Here to Stay: A Teacher's 46-year Journey with Accountability in One School Context

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*T*his narrative study explores accountability and care in the stories of an exceptional teacher, Marsha Ethridge, who taught more than 46 years in one low-socioeconomic community. While there has been an abundance of research related to teachers' stories of accountability conducted in the last 20 years, much of it reflects accountability imposed on classrooms through systems of high-stakes testing. In this study, however, multiple perspectives of accountability populate one teacher's stories. As a new teacher in 1964, Marsha recounted the negative impact of teaching in a time of little formal accountability. From the late 1990s moving forward, however, high-stakes testing had become a constant, sometimes friendly, sometimes oppositional, presence in her school. This analysis of Marsha's stories extends the work of Noddings to consider face-to-face accountability as an ethical act of caring that leads to transformation and hope.

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"*If you get a job there, you'll never get out.*" This was the warning Marsha Ethridge[1] received when she shared that she was considering a job in a notoriously high-crime area of Austin, Texas in 1964. Despite the ominous warnings—loaded with assumptions about the community itself—Marsha took a position at Franklin Elementary. As she entered her first years of teaching, she faced a classroom of 32 sixth graders—all from first generation Mexican-American immigrant families. Despite the challenges that came with teaching in a school that had been marginalized in multiple ways, she stayed by choice for more than 46 years. As early as the 1970s she became known in the community as a leader with the ability to work with the most difficult students, and who maintained ongoing, close relationships with families. Her career spans a time with limited emphasis on accountability to a time when one form of accountability, high-stakes testing, dominated the educational landscape. This research took place over a period of three years and employed ethnographic methods of portraiture and narrative analysis. It provides a close reading of the interrelationship of accountability and caring in Marsha's stories.

I began this study in response to critiques of Smith's research (2002) that represented literacy instruction in the United States as historically the same across contexts. While Smith's research proved a useful means of understanding broad trends in literacy education, it did not explore how literacy instruction may have varied in different school settings, such as schools serving students of color. My original intent focused on studying the stories of one highly successful literacy teacher to gain a clearer understanding of how literacy instruction and instructional materials evolved during her forty-six years at Franklin. However, in our earliest interviews, Marsha's stories of teaching consisted of stories of caring and her evolving sense of accountability. I began to realize that studying Marsha's approach to literacy instruction could not be done without

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[1] All names, including that of Marsha's school, are pseudonyms.

considering these important aspects of her experience. Therefore, my analysis was shaped in part by what Marsha considered to be important, and from our first interview she described how accountability had shaped and still was shaping her teaching journey. In the following section I present narrative analysis as a framework for studying teachers' stories, along with an overview of qualitative studies focused on teachers' stories and experiences with high-stakes tests.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative analysis and theories of caring in education shaped the framework for this research. By remaining close to the participant's stories, narrative analysis enabled me to construct a clearer portrait of her experiences. I also drew on Noddings' ethic of care (2003) to make sense of the relational nature of accountability as described in Marsha's stories.

Narrative Analysis

Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) framework of narrative analysis is used as a way to consider the interwoven nature of stories that populated Marsha's accounts of teaching. These up-close narratives of teaching have the potential to expose incongruence and inequity that may otherwise remain hidden in the "taken-for-granted nature of the stories we have learned to uncritically live and tell" (Olson & Craig, 2009, p. 545). Marsha's stories, then, serve as exemplars (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002) as they reflect her deeply rooted, longitudinal perspective lived out in one school community.

Clandinin and Connelly (1996) claimed that teachers' "knowledge landscapes" consist of interconnected sets of stories that are constantly changing (p. 4). Through the analysis of teachers' stories, researchers learn about the mega-narratives and small stories that populate the lived experiences of teachers. Mega-narratives, also called "grand stories," may contain ideas about "how society works, why it goes wrong and how it can be set right" (Cohen & Garet, 1975, p. 21). These grand narratives tend to travel into the classroom from the outside (Crites, 1971). Because of the sometimes abstracted authorship and origin of these stories they frequently go unquestioned, leaving Clandinin and Connelly (1995) to describe them as "sacred stories."

In contrast, secret stories are those lived out more privately in the daily lives of teachers in their classrooms (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). As an example, Whelan (1999) recounted the story of a teacher who decided to comply with her administration's mandates regarding how she must teach. This eventually led her to question herself as a teacher. Her shaken identity was not brought on solely by changed practices but by the changes that conflicted with her story of what it meant for her to be a teacher (p. 31). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) described this as an internal conflict with a sacred story of teaching practices linked to theory, policy, or research findings (p. 31). Olson and Craig suggest that "small stories," as they called them, sometimes become lost in the mega-narratives of policy. However, they also argue that small stories may interrupt and disrupt "grand policy narratives" (Olson & Craig, 2009, p. 548).

As Olson and Craig (2009, p. 549) pointed out, these "small stories appear in the cracks (Sollman, Emmons, & Paolini, 1994) and spaces of the big stories that society has uncritically accepted as sacred (Crites, 1971) or canonical (Bruner, 1986)." It is in the situated nature of

teachers' stories, set in local contexts and the "dailiness" (Lieberman & Miller, 1984, p. 1) of teaching that educators begin to co-construct narratives to disrupt dominant plotlines that otherwise remain unquestioned. For example, Valencia, Place, Martin, and Grossman (2006) found that mandated curriculums, which frequently accompany high-stakes testing, limited teachers' opportunities to reflect on what was best practice for their students, as well as for their own professional development. In addition, Sloan's ethnographic study of one urban school system (2006) documented teachers' struggles to meet the needs of their diverse student population as the district shifted its focus from student-centered instruction to improving test scores. Sloan encouraged researchers to further explore these "complexities and uncertainties" tied to high-stakes testing in public education in order to be responsive to the daily lives of teachers (p. 121).

Likewise, Craig (2004) documented how educators in one high school were making sense of mandated testing. In interviews, the principal repeatedly described testing as a dragon:

> When you work in a school and there is a dragon in your backyard, you had better prepare for the dragon. The dragon, of course, is the accountability system... (p. 1230)

The threatening image of a dragon in the backyard demonstrated the resonant metaphor (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 189) of a looming, yet unseen presence felt in response to the imposition of high-stakes tests.

While many of these studies portray stories of accountability as an intrusion, more research is needed that emphasizes the teacher's role in shaping and enacting various forms of accountability. The current study reflects tensions and resistance to high-stakes testing, but also presents the possibility of accountability as a means for transformation and hope in education.

Ethics of Care in Education

Prior to my meeting Marsha for the first time, those who worked with her had described the lasting relationships she developed with her students and their families to me. She remained friends with the families, attending a variety of events including funerals, weddings, and graduations. For these reasons, I also drew on the theoretical work of Noddings (2003) and those who have extended her work (White, 2003).

Noddings (1984) paved the way for dialogue about ethical caring in education. She argued that caring was not a character trait or quality of moral reasoning that might be attributed to one person or group of people; rather, caring exists in an encounter between one who cares and one who is cared for. A major contribution of Noddings' work (2003) is that she called attention to the experiences of the one who is cared-for in the encounter. She suggested that through *engrossment* a teacher becomes open to the experiences and perspectives of the student. Engrossment allows the teacher, then, to shift focus so that she or he temporarily adopts the motives of the student (Noddings, 1984, p. 33). Noddings (2003) noted that caring—in most cases—has not occurred until it is actually recognized as care and confirmed in some way by the cared-for as caring.

For example, in an ethnographic study of a high school in Texas, Valenzuela (1999) found that teachers reported that they were grading papers late into the night and working hard on their lesson plans as evidence of their caring. The students, on the other hand, felt the teachers did not care about them, because teachers did not honor students' heritage language or try to get to know them as individuals. Noddings would not have defined these encounters between teachers and students as caring because the students themselves did not experience it as care.

White (2003), however, challenged this, calling it a limited view of caring with particular import for the most vulnerable students. He extended Noddings' idea of engrossment by suggesting that a teacher must sometimes go beyond engrossment, in order to envision a possible future a student may not be able to see, but may eventually become motivated to work towards. Using activist-educator Paulo Freire as an example, White wrote, "He [Freire] believes in their voices before they believe they can speak; he believes in their freedom before they even recognize their subjugation" (2003, p. 310). White's example suggests that the one who is caring must sometimes discern hope in a possible future the cared-for may not yet be able to imagine (2003). For purposes of this study, I consider both views to be compatible. Noddings' (2003, p. 59) ethic of care shifted the focus to the experience of the "cared-for," while White (2003) included in his definition of care envisioning possible futures for students.

Methods

This study relies on methods of narrative analysis and portraiture. While narrative focuses most heavily on interview data, portraiture requires a researcher to engage the context in order to better understand what the participant considers to be important. Portraiture, as described by Lightfoot and Davis (1997), is an ethnographic approach used to capture the "essence" of an individual or subject.

A major strength of narrative research is its focus on depth, rather than breadth (Cole & Knowles, 2001). It is through this depth of inquiry that researchers may consider, from an outsider's perspective, an insider's experiences of the context in which they have lived and worked (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 25). According to Plummer (2001), life story research allows one to study a person's life as it moves "through history and structure" (p. 40). For this reason, it is a mistake to consider life story as strictly individualistic. Life story, in this case, involves the study of one teacher's stories as they intersect with systems of schooling, the Franklin community, and with the lives of those around her. Life story strives to make visible the ambiguities and contradictions that make up everyday experience (Plummer, p. 40).

Participants

Participants in the study included Marsha Ethridge and a group of colleagues at Franklin Elementary with whom Marsha collaborated regularly. In the following section I briefly explain the importance of including these participants in the study.

Why Marsha Ethridge? I first met Marsha in 2008 through a professor who had been teaching undergraduate reading courses at Franklin since the late 1990s. It was through this professor that I first became convinced of the relevance and urgency in studying Marsha's experiences teaching

in the same school community for so many years. She was selected, then, as a reputational case (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012) in order to learn from the experiences of someone with demonstrated expertise in the field of teaching in an urban setting. Especially because of the high turnover rates among teachers in lower socioeconomic communities (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012), Marsha provides unique insights as a teacher who persevered.

Marsha Ethridge is a white teacher in her late sixties who grew up in rural south Texas. Her experiences growing up played an important role in how she built relationships with her students and how she came to understand and practice accountability over her 46 years at Franklin Elementary. In interviews, colleagues told about the ongoing relationships Marsha developed with her students and their families, her loyalty to Franklin, and her passion for improving the life opportunities of her students through quality instruction. They frequently described her as a "go to" person for help with difficult students and for guidance navigating the complexities of teaching in a large, urban school.

Marsha also served informally as a school administrator and mentored numerous new teachers and faculty members along the way. Out of respect for the impact Marsha had on the school, during the 1990s one of Marsha's school administrators submitted a request to have the school renamed in her honor. The school, to Marsha's great embarrassment, even had a day set aside to honor her in which the students, families, and faculty members spent a day celebrating her contributions as a leader.

Why the teacher group? In addition to my interviews with Marsha, I conducted a group interview with teachers who played a significant role in Marsha's stories of teaching. Flick (2014) proposed that group interviews provide useful information because they "…correspond to the way in which opinions are produced, expressed, and exchanged in everyday life" (p. 244). This particular group of teachers started meeting together during the early 1980s in response to their interest in learning about the whole language philosophy of literacy instruction. Although their focus shifted from whole language to other areas of professional and personal interests, they continued to meet together for over 28 years. The group interview provided the teachers an opportunity to jointly construct and revisit their stories, which intersected with and were reflected in Marsha's stories each time I interviewed her.

Context

Marsha's stories are shaped to a large degree by the history and context of Franklin Elementary. Franklin sat on the edge of a large urban city, separated from higher socioeconomic communities by a busy interstate and a state highway. At the time of my research, Franklin served around 500 students (90% Latino; 8% Black; and 2% White). Ninety-five percent of Franklin's students qualified for free and reduced lunch, and approximately 35% of the students were placed in bi-lingual classrooms. The majority of students belonged to second- and third-generation Mexican-American immigrant families living in close proximity to one another and the school. In this community, it was not uncommon for multiple generations of one family, including extended family members, to attend Franklin.

Data Collection

Multiple sources of data were collected, including (a) individual interviews; (b) field notes from observations of Marsha in school settings; (c) a teacher group observation and interview; (d) artifacts related to Marsha's stories; and (e) member checking with participants to ensure the analysis reflected the intent of Marsha's stories.

Focus participant interviews. Data collection began with three separate 45-minute interviews with Marsha during her summer vacation in 2008. Although she was not getting paid for working at Franklin in the summer, she spent several days a week working at the school, so our initial interviews took place in her classroom as this was most convenient for her. The first couple of interviews were designed to build rapport and allow time for Marsha to become familiar with the research objectives and for me to get to know her and the school setting. We discussed what she had taught during her career and her current teaching roles. She gave a tour of the school and told stories of how it had changed, and I explained the purpose of my study and gained her consent to participate.

The following interviews took place over the next school year (2008-2009) and lasted anywhere from 45-minutes to one five-hour interview. Although it is not recommended to extend interviews beyond an hour or two, Marsha requested that we continue the interview even when given the option of stopping for the day. I honored her request and her timing for sharing her stories, because she stated that she enjoyed the interview experience and truly seemed energized by talking about her many years at Franklin.

I adapted the life history interview protocol developed by McAdams (1995) in order to focus more on Marsha's career. The initial interview protocol included some questions about her personal life, because these experiences inevitably shaped her professional identity. These questions were limited to where she grew up, how she came to teaching, and major life events that influenced her practice. However, the overarching goal was to learn from her stories about teaching. Therefore, I adapted McAdams' questions about life history to focus on professional history. I adapted, for example, questions about a low point in her life to focus on a low point in her career. And instead of asking her to describe her life story in terms of chapters, I asked her to explain how she would organize her years of teaching into chapters. I also shortened the McAdams (1995) interview protocol in order to elicit more of a conversational interaction pattern, one in which my questions also developed in response to Marsha's stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Informal observations. Drawing from ethnographic methods, I sought to better understand what these experiences meant to her through observing Marsha at Franklin, which served as an important backdrop to her stories (Craig, 2004). Approximately 40 follow-up informal interviews in 2010 and 2011, ranging from ten to thirty minutes long, occurred concurrent with informal observations of Marsha during the school day. Observing Marsha in her daily activities and routines provided points of connection to triangulate with her previous formal interviews. I took field notes on the observations and wrote brief reflective memos following each visit. In addition, I collected artifacts important to Marsha's stories, such as newspaper articles related to accountability and notices from Franklin's administration regarding test scores. As a way to give

back to Marsha for her participation and the gift of time she gave to my research, I also volunteered to read with one of Marsha's students before school on days that I came for observations.

Teacher group interview. Marsha gave a great deal of credit for her professional growth to a group of colleagues with whom she met each Saturday for more than 28 years. All of these colleagues taught at Franklin at one point in their careers. Eight of the ten founding members of this group participated in the group interview, which took place at the local bakery where the teachers met regularly, in the fall of 2008. I recorded the two-hour interview and transcribed it immediately afterwards. Although I came with a set of questions structured from general to more specific, the group's stories began to unfold naturally and most of my questions were addressed without me asking them specifically.

Analysis

Grounded theory. Constant comparative analysis was used to construct theoretical understandings grounded in the triangulation of data (Charmaz, 2006). In vivo coding was used when possible to remain close to the language of participants when assigning conceptual labels to their experiences. I used memos for personal, theoretical, and methodological reflections throughout the analytic process. Material evidence of the coding, categorization, and thematic construction process were kept as part of an audit trail. Member checking, triangulation of data, and extended time in the field (three years) all helped increase creditability of the findings (Huberman & Miles, 1998, p. 202). While this process allowed me to construct themes, I needed a secondary approach to synthesize these themes within the context of Marsha's life stories.

Portraiture analysis. Lightfoot and Davis (1997) described five "modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast" used in the process of constructing emergent themes in life story research (p. 193). I used these modes of analysis to both confirm and to further develop themes constructed through constant comparative analysis. These modes include listening first for persistent refrains, or "life litanies," articulated in the stories of participants (p. 197). In order to accomplish this, I highlighted individual stories within the transcripts and considered the meaning each story held for participants. Second, Lightfoot and Davis suggested that themes sometimes become evident through "resonant metaphors" that "express a large arc of human experience" (p. 198). This mode of analysis quickly brought to view and confirmed important themes in Marsha's stories related to accountability.

A third mode of analysis explores the rituals of institutions and cultures, such as school-wide festivals or saying the Pledge of Allegiance in Spanish and English every morning. The fourth mode of analysis, triangulation of data, occurred through multiple sources to support and clarify major themes and findings. I triangulated the data through collecting multiple types of data and member checking with participants as the analysis began to reveal possible themes. The fifth mode of synthesis requires the researcher to look for patterns beneath the dissonance. A few of Marsha's stories initially seemed incongruent, but by looking for underlying patterns and how they fit within the larger story, I made sense of the dissonance without discounting its significance. These five modes of synthesis provided useful means by which I synthesized and confirmed themes present in Marsha's stories (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Findings

I organized the findings according to the way Marsha defined the chapters of her teaching career. Marsha's stories of life prior to teaching became an important backdrop for her approach to accountability and are, thus, interwoven into the findings. In each chapter, Marsha's descriptions of accountability changed, but they always remained at the forefront of Marsha's interviews and my observations of her day-to-day interactions with colleagues, parents, and students. I conclude with a framework, grounded in the analysis of Marsha's stories, for considering the potential role of accountability in developing a more transformative ethic of care in education.

1960-1970: A Time of Survival

Marsha taught sixth grade during the mid-1960s to the early 1970s before switching to teach third grade. Typical of many beginning teachers, Marsha described these first years of teaching as a time of survival. However, she also faced the added challenge of teaching in a time and place in which her students had not been taught—even after years of attending school at Franklin—to read and write at a basic level:

> At the beginning, in the 1960s, the children I had—many of them did not even know their alphabet. *It was awful* [emphasized whisper]. I mean it was like [pause] there was no support. There was no help. There was no help between the teachers. And they put me in as a *barely* [emphasized] 21-year-old into a sixth grade class and I was small then and had children bigger than I was and *they couldn't read* [emphasized]. What they had been doing before this, I don't know.

Her words tell of the invisibility of her students' literacy development during their early years of schooling at Franklin. This invisibility in large part was attributed to the limited use of accountability for student learning in her school. She assigned part of the blame to the lack of collaboration among teachers, but also attributed it to the district administration for continuing to place principals at Franklin who had limited knowledge of instruction. She indicated repeatedly that this was the case, and would never be accepted at schools with higher-socioeconomic populations. It would be another 30 years, she explained, before Franklin was assigned a principal whom she considered to be knowledgeable about and focused on instruction.

As Marsha recalled transitioning from teaching sixth grade to third grade, she continued to highlight the lack of accounting for students' literacy achievement. She recalled having few professional or material resources for addressing the tremendous challenges she encountered as a young teacher. Although the district supplied textbooks for each grade level, these texts were well beyond what her students could read at that time. Adding to the difficulties, principals rarely stayed for more than a couple years at Franklin, providing little in the way of leadership or support. What happened in the classrooms of her colleagues remained a mystery to her, similar to the "egg crate" structure Lortie (1975) described.

Marsha worked on her Masters' degree in education from 1972-1975, and during that time moved from sixth grade to third. She began to receive more support from professors at the local

university and accepted her first student intern. However, during this time she continued to encounter students arriving in her third-grade classroom unable to read on level. Marsha recalled one particular class in which a group of ten boys struggled significantly with reading:

> There was a group of us that were in graduate school and we had interns. And I had an intern, Olivia, who then taught at Franklin for years after that. And we got Dick and Jane. And we taught those kiddoes to read. *Now what they did on tests* [voice dropped off and she shrugged her shoulders as though she was embarrassed she did not know]. I have no idea what kind of tests there were then and it *certainly* [emphasized] wasn't anything like TAKS [a high-stakes test used in Texas]. But see, I thought that was always a crime. Nobody said, "What do you mean your children aren't reading?" Just simple things. And these were the children that spoke English. They just didn't read. What they had been doing the first two years I don't know. But of course this was the 60s and 70s.

While she recalled her students taking standardized assessments, test results did not inform her instruction, nor did she feel they were useful for holding anyone accountable for learning. During our interviews Marsha continued to use the metaphor of *criminal neglect* as a way to make sense of the limited use of accountability during her early years of teaching.

The irony of the metaphor itself is not lost in a community known for higher crime rates and gang violence. The real crime, according to Marsha, manifested itself in the lack of value placed on the literacy development of her young students at Franklin. Marsha indicated that during this time, there was no precedent for assessing students or monitoring their progress. As she explained, "No one ever told us that you need to assess. And we didn't really sit down and talk about levels of children. I don't know why. It was just really awful." In time, however, she would develop and use her own system of accountability, and she would continue to champion the use of accountability for student learning throughout her career.

Late 70s-Early 80s: Beginning Steps to Accountability

As Marsha gained new resources through the graduate program, she began to explore ways to document her students' progress in reading. Tightly controlled vocabulary and strictly leveled texts, which were reportedly used in approximately 80% of U.S. classrooms at the time (Chall, 1967), allowed her to track the progress of her third-grade students.

> I was more aware of accountability for children and trying to get their reading levels up, and that's when I actually did the graphs of them and where they started. I would sit with the children and show them, "You started here, and now you're here." I could see the children who had never read; they could become readers.

For Marsha the vocabulary-controlled basal readers provided her with a new way to document her students' progress as they proceeded through each level. The side-by-side conferencing with her students was what I came to call *face-to-face accountability*. Similar to Noddings' (2003) descriptions of caring in education, this form of accountability was first and foremost situated in a relational encounter between Marsha and her students. It provided her with a new way to make her students' progress as readers visible.

Marsha's life experiences also shaped her beliefs about the important role of accountability in sustaining hope. Marsha illustrated this understanding of the interrelatedness of accountability and hope by talking about the books she chose to read in her own life. When she read books in which the main character overcame tremendous obstacles it helped her imagine that she too could do the same. Throughout our interviews, Marsha emphasized that it was not just important that students experience success, but that they develop an ability to see themselves as successful. One repeated refrain in Marsha's stories was, "You have to feel successful to be successful." Her intentional efforts to help students see their reading growth in the form of a graph was created to help them to sustain hope for future achievement. As Noddings described caring as occurring only when it was reciprocated by the cared-for (2003), Marsha's stories framed accountability as a mutual encounter, one in which students gained ownership for their achievements.

Her developing understanding of accountability took place in the context of relationships with students through several generations. Because of the long-standing friendships Marsha had with families, she could say things to parents or grandparents that might be difficult for someone else to say. As in other studies about caring in education, relationships came first and the families of students became an important part of these encounters (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Accountability with the purpose of creating and sustaining hope would also play a significant role in the most transformative years in Marsha's teaching career.

1980-1990: A Time of Renewal and Transformation

Marsha characterized the 1980s as the most transformative period of her professional career. She attributed this to the sense of accountability she developed within a group of teachers at Franklin. In the group interview these teachers shared similar stories of how ongoing dialogue with one anther helped them to etch out what it meant to be teachers in a marginalized community, and to challenge each other to continue to grow as professionals.

Unlike much of the literature on teacher collaboration (Hollins et al., 2004; Little & Horn, 2007; Rust & Orland, 2001; Swidler, 2001), this group was initiated and sustained by the teachers themselves. As a result, they developed their own professional development, which included accountability as a foundational process in defining themselves as teachers (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Through their conversations they constructed a common language for talking about their practices. This became important as they initiated peer observations. They asked difficult questions and held one another accountable for student learning due to the level of trust they developed over time. Marsha reflected:

> It really did change our teaching and it made it all fresh and new and we would try new things. And then we were so comfortable with each other that we could say, "No, that just didn't work." Things that I would hope other people would do. And they don't. They don't feel comfortable doing it. Like Sherry Foster—I watched her one time and this little boy was just looking at her [confused face]. And I said, "Do you really think he understood that lesson? He wasn't attending at all to you." And then we'd figure out why. And she'd come over and say, "Now do you know why you even taught that lesson?"

This expanded horizon of observation enabled them to open up powerful new avenues from which they could continue to learn (Hutchins, 1993, p. 52) and provided new opportunities to hold one another accountable for student learning. Their passion for accountability for continued learning became part of their identity as a group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As a prime example, during my informal observation of the group, each person who had had a recent birthday was asked to answer the question "What have you learned over the last year?" Learning with and from one another appeared to be of ongoing importance, even after more than 28 years. Accountability served as a catalyst for their learning, and the catalyst for their accountability was their mutual care for the students at Franklin and for one another.

1990-2000: The Reading Years

During the 1990s Marsha became the first reading specialist at Franklin. She continued to hold her own students accountable for their reading in the context of her relationships with them and with their families. She had flexibility in her role and spent much of her time mentoring and coaching new teachers in their classrooms. Although others referred to her as a mentor, Marsha referred to these relationships as co-mentoring, always pointing out that she and her partner were learning together in a side-by-side relationship. Although the students at Franklin continued to improve as the teachers grew in their practices, expectations for students' academic performance also continued to rise, and one particular form of accountability began to transform the educational landscape in Texas.

During the 1990s the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was introduced as a tool to hold schools and teachers accountable for student learning. TAAS scores were not initially tied to school funding, student promotion, or to teacher evaluations and pay, but throughout the 1990s the stakes continued to rise. As a result, the TAAS increasingly influenced curriculum, as well as Marsha's daily life at Franklin.

Marsha was an enthusiastic early supporter of the TAAS test as a way to hold teachers and students accountable for their students' achievement. She played a lead role in planning and carrying out pep rallies to build excitement for doing well on the standardized tests. As the stakes continued to rise, however, she began to question many of the unintended consequences (Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003) related to accountability in a system of high-stakes assessment. These questions increasingly emerged in interviews as Marsha described the intensifying focus on testing as she moved into what she called "A Time of Testing."

2000-2012: A Time of Testing

In 2000, the TAAS changed to the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and grew quickly in influence. Marsha continued to argue the need for assessments to hold teachers accountable for students' learning, but she also experienced increasing dissonance within the system of high-stakes testing that saturated the daily lives of students and teachers. During my group interview, for example, one of Marsha's colleagues began to express frustration over the influence of testing in her classroom. Marsha responded, "It's a giant. And it's here to stay." The phrase "here to stay" was purportedly used during the early years of high-stakes testing as a slogan to encourage teachers to stop trying to fight their imposition and to learn to function

within this system without complaining or resisting (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Marsha repeatedly referred to standardized assessment as "a good way" to hold teachers accountable. At the same time she described numerous ways in which Franklin teachers and students were influenced negatively by the enactment of the current system of accountability.

As a result of the heavy emphasis on test scores, the curriculum at Franklin became so rigid that the district expected each classroom to teach the same thing in the same way. Similar to the findings in Sloan's (2006) study, Marsha believed that for new teachers or for those who struggled, this had been helpful, but for those teachers who really knew what good instruction looked like, "It did take a little something out of it." When I asked what it was that had been taken away she responded, "Well I think people being creative. And doing a good job and knowing it." The top down approach to the district's test-centric curriculum seemed to distance Marsha from her own sense of self-efficacy as a teacher. Valencia, Place, Martin, and Grossman (2006), likewise, found that using a scripted curriculum—as Marsha was required to use—might influence teachers' self-efficacy and their view of quality instruction.

Marsha's reflection on the relationship between her current experiences with scripted curriculum and the focus on test taking conflicted with her own approach with students in which she highlighted student success as a means of instilling hope for the future. Marsha's preferred system of accountability was one in which she was "in it" with her students, an approach she sought to hold on to within a system of high-stakes testing that seemed forced upon them by a persistent, faceless "giant," as she put it.

In contrast to the transformation she experienced through peer observations, Marsha recounted— with a sense of disenfranchisement—how district administrators (called the "district police" by teachers) would "peer" into classrooms expecting to see the same things posted up on all the classroom walls. Rather than an accountability situated within caring relationships with her own students and her colleagues, accountability had become a mechanism for control imposed *upon* them. During the time I conducted my research, Marsha had numerous stories to share about the current impact of high-stakes testing at Franklin. I noted some of these in my field notes during observations and describe them in more detail below.

Encouragement and warnings. Marsha believed parents needed to be informed about the new requirements and expectations placed on students related to the TAKS. She encouraged the administrators to hold regular meetings with parents. During one of my informal observations on campus I witnessed the principal trying to inform everyone, including parents, about the significance of the tests during a fifth and sixth grade awards assembly. After the awards were handed out, he addressed students first, then teachers, and then parents, encouraging them all to participate in raising the test scores.

He began by noting how poorly all the students had performed on their initial benchmark assessments. He went on to describe the progress students were making and then warned that students would remain at the same grade level the next year if they did not pass their test. Teachers were simultaneously encouraged and passively warned that the district administration was "watching" those with a higher than average number of students struggling on benchmark

assessments. Parents were thanked for their support with another caution—that without their help their children would not move on to the next grade level and Franklin would get a low rating.

Stories of Franklin. Marsha felt that the story being told about Franklin in the city over the years was influenced by racial and economic prejudice. She feared that the current system of accountability could contribute to this ongoing negative perception of Franklin and the community it served. During our interviews, Marsha explained to me that if Franklin received a low rating on the TAKS, the state would label them as "Academically Unacceptable," and it would be "plastered" across the front page of the local newspaper.

In fact, on one of my visits to Franklin the school receptionist tossed the newspaper on the counter with disgust in front of Marsha while we were in the front office. The receptionist, a long-time resident of the community and close friend of Marsha's, asked, "What do you think about *that*?" Marsha glanced at the headline stretched out across the front page that asserted teachers in Franklin's part of the city were less qualified educators based on test scores. Her frustrated response was, "Not here, they're not. Here they have to be stronger, more knowledgeable." The ongoing media portrayal of high-stakes testing results continued to tell a story of schools who struggled to meet expectations on standardized tests—schools with the highest numbers of low-income students and children of color.

Because Franklin's benchmark scores were below a designated number set by the district, Franklin had already been given a "Level Orange" notice. This meant the teachers and school administrators, already working overtime to meet the needs of their students, were required to do a number of extra tasks, in addition to what they were already doing, to document and support student progress. As a result, I witnessed teachers crying out of frustration and exhaustion. Marsha was frequently a resource for these teachers, helping to scaffold the heavy workloads and challenges they faced as newer teachers learning to navigate a system that continued to increase their workload. Along with other teachers I observed, Marsha was tirelessly working 70 hours or more a week, before school, in the evenings, and during summer vacation, to help bolster students' learning in areas in which their scores were lowest.

During this time of testing, Marsha's students who came to her for support were selected solely on the basis of their reading test scores. She struggled with this criterion, feeling it was a disservice to students who performed well enough to pass a benchmark or standardized assessment despite significant struggles with reading. On multiple occasions students left her classroom placement, only to return again a year later after they failed the next standardized test. Marsha tried to mediate the students' feelings of failure on the high-stakes tests by helping them reframe how they thought about it. As an example, Marsha shared the story of one young girl's response to her reading scores:

> Really sad. I wasn't here last week and when I walked in on Friday the children had already been told who passed and who didn't pass. And this one little girl looked at me and she just burst into tears. She said [in a whispered, shame-filled voice], "I didn't pass." I said [in a definitive voice], "I know you'll pass the second time." You know it's just [shaking her head]. I said, "The bad news is you didn't pass. The good news is you keep getting to come to me [whispered gently]." So it's like those are the pressures that some

of them are putting on themselves. I would never say, "You better pass." I tell her I want ten extra points. That's what our goal is.

She reinforced the care she felt for students, and attempted to place this system of high-stakes accountability within a caring relationship (Noddings, 2003), as in this case she focused on the (attainable) points rather than the student's failure.

Seeing faces—seeing numbers. Towards the end of my data collection, I stopped by to visit with Marsha before school. I found her in the main hallway returning from an early morning faculty meeting in which the faculty had been reviewing students' scores on a recent benchmark test. Many of her students continued to struggle to meet benchmarks set by the district. As we moved to the doorway of the cafeteria, she began her routine of greeting students coming in for the morning assembly. After several students had passed, she put her hand on her forehead, sadly shaking it back and forth and said to me with a disconcerted laugh, "Now I'm seeing test scores instead of students' faces."

Her comment, taken in the context of her stories, reflected an ongoing struggle. The statement serves as a poignant example of the division described by Sloan (2002) between student-focused and ratings-focused responses to high-stakes testing. Franklin was being judged as a success or failure based on the state standardized assessment that has continued to grow in influence over the last 20 years. In response, Marsha's school district leaders shifted from a focus on students to focusing on scores (Sloan, 2002). This split caused growing dissonance in Marsha's story as a teacher (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

While she understood the need for some form of assessments that could be used to hold both students and teachers accountable, this continued to conflict with her own approach to accountability situated in caring relationships with her students and colleagues. She continued to voice challenges to the way in which this "giant" had taken up residence in so many aspects of her teaching, and resisted using the mandated curriculum. This dissonance in Marsha's stories remained as I concluded my study.

Accountability as a Transformative Process and Act of Caring

The current system of high-stakes accountability, constructed and passed down as a sacred story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) from policy-makers as a means to create more rigorous educational opportunities for all students, remained as a point of tension in Marsha's narrative. Administrators, media, and even Marsha herself transmitted this sacred story, which loomed like a giant, as she lobbied for some form of accountability. Quieter, yet no less significant, a more secret (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) story of accountability remained, one in which she enacted accountability with her students and colleagues as an act of caring.

As more nuanced understandings of accountability develop, it is important to consider Marsha's stories about the accountability she had within the group of teachers that she met with for over 28 years. Similar to what she believed was important with her own students, accountability in this group was situated in the safety of the relationships of trust and shared loyalty to students and each other developed over time. This transformative form of accountability in Marsha's

career shaped the literacy curriculum as well as her teaching practices, and provided another lens from which these teachers could make student learning visible. By questioning and challenging one another through their professional conversations (Bomer, 2011), they served up accountability in the context of relationships that required, and was dependent upon, a face-to-face response (Noddings, 2003). Accountability within this group of teachers invited a responsiveness that, for Marsha, led to transformation and empowerment in her teaching practices.

Marsha's stories of accountability reflect and add to Noddings' (2003) definition of caring in schools. Noddings did not include accountability as an aspect of caring, yet Marsha's stories indicate that accountability may provide a way to create hope and transformation within the context of caring relationships over time. Accountability, then, in Marsha's story occurred as a process rather than a single encounter. Additionally, Noddings described caring as achieved only when it is reciprocated by the cared-for. Marsha also defined accountability as needing a response, but a response that included students and teachers taking ownership of their achievements. This reinforces White's (2003) argument that educators must see a possible future the students themselves may not be able to see. Marsha offered an enactment of accountability that served to help students see themselves as successful so that they might then envision their own future success.

Marsha's life stories stand not in opposition to the current culture of shaming and blaming within high-stakes testing, but in defining contrast. High-stakes accountability in Marsha's stories was a faceless "giant" that developed out of years of policies attempting to address an ongoing challenge to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students. Despite ongoing evidence of the negative impact of high-stakes testing on teachers, students, and communities, the sacred story that these tests will transform public education continues to dominate education in the United States. As No Child Left Behind (NCLB) transitioned to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, for example, more than 50 civil rights groups came together to communicate concerns that returning federal oversight of testing systems to the states may once again leave the most vulnerable students "behind" (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 2016).

Similar to the 1960s—when an absence of any form of accountability left students' literacy development at Franklin neglected—when children's test scores became tied to pay, sanctions, and public shaming, scores took on new meaning for Marsha. Important aspects of students' literacy lives, such as students' achievements and literacy needs not captured by a single test score, became obscured (Jennings & Bearak, 2014). This does not negate the importance of accountability, but Marsha's stories instead ultimately emphasized the transformative power of accountability situated in caring relationships rather than testing regimes.

A key finding of this study, then, is that ethical caring in Marsha's stories (Noddings, 2003) included accountability. It suggests that the transformative power of accountability may rest in the hands of teachers, parents, and students. As Sloan (2006) argued, accountability is neither all good nor all bad, and it is in stories like Marsha's that we began to see that accountability is here to stay. How it is enacted and in what form it will continue to evolve and change, even as it is changing the lives of children, teachers, and entire communities, remains to be seen.

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