Only nine fourth graders are here in the Language Arts Resource class today. Usually there are eleven. Each child carries labels like “learning disabled,” “dyslexic,” “emotionally disturbed,” and “attention deficit.” Two sit on a futon sofa in the back corner of the portable; two kneel on the carpet at the foot of the sofa. And five more perch in chairs, completing a makeshift circle around Jacqueline, their teacher, as she reads Shel Silverstein’s (1981) poem “Homework Machine” from a handmade chart.

Then they choral read from their own copies and, together, find rhyming words to turn over with their tongues. One student, still angry about an argument with a friend that happened just minutes ago, stubbornly refuses to read. But the others chime in and giggle knowingly at the line, “nine plus four? and the answer is three.”

This is a typical opening activity for this group—poetry reading, choral reading, playing with language. However, it was not what I expected to find in a school that rests at the center of a Texas district undergoing reforms toward “academic emphasis”—a jargony term tossed around by district personnel that has meant cutting elective classes in all high and middle schools, trimming the curriculum to emphasize “core subjects,” and implementing a
district-wide, comprehensive, benchmark testing program to improve the district’s “performance indicators” (i.e., state test scores). I began this study to understand how testing and an “academic emphasis” influenced the inner workings of Jacqueline’s classroom and found that Jacqueline taught well in spite of (not because of) “academic emphasis” reforms. And as these reforms pressured Jacqueline to trim her instructional focus only to what is testable, she resisted passively and actively. Cochran-Smith (1991) argued that teachers could resist top-down reforms that emphasize testing as well as prescriptive programs that advocate test preparation as an instructional method by “teaching against the grain”; that is, resistance means creating and maintaining critical perspectives on educational policies and power structures that affect the classroom. Yet teachers know how exhausting it can be to always “teach against the grain” and maintain a romanticized state of nonconformity. In a survey of 200 Texas teachers, 85% agreed that state-mandated tests force “some of the best teachers to leave teaching because of the restraints the tests place on decision making and the pressures placed on them and their students” (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001, p. 489).

Leaving the profession is one way to resist, but our schools are suffering the loss. Instead of leaving, some teachers have simply coped with the tests, integrating them into their instructional methods (e.g., Yongerman, 2002; Santman, 2002; Wolf & Wolf, 2002). Indeed, testing is something to be reckoned with as it is becoming more and more prevalent in our educational systems (Calkins, Montgomery, & Santman, 1998). Reckoning, however, does not necessarily mean buying into the skills-oriented focus of standardized assessments. Instead, teachers might do better to “stay the course. Be creatively compliant and selectively defiant as it fits the learning needs of your students” (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001, p. 498).

As federal mandates and “accountability” systems overpower U.S. educational systems, teachers are developing creative ways to resist mindless teaching techniques and mandated programs using their own “counter-knowledge” (Baez, 2000). For example, Bislinghoff (2002) described her self-developed method for journaling and planning as a means to resist “mandated packaged programs.” Likewise, Block (2000) asked teachers to resist “rigorous standards [that] reduce reading to a collection of measurable, mundane, inconsequential skills” (p. 129) by concentrating instead on teaching the pleasure of reading that comes from inviting memories to float through words and savoring, page-by-page, the stories that offer us lives we have never lived. These examples of “counter-knowledges” define teachers’ resistance to an educational system that increasingly values what is measurable and prescriptive over what is meaningful and flexible. This article shows one more teacher’s “counter-knowledge” as she defies the pressures of testing while also developing a love of literacy within her students. I hope that other teachers who read this everyday story of resistance will also feel empowered to resist.

Yet teachers know how exhausting it can be to always “teach against the grain” and maintain a romanticized state of nonconformity.

THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

Jacqueline has a master’s degree in literacy instruction and ten years’ experience with elementary-level classroom and special-education teaching. Jacqueline is aided somewhat by what she calls her “outsider” status—she is currently neither a regular education teacher subject to the general testing program nor a traditionally certified special education teacher adhering to skills-oriented approaches to literacy learning. Her students, five girls and six boys, come from their regular education classrooms for an hour and a half of special education in language arts. These students are all from middle-class homes and are African American (3), Mexican American (2), and White (6); five of the eleven are female. Both Jacqueline and I are White women. During my visits, I helped students in small groups, read aloud to them, acted as Jacqueline’s assistant, and asked the children and their teacher about the standardized testing process they endured and what they considered to be the most important reasons for literacy learning.

This person-centered ethnography (Hollan, 2000; Wolheim, 1984/1999) describes how Jacqueline resisted the testing mentality so deeply engrained in Texas schools. After spending over 130 hours observing, conversing, and participating, I analyzed my student-and teacher-interview transcripts, my field notes written during and after each of my thrice-weekly visits (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), and lesson plans and work samples provided by Jacqueline and her students. Although I entered the classroom in January seeking to see how testing had defined Jacqueline’s teaching, I found little evidence to support that it did. I coded the transcripts with a focus on answering a new question that
evolved from my participation in the field: If she does not focus on testing, then what is the nature of Jacqueline’s literacy instruction? From the codes, I developed categories to describe how Jacqueline resists and how her students react. From this data, I concluded that Jacqueline’s resistance is the product of her savvy navigation of a variety of resources as she develops her own pedagogy for literacy instruction.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

From January through March, 2003, I observed Jacqueline’s fourth-grade language arts Resource class for 3–4 hours, three days a week, at River Ranch Elementary. Rated “Exemplary”—the highest rating donned by the state accountability system—River Ranch Elementary rests in the center of a suburban golf-course community in central Texas. Across one of the nearby roadways are smaller homes, but few students from these homes would qualify as “low income.” And although Texas has in place a system to equally distribute funding across “richer” and “poorer” districts, this campus benefits from PTA funding that could easily rival many small business budgets. This is a privileged school. Nevertheless, what I saw in this suburban school reflected criticisms raised about poorer, urban schools in Texas (McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999)—testing is a big deal.

Deep in the Heart of Testing

Fourth graders at River Ranch Elementary take more than 13 tests during the 9-month school year (see Table 1), including 3 state tests, and 10 district-mandated tests. Each test attempts to capture a student’s knowledge about a certain subject on a single day using a few dozen multiple-choice items. As the key factor in a school’s accountability rating, students’ state test scores are used to determine such futures as grade promotion or retention, high school graduation, and school rewards (Texas Education Agency). Students in special education take an alternative version of the test; however, their scores are aggregated into accountability ratings. Their scores are also often used to determine which grade-level objectives a child will work on in the upcoming school year. Given the recent federal legislation (the No Child Left Behind Act), if this is not the reality in other states, it soon will be.

While the state requires three tests, River Ranch’s district has added “benchmark tests”—an elaborate testing system developed to ensure that children are progressing throughout the school year so that they will be ready for the state tests. The benchmark tests, designed to prepare students to take yet another high-stakes test, ironically seem to carry their own high stakes because they are used to remediate students through pull-out programs and sometimes to serve as justification for special education referrals. District officials tout benchmarking as a way to inform teachers and to find students’ learning gaps before they get too wide. In reality, as several teachers at River Ranch told me, the benchmark tests often provide little feedback to teachers who already use a variety of assessments that they tailor to evaluate their students’ learning. The benchmark tests seem to stem from district administrators’ doubts that teachers can make knowledgeable decisions about student assessment and learning. Nonetheless, the benchmarks set the tone to define instruction: “Learn the test and practice test-taking so you can do well on the state test.”

Jacqueline’s Class Encounters “The Test.”

On the day of the statewide writing test, I met Jacqueline’s students in the hallway as they made their way to the portable. I agreed to help Jacqueline by taking Natalie and

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Table 1. District testing schedule for Grade 4
Asia to the bathroom before they took the test. On our way to the bathroom, Natalie clapped her hands and chanted, “Do your best! On the test!”

“Where did you hear that?” I wondered out loud.

“In the hallway. The little kids were cheering for us,” she replied. Natalie described how the kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders lined the hallways and chanted, “Do your best! On the test!” while the older students walked to their classrooms that morning.

“How did that make you feel?” I asked Natalie.

“Excited! And a little bit nervous. My stomach was doing tumbles.”

In my mind, I heard echoes of McNeil’s (2000) description of students in a Houston school chanting, “Three in a row? No! No! No!” to drill in their minds the hint that they should not answer “b” or “c” three times in a row on state tests. When I first read that description, I did not think that kind of school-wide testing frenzy would ever reach out to the suburbs. But it has. One River Ranch teacher exasperatedly told me that the school suffered from “test mentality.”

The alternative writing assessment taken by students who qualify for special education services and who have goals below others of their age and grade level is a multiple choice test with items similar to the regular education test. Teachers work with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team, a group of school professionals and a student’s parent/s, to select which grade level of the alternative assessment is appropriate for each student in special education. The students in Jacqueline’s class were all eligible to take the K–2 version of the alternative assessment. This version begins with dictation of single-syllable words and numbers, then provides pictures for the students to label, and concludes with a short prompt for students to write about. One fourth grader seemed offended by these simplistic tasks; upon seeing the contents of the first section, Keisha called out, “What? I didn’t come to school today to take this baby test!” She laid her head on her hands, refusing to write more. Other students assumed that the test-makers must be looking for something else in their answers. Several students wrote their answers in careful cursive, erasing and rewriting to get their words to look “just right.” After the test, I asked these students why they were erasing so much. Johnny responded, “It’s a handwriting test, you know. They want to see how neat we can write.” These students saw little value in the first sections of the K–2 writing test, which seemed to them to be a test of their patience (as they waited for each other to finish each item so Jacqueline could read the next instructions), of their ability to be silent, and of their best handwriting. It was a test meant largely to impress some far-off, arbitrary judge—so different from the more authentic literacy practices in Jacqueline’s class.

**Resisting by Embracing “Special” Status**

Jacqueline enjoys some perks of an otherwise trying position. She teaches language arts for 90 minutes each day to 11 students in a portable that sits just beyond the school doors. Like many teachers, the rest of her schedule is taken up teaching other students who flow in and out of the portable, following up on behavioral and academic concerns of parents as well as other teachers for more than 20 children, reams of paperwork, and “teacher collaboration” discussions that reach beyond early evening hours on a regular basis. But if I had to describe the “cushy” aspects of her position, I would have to admit that as a special education teacher, Jacqueline gets a teaching assistant at least three times weekly, has only 11 students in her language arts class, has some leeway in selecting students’ objectives and test levels, and works in a school with privileges that come from a wealthy community. She uses this position to her advantage as she resists emphasizing test mentality. She is a “special” teacher in so many ways. But her story is like many other teachers’ stories of contextualized, savvy, and thoughtful everyday resistance (Bisplinghoff, 2002; Block, 2000).

**Opting Out of the Benchmarks**

Students have not taken any benchmark tests in Jacqueline’s classroom, though she was originally told to administer them. However, when the benchmark tests were not made available to her because there were too few copies, Jacqueline did not pursue them:

_The first time the benchmarks were given, I was out on maternity leave. So we ended up just not doing anything. They [the substitute and principal] didn’t know what [level] to do for it. For the next one, we were going to have the students take it at their ability level, but not all grade levels were taking the same subject area tests. And they didn’t have enough tests for our students. We didn’t receive special guidelines for special ed. children, so we “opted” not to use them, at least this time._

_**She uses this position to her advantage as she resists emphasizing test mentality.**_
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[She says with a sly grin]. We use the progress on each student’s IEP goals to chart their development instead.

This overt dismissal of some of the tests was the first of a string of resistive moves that I saw. Although it was a quiet (some might call it passive) form of resistance, I wondered what would happen if all teachers “opted out!” But as Jacqueline told me this, I also worried about how long she would be able to “opt out.” Eventually she may be obliged to resist more actively by critically engaging peers, parents, and students in discussions about why she feels the need to opt out. For now, however, Jacqueline is satisfied because her students will not have to interrupt their learning—at least not this time.

Lowering The Stakes

The alternative assessment, meant to be given to students with special education IEPs, operates on the assumption that a one-size-fits-all test can measure a child’s knowledge and is supposed to be used as a means to understanding what kids know. They are often used when teams choose IEP goals and modifications for students with special needs. Like the regular education assessment, the alternative assessment comes in forms dedicated to particular grade levels, with multiple-choice items and a writing sample. Jacqueline argued that she cannot use the alternative assessment as a main factor in determining IEP goals because the alternative assessment grade-level forms do not correlate directly to the grade levels and objectives on the state curriculum.

“The test is too easy usually,” she said—easier, that is, than the state’s curriculum. So instead of using scores from the alternative assessment to list goals on a child’s IEP, she uses the state curriculum.

In effect, she makes the stakes for the alternative assessment lower.

Additionally, a child’s individualized educational plan usually includes goals at many grade levels and does not necessarily match the predetermined test-levels and test-specific objectives. There is no way of testing all of a child’s IEP objectives at any one grade level, much less at more than one grade level. She stated:

Many of my kids have IEP goals that span grade levels. And there’s no exact “level” of reading in the [standardized tests]. So I have a hard time using that as a way of knowing my kids. I might have fourth graders working on the concept of characterization or setting while reading books anywhere from grade 2 [level] to grade 4. Then I have to turn around and select a grade level for the reading test when their [state curriculum] objectives might be different from their reading level.

Yet Jacqueline’s process of evaluating and creating educational goals for students is perhaps an even more directly accountable process than a one-size-fits-all test:

In a sense, resource kids, because they have IEP goals, they and their parents get a much better look at “this is exactly what they can do, this is what they’re struggling with still.”

In fact, because of the strict format of the alternative assessment, its results carry little weight in her goal-setting process for developing an IEP. In effect, she makes the stakes for the alternative assessment lower. However, Jacqueline concedes, “I don’t have the pressure on me that some of the regular education teachers have.”

The scene of the special education portable sitting just beyond the school doors is a perfect metaphor for how special education sits at the outskirts of regular education. In most cases, this type of exclusion is reprehensible. Yet, this is one instance when Jacqueline welcomes being the “outsider,” and this self-proclaimed identity probably aids in her ability to resist the test-taking culture so prevalent in her school.

Resisting by Focusing on Students’ Needs

Jacqueline has defined her teaching. She selects methods, texts, and assessments gleaned from years of experience and applies them cautiously and thoughtfully. This is her own “counter-knowledge”—her own way of knowing what and how to teach.

Using Progressive Teaching Methods

During my tenure in Jacqueline’s classroom, I witnessed many instructional methods similar to those I teach preservice and inservice teachers (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Graves, 1994; Tompkins, 1994). For example, on a typical day in her classroom, the students begin by journaling, either responding to a prompt or choosing their own subject. Then they gather in the back of the room, on a futon sofa with chairs surrounding it, to listen to Jacqueline read a chapter from Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1991). Jacqueline follows up with a quick review of what students understood about the chapter and invites them to ask questions and make predictions. Once back at their seats, the children listen as Jacqueline describes the learning centers. Centers are supervised by an aide or by Jacqueline and consist of small-group instruction for guided reading, book club meetings, making words
Test Mentality

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JACQUELINE'S instruction is based on a well-defined theory of teaching and learning that values authentic literacy goals.

Jacqueline's instruction is based on a well-defined theory of teaching and learning that values authentic literacy goals. By creating time for students to converse about the books they read and the stories they write, she reinforces the message that literacy is meant not just as a means to pass a test, but also as a means to communicate socially, to entertain, inform, and enjoy their worlds. She states:

I would like my students ultimately to become independent readers who enjoy reading and read for fun, not just because someone tells them they have to. They should be able to talk about what they've read and really understand it. And more than just spitting out the who? what? where? kinds of questions, being able to talk a little more in depth. And I want them to be able to write complete, coherent sentences, and some stories with some more voice and some of the attributes that their classmates are doing a lot more in their regular classrooms.

ETHICALLY PREPARING FOR TESTING

Conversely, Jacqueline is sensitive to her students' concerns about testing and tries to prepare them without adding to their stress. She provides test practice passages "so
they have some exposure to the format.” Given very seldom, these are “not that big a focus of the day at all.” During my visits to Jacqueline’s classroom, I did not see a single test practice sheet until I finally asked to see one. Jacqueline told me that they use practice worksheets on Fridays and gave me several to review. Though a few came in multiple-choice format, most contained fill-in-the-blank questions or matching sequences based on short expository passages; they were markedly different from the stacks of practice tests I viewed in the regular classrooms. The students told me that they did not do these worksheets often or for very long. These were clearly not the focus of instruction.

Jacqueline also readied the students for taking the alternative assessment by telling them about a week before the writing test, “Next week, when we write, you won’t be allowed to talk, so we’re going to practice not talking while you write today.” The students wrote quietly for the first ten minutes, but they quickly reverted back to their social selves without a scold from Jacqueline—conversing was how they wrote, how they shaped their words for paper. These stories were not used solely for test preparation; the following day the students openly discussed with the group how they tried to include voice in their own writing through dialogue, onomatopoeia, and exclamations. When I asked one student if he ever prepares for testing in this class, he said, “No [pause] well, yes. She tells us to be quiet.”

Some critics say teachers should resist by critically analyzing standardized tests with their students to make them aware of what is tested, how items are designed, and who the test is for in order to reduce students’ naive ambivalence. So I asked, “Why don’t you mention [the test] to them?” Jacqueline answered,

Because they already have test anxiety. . . . I want them to do well, but I want them to do well all year. . . . I don’t think at this point it does any good for the special ed. kids at least. [This test] doesn’t have as much of an impact day-in and day-out for me. So we just worry about how they’re doing each day rather than just working up to that one goal.

Jacqueline does her best to under-emphasize the test; therefore, she did not talk about the test with her students until several days ahead of time because she believed that to do so earlier would only cause more worry and over-emphasize the value of the test itself. Instead, Jacqueline persistently focuses on providing authentic experiences with reading, writing, and speaking, and ignores the testing process as much as she can.

Resisting by Focusing on Alternatives to Standard Assessments

In order to assess how her students are progressing toward their IEP goals, Jacqueline uses a variety of ongoing assessments. On most Thursdays and Fridays, Jacqueline and her assistants listen to students read from trade books and conduct running records, administer individual spelling tests (each student has an individualized list of 10 words they are to study for the week), and confer with students to review their writing. The students seem to recognize the value of these more authentic alternatives to standardized tests as reinforcing their own goals for literacy. For instance, after completing a test of 10 spelling words chosen from his writing, Saleem told me that he wanted to learn to spell “so other kids won’t laugh at me when I spell things wrong.” After a similar spelling test, Keisha told me why she learned spelling, “There are two purposes. First, I can write a letter to my best friend in the whole wide world. She lives in California. I write to her every week.”

“And what’s the other one?” I asked. “So in fifth grade I won’t have to learn all these words,” she answered. I was surprised. “You don’t think you’ll have spelling in fifth grade?” “Well, not these words. Maybe on action words or feeling words.” “Do you want more words?” I asked, startled that she would offer to do more because spelling seems so difficult for her.

“Yes, it’s exciting to learn more,” Keisha answered.

Whether they want to learn spelling to retain some social status, communicate with far-away friends, or attain a higher level of competency, each student knew that the spelling test, with words taken from their own writing, provided a means for honing their writing. Jacqueline says her goal is:

... moving them closer and closing up that gap. But even if their gap isn’t closed, at least we’re moving them along so that they still are independent readers and writers, thinking
about what’s happening with both reading and writing, and speaking. . . . So basically I think learning takes place in many situations, over time, and I try to make it as enjoyable an experience as possible to help them really get it too.

By conducting regular, authentic assessments, Jacqueline is able to decide how her students are learning and what they might need to learn more about. She uses this information to guide her instruction:

Like when we were doing the similes, I tried to teach them what a simile is and then use literature and poems so they recognize it. In Maniac Magee, the book that we’re reading, whenever a simile comes up we point that out. So that it’s not just, “Oh, we did a week of similes.” They’ve heard about them and practice writing them and try to talk about them and write about them. And then it’s an ongoing thing throughout the year. And with these kids, repetition is a good thing. But it’s not, “Let’s do the same problem 25 times.” Instead, let’s do it this way, and let’s try it another way, and, you know, use their senses as much as possible.

The mismatch between the format of the test and her more authentic instruction often raises questions during Jacqueline’s discussions with parents. “It just seems odd to parents [who] say, “Well, why? Why are they still having some difficulty with second-grade goals when they are taking, according to the state, taking the third-grade level test?” She explains to parents that she uses more authentic and informal assessments such as running records of reading, weekly individualized spelling assessments, and writing conferences to understand what her students know. She also uses a variety of formal competency tests that complement her own ongoing data gathering:

I tell parents that the competency testing we use is a little bit more difficult and a little bit more truthful, I think, as to what’s happening at that grade level. And that this one-day assessment doesn’t really show as much depth as that person really needs to have in that area. . . . It just makes me lose credibility, in a sense, with the IEP goals.

Jacqueline believes that the mandated tests usurp her credibility as a knowledgeable teacher. She fights this by explaining the limitations of testing—especially the state tests—to parents.

CONCLUSIONS

Jacqueline’s resistance to test mentality is due to a variety of factors, one of which is her membership in a special education program that enables her to “opt out” of tests and lower the stakes of the alternative assessment. This seems ironic given critiques of special educators as being overly dependent on formal evaluations (Taylor, 1991) and too far removed from regular education classrooms (Cunningham & Allington, 1999). By maintaining her status as an outsider to the regular education program in her school, she is able to creatively adapt methods to strategically fit the needs of her students. For those who might take this statement as evidence of the necessity for more stringent testing and accountability systems for students in special education, I caution that higher stakes will only mutilate the types of authentic learning I witnessed in the portable that sat just beyond the chants, hint sheets, and practice tests so common in the regular education classrooms at this school. Another source for Jacqueline’s resistance is her well-defined, informed pedagogy—her counter-knowledge—based on progressive instructional methods, authentic literacy goals focused on reading and writing, and a variety of assessments, rather than just standardized testing, as a means for decision making. Jacqueline believes that literacy is an essential part of everyday life for her students; that her teaching must match and build upon what her students know about reading and writing and stretch their abilities to what they will need to know as adults; that authentic uses of literacy as a means to communicate and represent are possible and educative even (especially!) in the classroom; and that these are the literacies that will empower her students’ futures. She integrates methods that reinforce her philosophies, such as writers’ workshop and reading discussions based on “real” literature, and selectively applies them for each student’s instruction. As a result, Jacqueline’s students believe that learning to read and write are inherently valuable social acts that extend beyond the short scope of testing. Jacqueline’s classroom acts as a shelter to the storm of testing that is blowing through Texas schools.

The act of resistance is not one that can endure without the aid of outside resources. Even as she maintained that she has “outsider status,” Jacqueline continued to engage in professional development by attending multiple district-sponsored workshops and reading professional literature regularly. Jacqueline always asked me for ideas when I was in her room. But she did not...
adopt every idea offered. Her pedagogical understanding does not spawn from dictated or packaged curricula; it has grown steadily from years of studying the art of teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels, learning and teaching with students, and selectively choosing which methods to adopt from workshops, colleagues, books, and journals. Jacqueline insisted that she does not resist alone; instead, she resists by developing and practicing her own beliefs of how and why literacy is taught and learned, informed by her years of experience in working with children, talking to other teachers, studying teaching in graduate school and professional workshops, and reading professional literature. In the classroom, she incorporates elements of these resources to align her instruction with her students needs.

So to answer the challenge offered by Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001):

"It is easy to get discouraged by the [testing] frenzy. The political and economic forces supporting the movement are formidable. But the power of teachers and students is formidable as well . . . . As leaders in reading and literacy education, we have an important role to play in the fight against high-stakes assessment. Our professional colleagues . . . . are crying out for assistance and guidance. Their pleas are not just about themselves and their situation but the plight of the students they serve. Will we remain silent? (p. 498)"

Jacqueline’s story is one voice joining a chorus of resistance—a story about the everyday coping mechanisms she puts in place to counter the test mentality so ingrained in her school. I hope that her story will encourage more teachers to think through how testing affects their lives, what they value as authentic and meaningful learning and instruction, where to find resources to reinforce those values, and how to resist “test mentality.” Then I hope teachers will join the chorus to tell their stories.

References


Author Biography

Caitlin Dooley is a doctoral candidate in the Language and Literacy Program, Curriculum and Instruction Department at the University of Texas at Austin.