

Chapter Ten: Brewing a Crisis:
Language, Educational Reform, and the Defense of a Nation

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How Is A Crisis Brewed?

This chapter is about the language of national crisis—especially how crisis functions as a powerful metaphor in public discourse about educational reform. Leaders attempt to influence citizens' beliefs and actions in order to effect change, often in terms of "crisis." Such crises have personal consequences but are presented or perceived as problems of large scale and broad impact. They do not arise within, nor are they expressed by individuals. The characterization of a problem as a national crisis is a sociolinguistic transformation of that problem into an urgent call for organized response. The crisis is situated in a particular time, place, and social context. It is described in terms of the problem, its cause, the urgent need for decisive change, and the nature and content of that change.

A problem of authenticity in educational change exists when crises are not experienced or acknowledged directly and locally. If such is the case, persuasion is needed to convince educators that, indeed, a problem of practice has reached proportions threatening the national welfare. The cyclic appearance of an urgent call for reform in education is sometimes referred to by practitioners as the inevitable "swinging of the pendulum." However, identification of a national crisis sometimes illuminates problems in disparate locales, thus raising them to national significance. In addition, (inter)national crises may affect US society in ways that call for response in education policy and practice. This chapter offers examples of the varied contexts for and negotiation of crises in 20th Century US education.

Who Brews Crises in Education—How and Why?

As noted above, the metaphor of the swinging pendulum is often used to characterize educational changes. Yet, if we look across the last century, the path of change seems circuitous. At intervals roughly approximating the political ascendancy of various parties or social movements, leaders have used crisis-laden rhetoric to attempt to change the nation's direction, and education has played a part in that process (e.g. the Presidential Report, "A Nation at Risk"). There have also been occasions when an unexpected national or international event has been interpreted as a moment of crisis in which education should play a central role (e.g. the Cold War launch of Sputnik by the U.S.S.R.). Thus, although they are neither as predictable nor as repetitious as the swinging pendulum, education-related crises are frequent and they alter our society's educational trajectory.

Regardless of their source, crisis calls are made by leaders and resemble one another in form and function. They depend on core narratives and make heavy use of metaphor to accomplish the following: (a) identify clear and present danger, (b) assert the decisive changes to be made (typically framed by leaders and the experts who advise them), and (c) call citizens to action. Notwithstanding their variety, the rhetoric of national crises tends to reinforce the structural features of public institutions even as it calls for changes in their activities. This is because in the national crises of the last century we typically sought to regain order, not to create new order. However, as we will see in the examples below, since crises and their narratives are of human creation and proportions, they can, in Elbow's terms, be "believed or doubted" (1986). Moreover, we can tell new and different stories of change and respond to them in novel ways (Florio-Ruane, 1997).

One of the most powerful figures of speech we use to accomplish change in times of crisis is *metaphor*. When orators use metaphor to move readers and listeners, they are using a heightened form of the ordinary human capacity to make and share experiences by means of figurative language. In Lakoff and Johnson's words, "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is metaphorical in nature" (1980, p. 3). Thus, metaphors can shape consciousness in an individual life history and in a nation's shared history. In an analysis of the role of experience in the education of literacy teachers, Rosaen and I (2008) wrote that, "metaphors are...central to how we explore and understand the world because they provide an experiential framework for making sense of abstract concepts" (p. 706).

Since the entwining of language, thought, and culture happens as part of ordinary experience, we come to hold, and share tacit meanings passed on within cultural groups. We often do not recognize how our interpretations and actions have been shaped by powerful social rhetoric. We can see evidence of this in the ways that we readily assimilate ideas and situations into our vocabulary and take them for granted as "the way things are." This is a decidedly mixed blessing. It enables us to develop a working consensus with one another quickly and with relative ease, but it also enables us to take shared understanding for granted. This can close off inquiry and authentic dialogue in our personal and professional relationships as well as in our response to problems (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001).

In the past decade, for example, in my practice as a teacher educator, I have noticed how even the greenest of newcomers to literacy teaching readily pick up and use acronyms associated with reading education policy in the nation and my state (e.g. NCLB, AYP, GLCES). Along with this shared fluency comes the assumption of common knowledge of what these acronyms mean, belief in their objectivity, and expectation of their durable reality in a teacher's career. Thus, if asked, "Why are you teaching that literacy strategy?" the newcomer may reply, "Because it's a GLCE." (This acronym is pronounced, "glick," and refers to Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations.) When asked, "What is a GLCE?" the response is typically, "It is a strategy I am expected to teach."

As a teacher educator, I try to help my students risk breaking this sociolinguistic frame. Acknowledging the ubiquity of the GLCEs, I urge my students to put them aside for a while and to try their hand at designing curriculum. In this way, they begin to think about teaching literacy by asking such questions as, What do my students know? How can I find out? What do they need to learn? Why is it important for them to learn this? How will I help them learn it? How will I know that they have learned it? This shift centers their practice, students, and local context. It highlights the need for their thoughtful action as educators. We will return to this idea at the end of the chapter.

Crises in Education and the "Nation as a Family"

A fundamental metaphor by which we understand ourselves as a society is that of "the nation as a family" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 49). This metaphor is tapped—implicitly or explicitly—in times of crisis. Lakoff notes the depth and durability of "the nation as family," as a cultural metaphor by pointing out, for example,

We have Founding Fathers, The Daughters of the American Revolution. We 'send our sons' (sic) to war. This is a natural metaphor because we usually understand large social groups, like nations, in terms of small ones, like families or communities" (ibid., p. 5).

When we think about something large in terms of something small, or something "experience distant" in terms of something "experience near," (Geertz, 1973), we are *not de facto* exercising reductionism. Both the familiar and the unfamiliar (or the small and the large) are complex. It is the association of the two in metaphor that permits us to contemplate complexity—as Pinker (2008) says, metaphor "efs the ineffable." What Pinker means is that something we otherwise would find difficult to contemplate or comprehend becomes easier to understand when we think about it in terms of something more familiar, immediate, or concrete. Thus, for example, we can contemplate the history of our kinship relationships with the familiar image of the "family tree."

There are two problems associated with such "effability." First, the small is not the large—they are schematically related. If we confuse one with the other, we will distort rather than illuminate aspects of the complexity of each. This problem is a serious one if we are trying to theorize, predict, or control what is happening in one context based on our understanding of it by analogy to another. Second, the power to use the human capacity for metaphor to move large groups of people to a shared sense of meaning and collective action is socially consequential.

In Classical times, it was thought essential to master the skills of oratory, especially the rhetorical skills of persuasion by means of using figurative language, in order to lead (Lentriccia & McLaughlin, 1990). It is important but difficult to apply checks and balances to such power precisely because of its transparency, its use of ordinary sense making to shape ideology and its enactment. Pursuing the complexity of the nation as family metaphor, for example, Lakoff wonders, "If there are two different understandings of the nation, do they come from two different understandings of family?" (2006; the information referred to here draws on Lakoff's text, pp. 50-66). Hesuggests that how you view the nation as a family depends on your sense of the safety of that family in the context of world events—both those directly experienced and those about which you are told. This, in turn, influences the kind of parenting you value.

A dangerous worldview, Lakoff suggests, calls for a "strict father" that can (1) protect the family in a dangerous world, (2) support the family in the difficult world, and (3) teach his children right from wrong. In contrast, a view of the world as a safe place invites nurturance rather than vigilance. In Lakoff's terms, such a national family would value the following: (1) If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that. Therefore, freedom is a value; (2) You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore, opportunity and prosperity are values; and (3) If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore, fairness is a value.

Teachers Reading the Rhetoric of Crisis

Multiple calls to national crisis have characterized education as problem, solution, or both. The crisis-driven rhetoric of educational reform tips toward the strict parent. However, even in crisis, teaching must balance discipline with nurturance of the child's developing intellect, convention with invention (Bruner, 1960/77). Rosaen and I argue that it is a particular aspect of the educator's professional identity to be acutely sensitive to words and meanings in context and to avoid confusing naming (e.g. the 'struggling reader') with knowing how to enact practices (e.g. that support all learners to become successful readers). Educators must take the time to investigate meaning and pay attention to the rhetoric of teaching—what it is like, and what it reveals (paraphrased, 2008, p. 720).

Slowing down or stopping to look closely at our language and activity during a crisis is counter-intuitive. Yet it is precisely because national educational crises are rhetorical that we need not only to react to them, but also to "read" them. The remainder of this chapter "reads" three 20th Century crises involving educational reform in the US that have had implications for all teachers and, in the case of the most recent, particular implications for teachers of literacy. They occurred in (1) the inter-war years of the Great Depression in the 1930's; (2) the Cold War launch of Sputnik in the 1950's; and (3) recent era of reform under the law, No Child Left Behind, spanning 2001-2007. The chapter concludes with reflections on the need for educators, especially those who specialize in language and literacy, to be aware of how their pedagogy can be shaped, directed, or limited by the powerful rhetoric of crisis.

The Inter-War Years: All Hands on Deck!

Headlines of crisis rock the news. Reading reports of war, terrorism, and economic decline, we turn to the editorial page. There we find a highly charged essay turning on the metaphor of the "ship of state" in danger.

The mariner blown out of his course by adverse winds and sailing long under clouded heavens among dangerous reefs seizes the first opportunity to get his bearings and chart his way by fixed marks of sky or land. Likewise, in the management of human affairs, although the analogy is not exact, it is often necessary for leaders of the State, the professions, and callings,

amid great disturbances, to take their reckonings—to recur to first principles. This applies to education as well as to other branches of national interest and activity. None is independent of the others.

The essay identifies a crisis, rallies a collective response, and conveys what that response must be. The authors tell us that navigation of the ship to safety will be the interdependent effort. All must work together to figure out how to point the ship in the right direction. The language of this 1937 essay (published by the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association of the United States and the Department of Superintendence), as well as the crisis it names and the solution it offers, seem contemporary.

If you were to read this essay in today's news, its content, tone, or rhetoric would not surprise you. However, it was published at a time when the nation and the world were reeling from the shock of the First World War and struggling to survive an ensuing worldwide economic depression. The parallels in its rhetoric of crisis and those we have heard at times of reform in our own careers are striking. For example, the essay continues,

Since the outbreak of the . . . war . . . American society has faced disconcerting issues at home and abroad, has experienced storms of passion, and encountered the vicissitudes of a profound economic dislocation. The human and economic destruction of the war itself, the ensuing overthrow of governments and social systems . . . the collapse of prosperity in the United States . . . have shaken American thought and practice from center to circumference.

To find our way, it asserts, we must return to "first principles" and, since educators are among the crew, teachers will major role to play in rescuing the ship of state in crisis—it is a role of re-asserting core knowledge. Reading on however, we are told that education is not only a part of the solution, but also implicated in the crisis. Failing to keep democratic principles strong, teachers left the nation unprepared to weather the storms of national and international events. The authors write that

The war and the economic crisis accentuated the problem of the schools and added new cares to old burdens; but distracting issues arose. Their origins lie deeper than military events and economic stringency, and they will not be automatically settled by a guarantee of peace or a return of prosperity. Indeed, apart from immediate distresses, the chief effect of the financial shortage has been to make the teaching profession and the interested public acutely aware of the challenges and claims that had been dimly discerned years before the war and the panic broke upon the normal course of history.

Thus, the essay enjoins teachers to help save the nation, yet it also reminds them that they are part of a crew that let the ship drift. The metaphor of the Ship of State in crisis and the teacher finds her/himself caught in a revolving door where he or she is both problem and solution. The essay evokes the image of teacher as both "vigilant father" and "indulgent mother"—strict yet also lax—in ways that have put both children and the nation at risk.

Blurring the metaphors of the nation as a family and the ship of state, we recognize a strict father/captain responsibly commanding a hierarchy of people who, themselves, hold official ranks, rights, and duties. It is a closed society marked by interdependence with explicit rules and meanings. The ship of state is described in the 1937 essay was rocked not only on the stormy seas of worldwide conflict in ideologies, cross-national power struggles, and the rapid changes brought about by modern technologies, but it has been also been transformed by immigration, a world war, and intense poverty. It cannot afford ignorance of core democratic values, lack of a common language and literacy, of internal moral lassitude. The captain shouts, "All hands on deck!" and educators are immediately summoned to action under the captain's command.

"Crisis" interrupts ordinary, chronological time ("chronos"). The interruption calls for a swift response that takes the form of decisive change of course. This is a moment of danger and of opportunity, what Biblical scholars, and rhetoricians call, "*kairos*" (Erickson, 2004). This state of change can reinforce hierarchies but it can also be revolutionary, opening up possibilities of new action. As such, crisis can be a powerful catalyst for the making (or re-making) of society and identity. But there is a difference between a crisis that is experienced as authentic (either by way of powerful events of a social or natural cause or by powerful persuasion by leaders) and the rhetorical act of calling a national crisis—using the language and images of crisis metaphorically to prompt a particular response or to define a situation and the identities of its participants in particular ways. The former will present a moment of decisive change, while the latter may call for change but be resisted.

For those of us who live within, wrestle with, and/or study such narratives in our practice as literacy educators, according to Whitebrook, "the process of narrative construction is relevant inasmuch as it makes the point that identity is narratively made, and shows what that means for an understanding of political identity" (2001, p. 5). The authors of the 1937 position statement were using the metaphor of the "ship of state" to tell a particular story about the role of education in a democracy authentically in crisis. Over the ensuing seventy years, powerful voices seemed cyclically to proclaim that the nation was in crisis—either by force of events or by effort at political persuasion. The results were mixed, but teaching and teacher identity would be located in the eye of every one of these storms.

The Cold War, Sputnik, and Educational Identity

The "Cold War" centered education in the struggle to protect both American ideology and values, and also its very existence and the security and safety of its citizens. The Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the first manmade satellite to orbit the earth, is widely viewed as the major US crisis of the Cold War period. The launch disrupted ordinary time and expectations, evoked rapid and definitive response, and changed the course of American life. Sputnik's launch came at a low point in our own development of rocket technology. Americans were aware of the competition between our own and the Soviet Union's rocket development programs and the importance of success in launching a satellite into earth orbit in terms of both prestige and national defense.

Sputnik insinuated itself into Americans' public and everyday lives. With the naked eye, adults and children watched from backyards as it blinked across the night sky (Hickam, 1998). Amateur radio operators picked up its signal. Newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television networks covered the event. Speeches were delivered, bills introduced, reports written, conversations held, curricula designed, and lessons taught about Sputnik. Literally and metaphorically, Sputnik brought the global and the local together. It caused knowledge systems to change rapidly to accommodate new reality (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Interest in science grew at the grassroots level even as experts in the military, Congress, and academy pondered a new science curriculum (Bruner, 1960/77). The first federal legislation to fund state and local education initiatives was passed, largely in response to the Sputnik launch, and signed into law by President Eisenhower as the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). This act enabled the Federal government to help states build new schools to serve burgeoning baby-boom enrollments. It also enabled Congress to capitalize on an emerging relationship between the government and the academy in the form of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and step forward, with scientists and other academicians, to lead reform of US high school science and mathematics curricula.

It took a momentous event of crisis proportion, indeed, for the historic and sacrosanct national value of local control of education to give way even slightly to Federal assistance and involvement—and the small Soviet orb, with all that it implied, provided such a moment. It created a powerful, enduring way of triangulating science, national security, and education. In Lucena's terms, "As language resonates with the image of the nation under threat, it acquires a legitimacy that allows policymakers to define problems and solutions in terms of scientists and engineers" (2005, p. 8). Sputnik's launch was appropriated by a collaborative of national political, military, and scientific leaders to call for educational reform. As such, it was the first occasion to embody the saving role of education called for in the National Educational Association text of 1937.

No Child Left Behind and the Failure of a Crisis Narrative

Many literacy educators cannot recall a time when education reform was deliberated absent a sense of crisis. The narrative of national crisis has permeated educational reform for much of the 20th Century. As such, it is a part of everyday reality to expect that education plays an important role in our democracy, and that our politics influence education. We hold this knowledge tacitly, becoming aware of it only when policies fail to meet (or violate) our expectations. The re-authorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide even a brief history of ESEA, an Act of Congress arising out of educational reform during a previous period of crisis—the Civil Rights Era and the "War on Poverty." However, the purpose of the act was to provide federal support to economically disadvantaged school districts to assist them in providing special services and compensatory education to the children attending schools in those districts. Title I of ESEA, the part of the act dealing with assistance to low-income schools, is re-authorized by Congress on a cyclical basis.

Among the reasons why NCLB did not effectively mobilize a supportive response are the following: (1) it lacked a clear, compelling crisis narrative; (2) it posed a solution that overstepped traditional, normative boundaries between federal and state authority related to education; (3) it violated educators' customary local rights and responsibilities; and (4) it called for change that was limited in scope yet sweeping in impact on schools, teachers, and children. Sunderman, Kim, and Orfield (2005) argue that its micro-management of change via stringent regulation and accountability makes NCLB, "in many ways . . . the most startling departure in federal education policy in US history." They go on to say that

Under NCLB, performance on state reading and mathematics tests determines whether schools make annual yearly progress (AYP). Schools failing to meet these achievement goals are subject to an escalating series of severe sanctions over time. . . . For the first time in the history of Title I, the federal government is dictating the pace of progress required of all schools, regardless of the students they serve and the resources they have, and requires prescriptive standards for low-performing schools that fail to improve scores on standardized reading and math tests (2006, pp. ix-x).

The rhetoric of the nation's well-being as tied to education runs through NCLB as surely as it ran through the NDEA (and other precursors such as the 1983 federal report, "A Nation at Risk" *A Nation at Risk: Report from the US Secretary of Education to American People*, (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>))

Education is one of the most important functions of government . . . (and) satisfying the demand for highly skilled workers is the key to maintaining competitiveness and prosperity in the global economy (2004).

Note that Paige's statement describes education as a function of government, not of society, and that the rationale for its importance is related to national competitiveness and prosperity.

According to Secretary Paige, the purpose of education is to satisfy industry's "demand" must be highly skilled "workers," yet neither their skills nor the nature of their work is described. In phrasing which oddly echoes the need for a continuous stream of young people to do the grinding labor of millwork (as in the novels of Charles Dickens, for example), contemporary schools apparently exist to meet the insatiable "demand" for workers, presumably in light industry, business, and service. In this case it is not their physical strength and endurance that must be tapped, it is their "skill." Therefore, the function of the school, delegated by the government, is the production of workers with the requisite skills to fulfill the demands of undisclosed corporate enterprises.

We must teach all children "skills" because we are "competing" in a "global economy." The idea of a global competition is apocalyptic—especially since our competitors are unspecified and it is unclear what it is we are competing over. What will happen if we lose? How will we know if we are winning? Are we already behind? Ahead? If we teach our children skills, how will they help us win the competition? What will they do? Are corporations somewhat like the army, and are literate workers the foot soldiers? If not, why is the government directly responsible for ensuring the training of skilled workers for global competition? What will happen to the children who are behind? Will they hold us back? How should we save them?

In Secretary Paige's metaphor of a global "competition," we have the basis of a crisis narrative in which our nation's fate is tied to educating skilled workers. In order for this narrative to mobilize citizens for educational change, they must be persuaded that there is an imminent crisis, that educational change is needed, and that this reform should be aimed specifically at teaching skills of literacy and math to all students. As such, it has the generic structure of the Sputnik crisis narrative, yet it lacks the immediate and widely felt experience of a threat to national security and well-being that the Sputnik launch created. Moreover, it proposes a solution that is less obviously connected to the vague threat it poses—skill instruction in literacy and math, while very important to all of the nation's children and their future success as workers, seems the appropriate responsibility of our educational system, not a radical change in our ordinary commitments and practices.

Notwithstanding its focus on competence in reading (and math) at the elementary school level, however, NCLB's reach is far and wide—creating a large and ready workforce to feed industry's demand for workers with skills. Our economic future depends on such skilled workers because they will replace laborers in our country (which has in the 20th Century not only shed its agrarian identity, but also its industrial one). And, in a sociolinguistic act of sleight-of-hand, the very architecture of NCLB mirrors that of the corporation, replete with standards, benchmarks, high stakes assessments, and outcomes-based awards or sanctions.

As was the case with the response to the Sputnik Crisis, when NCLB called for reforms in education, expert panels were convened to deliberate and produce reports. Expertise again resided in science and research conducted chiefly within the natural science paradigm. A select group of experts in the field of literacy learning and research were charged to conduct a sweeping review of extant research in literacy instruction, applying the highest standards of empirical research to identify the knowledge that must be taught if our elementary schools were to be able to

achieve the goal of teaching all children to read at or above grade level by three.

The NCLB Act merged high standards, accountability by assessment, rigorous research to identify core knowledge, and federal funds to insure that all youngsters achieve literacy in English at or above grade level by grade three. Its mandates focused on literacy skill development in the early years of schooling basing curriculum and instruction on research selectively reviewed and recommended by federally created commissions, most prominently the National Reading Panel. National Reading Panel (April, 2000), *Teaching Children to Read*, access online at: <http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Publications/publications.htm>

With governmentally sanctioned standards of performance, assessment, and accountability, and teachers playing minor roles in the development of policy, it was commonplace during the decade of NCLB to hear teachers ascribe the entirety of their literacy curriculum to the authority of the federal government (Florio-Ruane, Pardo, & Highfield, in preparation; Sunderman, et al., 2005). Gradually it became apparent that NCLB was tainted by an apparent conflict of interest built into the very nature of the law's design. Websites and blogs about discussing the ways that NCLB's implementation overstepped the bounds of Federal policy. Their titles are colorful and angry—"D-Ed Reckoning"; "The Ongoing Reading First Debacle"; "NCLB Outrages", and so forth.

The Department of Education (DOE) held a competition for states' to win grants to raise the reading achievement scores in schools with large numbers of students deemed not to be making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). The grants program was called, "Reading First," and although states were not required to compete for these grants, only one state declined. Rich proposal development resources (reflecting the solutions implied in the reports of experts identified by the Federal government) were offered by the DOE to help the states develop their Reading First proposals and plan for their curricula, assessments, and professional development activities within those proposals. Yet the DOE did not—in fact legally could not—require that any state include in their proposed plan for improvement any of these particular resources. To do this would be to explicitly violate the limits set on the DOE at its inception and violate the legal limits the Congress had set on NCLB to promote products or promulgate particular methods. Yet from the perspective of many teachers, a clear line could be drawn from NCLB through their state department of education to their intermediate school district directly into their district, school, classroom, bookshelf—or first ninety minutes of their day.

Initially the rhetorical force of NCLB was sufficient to move states and districts to fall in line with the DOE beyond what was requested, required, or even legal. Yet sufficient public restiveness about NCLB in general, and Reading First in particular, prompted an investigation of the program six years into the authorization of NCLB. Its Reading First grants program was investigated by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) so that Congress could determine of there had, indeed, been conflict of interest in the ways the grants were awarded to states by the DOE. In the investigation and the follow-up recommendations for change, the GAO identified the DOE's failure to act, rather than its having acted inappropriately in implying that use particular materials or methods would be privileged in the competition for funds. Henceforward DOE would make it clear orally and in writing that there were no such expectations or advantages. The Report of the GAO reads as follows:

Education Reading First: Status Report Improvements in Reading Instruction, but Additional Procedures Would Clarify Education's Role in Ensuring Proper Implementation by States (February 2007). Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Requesters. (In this quote, Education refers to the US Department of Education and NCLBA refers to the No Child Left Behind Act.)

However, in a system where there are historically shared assumptions about rights and duties and where familiar narratives are spun which underscore "who we are and what we are doing," we cannot assume objectivity, rationality, or "saying making it so." It is hardly surprising that the Department could remain silent on the issue of choice of programs and yet states would appropriately assume that particular programs were more highly valued and thus more competitive than others were. This is an example of how members of a system tend to perpetuate that system in their language and thought. As part of tacit, cultural knowledge, the crisis narrative functions within an educational system that has a shared social history and discourse. Thus, participants will follow rules or norms for interpretation even to the point of limiting their range of options or opting not to act on the full range of their own authority and responsibility in order to maintain the system and their place within it. There are rewards and negative sanctions—explicit but also implicit—related to compliance with this unspoken but widely shared understanding.

Complicating the situation is that notwithstanding the many layers of apparent surveillance in NCLB's structure, there was curiously little monitoring of the implementation of the Reading First grants, once received and disbursed by the states. Had there been more oversight, presumably this misunderstanding could have been identified early on (the audit was conducted six years into a seven year appropriation) and rectified. Of this the GAO wrote,

While Education officials laid out an ambitious plan for annual monitoring of every state's implementation, they did not develop written procedures during monitoring visits and, as a result, states did not always understand monitoring procedures, timelines, and expectations for taking corrective actions.

The mixture of (1) high stakes assessment, (2) financial benefits tied to performance, (3) powerful federal oversight, and (4) uncertainty and lack of predictability or clarity about when, how, and to what standard states were to perform reinforced the authoritative tone of the Department of Education's suggestions. Not surprisingly, if you were teaching in a low-income, "non-AYP" second grade classroom in a "Reading First" school and were told to teach a particular text or use a particular test, you might assume that you were required to by the federal government under NCLB to do so.

However, more than a few state and local policy-makers and practitioners resisted the inevitability of the structure of education and its crisis narrative. Some states, as reported in the GAO audit, refused to assume the implied obligation to use federally sanctioned materials (one even refused to apply for the Reading First funds). Less visible but as important was the aforementioned restiveness among varied stakeholders in the change process in the academy, school administration, national professional organizations, and in teachers' local responses to the policy. The failure of NCLB to function as an effective crisis narrative is evidence of change in the landscape of American education. Its failure to persuade, its overreaching in its attempts to change practice, and the limits of its conceptual horizons as well as its support for lasting change have been noted.

The calling of a crisis where one is not apparent depends on persuasion—and those whom NCLB aimed to influence were ultimately not persuaded. Thus, what has happened over the lifespan of NCLB at multiple system levels is the making explicit of the limits of the policy but also the making use of the policy to more authentic, local ends. NCLB's failed "call to crisis" actually created an *authentic* crisis for educators calling for their immediate action "on the ground"—one in which powerful rhetoricians failed to control the terms of the narrative. Should they follow this limited yet high stakes path? How could they reconcile their values and professionalism with the force of governmental regulations pushing them to the margins of curriculum, instruction, and assessment? How could they "teach all children" if they were not sufficiently supported to do so? The stakes were enormous, and there was a felt need for decisive action to avert many "local" disasters. These are the dramas largely invisible to all but the teachers and children who experienced them, to the beginning teachers who witnessed and puzzled over them, to the teacher educators who worked at their periphery, and to those researchers who were able to chronicle them in descriptive studies (e.g. case studies, interviews, surveys).

Making Change by Making Do: Local Action to Solve Authentic Crises

It is reasonable to ask why a perennial problem of ongoing importance to US education, that of equity in the preparation of students in basic skills of literacy and mathematics, was elevated rhetorically to the status of a "crisis" in the late 20th Century. It is also reasonable to question the solution anticipated in the identification of the crisis—greater accountability by teachers for students' learning of the elemental features of written language. Teacher accountability was to be objectively measured by assessing students' learning chiefly by means of standardized tests. NCLB was hardly the first of such calls for teachers to respond to a crisis. Yet entailed within its identification of the crisis was an uncharacteristically intrusive solution: to regulate practice by the imposition of strict standards and high stakes pupil assessment. In a nation historically committed to the de-centralization of public education, and given a problem rather than a "crisis," the solution proffered by the DOE seemed draconian by many citizens.

Erickson (2004) has written about the ways practice is affected by large-scale political movements or organizing cultural narratives that are highly predictive of how people will think and act because they are part of common experience and norms within institutions. He is also interested in the local and immediate ways that people take action. What people do at the local level is not always predictable; it is less predictable when they lack a clear, compelling rationale for taking particular action. Especially in times when a major change in course of action has been called, it is in the local enactment that change happens—and various scholars have theorized about the ways that this change occurs and what it implies for social structure and the possibility of change within it. Of this Erickson (2004) asks, "How can change happen through practice that is local yet borne on the weight of history, as practitioners make use of prestructured tools for doing the work at hand in the immediate moment?" (p. 165).

Response to NCLB in terms of administrators' and teachers' local, decisive action can be described in terms of the metaphor of *bricolage*, in Erickson's words, "a metaphor for the process of evolutionary change in social practice" in "realtime work by social actors..." (ibid.). Reflecting the work of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), Erickson explains that that, "the French all-purpose handyman...jack-of-all-trades, the *bricoleur* 'makes do' with what is available at hand, adapting prestructured materials to do whatever work needs doing" (ibid).

In case study research on urban teachers who responded creatively to the actual and presumed mandates of NCLB (Florio-Ruane, Highfield, & Pardo, in preparation), we find that, in addition to more public, legal challenges such as the identification of implied conflict of interest, teachers have taken action daily in subtle yet powerful ways to make of NCLB mandates opportunities for their own creative practice. Like *bricoleurs*, they face authentic problems in their "realtime work" calling for immediate action, and they take what is available to them (in the form of the mandates, methods, and materials in their environment but also using their prior knowledge, experience, and the tools and artifacts of their classroom community) to make necessary changes and move on. These teachers innovate by turning the NCLB constraints with which they must contend into opportunities to *widen professional dialogue* among their colleagues; *engage in practitioner research* on the effectiveness of the reforms to make a difference in the literacy learning of their students; *clarify values* for themselves as well as within their own classrooms by assessing the pre-packaged curriculum in relationship to their own knowledge and experience; *teach in tactical ways* that adopt the most useful requirements as "tools" which they can use not only in the ways they have been assigned, but also in ways that empower them and their learners.

In the NCLB call to crisis, the crew did not report immediately or unquestioningly to their battle stations—and although they did not mutiny, they challenged the orders they received and risked taking alternative, tactical, local action. They acted not merely to make the best of things, but to take ownership of the runaway change process and shape it toward more complex and authentic ends than were provided for or envisioned by the law. In Erickson's words, such making use of circumstance to one's own ends, or "bricolage, carries with it a sense of tactics employed within concretely opportunistic situation of work; of doing what it takes to get the necessary work done in real-time moments of *kairos*" (p. 167). Educators authentically responded to this crisis. If the purpose of the law was to transform teacher thought and action, it certainly succeeded—but perhaps not in ways intended.

The failure of NCLB to function as an effective crisis narrative is evidence of change in the landscape of American education. Its failure to persuade, its overreaching in the attempt to change practice, the limits of its conceptual horizons, and its lack of support for lasting change have been noted. The calling of a crisis depends on persuasion—and those whom the call aimed to influence have not been persuaded. Thus, what has happened at multiple system levels is the making explicit of the limits of the policy but also the making use of the policy to more authentic, local ends.

Conclusion

Literacy, as central to all education, is most heavily implicated when a crisis is called and educational reforms are introduced. Therefore, literacy educators bear both the burden and the responsibility of enacting change when a crisis is called. Yet, as professionals with expertise in language and literacy, they also have the specialized knowledge about language—its forms, functions, and contexts. As such, literacy educators are uniquely positioned to identify the dynamics at play when calls to national crisis serve to mobilize educational reform. They are able to examine discourse critically, and exercise leadership as professionals and as citizens to raise questions, frame problems, and pose alternative definitions of situation.

As practitioner, teachers must also take action, doing the work of literacy education, preparation of literacy educators, and researchers of literacy teaching and learning. They are recipients of policies, practices, and materials not of their own design but with which they must work. However, they are also local problem-solvers who think, act, and respond moment-to-moment and in situations of complexity and continuous novelty. Thus, educators take creative ownership of the terms of their work, including the ways they make use of materials and mandates. Viewed this way, they are not the teacher-militia called to defend the nation. They are creative professionals who act according to law, knowledge of best practices, and their own professional judgment to educate the citizens of the democracy.

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For Further Exploration

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