

Held Hostage by High-Stake Tests

just as the teacher is portrayed as a victim. In making sense of this portrayal, what is real, what is imaginary, and what is symbolic?

Despite the obvious mood of *alienare*, the drawing is a site of resistance, representing a creative outlet for rebellion and iconoclasm.

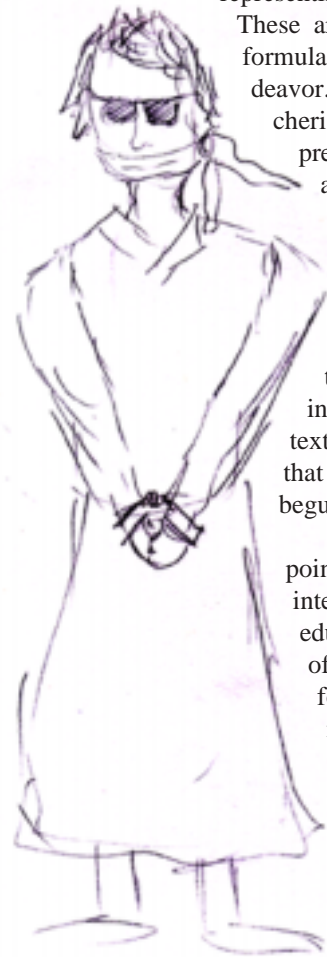


Figure 1.
Powerless Anonymous
(Female Literacy Teacher,
K-12 Setting), 2001,
Pencil Sketch

These are the invisible facets of the depiction that help formulate the central problematic of this sense-making endeavor. The perception of a teacher's role as something cherished is destroyed by the expression, creation, and presentation of this severe image. Her loss of control as

a facilitator of learning is well articulated in the drawing which embodies her sentiment as a *hostage*.

She wrote about her self-portrait, "I have blinders because I don't know what's on the test and how the standards are measured; I am gagged and shackled because I can't help the students bring out the learning I know students have but are not accessing on a fill-in-the-blank test" (2001, excerpted from text accompanying the drawing). There is an implication that the adoption of standards and standardized tests has begun to blunt teacher decision-making.⁴

The depiction of a female educator as a *hostage* points to the gendered nature of work in education, the intensification⁵ of teachers' work, and the role of female educators in resisting high-stakes testing. The adoption of high-stakes tests may contribute to educators feeling forced to accomplish work at the cost of quality, manage in a setting where time becomes a relic—an extravagance, and constrained interaction among colleagues and students prevents opportunities for sharing, critical reflection, and transformation of practices. Appreciably, pride in educators' work is jeopardized as effort is subjugated⁶ by others' conceptualization of what must be done. These facets of teaching as a labor process contribute to the devaluing and deskilling of teacher work (Apple, 2000, p. 116; Giroux, 1988, p.122 -125). This visual depiction makes it apparent that such state mandates extract an emotional toll from educators' lived lives.

In this short essay, I have attempted to make sense of a drawing (selected from my collection of 80, see <http://ganesh.ed.asu.edu/aims>) obtained as an educator's expression of her feelings regarding the state mandated Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards

(AIMS). The AIMS is a competency test that students must pass⁷ to graduate from high school. As we begin to deconstruct the visual representation on hand, we need to keep in mind that schools in the United States play an important role via their social function of cultural reproduction in legitimizing certain ideologies. If we subscribe to the notion that schools are the most important ideological machines of the state, what role do schools play in transforming society? What role do educators play in such a milieu?

Notes

¹ Swope & Miner (2000, p. 140) define 'High-Stakes Testing' as follows: "When an educational decision is based on a single test score—whether a student will advance to the next grade level, be able to enter a preferred program or school, or even get a high school diploma. High-stakes are also applied to schools and teachers, with judgment, rewards, or punishments, based wholly or primarily on standardized test scores."

² In the wake of Arizona's adoption of a high-stakes graduation test, the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), I collected from educators, visual representations of their feelings about the test. Some of these portrayals were accompanied by a short textual description of their visual expression. These depictions were collected at two professional development events for Arizona educators in the Phoenix Valley, in early February and late March, 2001. They formed the data corpus for an initial exploratory analysis of visual methods in educational research (Ganesh, 2002). Art paper and drawing supplies were provided and the study was conducted with permission from the institution's Review Board for Research with Human Subjects and full informed consent of participants.

³ Reitz (2000 pp. 51-77) describes alienation theory starting with tracing the etymology of the word alienation to its Latin, German, and Middle English meanings and also discusses its inseparability from our enduring inquiry into social life.

⁴ This is "the proletarianization of teacher work; that is, the tendency to reduce teachers to the status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricular programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns." (Giroux, 1988, p. 122).

⁵ Apple (1999, p. 101) says "Intensification is one of the most tangible ways in which the working conditions of teachers have eroded. It has many symptoms, from the trivial to the more complex—ranging from having no time at all to even go to the bathroom, have a cup of coffee, or relax, to having a total absence of time to keep up with one's field."

⁶ Power refers to the often surreptitious ways in which a dominant group or groups exerts their influence over others. The processes by which the dominant culture maintains its prevailing position seem abstract. For instance, the use of institutions to formalize power; the employment of a bureaucracy—the legislature, the state department of education, the school districts, the school administration, the departments dedicated to disciplines, and so on—make power seem abstract. Consequently, it seems that power is not attached to any one individual (Giroux, 1988, p. 122).

⁷ The AIMS is based on the Arizona Academic Standards, which are skills in reading, writing, and mathematics that students statewide are expected to master. Initially, the class of 2002 was to be the first cohort of students required to pass the AIMS graduation test (only the reading and writing portions) in order to receive a diploma. Later, all classes starting with

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the class of 2004 were required to pass the reading, writing, and mathematics portions of AIMS to earn a high school diploma. In 2001, the Arizona Board of Education unanimously endorsed the Superintendent of Public Instruction's proposal to postpone the AIMS as a graduation requirement until 2006.

References

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