tracks, it was an attempt to increase TD’s academic rigor. No longer could a student attend classes with low expectations. Rather, the idea behind collapsing the tracks was that students would be required to take classes with higher expectations that would better prepare them for academic success, college, and the workforce. However, new and old teachers responded negatively to this change.

Collapsing the tracks affected teachers differently based on their experience. For example, Floyd explained that once teachers get “promoted” because of seniority, they get “rewarded” by teaching mostly juniors and seniors. Because TD was struggling with student dropout rates, the quality of students increased as they got to 11th and 12th grade because the students who were not academically successful typically dropped out of TD by this time. Floyd saw this practice as unfair because it hurt TD’s newly hired teachers, who mostly taught younger students,

In regards to the challenges that resulted from collapsing the tracks, Gwen said she was told she could “meet all their [her students] needs through differentiation. Whatever that meant... To differentiate instruction was something I’ve always heard about, and, you know, loosely attempted in my internship... [but] no one tells you or prepares for how to differentiate for every student in your classroom.” Marie added:

I was really, really, really shocked by the fact that I was teaching a class that was totally mixed in ability, and it was a CP class, but that some of the students were soooo low. They were elementary level in their reading, and then I had students, my higher students, were struggling with even grade-level [texts], and I was really confused about how I was supposed to meet all their needs... I was told to just ‘differentiate’ for them, and I am still trying to figure out what that means. Some people have large print, some people have different assignments, some people have different tests, some people are only required to do part of their work, or some people are required to do something else. So every class day is kind of like a smathering of what’s going on. So, I’ve got better in that, but I had no idea.

Because TD’s more experienced teachers were given older, higher achieving students to teach even after the school reconstituted, the burden fell to TD’s less experienced teachers to teach the more challenging classes and lower achieving students. When they voiced their concerns about meeting the needs of their students, Gwen and Marie were told to differentiate their instruction; however, because they were new teachers, Gwen and Marie were still learning how to effectively differentiate their instruction and the PD they received during the previous summer did not offer them any methods for differentiating instruction. In this way, Carmen’s decision to collapse TD’s academic tracks may have actually hurt TD’s newly hired teachers and the instruction their students

received. The other major restructuring initiative launched during the 2007-2008 school year was to redesign TD into SLCs.

Structural Reorganization: Rethinking TD's School Design

A high school redesigning itself into SLCs is attempting to increase student achievement by breaking itself down from being a faceless, intimidating comprehensive high school to one where students gain an identity (Nieto, 2000). Oxley (2001) defined SLCs as "an interdisciplinary team of teachers that shares a group of no more than 500 students for a large part of their instructional time in a physical space dedicated to their collaboration" (p. 7). Marie explained TD redesigned into SLCs because "one of the main goals was to keep the classroom ratio small in order to both build relationships with students and to individualize instruction because we knew, with our clientele that we are working with, a lot them are not on grade level." To organize TD into SLCs, Carmen reported they started by creating a 9th grade SLC in 2007-2008 and then TD would add two more SLCs for students in 10th-12th grade the following years. Carmen explained "The reason we went with this model was that in 9th grade they'd be so tight [because]... they'd have the same principal, the same counselor, the same Project Grad person, all the way through for three years to develop the relationship piece that is super important here." After having the SLCs implemented for the first year, Carmen reported positive results:

We got the right administrator, Lead teacher, we got this team of teachers and they're all upstairs in one hallway. And they [freshmen students] are pretty much sequestered up there unless they go to an elective. And they've taken those kids, they've transformed those 160 kids from coming in here, and they didn't care about what really happened or classes or anything else to conversations that I'm hearing going on up there, 'how many honors classes can I take?' 'Can I take an AP class when I'm in 10th grade?' And we, you never heard conversations like that.

Though Carmen was still new to TD, she identified a changing culture at TD based on her observations of what she saw happening in the 9th grade SLC. For example, Carmen went from seeing students entering TD and not being engaged in their academic work to asking about advanced classes they can take the following year. Carmen cited the move to SLCs as a main success of TD's restructuring. However, Carmen was only able to provide anecdotal stories to justify the effectiveness of TD's SLCs, and other teachers saw the SLCs as working against developing students' abilities to be successful in college. Gwen reported:

They are not autonomous, they are not self-directed, they are not able to solve their own problems. They have received all these supports because of the restructuring money [such as]... the SLC principal, they have administrative assistant for that persons, they have a Lead teacher, they [students] have someone to come get them and say 'turn in this work to Mrs. Gwen' they don't have that [in college]. They have it all through their, their senior year, we do all this work to get them graduated and

then they go to college, and, uh, they struggle because there are none of the supports in college.

From Gwen's point of view, the SLCs were actually working against preparing students for college success by only coddling students until they graduated. Essentially, Gwen saw the SLCs as setting students up for failure once they leave for college. However, Marie saw the SLCs in a more positive light. Marie saw SLCs as being efficient, autonomous communities within TD. Marie said, "I get great reports from teachers working with the freshman... When there is a problem, they are able to handle it immediately because they are all on one hallway, the administrators can get there if need be or pull a kid out and talk to them." From Marie's perspective, she keyed on how the 9th grade is self-reliant and makes TD more productive. No longer were TD's administrators searching for students; rather, because of the close proximity the SLCs provided, it allowed for TD's administrators do their job more efficiently.

Where are they now: A Participant Epilogue

Education researchers strongly support sustaining school reforms, which includes keeping the same personnel in position for multiple years (Datnow & Stringfeld, 2000; Fullan 2001). In TD's scenario, this was not the case. Following the 2010-2011 school year, the county transferred Carmen from TD and installed her as the head principal in a different, higher-performing high school after she had planned and implemented the first years of TD's restructuring. During that same summer, Marie transferred from TD and became the English department head at the county's new Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math magnet school. Additionally, Floyd applied for and received a new position at a different high school in the same county. In his new position, Floyd became that school's Lead teacher and no longer spent half his day in the classroom. One year later, Gwen transferred from TD and joined Floyd at his new school. This personnel movement corroborates previously conducted related to high teacher turnover that low-performing schools experience (Desimone, 2002; Sindelar et al., 2006).

Effectiveness of TD's Restructuring

For a school to successfully restructure and return to good standing during the era of NCLB, it has to post proficient test scores on high stakes assessments for two consecutive years as determined by its state. In the years following its restructuring, TD failed to post the test scores it needed as displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparing TD's 2008 and 2009 Student Achievement Data in Math and Reading/English Language and Graduation Rates by Student Subgroup against State Target and Average Scores*

Criteria	Math 2008	Math 2009	Reading/ Writing 2008	Reading/ Writing 2009	Graduation Rate 2008	Graduation Rate 2009
State Target	83%	83%	93%	93%	90%	90%

State Average	87%	89%	93%	94%	-	-
TD Average	76%	62%	90%	88%	75.2%	74.9%
African-American	75%	63%	89%	87%	76.9%	76.5%
White	88%	55%	90%	96%	55%	58.8%
Low SES	76%	59%	88%	85%	-	-
Special Education	39%	22%	54%	79%	-	-

*Data retrieved from Tennessee Department of Education (<http://tn.gov/education/>)

When looking across Table 4's data, TD's student achievement fell in both math and reading/writing in 2008 and 2009. In math, TD's average student achievement data fell by 14 percentage points and TD's average student achievement in reading/writing fell by two percentage points. Additionally, TD's graduation rate remained stagnant. Looking at these indicators, TD's restructuring efforts did not effectively result in improved student achievement.

Discussion

As a nation, we made a promise that all citizens are entitled to a quality education (US Dept. of Education, 2010). However, school restructuring efforts that become policy but do not result in significant increases in student achievement undermine our ability to fulfill that commitment. If we are going to successfully restructure schools, we should use strategies that support teachers, not fire them. In that notion, I propose an alternative school restructuring strategy.

Partner Schools

Drawing from the literature about professional learning communities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010) and teacher mentor programs (Barrera et al, 2010; Moir et al., 2009), I propose a partner-school restructuring model where low-performing and high-performing schools in the same county would create a "teacher-exchange" program. Instead of a reconstitution scenario where teachers who were deemed "ineffective" may be at jeopardy for losing their jobs, selected teachers from the low-performing school would transfer into a higher performing school in the same county for two years. In their new school, the selected teachers would be assigned classes to teach and a mentor teacher. With their mentors, the selected teachers would study best teaching strategies (Marzano et al., 2004), conduct action research (Kincheloe, 2003), and use reflective practices (Brubacher, et al., 1994) while teaching at their partner school. Additionally, the selected teachers would be required to learn how to collaborate across the curriculum, analyze student test data, and engage any other school-wide initiatives. The intent then is to build the selected teachers' instructional skill levels and conceptualizations of how an effective school

works. That way, when they return to their school after two years, they will have a stronger teaching foundation.

To work effectively, teachers from the higher performing school would then transfer into the lower performing school for two years, which may require the use of monetary incentives. As these teachers join the lower performing school's faculty, they would be assigned classes to teach and be asked to share their best teaching strategies through instructional workshops and/or classroom demonstrations. Additionally, after spending 6-12 months becoming part of the lower performing school's culture, these teachers would recommend to the principal specific reforms that could be implemented to increase student learning, teacher effectiveness, and school-wide collaboration. The remainder of their time in the lower-performing school would be used to develop a plan for implementing specific recommendations that the principal agreed to and begin executing them. The benefits of this restructuring model as opposed to the turnaround model include:

1. Teachers from both higher and lower performing schools will have a unique experience that will most likely strengthen their teaching practices;
2. Teachers from lower performing schools will be provided support in how they can improve their instruction instead of being released;
3. Lower performing schools that previously implemented the turnaround strategy would not have to scramble to hire inexperienced teachers to replace released teachers;
4. Collaboration will be emphasized opposed to top-down reform agendas;
5. The cost of incentivizing teachers from higher performing schools to transfer into lower performing schools is likely negligible compared to the cost of hiring and training a cadre of rookie teachers;
6. By having teachers from higher performing schools teach in lower performing schools, it will likely increase their conceptualization of lower performing schools and the challenges they face.

When looking back at TD's experiences with school restructuring, Carmen and King were put in a situation where they had to make quick decisions about releasing teachers, and individual support for newly hired teachers who were struggling with differentiating their instruction to meet the needs of their students was not offered. Moreover, the overall result of TD's restructuring efforts was not increased student achievement; rather, it was that TD's English teachers and assistant principal left while student achievement remained stagnant, at best. If the goal of turning around schools is to increase student achievement, an approach that supports teachers and students needs to be used to restructure schools. The proposed "teacher exchange" program takes that aim, and the current school turnaround strategy does not.

Limitations

My study was limited to the data I gathered from my participants, the historical documents I found, and the information posted online. I was not privy to the actual meetings between the district and TD's administrators, and my

involvement with TD began after the school had been restructuring for three years. Additionally, I delimited my study to only TD's English teachers, which made my pool of potential participants smaller.

Also, when working with narrative, researchers tend to become part of the story and I was no exception (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As I worked through the data, I was the individual who ultimately chose the quotes, events, and happenings to include, not my participants. My own experiences of being a former English teacher in a low performing school and working as a mentor for interns who completed their student teaching experience at TD informed how I viewed TD's restructuring and the work of my participants.

Conclusion

School restructuring is not an easy process, and there are no "correct" methods to turnaround a school. Moreover, to determine which strategies actually were useful when a school does successfully restructure is comparable to trying to get the egg out of a cake once it has been baked. In my study, I discussed how TD used multiple school improvement initiatives to help it restructure, but none of my participants keyed in on one specific strategy that was "the" strategy to improve student achievement, and TD's test score data suggests that none of the school reform strategies were effective. Additionally, the teacher attrition rate TD experienced suggests TD's restructuring did not result in it becoming a place where teachers wanted to work. As such, I offered "Partner Schools" as an alternative model for school restructuring, which emphasizes growth, support, and understanding for teachers and low performing schools. As education policies continue to use test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools and teachers, we must go about the work of transforming low performing schools into higher performing schools by using reforms that are caring to our teachers and students.

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