

Virginia vs. Florida: Two Beginning History Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of High-Stakes Tests on Their Instructional Decision-Making

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Abstract

This paper examines how a beginning teacher in Virginia and a beginning teacher in Florida make sense of the high-stakes tests in their state. By examining beginning teachers in two states where the tests are so very different, we gain important insight into whether there are similarities and differences across states and how the nature of the test affects the teaching and learning of history. We first offer insight into the context of accountability in Virginia and Florida and then discuss what ambitious teaching and learning look like in these states as informed by the literature. Then, we turn to our research methods, findings, and implications for the field of social studies.

Introduction

As S. G. Grant (2006) states:

Lost in much of the shouting [about high-stakes testing] is the empirical study of what happens in classrooms as history teachers and students read and respond to new or revised state-level, and increasingly high-stakes, social studies tests. If tests drive teaching, as so many policymakers seem to believe, then what does that relationship look like, and more importantly, do new tests ensure more ambitious teaching and learning?

This question takes on interesting dimensions when comparing Florida, where social studies is *not* an explicit part of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), and Virginia, where social studies *is* assessed in end-of-course high-stakes fact-recall Virginia Standard of Learning examinations (VSOLs). In both states, these tests have implications for teachers' classroom practices as they try, to varying degrees, to negotiate the complex contexts within which they make instructional decisions. In Florida, teachers struggle to find time and reason to teach history in meaningful ways when their attention is continuously drawn to the

state exam—a test that contains no social studies content. In Virginia, faced with history end-of-course fact-recall exams, teachers make difficult decisions about how to cover fact-heavy curricula that encompass large time periods in history and how to prepare all of their students for the high-stakes test.

While these complex teaching environments create challenges for all teachers, they are particularly difficult for beginning teachers to navigate. Beginning teachers face a myriad of challenges as they enter schools—an increasing diverse student population, lack of support or mentoring, heavy teaching loads, multiple preparations, extracurricular duties, discipline issues, professional isolation, high parent expectations, unfamiliarity with routines and procedures—and, in addition to that intimidating list, the pressures imposed by state mandated accountability measures (Darling-Hammond, 1998a; Gold, 1996; Gold & Roth, 1993; Gradwell, (2006); Rust, 1994; Ryan, 1986; van Hover, (2006); van Hover & Yeager, 2004). As beginning history teachers in these two states work through the complex process of learning to teach, they do so within a context that includes examinations that directly affect school accreditation and students' opportunities to graduate from high school. This paper examines how a beginning teacher in Virginia and a beginning teacher in Florida make sense of the high-stakes tests in their state. This question is important because, as Avner Segall (2003) notes in his study of the impact of Michigan's mandated testing program on social studies, what a high stakes test entails "for teachers and how they respond to it are, to a large extent, dependent on [teachers'] perceptions of that assessments (p. 288). How beginning teachers, as S.G. Grant argued, read and respond to the tests will, in a large part, influence how they conceptualize and develop their instructional practice and, possibly, determine whether or not they stay in the teaching profession. And, by examining beginning teachers in two states where the tests are so very different, we can gain important insight into whether there are similarities and differences across states and how the nature of the test affects the teaching and learning of history. In this paper, we first offer insight into the context of accountability in Virginia and Florida, and then discuss what ambitious teaching and learning look like in these states, as informed by the literature. Then, we turn to our research methods, findings, and implications for the field of social studies.

The Context of Accountability

It has long been understood that major trends in the larger educational environment (e.g., high-stakes testing and stringent state standards) create an impetus for social studies curricular change (Lippert, 1969); these changes are aimed at student-specific improvement (Iozzi & Cheu, 1978), and they are designed to facilitate students' capacity to make socially effective choices by enhancing their academic ability. With the recognition that for more than a decade social studies has been a field measured and re-measured by standards (Thornton, 2002), today's social studies educators bear the responsibility of integrating the press for heightened accountability with their best pedagogical intentions (Thornton, 2005).

In the recent era of high-stakes testing and stringent, often poorly constructed, mandatory state standards, social studies teachers face ever-expanding levels of accountability. The result is that by means of "coercion and exhortation...teachers are expected to implement a curriculum [while] having played no part in the formulation of its aims" (Thornton, 2000, p. 3). This increasingly aggressive environment leaves many social studies teachers wondering exactly what path their chosen profession will take. Indeed, with recent literature showing the complexities arising at the intersection of high-stakes testing, teaching, and learning (McNeil, 2000),

combined with the decidedly non-standardized professional preparation experiences of teachers in the key areas of historical inquiry (Yeager & Davis, 1994, 1995, 1996), use of primary documents (Seixas, 1998a, 1998b; Yeager & Wilson, 1997) and understanding of wise classroom practice (Adler, 1993; Davis, 1997; Purkey & Stanley, 1991; Shulman, 1987; Yeager & Wilson, 1997), many history teachers face a sort of identity crisis. Certainly, one hears teachers asking the following types of questions: “Am I a history teacher or a reading teacher? Am I a facilitator of learning or a purveyor of test-related content? Must I abandon the reasons I became a teacher in order to prepare students for this test?” In Virginia and Florida, we hear such questions among both pre-service and practicing teachers.

In Virginia, the accountability system, implemented in the mid-1990’s, includes three main components: content standards, high-stakes testing, and revised standards of school accreditation (Duke & Reck, 2003). Virginia’s content-based standards, the Standards of Learning (SOLs) set expectations for teaching and learning in all subject areas and list knowledge and skills that every child is expected to learn. The History and Social Science Standards of Learning were initially released in 1995, then revised and re-released in 2001. At the high school level, although the sequence varies by district, courses offered and tested include World History I, World History II, World Geography, United States and Virginia History. Virginia and United States Government courses are typically offered in the twelfth grade, but, to date, neither has an end-of course test. The end-of-course assessments for the other courses are four-choice, multiple-choice tests, and, in history, these tests almost exclusively emphasize recall of factual content. The tests are scored on a scale from 0-600, and a student must receive a score of 400 or higher to pass the test.

These tests are high-stakes for two reasons. First, 70% of students who take the SOL tests must pass in order for a school to be considered for accreditation. Second, students need to pass a certain number of tests to earn a diploma. Virginia offers two diplomas: Standard and Advanced. College-bound students must earn an advanced diploma. In order to graduate with a particular diploma, students have to earn standard units of credit and verified units of credit. Standard units of credits are earned by successfully completing 140 clock hours of instruction and passing the course with a D or higher. A student is awarded a verified unit of credit if they earn a standard unit of credit *and* pass the corresponding SOL exam. For a standard diploma, students must earn three standard units of credit (pass three classes) and one verified credit in history. An advanced diploma requires the student to earn four standard units of credit (pass four classes) and two verified credits in history.

The testing situation in Virginia impacts history teachers in complex and interesting ways. Teachers are held visibly and publicly accountable to their test scores—data are disaggregated and presented at faculty meetings, score reports are distributed to teachers individually, course assignments are often altered/determined by pass rates. The tests cover wide expanses of time—World History I, for example, covers the beginning of time until the Renaissance. The amount of content included in the curricula and tested on the end-of-course examination is enormous and specific. Thus, teachers contend with difficult decisions about what content to teach, why to teach particular content topics, how to structure instruction, and most significantly, at what pace to cover content. Ultimately, conversation in Virginia revolves around issues of time and coverage—how to *get through* the curriculum in order to be ready for the end-of-course examinations in May.

In Florida, confounding the situation is the fact that, although policymakers have specified state social studies standards (the Sunshine State Standards) at all levels of schooling,

social studies content is not tested on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The FCAT, administered to students in grades 3-11, is the latest version of Florida's statewide assessment program and contains two basic components: criterion-referenced tests, measuring selected benchmarks in mathematics, reading, science, and writing from the Sunshine State Standards, and norm-referenced tests in reading and mathematics, measuring individual student performance against national norms. The Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability began conceptualizing the FCAT well before the first test was administered in 1998. In 1995, the Commission recommended procedures for assessing student learning in Florida that would "raise educational expectations for students and help them compete for jobs in the global marketplace" (Florida Department of Education, 2005). The State Board of Education adopted the recommendations called the Comprehensive Assessment Design in June 1995. The Design specified the development of new statewide assessments to address four broad areas described in the first four standards of Goal 3 of Blueprint 2000. These four areas highlighted reading, writing, mathematics, and creative and critical thinking. In addition, the Design required that educational content standards be developed and adopted. Subsequently, the Florida Sunshine State Standards were developed and adopted by the State Board. The frameworks and standards established guidelines for a statewide system that incorporated assessment, accountability, and in-service training components.

According to the Florida Department of Education, "the FCAT was designed to meet both the requirements of the Comprehensive Assessment Design and the rigorous content defined by the Sunshine State Standards. The FCAT measures the content specified within the strands, standards, and benchmarks of the Sunshine State Standards and does so in the context of real-world applications" (Florida Department of Education, 2005). Initially, the FCAT was designed to assess reading, writing, and mathematics at four grade levels so that each subject was assessed at all levels of schooling. With legislative approval of Governor Jeb Bush's A+ Plan in 1999, the FCAT was expanded to include grades 3-10. In 2001, achievement for all grade levels was reported for the first time.

At the high school level, the testing situation impacts teachers and students in diverse, often unsystematic ways, as teachers struggle to figure out what their roles are supposed to be within the overall goals of their school. In our experience of observing and working with dozens of Florida high school history teachers over the past ten years, it strikes us as unusual as to the consistency of how teachers from all over the map perceive their responsibilities with regard to FCAT preparation, in particular, and student achievement, in general, and certainly schools from all over the map with regard to the in-service training component specified by the state.

For a history teacher, especially one new to the profession, to move beyond a fragmented (Thornton, 2000) and frantic identity to a wiser or more ambitious practice (Brighton, 2002; Davis, 1997; Feldman, 1997; Foster, Hoge, & Rosch, 1999; Foster & Yeager, 1999; Grant, 2003; Yeager, 2000) that both engages students and prepares them for a standardized test is a tall order. Such a mandate is especially frustrating and confining when one's content is either reductive or invisible on the test. Not surprisingly, then, we hear teachers ask if they should scale back their content to implement test preparation activities, if their subject will be eliminated or tested, and if and how they are supposed to contribute to student achievement on the test.

Ambitious Teaching and Learning in a High-Stakes Context

One way in which we have thought about effective history teaching in Virginia is by exploring S.G. Grant's (2003; 2005) conception of ambitious teaching. He (2003) situates history practice within the schooling context and that ambitious teaching develops when, as he argues:

- 1) teachers know their subject matter well and see within it the potential to enrich their students' lives;
- 2) when teachers know their students well, which includes understanding the kind of lives they lead, how they think about and perceive the world, and that they are capable of far more than they and most others believe;
- 3) when teachers know how to create the necessary space for themselves and their students in environments that may not appreciate the efforts of either. (p. xi)

Thus, ambitious teaching in a context that emphasizes (and tests) recall of facts would perhaps include attention to situating these facts within the big ideas of history, to connecting these ideas to students' lives, and to encouraging them to think critically about key questions and issues in history. Ambitious teaching could include the use of varied and powerful teaching methods that are appropriate and engaging for students. In other words, ambitious teaching in Virginia assumes that teachers avoid the impulse to drill facts but rather make space for themselves and decide to teach in engaging and interesting ways that allow students to learn facts within a larger framework that fosters a deeper understanding of history. Borrowing from the National Research Council's definition of expert teachers, "rather than simply introduce students to a set of facts to be learned," ambitious teachers would help students to "understand the problematic nature of historical interpretation and analysis and to appreciate the relevance of history for their everyday lives" (p. 159).

In Florida, wise history teaching practice would seem to include more and better content-specific reading and writing strategies in history classes so that students can master these skills for the FCAT. Dobbs (1997) asserts that "there is a high failure rate in the content area because children [with regard to reading] have problems understanding text material, poor study skills, and lack of motivation" (p. 3). She suggests a variety of methods to monitor and improve reading skills and behaviors that will "help the students think about what they are reading, create mental pictures, and ask questions" (Dobbs, 2003, p. 3), which eventually can reduce dropout rates and behavior problems as well as improve academic achievement. Kameenui and Carnine (1998) argue that improved reading and writing skills in the social studies classroom directly benefit diverse learners both in and out of the classroom (Kameenui & Carnine, 1998). Additionally, the focus on content-specific reading and writing skills provides for the inclusion of historically-ignored groups (McElroy & Downey, 1982) and for academic stabilization or improvement in high-poverty and high minority-populated schools as a whole (Education Trust, 2002) and for member students specifically (Dodge & Price, 1994). Other researchers (Irvin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown, & Shepard, 1995; Patrick & Leming, 2001) support the conclusion that tailored use of reading and writing strategies in social studies classrooms can "deepen students' understanding of the social sciences" and motivate them to engage in the dialogue of "reading and writing in the social studies class" (Irvin et al., 1995, p. 1). If true, such an approach could constitute evidence of the truly "powerful teaching" (NCSS, 1994) that has been described and desired for more than a decade.

Purpose of this Study

As we know from van Hover (2006) and from an abundance of additional research, beginning teachers face unique issues and challenges related to workload, support and mentoring, and classroom management, not to mention the fact that they are still learning the content they are expected to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1998b; Lawson, 1992; Rust, 1994). van Hover (2006) focuses on teachers who deal with the high-pressure environment of the Virginia SOLs test, which mandates the teaching and testing of an extensive, detailed list of historical facts and skills. The teachers in her study have known no other teaching environment, thus their perceptions of the test and of their own teaching practices with regard to the test are of special significance, a conclusion reminiscent of Segall's (2003) study of Michigan teachers.

In a sense, the new standards and testing mandates may make many teachers feel like rookies in an entirely new ball game. In Virginia, teachers struggle to determine how to prepare all students for an end-of-course test that covers an enormous span of time and a plethora of factual content. They recognize that they are held accountable to their test scores and thus make difficult decisions about how to structure instruction and at what pace to cover content. In Florida, these policies take on a unique cast insofar as the absence of a state-mandated history test leaves teachers struggling to understand where they fit into their school's FCAT mission. Our experiences with Florida high school history teachers at all levels of experience suggest that these teachers believe that, on some level, they are expected to help raise scores, but how they do so appears largely idiosyncratic.

In this paper, we juxtapose two stories that typify some of the issues and challenges of the high-stakes testing context. We present a snapshot of two history teachers, in very different school settings, trying to make sense of the test and their roles in preparing students for it. Both teachers, in their first year of teaching, can claim the testing environment as the only one they have known. We discuss their perceptions of the test's impact on their teaching and on what they consider to be wise or ambitious practices as they use various reading and writing strategies to "deepen students' understanding of the social sciences" and motivate students to engage in the dialogue of "reading and writing in the social studies class" (Irvin et al., 1995, p.1).

Methods

We used a case study methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995) to study two secondary history teachers, Claire and Suzanne (pseudonyms), completing their first year of teaching. The case study approach allowed us to investigate the classroom lives of these teachers as "bounded systems" (Stake, 1995). Our research examined the following questions: What are two beginning history teachers' perceptions of the influence of standards and accountability on their emerging teaching practices? How are these perceptions similar and/or different according to the specific context (Virginia or Florida) in which they work?

Participants and Setting

We selected the two teachers on the basis of several criteria. First, they were full-time history teachers in their public school systems. Second, they were both in their first year of teaching and within the "high-stakes test generation" of classroom teachers. Suzanne, a White female in her early twenties, taught 11th grade U.S. history at 105-year-old University High

School, a large, diverse school of 1700 students in a small North Central Florida city where, in addition to a mix of African Americans and Whites, the school draws Asian and Hispanic students because it houses the district's main ESOL program. The school's FCAT scores declined in recent years, going from a B in 2001 to a D in 2005 via the state's school accountability grading system. Suzanne was in her first year as a full-time teacher after having earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's/certification degree in social studies education at the large public university in the same city as University High.

Claire, a White female in her early twenties, teaches at Jefferson High School, a highly diverse high school located in a city district in central Virginia. At the time of the study, Claire taught six sections of World History II. The course load for most teachers is five sections; Claire was assigned an extra section due to over-enrollment. Demographically, Jefferson High School is approximately 50% African-American students and 50% White students. The state has labeled Jefferson High School as "provisionally accredited/needs improvement"—in other words, the school has not met the 70% SOL pass rate for all areas of study. Claire graduated from the teacher education program at the local public university; she earned a bachelor's degree in history and a master's teaching degree in social studies education. As part of her teacher education program, Claire completed a semester-long student teaching experience; she was placed at Jefferson High School where she taught four sections of World History II. She graduated a semester early (December) from her five-year program, was hired as a permanent substitute by Jefferson High School, and offered a full-time position to "replace" her former directing teacher, who was retiring at the end of that school year. At the time of this study, Claire was in her first year as a full-time teacher at Jefferson High School.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

The data sources for this study included 16 classroom observations per teacher and several semi-structured interviews. We audiotaped and transcribed each of the interviews, which were semi-structured because our primary interest was to accept the validity of the responses and to learn more about the participants' perspectives. We gathered only field notes during observations. We designed the interview protocol to elicit the teachers' views on the issues described above, as well as the relevant personal background information that provided the basis for their responses. Observations were conducted in order to gain a sense of each teacher's lesson planning, instructional methods, and classroom dynamics. The observations lasted for one class period each. During the observations, we took extensive free-form field notes and completed reflective notes afterward.

We analyzed the data in several phases. First, we each conducted independent, systematic content analyses of the interview transcripts and field notes, looking for similarities, differences, patterns, themes, and general categories of responses (Stake, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Secondly, we each prepared our own tables for categorization of responses, as well as research memos detailing our analysis. Then we met to compare our analyses and generate an outline of the major themes and issues emerging from the data. We adhered to Kvale's (1994) discussion of the social construction of validity and the conception of "moderate postmodernism," which accepts the possibility of specific local, personal, and community forms of truth, with a focus on daily life and local narrative" (p. 231). We also employed "experiential" and "consequential" types of analysis (Kvale, 1994). "Experiential" questions attempt to clarify what the interviewees have said about a particular subject—the content. "Consequential" questions ask about the

implications of the interviewees' statements. Furthermore, our analysis of the interview text followed what Kvale (1994) has called "meaning categorization" and "meaning interpretation." For the former, we read the interview transcripts and identified and coded prominent themes into categories. These were listed as main points in our internal research memoranda. We employed the latter for particular statements that we thought were both representative and meaningful.

Ambitious Teaching: Preserving Content, Integrating Literacy

We wondered how these two high school history teachers, who have worked only within a context of standards and accountability, interpret the influence of a high-stakes test on their teaching practice—and one with the added dimension of a test that did not include their disciplinary content. We found the two teachers, Suzanne and Claire, had highly divergent experiences yet reached some of the same conclusions. We explore some of the essential differences in their experiences and perceptions, focusing on the nature of their students, their school culture, their professional development/training with regard to the test, and their instructional and assessment decisions in the classroom. After discussing the teachers' situations separately, we analyze their views on ambitious teaching, how they feel the test has impacted their ambitions, and how they respond to what they perceive to be the message from the "powers that be."

Suzanne: "This Feels So Unprofessional"

Snapshots from Suzanne's Classroom

Suzanne takes an interesting approach to balancing history content and the literacy skills required as part of preparation for the FCAT test. A rookie teacher, Suzanne feels sufficiently capable and empowered to forefront the historical ideas she chooses to teach, working the necessary literacy skills into the content-based activities she designs. Complicating Suzanne's approach is the fact that she works within a school context that offers no particular support for her ambitious practices. The two vignettes presented below capture something of the activities Suzanne leads on her "FCAT practice" days.

Suzanne begins by directing the class to write down a definition of the term "Emancipation Proclamation," using the glossary from their textbook and to explain the statement: "The Emancipation Proclamation had far more symbolic than real impact." Asked to recite their answers to these questions, most students do so accurately. Next, Suzanne tells students that they will read a secondary source related to U.S. history, "The Emancipation Proclamation: An Act of Justice," by John Hope Franklin (1993), an article on the context and significance of the act. The four-page document is relatively long with some high-level vocabulary (e.g., trenchant, deliberation, enfranchisement) which is not discussed. Suzanne instructs the class to respond in writing to several questions: (a) What is the significance of the correction Lincoln made to the Proclamation before signing it? (b) Describe the scene in which he formally signed it. (c) Where is the original document today? (d) List and describe two differences between preliminary and final drafts of the Proclamation. (e) How did people around the country react to it? (f) If the Proclamation did not actually free slaves in many areas, what did occur because of it? (g) Why does the author say it is more common to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation than the 13th Amendment? (h) How did President Kennedy reference the Proclamation as a defense for equal rights for blacks? (i) What is the author's

opinion of Lincoln's position as compared to U.S. leaders today? The students work on this assignment for the rest of the period and turn in their papers when the bell rings.

In a subsequent class period, Suzanne reviews the major problems the students had with the assignment, focusing on vocabulary issues and the perspectives described in the document. A content lesson, in part, she focuses specifically on the literacy skills of vocabulary development and identifying point of view. Suzanne tells the class that they are going to do an exercise on opposing viewpoints on the question, "Should black soldiers fight for the Union?" She explains that she will give them either one "pro" or one "con" reading on this topic. This time, the readings are short (less than two pages each). Before the students start reading, Suzanne provides some scaffolding:

As you read, write down all the facts to support your argument, write down the underlined words on your handout, and match each one to the word(s) in the list at the end of your reading. Then after you read, I'm going to ask you to defend your argument, listen to the other side, and decide who has the best argument on the basis of the facts.

Suzanne closely monitors their work, making sure they are on the right track.

After a brief period, she calls time, tells them to turn to the person next to them with the opposing viewpoint, and explain their viewpoints to each other. At the conclusion of the conversation, students decide who has the better argument and engage the activity productively. Before the bell, Suzanne calls time again, says "all eyes on me," and directs students to write a one-paragraph reflection on which argument is best and why, supporting their stand with facts from their reading. Some of the students grumble about the paragraph, but she tells them it is "writing practice you need."

Understanding the Balance of Content and Literacy in Suzanne's Practice

Evident in her interviews and in these classroom illustrations, Suzanne finds ways to justify her preferred content-heavy instructional practices, believing that they provide the best route not only to engage her students' thinking but also to help them practice for the FCAT. The Emancipation Proclamation activity is typical of her "big idea" content focus that demands far more of her students than the FCAT writing test. Yet, when she tries content-based writing without taking into consideration her students' lack of basic literacy skills, she realizes that her lessons have to include these skills if students are to understand the content. Although the FCAT is not a daily focus of her instruction, Suzanne believes there are certain reading and writing skills that her students need to practice, whether or not the FCAT exists.

Having come from a sociology background, Suzanne jokes that the reason she teaches history is because "it's the job I was offered." Continuing, she notes the importance of history:

As an application to today...how does this affect us? What can we learn now from the past...Relevance is the key to the meaning of history. Instead of giving students dates and time lines, I want them to remember perspectives, viewpoints, stories—not just events but overall themes.

In her first year, Suzanne teaches five classes of U.S. history to a diverse group of mostly 11th graders (25% African American, 70% White, and 5% Hispanic and Asian; about 20 of her students were in the school's ESOL program). The students are diverse academically and ethnically, but many exhibit ability and behavior issues that are "very challenging...the application is the problem. They have the ability, but the motivation is not there. A lot of them think it's not cool to achieve." Many of her students read below grade level and demonstrate "a

lot of comprehension problems.” Thirteen of Suzanne’s students failed the FCAT reading test when they took it in 10th grade, and three students have with 504 Exceptional Student Education accommodation plans for reading problems. Twenty-five students are assigned to the “strategies” class for “at-risk” learners; thus, she regularly attends scheduled meetings with the teacher of the strategies class.

The school context in which Suzanne teaches is also challenging. She believes that the school is “not as strict as it needs to be to improve achievement...Extracurricular stuff seems more important and it always disrupts the class schedule.” She credits the principal with his plan to bring new energy and ideas into the school by hiring 30 new teachers. But she characterizes the veteran teachers as “very negative and cynical...When new teachers act enthusiastic or suggest new ideas, the older teachers put them down.” Suzanne seeks out colleagues for advice, including the media specialist and the ESOL teacher, and her colleagues have become friendlier to her. Still, most of them continue to disparage the more ambitious ideas she tries in her classes.

Interestingly enough, the FCAT is discounted by most of Suzanne’s colleagues. The principal led some in-service activities in which he instructed the teachers to begin their classes by writing a Sunshine State Standard objective on the board each day. Suzanne reports that few teachers took the principal or the state test seriously:

A lot of the teachers in my department make fun of this behind his back and don't do it. And the FCAT is not taken seriously at all, especially compared to [the school where she did her internship]. Some kids didn't even know they had to do the FCAT retake this year and were totally surprised when they came to school that day!...So since the FCAT is not on the test, the teachers just don't care. The honors and AP teachers could care less. A few new teachers have tried to work with some of the English teachers to plan for the practice days, but most teachers say that they are just going to drag their feet about the whole thing.

Perhaps sensing his staff’s resistance, the principal issued a directive to faculty with students taking the FCAT that they must teach FCAT-based reading skills every Tuesday and Wednesday using a prescribed but generic literacy skills workbook. A few weeks later, the principal conducted a workshop that Suzanne found “silly and demeaning”:

I think some of the older teachers are using it, just copying stuff out of the FCAT book. I guess some are taking the path of least resistance. They just hand out the stuff and it's like a day off from lesson planning. But I can't stand the time away from my content. The new teachers feel the same way. It feels unprofessional, like not what I was taught to do. I want to come up with my own readings and questions. Yet if someone came in and observed me doing the generic stuff, which I've been told will happen, it would be considered perfectly acceptable.

Suzanne explains that she attempted to follow the guidelines and implement some of the practice activities from the workshop, but she quickly concluded that the students “saw through them, and I knew I was wasting my time and theirs.” Reflecting on this sequence of experiences, Suzanne decided to locate content-oriented reading and writing activities directly tied to her U.S. history curriculum. She rejects the lack of ambition in some of the test-related measures her school is promoting, and resolves to resist this “laziness.”

Suzanne seems determined to make the policy fit her practice. For example, when she plans for instruction and assessment, she initially focuses on “the outcome...What do I want them to learn/achieve? Then I decide how much in depth I want them to go. Only then do I decide how to apply the [Sunshine State] standards. I can apply the standard to any lesson I want.

I don't try to fit into the standards.” She uses the Internet as a resource for primary sources and documents and the textbook as her main secondary source. Lesson plans are not required or checked in her school, but she finds the lesson planning format she learned in her master’s program to be practical and continues to use it. Her preferred teaching methods include cooperative learning activities and lecture with question-and-answer sessions. When she received the FCAT practice directive, Suzanne feared that these preferred methods and most of her content would have to be abandoned. But just as she rejects the negativism of her colleagues toward “new” ideas, so too does she reject the notion of boilerplate FCAT practice, and she resolves to use her own judgment about what will and will not work for her students.

But when asked about the influence of the FCAT on her practice, Suzanne’s response reveals the complex feelings the test generates. First, she clearly feels pressure to help her students perform well on the test:

Now I'm concerned because I feel the weight of getting the kids to pass the test. I have to do this practice every Tuesday and Wednesday, but it's hard because the ones who need it the most are the ones who are absent all the time.

At the same time, Suzanne seems a bit overwhelmed trying to figure out how to do what she wants to do:

My concern is how to incorporate more reading, but I'm concerned the students won't do it if there is too much reading involved in an activity. They just will not read anything for too long. They just give up. It's a big task for them to read. What do I do?...I just am not sure what to do....Right now it's not clear how to connect the content I want to cover with the FCAT strategies.

And yet, Suzanne seems determined not to let the test and the mindless drill-and-practice suggestions from her principal define her practice:

I've been given a workbook, but I think I have more flexibility than that. I've talked to others, and I feel like I can take historical fiction, primary sources, and so forth, that are relevant to U.S. history and just model my activities for these after the workbook. The workbook is not relevant at all.

Although the FCAT is not the daily priority that it is other teachers in her school, Suzanne finds that the historical document and primary source reading and writing activities she prefers happen to be beneficial with regard to FCAT practice. She also finds that her preference for including a writing section on each of her tests is consistent with helping students prepare for the FCAT. She thinks she may be asked to do more explicit FCAT activities in the future, but for now, she believes she is helping her students gain expertise in tested skills without sacrificing the content she thinks is so important. Suzanne attends to her content and to the state test by choosing the content she wants to teach and then determines which literacy skills she can teach within it.

Claire: “Catch up or Move On?”

Snapshots from Claire’s Classroom

Claire is a lively and enthusiastic teacher who exhibited a sense of humor, possessed excellent behavior management skills, and used a wide variety of creative and engaging instructional approaches. Yet, within a testing context that requires all teacher to cover all “testable” content with all students by a certain date, Claire had to consider the specific needs of

her students, recognize the requirements of the end-of-year test, and make very difficult decisions and compromises about whether to, in her words, “catch up, or move on.” The vignettes below present Claire teaching about the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War in order to offer a snapshot of Claire teaching “testable” content and negotiating the balance between depth and breadth.

Claire introduces the topic of the Russian Revolution through a very brief lecture. She then hands out a chart that describes the plot and characters of the book *Animal Farm* and asks students to work in pairs to read the excerpt of *Animal Farm* and fill in the chart. The class goes over the chart, discussing the metaphor and comparing the characters in the book to figures and events in the Russian Revolution. Next, Claire distributes a one-page short history of the Russian Revolution and a People-Events-Terms notes chart. She asks students to read the excerpt and fill in the chart, which includes such items as follows: Lenin, 1917, landless peasantry, Bolshevik Revolution, and Joseph Stalin. At the end of class, Claire reviews these terms with students.

The next day, Claire opens class by reviewing the key events of the Russian Civil War. She asks the students recall questions about dates, names, and events. The students respond quickly and accurately. Then, Claire introduces the day’s activity—to create a newscast about the Russian Civil War. She tells students that they can choose a news format (anchors reporting, location reporting, interview, opinion) to report on an assigned event from a particular historical viewpoint. Claire explains that they will be able to use textbooks and lap top computers to conduct research for their report. She then briefly reviews the notions of “point of view” and “historical perspective” with the class. Claire divides students into groups and assigns them their point of view: Bolshevik Sympathizers, White Army Sympathizers, Western Europe, and the United States. Students are given 30 minutes to put together their report. The students’ presentations are very creative and chock full of historical facts—in one, for example, Rasputin reported on his own death from hell, taking a White Army perspective. At the end of class, Claire pulls together the reports and, once again, reviews the key facts of the Russian Civil War.

On day three, Claire introduces the class by saying, “We’re going to talk some more about the Russian Revolution and we’re going to compare it to a revolution we’ve already studied: the French Revolution.” She then asked students, “How might they be similar?” One student responded, “Because people got sick of how absolute monarchs were handling things.” Claire nodded in the affirmative and then distributed a chart. As a class, they filled in the class, discussing the similarities and differences between the two revolutions. Claire finished the activity by reviewing the idea of “revolution” with the class. They then moved on to a brief lecture on Stalin.

Understanding the Balance of Content and Time in Claire’s Practice

Claire taught about the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War in three class periods—two 90-minute blocks and one 50-minute block. For Claire, this is quite a “long” unit of study—many topics are covered in a day or less. Yet, even within this relatively short period of time, Claire emphasized the important facts and testable content of this period (as identified by the scope and sequence chart provided by the state) while allowing students to explore some topics in depth to learn important thinking skills (metaphors, compare and contrast, historical perspective), and to understand a big idea (revolution). This reflects Claire’s approach to making sense of the test—to include and emphasize the important facts as well as allow students to walk away with the big ideas of history and some useful thinking skills.

In her first year, Claire teaches six sections of World History II—four sections of students identified as “honors” students and two sections of students identified as “general” students. Claire described her honors students as very bright students who “need absolutely no help in figuring out what the textbook said or absolutely no help reading things and learning things,” and Claire reported that over 60% of her honors students passed the SOL pre-test given at the beginning of the school year. The students identified as “general” level students, on the other hand, according to Claire, read at a 6th grade level and have struggled academically. This group, however, represented a crucial group for the school—they were students who could “go either way” in terms of the SOL test, and in order for the school to meet the 70% pass rates, these students had to pass. Thus, the school’s message was simple: get as many students to pass the SOL as possible. Claire, however, for the most part, had to make sense of how to do this on her own.

Claire felt comfortable with her instructional decision-making: about *how* to teach. She enjoyed using a variety of different methods and resources—group work, individual work, lecture, discussion, in-class projects, at-home projects, arts and crafts activities, primary and secondary historical sources, visuals, video excerpts, and more. Claire identified her major challenge as determining *what* to teach, and at what pace. The history department provided all teachers with pacing guides, curriculum scope and sequence charts, and test blueprints. The pacing guides, created collaboratively by teachers within Jefferson High School’s history department, provided a list of dates and units. The World History II pacing guide, for example, stated that teachers should have covered all units up to World War I by the end of the first semester (January). The curriculum scope and sequence charts, distributed by the state, outline the essential understandings, questions, knowledge, and skills for each topic. Finally, the test blueprints break down the number of test items per standard. So, for World History II, the blueprint revealed a heavy emphasis on 20th century world history. Claire used these to help her plan, but, she admitted, it took her awhile to figure out how to get a “feel” for the issue of depth versus breadth and how to determine how much time to spend on one topic before moving on. She struggled with how to *catch up* her general level students while *pushing* her honors students.

Claire described her challenges with choosing content and pacing content within the context of an “epiphany” she experienced over Holiday Break in her first year of teaching. That December, Claire realized that she had fallen five or six weeks behind the department-mandated pacing guide—she should have been moving into the causes of World War I, but she was still covering the French Revolution. This realization, Claire noted, forced her to rethink the fundamental question of depth versus breadth. Her general students possessed very little background in world history, and thus, during the first semester, Claire spent a great deal of time teaching each topic in depth. This allowed her to “catch up” her general students while exploring topics in even greater depth with her honors students.

What finally clued me in was that I took the scope and sequence for the SOLs and I looked at what they said was essential facts and information—the nitty gritty, what they will have to remember for the SOL test. Then I looked at the big concepts and said, oh, they want them to understand that religious reform caused conflict in Europe. Which I hadn’t really touched on because I was so busy trying to see that they knew the difference between the early reformers and Martin Luther and that they knew all the problems of the church. Really, all I needed to teach them was indulgences—that’s the only thing they need to know according to the SOLs.

This realization, however, as the quotation below highlights, compelled Claire to grapple with the question of whether it was enough to simply focus on the content presented by the Scope and Sequence:

I struggled with this. Do I really get into the heart, the details, of all of this, or do I just talk about indulgences? And then I realized, what do indulgences say? The people who wrote the SOLs, bless their hearts, may not have it all together, but they are not idiots. They know that the selling of indulgences was the thing that kicked Luther off and made him start this whole thing, so, yes, it is the most important abuse of the Catholic Church for us to study at this point. And, it also goes into the greed of the Catholic Church and it's also corrupt. So it really is all of these things. So, instead of teaching about the lavishness of the Popes and nepotism, all I have to say is that the Church is very greedy and part of the greed was selling indulgence. That's what Martin Luther saw, and this is what he did. And I was able to pare it down to stuff that was (a) not overwhelming for them and (b) still got at the central understanding.

Once she chose to focus on the content included in the scope and sequence, Claire asserted, she found it easier to focus on the big ideas and use the SOL content to help students understand those big ideas.

Thus, the influence of the test on Claire, in her estimation, was greatest on her planning and her thinking about what content to teach as well as at what pace. On her day-to-day practice, she did not drill students, but rather framed the facts within big ideas and the teaching of essential skills of history. Indeed, she provided intensive review two weeks before the test, but after the test, she assigned projects that reviewed the big ideas, the “big things” in world history. When asked about the test, Claire reflected that her students valued the test as a measure of their success:

In this learning community, success is measured by whether or not you pass the SOL test. And I was aware of that, but I didn't realize how aware my students were of the fact that if they were going to be successful, this is the measure of your success, period, end-of-story.

She went on to describe her pragmatic view about the SOL tests—they exist, and she will do her best to help students achieve success:

If that's how [the students] are going to measure success... that's fine, that's what the state government is telling them is important. I disagree with that being the measure of success. But if that's what their measure of success is, then it's my job to give them what they need to [pass the test]. At the end of the year, I'm not afraid to measure my own success as a teacher by whether or not they've passed...I want [my students] to pass the test and I think that's OK. I would be elated if the state government would trust my assessment of whether or not they've passed world history. I think I should be able to judge whether this kid knows this or this kid doesn't. I don't think the test should take my place in judging whether or not they've reached a level of mastery. But there are some teachers who are not competent to make that judgment. But instead of giving a test, I think that you should fire those teachers. Even though I'm not comfortable with the SOLs as the measure of success that's what [my students] understand. They see a number and they think, I succeeded or I failed. So that's what I want—I want them to pass [the test.]

Discussion

This study examines the question of how two beginning high school history teachers, one in Florida and one in Virginia, make sense of their role in the high-stakes environment of state standards and testing. We found similarities—both teachers are on what S.G. Grant terms the “journey” towards ambitious teaching. They are thoughtful teachers who teach in interesting and engaging ways, work hard to connect subject matter to their students, and make space for themselves within challenging contexts. Yet, clear differences emerged.

First, the differences in the nature of the test in each state influenced how the two beginning teachers perceived the influence of the test on her instructional decision-making. Claire, facing an end-of-year, fact-recall, high-stakes world history exam, had to cover her curriculum at a brisk pace in order to prepare students for the examinations held in May. She agonized over what content to include/exclude and over the high expectations from her administration for her pass-rates on the test. Suzanne, on the other hand, had to contend with an examination that did not include any social studies content. Rather, the principal mandated that she teach reading and writing skills using a generic FCAT workbook. No one at her school seemed concerned about whether or not she actually taught U.S. history—rather the emphasis was placed on skills directly tested on the high-stakes exam.

Second, who these women were as beginning teachers made a difference in how they perceived the influence of the test. In other words, issues such as educational background, student teaching experiences, course load, and context exerted an enormous influence on how these beginning history teachers made instructional decisions and how they perceived the high-stakes test. Claire possessed a strong background in history, generally, and world history, specifically. She had completed her student teaching experience at Jefferson High School and had taught World History II—in fact, Claire’s directing teacher retired, and Claire was hired to replace her. Also, Claire’s district had implemented an intensive beginning teacher mentoring/induction program. Claire was assigned a mentor, an experienced teacher who served as a full-time induction mentor, observed Claire once a month, and met with her once a week. Suzanne, on the other hand, majored in sociology but was teaching U.S. history, a new content area for her. Additionally, she was working in a department traditionally hostile to new teachers. Suzanne had to request a mentor but found this teacher to be unhelpful and distant. She had to survive on her own—and, more importantly, she had to make sense of the test on her own.

What struck us about these two teachers was the *personal* and *contextual* nature of their instructional decision-making with regard to the test. Both teachers possessed an intense personal drive to find ways to make the test work for them and to not allow the test to completely dictate the nature of their work. At Claire’s school, preparation for the SOLs had become such a deeply ingrained priority among the entire faculty and student body that they simply accepted the test as a fact of life and got on with their tasks. At Suzanne’s school, the faculty and students seemed either complacent about or hostile to the FCAT. But Suzanne, after a brief period of FCAT “culture shock,” gradually rebelled against the competing pressures from her colleagues of either succumbing to the easy path of mindless test preparation activities or else ignoring the test altogether; both of which she believed would be detrimental to her students. Both Claire and Suzanne seemed to take it as a personal challenge to ensure that the test would not water down or wash away the history content they loved.

Clearly, Claire’s and Suzanne’s school settings and student populations were quite different from each other. Yet they both worked hard to understand their students’ needs and

abilities, to set realistic goals for what they could accomplish, and then to push their students to not “just sit there” filling out worksheets but to become engaged in the history content. Nor did either teacher want to “just sit there” grading those worksheets; to them, taking the path of least resistance seemed inconceivable. They wanted to be engaged in their content, too.

Without a doubt, accountability related to high-stakes testing and mandatory state standards is on the rise across the United States and shows no sign of going away. These accountability measures exerted a definite influence upon the classrooms of both Claire and Suzanne. Moreover, it seems clear that teaching takes on a significant level of difficulty and complexity in the potentially schizophrenic environment of high-stakes accountability. Thus the questions arise for teacher educators: (a) How do we recruit and retain new teachers in this environment? (b) How can we convince our teacher education students to work in a low performing school? Whether social studies is tested in a highly prescriptive manner or completely omitted from the state exam, how can we show them that they do not have to give up on the idea of teaching their content even while practicing the exam skills? How do we encourage these teachers to be defenders of their discipline as well as facilitators of achievement on standards and tests, regardless of the idiosyncrasies of their individual school environments? The two teachers that we describe in this paper, as well as a great many others, hold the potential to be powerful advocates of effective and challenging social studies teaching in an uncertain, frustrating time. Certainly, the simple fact that these two teachers have chosen to work in challenging settings—and that they do so gladly and energetically—is a positive sign. Working with Claire and Suzanne has planted the questions above firmly in our consciousness and caused us to rethink how we structure our teacher education programs.

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High Stakes vs. Low Stakes. A "low-stakes test" would be used to measure academic achievement, identify learning problems, or inform instructional adjustments, among other purposes. What distinguishes a high-stakes test from a low-stakes test is not its form (how the test is designed) but its function (how the results are used). A widely discussed example of high-stakes testing being used to influence school, teacher, and student performance. High-stakes testing is one of the most controversial and contentious issues in education today, and the technicalities of the debates are both highly complex and continually evolving. education begun though the teaching was being carried out under verandahs (Ssekamwa, 1999). Later, missionaries established schools which necessitated the establishment of teacher training schools to train teachers who would become professionals and these were equipped with both content and pedagogical skills (Ssekamwa, 1997). The curriculum which basically constituted the 3Rs (that is; Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic) was designated not only to create a new class of elites but also religiously adherent citizens (Nkwanga, 1992). The missionaries used a recruiting system of pupil-teacher to become their assistants in teaching but only those whose personalities seemed ideal for exemplary conduct in the community and had grasped some aspects of the 3Rs were recruited.