

CONSTRAINTS AND NEGOTIATIONS: TFA, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND SCRIPTED PROGRAMS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

As the educational community continues to consider the impact of the proliferation of accountability-aimed reform on students, schools, and communities, the consequences of said reforms on teachers must be included. Results of this study indicate that even distant, broad educational policies manifest in specific and profound ways in teachers' daily, lived experiences, shaping novice teachers' identity, beliefs, and efficacy. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the perspectives of 38 Teach for America Corps Members (CMs) to situate how the educational reform climate socializes and oppresses teachers from all layers of influence, resulting in permeated macrotransgressions, which negatively impacts teachers. While this oppressive culture poses serious threats to the teaching profession, particularly in urban contexts, we also highlight the ways in which CMs resisted the confluence of socializing forces resulting from neoliberal shifts in educational policy and reform. Implications for teachers, educational leaders, policy makers, reformers, teacher educators, and communities are considered in order to envision a reprofessionalization of teachers working in tandem with the communities they serve to (re)construct a more just society.

Keywords: accountability reforms; socialization; scripted literacy curriculum

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census (2013), forty-seven percent of children under the age of five belong to a racial or ethnic minority group. In contrast to the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of classrooms, there is a continued push for standardization of pedagogy and curriculum in schools serving marginalized students (Au, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Sleeter, 2005). These trends toward one-size-fits-all education ignore the changes in demographics, which are inherently reflected in students' experiences, prior knowledge, interests, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds (Durden, 2008; Schultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur, 2008).

Anyon (1980) argues that our nation's children receive an education that mirrors their social positioning in society, meaning that children from working class, urban, and rural backgrounds learn "the basics"; teachers keep students busy with low-level work, and children internalize the notion that knowledge is created by others. Haberman's (2010) "pedagogy of poverty" demonstrates how teachers perpetuate structural educational inequities by using control, teacher-centered pedagogy, low-level questions and tasks, and numerous tests. Urban schools are under threat of sanctions, demonization, and loss of funding due to accountability systems based on high-stakes test scores, so it is imperative that we examine the nature of teaching, learning, and assessment in order to counter these forces which systematically disadvantage marginalized students.

This multiple case study considers the experiences of two novice Teach For America (TFA) teachers enrolled in a university preparation program. They espoused a culturally relevant teaching ideology but were required to implement a mandated scripted literacy program, Success for All (SFA), in their urban elementary classrooms. Examining how novice teachers navigate educational policies, which require that they implement curricular mandates that were antithetical to their asserted teaching lens of culturally relevant pedagogy, we can better bridge the theory to practice gap inherent in teacher education and induction.

Context

Freedom School System (FSS) (all names are pseudonyms) is a large urban district in the southeastern United States. The

ethnic distribution of the 48,000 students in FSS is 83% Black, 10% White, 5% Hispanic, 1% Multiracial, and less than 1% Asian, American Indian, or Alaskan. Over 76% of Freedom's enrolled students receive free or reduced-priced meals. Carter University (CU) is a large research-intensive university located in FSS and has long prepared educators to teach historically marginalized students. The College of Education at CU states as its mission to prepare educators who are "(a) informed by research, knowledge and reflective practice, (b) empowered to serve as change agents, (c) committed to and respectful of all learners, and (d) engaged with learners, their families, schools, and local and global communities" (Carter University Website, 2015).

Since 2009, CU has collaborated with Teach For America (TFA) to offer corps members a teaching certification and master's degree during their two-year teaching commitments. TFA (discussed below) espouses the mission to "enlist our nation's most promising future leaders in the movement to eliminate educational inequity" (Teach For America, 2012). The complex context and intersection of FSS, TFA, Carter University, and the individual schools and classrooms of the participants created the intersectional spaces of their socialization and practice in which they constructed and enacted their beliefs about teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Multiple theoretical constructs and contexts frame this study. Taken together, the literature on urban education, TFA, federal and local education policies, new teachers and socialization, critical theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy situate and contextualize the experiences of these teachers.

Urban Education

Milner (2012) charges those involved in urban education to explicitly define "urban" in order to flush out the varied definitions, assumptions, coded meanings, and deficit perspectives inherent in dominant narratives surrounding the field of urban education and those students, teachers, families, and communities located within it. We draw upon Milner's (2012) conceptualization and categorization of an *urban intensive* context. Meaning, the density of this large, metropolitan city and its schools creates a context where "outside of school factors such as housing, poverty, and transportation are directly connected to what happens inside of the school" (p. 559).

Due to a host of sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and socioeconomic factors inside and outside of the school context, many of the students attending schools in Freedom School System, the system where this study takes place, are experiencing what Ladson-Billings (2006) termed an accumulated "education debt." These factors, also noted in extensive research on educational equity, include: a) inadequate funding and resources (Weiner, 2000), b) accountability measures and reform mandates that reduce instructional time and focus (Au, 2007; Kavanagh, 2010; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Esposito, Davis, & Swain, 2012; Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, & Martin, 2016; 2017; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002), c) underprepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Vasquez Helig & Jez, 2010), and d) systemic racism and classism that challenge many urban districts and communities (Anyon, 1980; Oakes, 2005; Weiner, 2000). The confluence of these complex factors and inequities creates a challenging context for learners and teachers.

Teach For America

Created, at least in part in order to address the need for teachers in underserved communities, "alternative teacher certification" programs have become increasingly common. While these programs vary widely in recruitment, coursework, length, mentoring, internship, and practices (Humphrey, Weschler, & Hough, 2008), all are designed to recruit, train and certify individuals who have completed bachelor's degrees in a major that is rarely education related, often in an expedited fashion. Teach For America (TFA), one alternative pathway into teaching, has a significant presence in FSS. The sheer number of TFA Corps Members (CMs) who have taught in high-need schools (46,500 TFA alumni nationwide) and the number of marginalized students in our nation's schools who have been impacted by their instruction calls for a careful examination of the context and experiences of TFA CMs. Since 2000, more than 1,300 TFA CMs have taught in the city where this study takes place (TFA Website, 2015), despite the presence of 7 major and regional colleges and universities matriculating traditionally-prepared and certified teachers within a one-hour radius of Freedom School System.

TFA's founder, Wendy Kopp, often describes TFA as a leadership development organization and not a teaching organization, meaning that its training emphasizes leadership skills and management rather than the pedagogies, content, and child

development processes included in traditional teacher preparation (TFA Website, 2015). Preparation for TFA CMs includes a 5-week Summer Institute that purports to include co-teaching, observations and feedback, rehearsal sessions, and lesson planning clinics. Sessions and training materials used during Institute are light on teaching, learning theories, and methods related to diversity, child development, English Language Learners (Hopkins & Heineke, 2013), Special Education, and content pedagogy (Veltri, 2008; 2012). Former CMs identify these absences of critical content, and suggest the pedagogical training is inadequate and does not reflect the reality of teaching, learning, and assessment in urban schools (Veltri, 2008; 2012).

TFA is frequently criticized by researchers and teacher education programs for exacerbating educational inequities by putting the least prepared teachers in underserved schools (Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010; Heineke & Cameron, 2013) and for deprofessionalizing teaching and teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Empirical research on the effectiveness of TFA teachers remains mixed and inconclusive due to methodological concerns and a lack of independent research conducted by individuals who do not have ties to TFA (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Decker, Mayer, & Glazeran, 2004; Kovacs, 2013; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001; Veltri, 2008, 2012). In spite of criticisms, TFA boasts strong support from policymakers, corporations, and both neoconservative and neoliberal reformers.

Federal and Local Education Policies and Mandates

No Child Left Behind

In recent decades, policymakers developed systems in the name of teacher and school accountability with hopes that mandates for improving student achievement would lead to increased educational equity, especially for those students traditionally underserved in schooling contexts. Few educators discount the long-lasting effects the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has had on schooling. These consequences profoundly shaped curricula, assessment, practice, certification, induction, recruitment, preparation, and views of teaching and learning (Au, 2007; Achinstein, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Zumwalt & Craig, 2008). Researchers illustrate effects of NCLB mandates on narrowing of curricula and pedagogy, proliferation of prescriptive literacy programs, increased assessments; and negative effects on teachers' identities, autonomy, and desires to teach (Au, 2007; Kavanagh, 2010; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Esposito et. al, 2012; Milner, 2014; Schultz, et.al, 2008; Smagorinsky, et.al, 2002).

Comprehensive School Reform Act

Accountability policies and underlying assumptions about teaching, learning, and assessment associated with NCLB led many schools to choose Comprehensive School Reforms (CSRs) to increase student achievement as measured by high-stakes tests. The Comprehensive School Reform Act of 1997 provided federal funds for schools to implement one of several approved reform models. Extant research suggests overall average effects of these programs on student achievement are small; however, variability in effectiveness among CSRs is significant (Correnti & Rowan, 2007; Tushnet, Flaherty & Smith, 2004). Many urban school districts dealt with accountability pressures, mandates, and measures by using Title 1 funds to adopt scripted literacy programs that use teacher-centered, direct instruction as a primary pedagogical tool (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speigman, 2004; Ede, 2006). Of the many school reform programs available, FSS chose eleven, with Success for All (SFA) implemented at the schools in this study.

Success for All

SFA, with a foundation in behaviorism, uses procedural controls to produce instructional change in schools by providing a highly-structured program with daily scripted and paced reading lessons. SFA consists of several components: a 90-minute daily reading and writing period, homogenous reading groups across grade levels, one-week and eight-week assessments, cooperative learning, one-to-one tutoring, and family support teams. Centralized management leaders monitor fidelity in implementation (Correnti & Rowan, 2007; Slavin et al., 2009). This means that in schools where SFA is implemented, individuals at the school and local levels are trained to come into classrooms and assess teachers for their fidelity to the scripts mandated by the program. Despite attention to fidelity of implementation at the classroom and script level, several key components and stated priorities of SFA which would be more aligned with CRP-- such as working intentionally with families and integrated reading/writing periods-- are rarely implemented due to institutional constraints such as funding, time, and lack of professional development (Kavanagh, 2010; Datnow & Castellano, 2000).

SFA developers, Slavin et al. (2009), suggest SFA is a proven model that could be used in any school, but importantly, they

recognize their programs are only used in high-poverty schools. Other research has demonstrated constraining, negative effects of scripted programs like SFA on teachers' professional identities, autonomy, and creativity (Achinstein, et al., 2004; Kavanagh, 2010; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Esposito et. al, 2014; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002.) These prescriptive curricula exacerbate inequities between urban and suburban schools by socializing teachers into two disparate tracks: one track of urban teachers who are often required to implement programs that rely on scripts and control, and another track of often suburban teachers who generally have greater freedom to exhibit autonomy, creativity, and experimentation in their pedagogy (Achinstein et al., 2004). These curricular choices and experiential inequities leave children and teachers in urban schools at a disadvantage when compared to their suburban peers. Due to the influence of school contexts and curricular offerings on teaching, learning, and new teachers, we must look carefully at the literature and research on teacher socialization.

New Teachers and Socialization

There is often a dichotomy between pedagogical beliefs and theories learned from teacher preparation programs, such as culturally relevant pedagogy, and what is expected that teachers do in their classrooms, based on a school's administration, curriculum choices, testing practices; and on pressures from federal and local policies (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, & Martin, 2016;2017; Cochran-Smith, 2004). This means that a significant theory-to-practice divide has implications for novice teachers and their developing professional identities. When prospective teachers are not explicitly prepared to connect content taught in the academy to practices mandated by educational policies, they are conflicted and unprepared for the realities of teaching in today's standardized milieu (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Researchers have found that teachers are socialized and influenced by the practices, policies, and cultures of the spaces in which they develop and teach. New teachers espouse beliefs and enact practices that reflect their districts' approaches to literacy instruction (Achinstein et al., 2004; Grossman & Thompson, 2002). Unsurprisingly, urban communities with high concentrations of underprepared teachers, those who typically have "fast-track" credentials and little to no preparation or teaching experience, have been found to be more likely to use scripted programs in order to give these teachers direction and guidance (Kavanagh, 2010; Milner, 2014; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010). Likewise, Haberman (2010) argues that the "pedagogy of poverty," with its regimens, systems of control, direct instruction, and sorting appeals to those—such as underprepared teachers and policy makers—who do not know the full range of pedagogical options possible.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1994) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) are two complementary theoretical perspectives on schooling that frame this study on scripted curricula. Critical pedagogues are concerned with the institutionalized ways that power is structured in schools and the impact of those inequitable structures on students and teachers. Giroux (1994) explained that critical pedagogy "signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities" (p. 30). These power structures and relationships are reified through accountability measures, high-stakes testing, scripted programs, and the proliferation of underprepared teachers. Additionally, critical pedagogues are interested in how schools reproduce what counts or is valued as official knowledge. Critical pedagogues problematize the use of prescribed materials that dictate what is taught, when it is taught, and how it is taught; arguing that scripted programs are inherently antidemocratic in ways that systematically and disproportionately impact urban schools and learners.

In her discussion of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), Ladson-Billings (1994) outlines pedagogical and ideological tenets that she identifies as central to effectively teach students of color. CRP advocates for developing students academically while affirming and nurturing their cultural competencies and cultural identities, and developing a sociopolitical and critical consciousness that challenges the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This pedagogical perspective is often used as a conceptual framework for progressive teacher preparation programs and discussions of K-16 multicultural education. Taken together, critical pedagogy and CRP are essentially the antithesis of predetermined scripted curricula. Research conducted within the framework of CRP and critical pedagogy-- including this study- is concerned with educational disparities and how power is distributed in schooling through curricula.

Research on Socialization and Curricula from Critical Pedagogy and CRP Perspectives

Research has shown that even when teachers leave education programs with preparation to teach in culturally relevant ways,

initial jobs and local contexts shape and constrain teachers' ideologies, agency, goals, and practices connected to teaching diverse students (Athanases & DeOliveira, 2008; Kavanagh, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Shultz, et. al., 2008; Smagorinsky, et. al, 2002). This is particularly a concern when the school or district adopts an externally created, scripted curriculum.

Critics of scripted programs suggest scripts, externally-produced lessons, and prescribed stories render the students' interests, cultures, communities, and knowledge invisible (Kavanagh, 2010; Durden, 2008; Schultz, et. al., 2008; Shanton & Valenzuela, 2005); and fail to build upon the cognitive, social, and personal resources learners bring to school. Datnow and Castellano (2000), for example, found that almost all the teachers in their study (n=39) made adaptations to SFA in order to meet their students' needs. These adaptations were due to externally-developed lessons not aligning with the teachers' beliefs, professional judgments, and/or consideration of what is best for student learning. This curricular and pedagogical focus has left the most underserved students with low-level and limiting literacy access and opportunities.

Need for this Inquiry

This study was conceptualized by taking into consideration the socializing context of FSS, specifically the Comprehensive School Reform model of literacy instruction, SFA, in place in our community schools; and a concern for equitable and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in our community. Specifically, this study examines how two novice TFA CMs who espoused culturally relevant pedagogical philosophies, navigated and learned to teach within this context of mandated fidelity to SFA. Through this multiple case study, these novice teachers reveal the identities and pedagogies they developed and enacted while experiencing significant dissonances between their beliefs about responsive literacy instruction and the mandates they were required to implement in their urban classrooms. This is a particularly relevant and compelling inquiry as it not only addresses a significant gap in the research and literature, but also holds implications for a range of stakeholders and those who work for equitable schooling.

Previous research, deep knowledge of the context, and the framework of CRP and Critical Pedagogy led to the creation of the guiding questions for this inquiry:

1. How do novice teachers prepared with a culturally relevant teaching framework implement a scripted literacy program?
2. What are the teachers' beliefs regarding the use of scripted programs during literacy instruction?
3. How does a scripted curriculum influence the identity of a novice teacher?
4. How does high-stakes testing influence culturally relevant literacy instruction?

During the first round of data collection, it became clear the last question needed to broaden its focus beyond just the construct of high-stakes testing. Meaning, it was not only high-stakes testing, but the larger context of federal policies like No Child Left Behind, that influenced Comprehensive School Reform, Title I, TFA, alternative teacher preparation programs, and definitions and measures of knowledge and success. These complex, interrelated factors influenced culturally relevant literacy instruction. Therefore, the final question broadened in scope to ask, "What larger contextual factors in the educational milieu influence culturally relevant literacy instruction?" Findings from each of these questions are illustrated in this article.

Methodology

A multiple-case study design guided the examination of participants' educational beliefs, attitudes, identities, and instructional practices regarding the two competing ideologies of SFA and CRP. Yin (2003) defined a case study as a method that "investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Merriam (2009) offered case studies as a means of examining complex social units consisting of several variables of potential importance, revealing the possible interactions of these factors in order to understand a phenomenon. Yin (2003) noted that multiple-case studies may reveal similar and/or contrasting results within a phenomenon. This study examined multiple intersections of many variables that contributed to the phenomenon. NCLB policies, scripted curriculum, high-stakes testing, new teacher socialization, TFA, alternative certification programs, and teacher beliefs all contributed to the phenomenon, so two cases were selected in order to illuminate commonalities and distinct differences in the experiences of individuals learning to teach in different school contexts. While initially each participant was considered her own case and was analyzed individually to glean within-case findings, this article will focus on themes which became clear from the

final phase of analysis, cross-case analysis.

Researchers

Data from this study and the primary analysis are direct results of a study conducted by [Author One]. In the final round of analysis and interpretation, [Author Two], who brought an emic perspective as program coordinator and primary instructor, was invited to join the analysis and interpretation, particularly considering implications of the findings for teacher education programs.

Participants

Given the research questions and context, purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) began with [Author Two], the TFA/CU partnership coordinator and lead instructor. Based on the research questions, sampling criteria included TFA CMs who (a) self-identified with culturally relevant teaching in coursework, discussions, and written teaching philosophy; (b) taught with a scripted literacy curriculum, (c) had one to three years of teaching experience, and d) taught first through fifth grade. [Author Two] was able to identify six possible participants who fit all sampling criteria. Three people were interested and able to participate, but Dee and Fiona were selected as the two cases in order to have distinct differences and similarities between the cases (Yin, 2003). Both participants (a) were young, Black women, (b) taught 4th grade in predominantly Black, low socioeconomic schools in FSS, (c) used the SFA scripted literacy program mandated by their schools, (c) were enrolled in the alternative certification program at CU which touted culturally relevant teaching, and (d) were TFA corps members. Distinct differences in the two cases included two different school and classroom contexts and experience, and the fact that Dee was a first-year CM, and Fiona a second-year CM.

Dee self-identifies as a Black woman, single, and in her early 20s. She identifies with her students because she says, “I was on reduced and free lunch during different periods growing up.” She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Spanish with a minor in Child Development. This was her first year teaching 4th grade at Grey Stone Elementary; 99% of the students were of color and 100% of the students received free or reduced-price lunch. Fiona is a twenty-three year old, single, Black woman with an undergraduate degree in Psychology. She was in her second year teaching at Matthew Graves Elementary school; 98% of the students were African American and 98% of the students were on free or reduced-price lunch. Participants espoused a culturally relevant pedagogical philosophy due to their Carter University (CU) preparation program, but were mandated to use the Comprehensive School reform literacy program, SFA, in their work in low-income schools serving predominately African American children.

Data Collection

Data include participant interviews, classroom observations, and self-chosen documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for each participant at the beginning and end of the four-month data collection period. Initial interviews included the same predetermined questions for both participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and immediately transcribed verbatim to inform the next interview and observation. At the end of data collection, second interviews offered the chance to explore participants’ personal backgrounds and experiences with schooling, and provided participants an opportunity to discuss self-chosen documents (i.e. lesson plans and visual representations). These second interviews provided additional insights by clarifying questions and offering explanations for ideas which arose from data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Classroom observations (n=6 Dee; n=7 Fiona) were conducted during SFA. The researcher noted interactions, behaviors, and activities of students and teachers while documenting examples of culturally relevant instruction and the absence of it. Observation debriefs (n=6 Dee; n=7Fiona) allowed for specific questioning and clarification of what was observed. Each participant provided documents which included three culturally relevant lesson plans they developed and taught, SFA scripts, CU course assignments, and two visual representations. Visual representations (e.g., illustrations, objects, pictures, photos, quotes) creatively answered two questions: *How do you view culturally relevant teaching? How do you view scripted curriculum?*

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were simultaneous, recursive, and dynamic processes that occurred in and out of the field (Merriam,

2009). An important part of analysis was researcher-generated memos which informed data collection and which were essential to capturing questions and creating rich descriptive portraits of the teachers. Initial findings were sent to each participant so they could provide feedback.

Grounded theory techniques helped generate and interpret findings. Analysis occurred in two phases: within-case and cross-case analysis, the latter of which is the focus of this manuscript. The initial phase of analysis consisted of detailed line-by-line open coding, wherein events, ideas, and incidents were given names in order to begin to classify and make sense of concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.105). Following Miles and Huberman's (1984) suggestion to analyze data by creating a matrix of categories, a coding manual was developed which included major concepts and codes found in each source and their location. Concepts were then grouped into initial abstract categories. Categories were identified, defined, and expanded in terms of particular properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and subcategories that provided detailed information that explained where, why, when, and how the phenomenon occurred. Following open coding, axial coding enabled a more cohesive reassembling of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Peer-coding and debriefings with two colleagues (Yin, 2003) supported the trustworthiness of emerging themes.

After within-case analysis, cross-case analysis began. Drawing from Eisenhardt (1989), data were analyzed in divergent ways by selecting categories and looking at their within-case similarities and inter-case differences. Listing similarities and differences between the cases revealed nuances, so new charts were created to show how the cases compared to and contrasted with each other. This phase of analysis made evident cross-case and within-case themes. To fulfill criteria for credibility in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), this study had (a) data and method triangulation, (b) peer debriefings, and (c) member checking. The participants' own words are used throughout the findings and noted as direct quotations.

Findings and Discussion: Cross-case Similarities and Differences

Two major themes that emerged through cross-case analysis will be discussed in this manuscript; specifically, a) *institutional and contextual constraints* and b) *curricular and identity negotiations*. Findings delineate curricular and identity negotiations that Fiona and Dee undertook in response to dissonances they felt between institutional and contextual constraints and the culturally relevant pedagogy they desired to enact.

Institutional and Contextual Constraints: NCLB, TFA, and SFA

Institutional constraints stemmed from two federal policies: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Comprehensive School Reform Act of 1997 (CSRA) (discussed above). These policies were manifested in a school context of: (a) standardized high-stakes testing and accountability measures, (b) the definition of "highly qualified" teachers that designated TFA CMs as highly qualified without any teaching experience, and (c) comprehensive school reform using SFA.

NCLB standardized testing as a constraint on CRP

Teachers and students faced accountability pressures that focused on test scores and maintaining their presence on the list of schools meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures. Participants reported the extreme value placed on high test scores by the district and the administration. This led to the primacy of testing and test-preparation in school-wide and classroom curricular decisions. Fiona stated that everything was "very geared towards um, what they're gonna have to do on the [State Test]". Testing pressure led to a feeling of doing "important things that you want to do" only after testing had been completed because it's hard to "squeeze it all in." Dee said in her second interview that in the month prior to testing, everything was "VERY like drill, drill, drill kind of time" and "everything was [focused] on the [State Test], like the whole schedule of the school changed." The standardized testing climate and focus on preparation for the test constrained these teachers, tying them to instruction which focused on testing practice rather than a more culturally relevant literacy curriculum.

"Highly qualified": TFA as a constraint to CRP

Another consequence of federal policy that contributed to constraining these teachers' abilities to enact a culturally relevant pedagogy was NCLB's definition of, and requirement for, a "highly qualified" teacher in every classroom. "Highly qualified" in this context, designates an individual who: a) has a bachelor's degree in any subject, b) passes a state teaching test, and c) is

enrolled in (but has not completed) a certification program like the CU program. Due to their status as TFA CMs, Dee and Fiona were “highly qualified” yet uncertified novice teachers. Therefore, they had numerous individuals from the university, TFA, the school, and the district observing and evaluating their practices. These included TFA personnel (who themselves had limited teaching experience), CU coaches, school administrators, and SFA facilitators. The policies, practices, priorities, and pedagogies of each of these organizations and individuals varied considerably. This means that Dee and Fiona were simultaneously FSS novice teachers, TFA CMs, and candidates for certification at CU, and that each of these roles required implementation of frequently conflicting if not mutually exclusive classroom practices. These expectations and constraints required teachers to engage in curricular and identity negotiations as they were evaluated by each organization through varied lenses and priorities. CMs were usually placed in historically and currently underserved, high-poverty, urban schools that had a CSR (i.e., SFA). Specifically, school and district-based constraints on culturally relevant literacy instruction were frequently attributed to the practices and processes of the implementation of the Comprehensive School Reform Model, SFA.

SFA as a constraint to CRP: Scripts, groupings, and surveillance

Another institutional constraint that made it difficult to implement culturally relevant literacy instruction was the Comprehensive School Reform model, SFA. Dee’s and Fiona’s schools chose SFA, one of eleven models allowed by Freedom School System. Requiring CSRs in exchange for federal funding led to institutional constraints such as a lack of teacher autonomy within daily classroom practice and curricula dictated by SFA. The most prevalent constructs were constraints on CRP due to a) SFA scripted literacy plans, b) the scheduling and grouping of children, and c) the use of surveillance.

SFA Scripts: SFA scripts were a major influence on classroom practice, as they dictated what literacy content was taught, how and when it was taught, and how mastery of literacy content was assessed. SFA scripts determined the reading skills, vocabulary words, questions, activities, assignments, and story tests. Because Dee and Fiona were TFA CMs with very limited preparation in pedagogy or content, they initially welcomed and needed the detailed scripts and lessons. Dee admitted, “...basically the first two weeks of school I had no idea what I was doing, um, so they just told me to go in there and do it, and that’s exactly what I did”. Fiona echoed this sentiment, stating, “It kind of identified my reading practices as a teacher.” Dee explained that the scripts proved to be a necessity at first, and then turned into a helpful “guideline” and “map” while they were gaining at CU the confidence and pedagogical content knowledge they needed to teach literacy with a culturally relevant lens.

Fiona reported having a limited and inconsistent voice in choosing the books and skills she taught. She described the script and how it influenced her planning and practice, “I feel restricted....So I don't think I'm being as effective as I could be.” Dee also revealed she had little to no voice in the content, sequence, skills, topics, or books chosen for her reading instruction because the SFA facilitator chose them. When asked how she selected these, Dee responded in a matter-of-fact tone, “I don't. They are just given to me and sometimes they're just random.” The entire SFA period was structured in a way that eliminated teacher decisions or children’s choices which limited the participants’ autonomy to teach literacy in culturally relevant ways.

The scheduling and grouping of children: SFA protocol required grouping students for literacy instruction in homogeneous groups according to quarterly SFA assessments. This means that SFA classes were formed and reformed quarterly, pulling students from across classrooms and grade levels into one classroom with a teacher who was rarely their own. This grouping and regrouping process was a constraint on teachers’ developing knowledge of and relationships with students, which inherently made challenging the possibility of CRP. Having little connection to their own students during this part of the day also contributed to the participants’ lack of autonomy and opportunities for culturally relevant curriculum planning and decision making.

It should be noted that this SFA protocol was not implemented with fidelity in every context. Fiona’s grade level decided to not adhere to cross-grade level groups. This resulted in Fiona teaching reading to all of her homeroom students except for two. This freedom to work with learners she came to know and whose stories and interests she was more familiar with had potential to facilitate more culturally relevant literacy instruction. Conversely, the majority of Dee’s students left her classroom during SFA instruction which was designated as the daily “literacy instruction” time. Dee described her frustrations with this constraint on her teaching and being held accountable for her students’ state test scores while not being able to teach them reading in the following quote:

Ok, I'm responsible for my students. You know their names are on my roll and I'm going to be responsible for them at the end of the year and I don't even have them during reading.

Additionally, the revolving door of students who she did not know well was a significant barrier to creating literacy instructional engagements which could foster and support the cultural and personal identities of the learners in the SFA groups.

The use of surveillance: A third aspect of SFA which constrained CRP was that participants were influenced explicitly and implicitly by surveillance and observations from SFA observers. Fiona explained that these observations were to see “mainly that we’re following the script and executing the script to fidelity”. The level of monitoring varied across the two schools. Fiona explained that she was heavily observed and monitored during her first year to see if she was using the script correctly, but was less so now. Dee reported, “Certain times of the year they really have you on observations... and if you’re not exactly where you are supposed to be, they mark you down for the observation”. Overall, lack of autonomy and lack of CRP stemmed from having a mandated script, constantly changing groups of children, and varying degrees of surveillance.

Fiona and Dee noted that, in the absence of surveillance, particularly in the time leading up to and following the State Test, teachers were much less likely to implement the SFA curriculum and had more opportunity to craft culturally relevant lessons. While Fiona believed that SFA was initially chosen in order to improve achievement on test scores, she and Dee strongly believed that SFA did not align with state standards or state tests. In Dee’s school, it was observed that in the months leading up to testing, SFA changed from 90 minutes to 60 minutes, and then was eliminated as a focus on testing took over the school schedule. In Fiona’s school, SFA was sidelined in weeks prior to testing and did not continue after testing. She concluded, “I think the staff doesn’t value SFA.” She admitted:

It’s kind of like, we’ll do it as long as you make us, but if you don’t make us, we’re not going to do it. And I think it’s important to know that it doesn’t mean that literacy instruction wasn’t happening um, it just means that it wasn’t happening with SFA.

The negotiation of curriculum and identity, and the spaces where literacy instruction was happening, at times in spite of the adopted curriculum, are discussed below as a demonstration of the efforts toward CRP that Fiona and Dee increasingly engaged in as they negotiated their educational identities and curriculum.

Curricular and Identity Negotiations to Mitigate Dissonances between SFA and CRP

A second cross-case theme involved curricular and identity negotiations as Fiona and Dee navigated tensions between mandated SFA implementation and their desire to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. In the context of their certification program, CU faculty were asking them to teach in “culturally relevant ways” and “teach the students holistically” by making connections to students’ lives. Because of their initial lack of preparation and content knowledge about literacy, participants initially welcomed their scripted curriculum. However, as they continued to learn about and espouse constructs of CRP, they increasingly grappled with the dissonances between curricular decisions surrounding SFA scripts and what they were learning about culturally relevant teaching at CU. They reported that during their certification program, they discovered more meaningful ways to negotiate the constraints of, and dissonances between, their schools’ SFA requirements and their desires to teach with a culturally relevant lens. The most prevalent and explicit negotiations were curricular negotiations as Fiona and Dee worked within SFA and created alternative spaces for learning because of SFA. These negotiations took the form of supplementing and altering the scripts during the SFA instructional period, while literacy integration and CRP were often manifested in curricular spaces and choices outside of SFA instructional times. A second type of negotiation was identity negotiation and was implicit across the data, as the multiple identities of these participants were constructed and challenged by a) various stakeholders, b) their beginning teacher status, and c) their desire to be culturally relevant teachers. Fiona and Dee’s beliefs and attitudes regarding SFA, coupled with their new desire to teach in culturally responsive ways, were the major reasons they felt they had to negotiate the curriculum and their competing identities.

Curricular negotiations

Throughout the data, Fiona and Dee expressed their beliefs that SFA was lacking in appropriate relevance and rigor. However, the data collection process that prompted Dee and Fiona to visually represent the answer to the question: “How do you view scripted curriculum?” particularly revealed their tensions with this reform. Fiona’s SFA visual representation (Figure 1) and the description she offered to interpret her image revealed her beliefs about SFA which led to her curricular negotiations. Her voice became very serious as she explained why she chose this dramatic visual representation:

I feel like the higher level thinking is sort of off limits for the kids I teach given the curriculum that we're given to use. So if the teacher does not go above and beyond and getting the kids to think critically and challenge their writing and reading, it won't happen if you just stick with the SFA curriculum. So I think those kinds of things are off limits for the students that I teach.

Dee's visual representation of SFA instruction also indicated her beliefs that the program was missing something; this belief explains why she engaged in curricular negotiations. Referencing Figure 2, she said, "SFA was a well-intentioned program that needed to be supplemented".

Figure 1. Visual Representation: Fiona's Beliefs and Attitudes about SFA.



Figure 2. Visual Representation: Dee's Beliefs and Attitudes about SFA



As Fiona and Dee grappled with the mandated curriculum and worked to address what they found to be missing in terms of rigor and relevance, they worked to alter, supplement, and integrate curricula in order to address absences of learning and literacy they felt to be important.

Altering, supplementing, and integrating curriculum

Evidence drawn from observations, debriefs, and interviews demonstrated that Dee and Fiona negotiated their beliefs about the lack of rigor in SFA by supplementing SFA scripts in a range of ways. Additionally, Fiona and Dee believed SFA scripts and books were decontextualized and not relevant to students. Dee said in her first interview, "I look at the curriculum and the things that I'm given. I try to find a balance between doing what they tell me to do and then adding things that the kids relate to." Participants acknowledged the importance of knowing what the scripted lessons and SFA overall required of them first before adding their own ideas into SFA. Fiona said she tried to stick to the scripts in the beginning, but when she "saw no growth," she "deviated from the script... just challenging them a little bit more". In observations, Fiona and Dee supplemented the script with culturally relevant examples, critical thinking questions, writing activities linked to students' lives and communities, and reading culturally relevant stories or poems.

Dee and Fiona were also observed altering SFA assignments and scripts to make them more interesting and relevant to students. Fiona remarked, "I think if you were going by the script some of the questions that would be relevant are not asked in the script. So if you're following the script strictly by the script, you might be missing out on really key important pieces for students to hold onto". This statement demonstrates Fiona's newly developed understandings of the value of connecting curriculum to students' lives. As Dee and Fiona's identities as teachers and culturally responsive pedagogues shifted with their new knowledge, so did their curricular decisions, which freed them in small ways to alter scripts--skipping and deleting whole sections, questions, or activities that they believed were not interesting or useful for their learners-- while supplementing scripted lessons with additional and relevant reading and writing engagements.

Another way participants negotiated the curriculum in response to their beliefs about SFA was teaching literacy using a culturally relevant lens throughout content areas before and after SFA. Participants reported integrating read alouds, critical reflections, and literacy assignments during Math, Social Studies, Language Arts, and Science, since they were not able to integrate these practices during the 90 minutes of SFA. Dee began guided reading groups and centers during her English Language Arts time,

so she could be sure all her students were getting literacy instruction based on more authentic literacy engagements. Dee and Fiona sought opportunities outside of formal SFA instruction to practice relevant literacy practices which they were learning at CU, specifically the integration of guided reading, reflections, and multicultural literature across content areas.

Competing Identities Negotiations

As noted above, since these novice CMs were not yet certified, a number of individuals from various stakeholder groups supervised and evaluated them. The perspectives, priorities, and pedagogies of these individuals were widely varied; however, each was in a position of power, and Fiona and Dee grappled with their competing (and often mutually exclusive) requirements. This imbroglio created the second type of negotiation which was implicit across data sources, as these novice TFA teachers constructed, challenged, and negotiated multiple, often conflicting, and simultaneous professional identities.

Different practices and beliefs were valued by different stakeholders involved in Dee's and Fiona's lives including: (a) TFA personnel who "help them assess student growth numerically" (Dee); (b) CU coaches who provided "guidance and support" to "specifically focus on things that I felt like I needed help with" (Fiona); (c) SFA facilitators who "look to make sure you are exactly where you are supposed to be" (Dee) in the script; and (d) CU professors who emphasize culturally relevant teaching practices and teaching "holistically" (Fiona). They learned to negotiate and demonstrate what each stakeholder valued; this resulted in a performative space in which that their practice varied considerably based on who was coming into their room for the day. These performances and negotiations of identity required Dee and Fiona to develop and display different and sometimes contradictory ideas and practices depending on who was observing their class, reading their assignments, or evaluating their teaching.

[Author Two], the CU professor, when interviewed during the initial data collection, described this negotiation as CMs took up varied roles with mutually exclusive expectations as "a real crisis of identity for these people who are used to being successful." She explained that this tension often left CMs, who had previously experienced significant success in school settings, "not feeling like they have the autonomy or knowledge and sometimes the compassion to be teachers". She felt that these feelings ultimately contributed to many CMs leaving the field after the completion of their two-year commitment to TFA.

Fiona and Dee noted that their professional identities shifted as they negotiated competing beliefs about SFA and CRP, particularly as they gained knowledge about teaching and learning in their program at CU. They simultaneously claimed several identities including: (a) elite TFA leaders; (b) novice teachers; (c) SFA script readers; and (d) culturally relevant pedagogues. They were evaluated, by different stakeholders, in each of these mutually exclusive identities and therefore were required to navigate the competing demands that came with each role. This forced Dee and Fiona to compromise and renegotiate these developing identities over time. For instance the first identity negotiation was juxtaposing their elite, confident, TFA leader status with the identity of an unsure, unprepared novice teacher. Dee described this juxtaposition of identities in the following statements, "I am a part of Teach For America, a special group of talented and determined individuals who will stop at nothing to make sure that their students succeed." However, she then expressed that in her role of novice teacher she often felt like she "had no idea what I was doing" and "felt like I was a freshman in college all over again;" was "overwhelmed", and "lost in the dark." These quotes indicate that Fiona and Dee were experiencing complex tensions and dissonances as they negotiated their claimed identities. Fiona's shifting identities were seen in comments like feeling "completely overwhelmed" yet "completely driven," and "determined" and then "all over the spectrum."

A second identity negotiation occurred between the self-described "robot" whose job it was to read a SFA script and the teacher committed to urban educational equity—the commitment for which Fiona and Dee were selected as TFA CMs, which was nurtured through CU's program. The identity of being a culturally relevant pedagogue challenged the participants to teach to and through students' strengths and interests. This was in direct conflict with the "robotic" following of decontextualized SFA scripts that Dee described as a "teacher-proof guideline so that no one can mess up". This conflict required Dee and Fiona to negotiate how these identities intersected and influenced their beliefs and practices about teaching, learning, and literacy, and were manifested in their altering and augmenting literacy practices within and beyond SFA-sanctioned instructional spaces engaging where possible in culturally relevant teaching, despite institutional constraints.

Summary of Findings

The findings revealed that participants were interested in teaching in culturally relevant ways, but they were limited by competing agendas from accountability measures through high-stakes testing, by SFA, and by their novice teaching abilities as TFA CMs.

These profound institutional and contextual constraints significantly influenced their understandings of literacy, teaching, and learning. This challenging milieu created significant tensions for them as they negotiated identities and curriculum in order to--in small ways-- claim autonomy and subvert some of the constraints imposed by reforms with which they did not agree. This enabled them, at times, to act with more congruence between their beliefs, to exercise autonomy, and to enact a more culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. First, findings cannot be generalized to how culturally relevant teaching or scripted programs are defined and/or implemented by all novice, Black, TFA teachers in urban classrooms. Second, this study is bounded by time and context. Finally, as White researchers who were CU professors, we remain aware of issues within the research context of power and positionality as we studied the practice of Black teachers who taught Black students.

Implications and Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature considering and problematizing the constraints of scripted literacy instructional mandates in urban classrooms in an era of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability. Specifically, this work attends to the complex negotiation of identity and curriculum within this macropolitical educational milieu and poses implications for teacher education programs, induction processes, and the larger policies and practices which shape how teachers and learners are socialized (Fisher, et al., 2013).

Previous research has indicated the need for teacher preparation programs to prepare candidates to be aware of and navigate institutional and contextual constraints (such as testing and scripted curriculum) on their future teaching (Achinstein & Barratt, 2004; Athanases & DeOliveira, 2008; Kavanagh, 2010; Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, & Martin, 2016; Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, & Martin, 2017). These constraints are often cited as primary reasons teachers leave the profession. Therefore, if preparation programs underrepresent the complex mandates and realities of the contexts of schooling, we underprepare teachers for the current educational milieu, one that varies significantly from the perceptions and hopes regarding teaching many candidates have developed through their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, p. 61). Researchers have documented this "practice shock" (Achinstein & Barratt, 2004) that results from the gap between teacher preparation and the realities of schooling. Teacher preparation programs must intentionally support candidates in considering and navigating the context of schooling by creating opportunities which explicitly expose and critique macro and micro level constraints on teaching. Programs must provide opportunities for candidates to explore and develop their teaching beliefs and identities and to consider how they are in confluence and, at times at odds, with larger structural constraints. Subject-specific assignments, social justice readings, and "teaching against the grain" stances (Cochran-Smith, 2004) can create spaces for candidates to become more prepared to navigate constraints they will encounter, such as testing and scripted programs, in light of their identities and beliefs.

This preparation locates teaching and learning within a sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and sociocultural lens, enabling novices to understand and evaluate their own schooling, identities, life opportunities, constructions of knowledge, and education beliefs (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Sleeter, 2005); and to locate these personal constructions within the larger systemic context. Framing teacher development and support with this paradox in mind creates a space for beginning teachers to begin to anticipate and work to mitigate their own "practice shock" by creating a theoretical and practical foundation for grounding acts of resistance to institutional constraints that are symptomatic of teaching in urban schools during this accountability era (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Schultz et. al, 2008). Grounding programs, classes, coursework, and mentoring in research and practices which locate teaching identities and beliefs in the larger political context not only prepares candidates to enter the sociopolitical context of education but also is essential if they are to successfully navigate these impending constraints (Achinstein et. al, 2004; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Bergeron, 2008; Schultz et. al, 2008; Sleeter, 2005) as political beings (Bruner, 1996), who choose implicitly or explicitly to participate in or challenge systemic inequities.

Literacy instructors at the teacher preparation level must provide novices multiple opportunities to engage, critique, and supplement scripted programs-- akin to how Dee and Fiona supplemented with critical thinking questions and linking stories and literacy assignments to students' lives, communities, and identities. Teachers like Fiona and Dee, who are actively navigating institutional and curricular constraints while endeavoring to create teaching identities and curricula which reflect culturally relevant teaching practices, should be invited into teacher certification programs and coursework as cooperating teachers and guest speakers. Videotaping how these teachers supplement, integrate, and omit practices within and outside of scripted SFA curricula, and deconstructing these practices within literacy coursework could help preservice teachers imagine ways to negotiate and create spaces for culturally relevant teaching. Integrating engagements that reflect the realities of teaching while providing visions of the possible can provide explicit examples for preservice teachers to imagine opportunities in their own classrooms for implementing responsive literacy practices using a culturally relevant lens, guided reading, centers, and readers' or writers' workshop. This negotiation and the opportunity to practice articulating rationales for the implementation of responsive

curricular and pedagogical decisions can and should be practiced through course-based discussions, role playing, case studies, and creation of research-based rationales for practice. This is critical if novices are to build the necessary discursive practices and articulated stances they will need to advocate for and justify their pedagogical decision-making in the face of constraints on their classroom practices.

This support cannot and should not be located solely within the confines of literacy coursework in teacher education programs. Providing explicit opportunities for teachers to investigate state standards across subjects (Sleeter, 2005) and to integrate critical literacy and culturally relevant reading, writing, and critical reflection opportunities throughout content areas is a necessary focus. These opportunities are critical if we are to support teachers in navigating and moving beyond the contextual and institutional constraints of scripted literacy curricula. Additionally, a specific focus and examination during teacher preparation that problematizes everything from the testing industry and cultural bias in testing to privileging certain testable knowledge and the limited information gleaned from test data, could help equip novice teachers with the information they need to resist the myopic focus on test preparation and its constraints on teaching and learning. Exposing the power dynamics related to standardized testing, especially in urban schools, could be a profound teaching opportunity for teachers and their students to explore.

There are policy implications for this work at the teacher education, district induction, school, and classroom level. There are macro policies which must be addressed to mitigate damages done by scripted curricula, and the accountability system more broadly must be re-examined. Few would agree with the problematic concept that teachers should be held accountable for the test scores of students whom they do not teach, or for whom they cannot craft responsive learning experiences due to their required fidelity to unyielding scripted programs (Kavanagh & Fisher-Ari, 2015). Practices and policies must change if we are to stem this tide of urban students and teachers being buried under an education debt (Ladson-Billing, 2006), created by structural and pedagogical mandates and constraints leaving all caught in the contradictions of the accountability trap (Kavanagh & Fisher-Ari, 2015).

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