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Review of: Olsen, B., & Sexton, D. (2009). Threat Rigidity, School Reform, and How Teachers View Their Work Inside Current Education Policy Contexts [Electronic version]. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 9 –44.

Part I: The Study Design

In the report, Olsen & Sexton explain why they feel the current education policy climate in the United States is divisively complicated. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 has become a heated topic for K-12 public schools. Part of the reason for this heated topic the last few years has been a policy culture in education dealing with significant changes in how schools operate. For instance, how does education define and measure “highly qualified” teachers? The impact of the associated definition and measurement of quality has affected teacher training and licensure; meanwhile, it has also amplified the study of and support for various alternative entry methods (like Teach for America, Troops to Teachers, etc.) into the field. Teachers and administrators battle not only rising scrutiny of their performance from the public sector, but also battle over job security and state receivership of their schools at the governmental level. Many states and city school districts call for strict adherence to pre-designed, cookie-cutter curricula, authoritarian methods of teaching, and mandated textbooks. A main question surrounding this is whether the K-12 public education system is defective beyond repair or if it can effectively recover if left to its own direction (Olsen & Sexton, 2009).

Olsen & Sexton conduct a qualitative study at a "reforming" (via NCLB guidelines) Californian high school - focusing on six high school teachers. The authors purpose is aimed at answering two questions: 1. how does a climate of reform with all of the associated influences of education policy ranging from the federal expectation and culture to the local, affect teachers and their teaching careers? 2. How, in return, do these same teachers then affect the same climate of reform at their school?

The authors selected six teachers from the English department at one well sized underperforming high school in Southern California. The high school was chosen due to demographic and student achievement particulars that label it as a target school for educational reforms and also because its recent history shows various attempts at reform. The specific teachers were selected by the authors wish to signify a wide scope of professional experiences:

... including teacher preparation, multiple roles within teaching, and years in the profession. The resulting stratified random sample included English teachers who attended various teacher preparation programs (undergraduate, graduate, and intern) at public and private universities. Furthermore, all participants had taken on different leadership roles as teachers, and the sample varied in number of years teaching, from 3 to 25, which we grouped into early-career teachers ($n = 2$), midcareer teachers ($n = 2$), and later-career teachers ($n = 2$). (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 11).

The authors met with each one of the six participant teachers in the fall, winter, and spring of 2005–2006. During these meetings, Olsen & Sexton held hour-long semi-structured interviews which they recorded (audio). Their interview protocol aimed at revealing each teachers' individual and professional

histories; their classroom pedagogy and how/if it has changed over time; perspectives on teaching, their high school and the various education/policy reforms via NCLB; and future career goals. Interestingly, the authors note that the high school principal declined multiple interview requests. During the research, Olsen & Sexton also gathered various artifacts, "... published reports, Web site data, news articles, and teacher materials relating to the federal, state, district, and school contexts" (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 11). By using a framework like this, the authors were able to observe ways in which the reform implementation process dictated the reforms being employed and the teachers' perception on correlated influence on their work.

Part II: The Logic

Early in the article, Olsen & Sexton outlined their conceptualization that threat rigidity could be seen as an outcome of the governmental policy and associated changes to expectations in teachers, teaching, curriculum, etc. While this may seem logical in essence, the fact that many teachers misinterpret NCLB in terms of general cause and effect relationships seems to point to potential flaws in the logic. It does not seem fair to teachers – even those in schools of reform, to point to one over-arching issue as the origin point for various tenors and tendencies in education. Consider, if teachers in non-reform schools replaced these teachers, how much would the data change? Would the teachers stop being critical of NCLB if their school wasn't under the umbrella of reform? Since the authors only looked at one school and it was under the umbrella of reform, what do they have to measure against? Thus, one school, and utilization of six teachers in that school seems a somewhat small measurement for considerations of NCLB and community.

The research was intended to inspect the reciprocal relationships between teachers' perspectives on their work as situated along the continuum of education policy reform climates. Since all pieces of the puzzle, "... teachers' views, work, and careers; school contexts; larger policy climates and pressures..." (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 11) are not discretely separated, but instead are interwoven, the authors use a research design they feel is ecological in nature. Implementing an inductive analytical method to interpret their findings, the authors analyzed their data using two, "...research frames: school reform implementation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977) and school restructuring (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Rosenholtz, 1991)" (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 11). Once the authors filtered their data through their first two frameworks, they then looked at the data through a "threat rigidity" framework, looking for impact on organizational behavior. "Threat rigidity is the theory that an organization, when perceiving itself under siege (i.e., threatened or in crisis), responds in identifiable ways: Structures tighten; centralized control increases; conformity is stressed; accountability and efficiency measures are emphasized; and alternative or innovative thinking is discouraged" (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 15).

Olsen & Sexton uncovered that the school administration and teachers engaged in "rigid defensiveness," paired with a philosophical shortsightedness that *interfered* with the reform attempts and added to an uncomfortable professional context for the teachers participating in the study. To better understand this experience, the authors decided to implement sociological research concerning how systems, vis-à-vis organizations, manage the onset of adversity. Thus, Olsen & Sexton called upon the premise of threat rigidity to view the teacher-to-school organization and relationship.

As a public organization supported through tax revenue, a school earns external legitimacy when its visible structures resemble what society expects a successful school to look like: a recognizable architecture, a U.S. flag out front, knowledge demarcated by

class periods with familiar names, teachers with official credentials. This societal validation seals off and protects the school's core work (i.e., learning and teaching) from outside intrusion or suspicion. Within this perspective, then, recent wholesale attacks on the legitimacy of schools as effective learning organizations (e.g., the current press for accountability, teacher quality concerns) compel different levels of the organization to respond in particular ways because the 'forces maintaining the structure are themselves activated by forces threatening the equilibrium' (Scott, 2003, p. 61). (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 13)

Hence, the authors find that the emotional and political posturing as seen by the government goal of NCLB, and mandated curricula paired with standardized testing, may have further irritated issues that were previously there, but buried through time. As a possible result, when asked about the actual influence of NCLB on the forces in their school, teachers often provide inaccurate information or connect to previous issues they assume were influenced (theoretically by the teacher) by NCLB (Olsen & Sexton, 2009).

Part III: The Reaction

I believe Olsen & Sexton present a study that is rhetorically sound in nature and speaks to their professional and ethical considerations of valid assessment. However, had the authors simply blamed NCLB for their colleagues poorly adapting performance to the new bureaucratic policy, they could have possibly missed the impact that policy itself had on the teachers, the school, and the students and how the surrounding community views each. However, I would have liked to see a larger group size related

to the authors' research, in aims to add to the projects validity and implications of reliability. To see the authors take NCLB and school reform and the associated policies and procedures to task, reminds readers -- both like and unlike-minded -- that it is part of our professional responsibility as educators to hold administrative policies and societal based assumptions to a valid and reliable consideration. However, we also can see them for what they are: an ever-changing, often influenced, series of inter-related issues, presented by the authors' considerations, and the research participant teachers understandings (and misunderstandings), and prone to flaws and instability.

Their attempts at transparency and scope which the authors approached their research and data support the concept that this research was aimed at the purpose of analyzing the validity of classroom actions and teacher interpretation, but also show the problematic impact of threat rigidity and the tendency to circle the wagons. Also, their consideration of various teaching experience and mastery showed that they were not searching for a single cause-effect relationship or a single contingent on which to place blame. Yet, since their research then incorporated only one school and six teachers, I don't feel the teachers achieved the potential that they could have had they offered a wider margin and more comparative sectional look.

However, I must consider my own political stance as a reader of this article. I hold the belief that policies created by administrators who do not have educational training and are not versed in pedagogical theory are an ineffective template and model of what schools need in this climate. Looking at tools of measuring learning, content mastery, effort, etc. due to an overwhelming lack of commonality, validity, and reliability from state-to-state, school-to-school, class-to-class, teacher-to-teacher, and most importantly, from student-to-student, as I've said before and will say again, cannot be adequately represented in one school or only a handful of teachers as Olsen & Sexton attempt. Since I

question administrative ability to effectively evaluate pedagogy in its complexity, I assume that I may have read this article, that presents research that is a hornets' nest in regards to my own beliefs, a bit too critically in nature and found both kudos and concerns that it does not deserve.