A Teacher’s Perceptions of Teaching With Expeditions in a Tested History Course

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This qualitative case study investigated an interdisciplinary expedition in an urban high school (based on the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound model). The author wanted to understand what happened during an expedition and how the Global History teacher perceived teaching a tested course in an Expeditionary Learning School. Findings indicated the teacher thought the expeditions students engaged in each semester assisted them in developing a sense of global awareness and in making interdisciplinary connections. The teacher also discussed challenges encountered when teaching the Expeditionary Learning curriculum to students who struggled academically. Though 35% of students failed the state Global History and Geography test at the end of the semester, the teacher remained committed to teaching with expeditions. This research highlights the teacher’s perceptions of the benefits and challenges of implementing expeditions in a state-tested course in an urban high school, as well as the need for additional supports for implementing this type of curriculum and preparing students for high-stakes exams.

**Keywords:** Teacher’s Perceptions, State Tests, Expeditionary Learning, Urban Students, High School, Global History

Reforms such as theme and charter schools, restructuring, and interdisciplinary curriculum have been implemented to assist low-achieving urban schools. Research about what is happening in these schools and classrooms as these reforms are enacted is limited (Crocco & Thornton, 2002). Despite much research over the past two decades, the influence of state-mandated accountability testing on teachers’ practices remains unclear (Cimbricz, 2002; Grant, 2001, 2003; Neumann, 2013). Thus, research about teachers’ perceptions of teaching state-tested courses in urban charter schools is timely and important.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine an interdisciplinary expedition in an Expeditionary Learning (EL) charter high school in an urban district (Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, 2011). I wanted to gain a stronger understanding of what happened during the expedition and how the tenth-grade Global History teacher perceived teaching a state tested course in an EL school. In conducting this investigation, I found the teacher described the benefits and challenges of teaching with expeditions in a Global History class, and explained how the Global History and Geography Regents exam influenced her content and instructional practices. While she remained committed to EL practices, she struggled with how she could teach EL curriculum and prepare her students for the state test.

**Related Literature**

**Social Studies Teachers’ Responses to State Tests**

While state tests influence teachers’ practices, their influence is unpredictable (Grant & Salinas, 2008). Research illustrates state standards and tests have a significant influence over teachers’ content decisions (Grant, 2006; Grant et al., 2002; Segall, 2003; van Hover, 2006).
Researchers who have studied the effects of state tests on teachers’ content decisions have found some social studies teachers narrow their curriculum and teach to the test (McNeil, 2000; Smith, 1991; Vogler, 2002, 2008), while others integrate test preparation into their content and continue to use inquiry and other teaching methods beyond test preparation (Grant et al., 2002; Salinas, 2006; Segall, 2003; van Hover, 2006).

Researchers have discovered state tests influence assessments teachers create (Fickel, 2006; Grant, 2003; Grant et al., 2002; van Hover, 2006). Some studies illustrate how teachers use state test items to assess student learning (Vogler, 2006), but as Grant and Salinas (2008) indicate, social studies teachers have a history of using standardized exams to assess students, so the influence of state tests on assessments may not be significant. Social studies researchers, additionally, have investigated the effects of state tests on teachers’ instruction (Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2001, 2003, 2005; Neumann, 2013; Segall, 2003; van Hover, 2006; Vogler, 2006). In an earlier study, Vogler (2006) teachers who changed their instruction to mirror the state exam and taught students factual knowledge were investigated. In contrast, Jill Gradwell (2006), S.G. Grant (2003, 2005), and Fred Neumann (2013) described teachers who continued to use a variety of instructional strategies and authentic assessments despite the presence of a state test.

As many state social studies tests have changed in recent years due to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (National Governors Association, 2010), there is a need to investigate how teachers in different school contexts perceive the state tests. In this study, the 10th grade Global History and Geography Regents Exam influenced the teacher’s content and assessments, as well as her pedagogy. She remained committed to using EL curriculum even though 35% of her 10th grade students failed the state test at the end of the semester.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Teaching Expeditionary Learning Curriculum**

Expeditionary Learning Schools (ELS’s) are comprehensive Kindergarten-12 schools subscribing to the principles that grew out of Outward Bound, a non-profit organization founded by Kurt Hahn in 1941. Expeditionary Learning School’s focus is: building relationships between students and teachers, drawing on the power of small groups, creating in-depth curriculum, and encouraging school and community connections (Udall & Mednick, 2000). The growing number of schools (over 150 schools as of 2014) that subscribe to the ELS model suggests expeditionary learning practices may have potential for teaching and learning.

The *Expeditionary Learning Core Practices* (2011) guide assists classroom teachers in implementing EL design principles and core practices, such as designing learning expeditions (Core Practice 2). According to the guide, learning expeditions are the “signature Expeditionary Learning curricular structure” and should provide students with opportunities to study topics in-depth and make real-world connections (p. 17). Learning expeditions encourage students to engage in original research; to develop critical thinking, problem solving, and literacy skills; and to build character.

A review of the literature on EL schools found only one qualitative case study that included learning expeditions. In a year-long case study of a Kindergarten-12 EL school to examine what made the urban school successful, Chinwe Ikpeze (2013) found its school culture, structure, teachers’ commitment, and engaging curriculum were important factors in the school’s success.

A group of urban, suburban, and rural teachers contributed anecdotal accounts of their planning and teaching of learning expeditions (Udall & Mednick, 2000). The purpose of their
book was to assist these teachers in reflecting on their practice and to encourage readers to join them in rethinking teaching and learning (Udall & Mednick, 2000). In one chapter, Christine Cziko, a former Humanities teacher at a Northeastern City high school described her reflections on implementing an interdisciplinary expedition on the social, political, and economic issues of the Great Depression. She said the expedition assisted her students in becoming stronger researchers, readers, and writers. Cziko also identified difficulties she faced teaching a challenging expedition to heterogeneous students, such as students failing to complete reading assignments and doing poorly on tests. While the personal stories in Denis Udall and Amy Mednick’s (2000) book are important in assisting teachers who want to engage in expeditions, more rigorous research is needed to document what is happening during expeditions and how teachers are perceiving teaching in these 150 EL schools, especially if they are becoming strong alternative school models for urban students (Ikpeze, 2013).

Method

This six week qualitative study occurred during the spring 2012 semester and was guided by the following research questions: (a) What happens during an EL expedition in an urban charter school? (b) How do students perceive the expedition? and (c) How does the teacher perceive teaching Global History in an urban EL charter high school? An instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995) was used to investigate these questions. This article focuses on the third research question about the teacher’s perceptions of teaching Global History in an EL school.

The participant, Carrie Lewis (all names are pseudonyms), a 10th grade Global History teacher at United Charter High School (UCHS), was purposely selected (Merriam, 1998). Lewis left her social studies teaching position in a nearby suburban district six years earlier to start UCHS with a group of administrators, teachers, and parents who wanted a small alternative public high school for students who lived in the city. She was identified by her principal and local teacher educators as being a skilled teacher who was committed to the EL model and to the teaching of urban students. At the time of the study, Lewis had 13 years teaching experience. She taught Economics and Participation in Government as well as Global History. Lewis possessed an undergraduate degree in Art History and a Master’s degree in Social Studies Education. Lewis said she enjoyed teaching at UCHS because she could teach history with big ideas and themes (Grant & Gradwell, 2010; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

UCHS is located in a large metropolitan area within the state of New York. State charter school admissions policies require the school’s demographics be similar to urban public schools around the United States. At the time of the study, 348 students attended the high school with 75 students enrolled in the tenth grade. Of students at UCHS, 43% were free or reduced lunch eligible. The school was ethnically and racially diverse; 50% of students were African-American, 5% were Hispanic, 1% was Asian/Pacific Islander, and 43% were White. All classes were inclusive and 20% of students were classified as special education.

The students at UCHS came from over 25 middle schools throughout the city. As a New York charter school, UCHS is required to follow the state public school curriculum, which means students have to pass Regents exams in mathematics, English, science, global history and geography, and U.S. history and government in order to graduate. It is important to note if a large number of students failed Regents exams, UCHS could lose funding and be closed.
Data collection included: regular observations of one of Lewis’ Global History classes during the expedition, interviews with her and five students, and a collection of curricular documents (handouts and assessments) in Global History, English Language Arts, and Studio Art related to the Fear and Freedom expedition. Data sources were triangulated to reduce the biases or limitations of a single source (Maxwell, 2012).

I observed Lewis’ second period Global History class two to three times a week for a total of 14 observations over six weeks. During observations, I took field notes, which were later elaborated, typed, and coded. I also observed the 10th grade students in their English and Art class one time each, and attended the tenth-grade team’s planning and wrap-up meetings and the expedition Kick Off Day. Three one-hour, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Lewis over the course of the semester. I interviewed her before the expedition began, three weeks into the six-week expedition, and six weeks after the expedition, when the students’ state test scores were published. In the first two interviews, I asked her to reflect on her background, purposes for teaching history in an EL school, goals for the expedition, views about teaching interdisciplinary curriculum, and views of teaching urban students (see Appendix A). During the third interview, I asked her to discuss the expedition process, students’ learning, students’ test scores, and what she would do differently the next year (see Appendix B).

Data analysis began immediately and continued throughout the research process. I read through field notes and interview transcripts several times in an attempt to understand the teacher’s perceptions of teaching EL curriculum in a Global History class. I coded field notes and interview transcripts based on initial themes and patterns. During our first two interviews, before and during the Expedition, the teacher was not directly asked about the 10th grade Regents exam; however, she consistently discussed the exam as she discussed her curriculum and pedagogy. As I continued rereading and coding data, two distinct themes emerged: the teacher’s perceptions of the benefits of teaching with expeditions and her perceptions of the challenges of teaching heterogeneous students. A final theme emerged from my third interview with the teacher: her resolve to continue teaching with expeditions despite her students’ poor test performance. I referenced the literature on teachers’ responses to state-level tests (Grant & Salinas, 2008) and teachers’ perceptions of EL curriculum (Udall & Mednick, 2000) to assist me in interpreting my findings, and worked to ensure validity through member checks with the teacher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The limitations of this study are that it is a single case of a charter school. The findings of this case study cannot be generalized, but they can provide implications for similar schools to possibly consider.

The Global 10 Curriculum at UCHS

Lewis’ 10th grade Global History curriculum was different from the curriculum being taught in other area high schools. The curriculum focused on five themes aligned with the New York state standards and core curriculum for Global History and Geography: Political Systems, Conflict, Power, Revolution, and Human Rights. Lewis explained she covered these themes in-depth and spent several weeks on each theme.

Students in 10th grade Global History also engaged in one three to four week expedition each semester. The expeditions were focused on “big ideas” and “guiding questions.” During the fall semester, the expedition occurred in students’ mathematics and science classes. In the spring semester, when this study was conducted, the expedition was enacted in students’ Global History and Geography, English, and Studio Art classes. During each expedition, the 10th grade
teachers worked together to plan the curriculum and products or assessments that students would complete during the expedition.

Some of the big ideas and guiding questions for the observed expedition included:
1. Guiding Question: How is fear used by governments to control people?
   a. Big Idea: Propaganda, censorship, and technology are used as methods of control in times of fear.
   b. Big Idea: Individualism threatens government control.
2. Guiding Question: Why are people often willing to sacrifice liberty for security in times of fear?
   a. Big Idea: Sometimes people choose safety over their own rights.
   b. Big Idea: Fear and control can affect all parts of citizens’ lives.

In Global History, students used the big ideas and guiding questions to study the Cold War and Totalitarian State in the Soviet Union. They completed three products: an essay quiz on the big ideas and guiding questions in Global History class, a research paper focused on issues of privacy and security in English class, and a propaganda poster in Studio Art class. During the expedition, Lewis’ lessons were geared toward providing students with the factual knowledge needed to pass the Global History and Geography Regents exam at the end of the school year.

Lewis created informational packets for each unit students’ studied, which were filled with maps, fill-in-the-blank notes, some short primary source documents, and graphic organizers to help them read and organize information from their textbook.

Findings

As above stated, findings for this paper are focused on the third research question about Lewis’ perceptions of teaching in an urban EL charter high school. Three main themes emerged from interviews and observation data, which highlight her views of teaching Global History in an EL school.

Benefits of Teaching With Expeditions in a Tested Global History Class

When asked about her goals for her class, Lewis responded she wanted students to develop a global vision of citizenship:

I want them to understand the impact American policies have on others and the impact that other events around the world have on us…not just the sense that we are a superpower and can do whatever we want. This is an interdependent world; we have to work with other countries, other peoples.

Lewis thought the expeditions her 10th grade students participated in twice a year assisted them in developing global awareness. During the observed Fear and Freedom expedition, students engaged in a case study about the Soviet Union, wrote a research paper about current security issues such as Internet privacy and airport security, and created a propaganda poster to express their ideas.

Lewis explained that one of the reasons she wanted to teach at UCHS was the challenge of teaching history with big ideas and themes. She said her thematic approach helped students connect global history topics to current events. When teaching a unit on Revolutions, for example, Lewis began the unit with an exploration of the Arab Spring. Lewis also related that rearranging her global history curriculum to focus on themes helped students with predicting, a skill they would need to use on the Regents exam. She discussed her unit on Revolutions:
I took five revolutions that I would have typically spread out through the entire year and taught them all as one unit...the first one they [students] were like, ‘Yeah, yeah revolutions,’ the second one they were like, ‘This is starting to sound familiar.’ By the time we got to the fifth one they [students] were like, ‘They are all the same.’ So, now I think they get the idea that regardless of the question on the exam, they can predict what will happen.

Lewis described how working in a small EL school involved collaboration with colleagues, which she thought enhanced her global history curriculum. She described her experiences planning for expeditions with her 10th grade team, “It really makes for much more of a deep experience...for the teachers and the kids. I am learning what English and art teachers do and what they can bring to my content.” Lewis was the team leader of the observed spring expedition because Global History was one of the tested subjects for tenth-grade students. She explained the interdisciplinary focus was implemented to encourage students to see connections between classes and to help them on standardized tests:

Because the Regents lie in science and social studies, one of the reasons they are led by those subject area teachers is to improve Regents scores. So, this brings that content into all kinds of arenas where hopefully kids will be able to remember it better...if they are dealing with it through the art lens, the English lens, the history lens...at the end of the day they will sit down at the exam and do better on the test as a result.

Lewis’ comments echoed recent research about students performing better on standardized exams when engaged in authentic schoolwork (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007; Saye et. al, 2013). She supported this conclusion by stating students seemed enthusiastic about coming to school while participating in the expeditions. Students’ positive views of school, according to Lewis, helped them to engage in more routine tasks of schooling, which included learning factual knowledge and taking standardized exams in Global History class.

When asked if TCHS students scored higher than neighboring schools on the Global History and Geography exam, Lewis explained they performed better than students at large public high schools with similar students, but not as well as suburban students who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Challenges of Teaching Heterogeneous Students

While Lewis believed expeditionary learning experiences assisted students in taking the state test, she indicated some of her students’ academic backgrounds made it difficult for them to pass the Global History and Geography test at the end of the school year:

Many of them do not come to us with a lot of rich background experience that is connected to school. Their skill sets are hugely variable. Some kids come to us from [an EL elementary school] and they are great writers and readers and they have done expeditions so they are right on board. Other kids come to us [from schools] where honestly I do not believe there are any expectations of work. So getting those kids on board is a bit challenging...[sometimes] those kids fail the exam two or three times.

As a result of her students’ varied reading and writing abilities, Lewis had a difficult time integrating primary source documents in her curriculum, “The biggest challenge [for me] with primary sources is the reading level...primary sources can be so dense.” She also noticed students were discouraged by the vocabulary in the documents. To counter this challenge, Lewis used shorter written documents, photographs, and propaganda from the time period. She explained: “I do find throughout the years that when I use images, then kids remember it.”
also drew a timeline toward the top of the walls of her classroom that she added to during each unit of study because she was concerned students would “lose the chronology” when she taught thematic units.

Students’ varied academic backgrounds and limited schemata encouraged her use of traditional curriculum and assessments, such as fill-in-the-blank notes, short primary source documents with questions, multiple choice questions, and document-based questions. She did not assign homework outside of class because she was philosophically opposed to it and said it “widened the gap” among her heterogeneous students. She added that only 30% of her students completed homework when it was assigned. Thus, Lewis tried to assist her weaker readers and writers by using traditional curriculum and assessments and not assigning much homework.

Teaching in an EL school where students took periodic field trips and engaged in project-based learning in their classes also posed difficulties for Lewis’ coverage of global history content. When asked if three hours a week was enough time for her to teach the required global history standards and curriculum, she responded, “No…it never is…but that is one of the tensions of the course…not enough time and too much content.” She explained how the lack of time required professional judgment about what content to leave out, which was “scary.” Lewis also shared that while her school provided professional development about teaching in an Expeditionary Learning school, she wanted more professional development on thematic and interdisciplinary teaching. She thought additional education on those topics would encourage her growth as a teacher.

Resolve to Continue Teaching With Expeditions Despite Poor Test Performance

My final interview with Lewis occurred right after she discovered 35% of her 10th grade students did not pass the Global History and Geography Regents exam at the end of the semester. This failure rate was a 15% increase from the previous year, which Lewis attributed to the fact 75% of the exam focused on 9th grade content, which was “unusual.” The school provided a five-week “down and dirty” test preparation course over the summer to help students who failed the Regents exam. Lewis said she was disappointed by the increased failure rate, but she was not “taking it personally”: “Our feeling about the test was it was 75% ninth-grade material and we do not do a lot of review because we really want to do in-depth teaching. So our kids were at a distinct disadvantage because of that.”

When asked if she thought the state should get rid of the exam for Global History and Geography (which was being considered by the Board of Regents at the time of the study), she said she was “ambivalent”:

On the one hand it is something to keep, not only to keep kids accountable, but teachers accountable…because I really believe that in places like [city she teaches in], in schools with really high poverty rates, there are teachers who prior to the requirements of the Regents did not teach anything to kids, who were perceived as kids who were not able to learn. A teacher cannot get away with that…number one is teacher accountability, and secondly, I do think there is something to be said that there is something you are working towards…it is a much bigger mandate.

Lewis added, since she came to UCHS and began teaching students from so many different middle schools, standardized tests were always an issue because “the reading level on the exams are quite high.” She believed the exams should not just be thrown out, as some of her social studies colleagues argued, because they hold teachers accountable and ensure all students have a foundation of factual knowledge about global history. Lewis insisted students’ poor test results
would not mean fewer expeditions. Instead, the scores illustrated she needed to build in more “drill and kill” for longer periods before the exam. To Lewis, this meant she would need to spend four weeks preparing students for the state test as opposed to only spending two weeks as she had done previously. She said while she may not get to teach as many historical themes, she was not going to decrease the time students spent engaging in expedition work.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study adds to the sparse qualitative research about EL schools by providing rich descriptions of one teacher’s perceptions. Similar to Cziko’s (2000) experience teaching in an EL school, Lewis saw many benefits to teaching with expeditions, but was challenged by her ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically heterogeneous students, who needed more preparation than was provided at her school to pass the Global History and Geography Regents Exam. Lewis thought expeditions assisted students in developing a sense of global awareness and making connections across content areas. She also believed the expeditions inspired students to be more enthusiastic about school, and, when needed, to engage in routine, pedantic academic tasks such as test preparation.

Interviews with Lewis also revealed some of the challenges she encountered as she taught EL curriculum in an urban charter school where many of her students were weak readers and writers. She struggled to engage them with lengthy written primary sources, so she differentiated her instruction by using shorter documents and visual sources, such as photographs. Lewis was challenged by a school culture where students attended class three hours a week and did not complete homework, so it was difficult to provide students, who were already behind, with additional academic support. She felt she needed more professional development on teaching interdisciplinary, thematic curriculum to diverse learners.

This case study extends the social studies research on teachers’ responses to state tests by describing the views of a Global History teacher who is focused on providing students with rich learning opportunities despite the presence of a state test. Similar to teachers other researchers have studied (Cimbricz, 2002; Gradwell, 2006; Grant, 2001; Neumann, 2013), there were multiple influences on Lewis’ curriculum and pedagogy, such as her beliefs about teaching Global History and teaching urban students. Lewis’ case was different in that she taught in a small, urban charter school where many students failed state exams and had to retake them in order to graduate from high school. While state testing had an influence on her curriculum, as observed in her coverage of basic factual knowledge during the expedition, she did not limit her approach to teaching historical facts. Lewis used themes to teach big ideas and guiding questions, and, at least twice a year, students engaged in project-based learning where they exhibited their work during expeditions. After a number of students failed the Global History and Geography exam, Lewis thought about how she could build in more time for test preparation the next time she taught the course. She remained committed to her belief that the state test was beneficial because it held teachers accountable for providing students with a foundation of factual knowledge about global history.

Lewis’ case raises important questions and has implications for future research. She engaged diverse students, many who did not possess strong literacy skills, with thematic and expeditionary learning curriculum, and a little over one-third of students failed the state test at the end of the school year. Some educators may express concern that Lewis would not overhaul her curriculum and methods when so many of her students failed the exam. Studies have shown
students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups perform better on tests when they engage in relevant, authentic work at school (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007; Saye et. al, 2013). Is “drill and kill” test preparation during the last two months of the semester the answer? How can teachers weave test preparation throughout their curriculum? What are some ways teachers can scaffold their instruction to help weaker students engage in expedition work and pass the state test? This study illustrates the need for more research and professional development on how teachers in these growing alternative urban schools can teach students progressive curriculum, like EL curriculum, and help them acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to pass the state test.

References


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Web-based References


Appendix A

Questions for First and Second Teacher Interview

1. Describe your post high school academic background.
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. What subjects have you taught?
4. What do you like most about teaching history?
5. What do you believe is the purpose of history education?
6. What are your main goals for the students in Global 10?
7. Tell me a little bit about the class I will observe.
8. What are your main goals for the EL *Fear and Freedom* expedition?
9. How have you rearranged the scope and sequence of your course to focus on thematic teaching?
10. How do you feel about collaborating with other team teachers (to plan for the expedition at this point)?
11. How often do students have homework? What types of homework assignments do students complete? Do you feel you have to spend a lot of class time ensuring students have basic historical knowledge?
12. Do students do debates or Socratic Seminars?
13. Are you required to have a learning target posted every day?
14. I noticed most of the notes in the packets are fill-in-the-blank. Why do you use that format?
15. Do you think that four periods a week is enough class time to get through the Global curriculum?
16. Why do you keep class packets?
17. Do students work with primary sources in 9th grade? Do you go over how to examine primary source documents at the beginning of the year? Are students asked to examine documents in depth?
18. I noticed you like to use picture galleries – can you say more about why this approach appeals to you and your students?
19. How much time do you usually spend on the Do Nows and Exit Tickets? How do you assess the Do Nows and Exit Tickets? What about student writing in the packets? Do many students elaborate on their responses?
Appendix B

Questions for Third Teacher Interview

1. How were the students’ final grades?
2. How were their state test scores?
3. Do these scores influence future expeditions in any way?
4. What are your final thoughts on the expedition (what worked, what did not work, what would you do differently next year)?
5. At the final meeting, the Curriculum Coordinator brought up that some students did not understand the history connections as much. What did you think about that?
6. At the final meeting some teachers discussed completely changing the expedition to ensure the school is serving the community. What are your thoughts on that? What do you think about implementing a different product?

Author Bio

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