



“What Students Are Facing  
Now...”: An Investigation Into  
Teachers’ Understandings  
of Context

Max Altman

University of Michigan  
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# Rationale

- 'Context' is an ill-defined word
- Context in most studies decided by researchers
- Teachers more likely to form trusting relationships with those who demonstrate knowledge of their context (Sharkey, 2004)
- Policy buy-in vastly improved by teacher trust and collaboration (Leithwood & Strauss, 2008), teachers in the most disadvantaged schools likely to reject top-down policy outright (Payne, 2008)

# Purpose

- Let teachers define their own context
- Determine what relationships teachers see between contextual factors they consider salient

# Methods

- 30-60 minute semistructured interviews
- Four teachers, two schools, two different cities
- Questions:
  - What do you see as the relationship between your local context and this school?
  - What do you see as the relationship between local and school context and your students and their families?
  - What do you believe are the purposes of teaching in general? Why are you, personally, a teacher?
  - How do you think your actions in the classroom reflect your beliefs about teaching and why you teach?
  - How do you think factors of your local context, the school, and your students impact the actions you take in the classroom?

# Still Methods...

- Strings of meaning – Source-Issue-Target, +/-/~
- Examples:
  - “I know that the parents that come up and check on their students, the students tend to respond to that, if a parent is up here or they know that their parent will come up, even the thought of us calling.” Families-School Visits-Students, (+)
  - “There aren’t any examples here for them [students] to follow, or very few examples here for them to follow. And children at this age tend to want to do what their peers are doing. So if their peers aren’t doing anything, they’re not doing anything.” Students-Peer Role Models-Students, (-)
  - “There is a lot of focus on getting our students to pass the different benchmarks and the ACT. So there is a lot of focus on that as far as what we are enforcing in the classroom.” Unclear-Testing-Classroom, (~)

# Yet More Methods

- Qualities and longer chains
- Examples:
  - “This year, I haven’t made many phone calls home. I meet them at parent-teacher conferences or open house. I just haven’t went that route this year.”
  - “School factors make it to where, because we are in such a deficit that some of the things I would love to do, I back off of. I have 40 kids in a room and I’m trying to keep them focused and engaged and this group you know not messing around and so I tend to sometimes pull back to the protection mode of where I can keep control and it is not necessarily what I think is the best at the time.”

# Findings

- 126 total strings of meaning => 82 different issues
- Little to no consistency or pattern
- Most common issue - Financial problems - 7 mentions among 4 teachers

# Findings!

## ○ Source-Target patterns

People and groups listed as sources	Total Number of Mentions (T1/T2/T3/T4) (positive/negative mentions)	People and groups listed as targets	Total Number of Mentions (T1/T2/T3/T4) (positive/negative mentions)
School	22 (0/6/15/1) (5+/16-)	School	15 (2/9/4/0) (1+/14-)
Students	22 (1/7/9/5) (1+/17-)	Students	<b>65</b> (12/15/27/11) (18+/44-)
Families	<b>27</b> (4/13/8/2) (6+/21-)	Families	4 (0/0/4/0) (3+/1-)
Classroom	<b>0</b>	Classroom	<b>3</b> (0/2/0/1) (0+/2-)
Teachers	5 (0/0/5/0) (2+/3-)	Teachers	3 (0/0/3/0) (1+/2-)
Teacher	13 (4/2/3/4) (11+/1-)	Teacher	11 (0/3/6/2) (4+/6- )
Other	37	Other	26
Total	126	Total	126

# Findings!

- Notable:
  - Students make up more than half of all targets mentioned
  - Classroom mentioned only three times
  - Families most common source, hardly ever target
  - Other:
    - No chains had teachers as source and school as target
    - All but six (5/1) mentions of school negative
    - Only one positive string with students as source

# Implications

- High number of factors mentioned means studies that pre-define context can be missing important stuff
- Do patterns appear? Need more research.
- Reconceptualization of how teachers see context (source-issue-target). Impactful?
- Different researcher – different approach

Questions?

# References

- Leithwood, K., & Strauss, T. (2008). *Turnaround schools and the leadership they require*. Toronto, ON, CA: Canadian Education Association.
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- Sharkey, J. (2004). ESOL teachers' knowledge of context as critical mediator in curriculum development. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 279-299.