
No One Curriculum is Enough: Effective California Teachers Tailor Literacy Instruction to Student Needs Despite Federal, State, and Local Mandates to Follow Scripts.

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This study examines six teachers' responses inside and outside of their classrooms to increasingly mixed messages about how they should develop the literacy of California's youngest and most at-risk students. While they must develop highly developed knowledge and skills to teach literacy in linguistically diverse classrooms, they must also adhere rigidly to the substance and pace of scripted literacy curricula. This qualitative study sought to fill an impact research gap by investigating how six first grade urban teachers, identified as "effective" by district personnel, university professors, and peers, did respond. Despite a tightly monitored policy context, these teachers responded in deeply meaningful ways rather than blindly implementing the curricula. These findings suggest the importance of honoring teacher creativity, thirst for knowledge, and practical experiences.

Introduction

This article describes six urban teachers' responses to increasingly mixed messages about how they should develop the literacy of California's youngest and most at-risk students. These mixed messages tell them, on the one hand, that they need highly developed knowledge and skills to teach literacy in linguistically diverse classrooms. On the other hand, they are told not to use this knowledge, but rather to adhere rigidly to the substance and pace of scripted literacy curricula. Not surprisingly, recent studies suggest urban teachers who use mandated curricula experience loss, guilt, and depression and often leave their schools (see, for example, Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). However, other preliminary evidence shows that many effective teachers are staying within their schools and continuing to provide high quality literacy instruction to their students.

The National and State Context

Urban teachers work in a context of increased literacy workplace and global participation demands, necessitating that all students receive advanced reading instruction (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Luke, 2003). However, despite a bevy of recent reforms, the reading levels of urban students still significantly under perform their peers attending suburban schools, as evidenced by their performance on fourth grade reading

assessments (Manzo, 2003). In addition, urban school districts are having an increasingly difficult time filling their positions with trained teachers given the rapidly aging teaching population, the high demands of working with diverse student populations, and new federal requirements (Carroll, Reichard, & Guarino, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2000, Manzo, 2002).

Developing integrated remedies would be ideal given the strong evidence that literacy teachers, rather than the instructional programs they use, have a greater impact on student reading growth (Bond & Dystra, 1967; Hoffman, 1991; Snow et al., 1998). However, in response to recent state and federal demands to improve early literacy skills quickly, many urban districts are being encouraged, and at times forced, to implement prescriptive early reading curricula. The federal government's Reading First program requires districts to spend 80% of their grants to purchase scientifically proven reading curricula, most of which require all teachers within individual schools to use direct instruction, phonics-centered, one-size fits all teaching methods (Allington & Waimsley, 1995; Coles, 2000; Goodman, 1998; Taylor, 1998).

While state and federal officials place their funding emphasis on curricular implementation of scientifically proven reading curricula, strong research evidence demonstrates that effective literacy teachers use multiple instructional strategies tailored to the specific needs of students, particularly those with varying language and cultural backgrounds (Knapp, 1995; National Reading Council, 2000; Wenglisky, 2000, Yatvin, Weaver, & Garan, 2003). In their multi-year study of primary-grade reading instruction in urban schools, Taylor et al (2002) found that effective literacy providers provided explicit phonics instruction along with small group coaching high level questioning of text, and frequent writing in response to text.

The scripted literacy curricula approved by the federal Reading Program approved curricula do not include this balanced approach (Yatvin, Weaver, & Garan, 2003). Allington (1991) believes that these lower-order skills, oriented curricula focus on improving decoding skills without a concurrent focus on higher level, meaning making instruction. Effective literacy teachers move beyond providing this compensatory instruction, offering their weaker, less economically advantaged students instruction tailored to their specific needs (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). Yatvin, Weaver and Garan (2003) find a remarkable lack of scientific verification of the long-term benefits of these widely used commercial, scripted curricula. The authors then make twelve key recommendations from high-quality research about key components of early literacy programs, elements that are lacking from the commercial curricula. Their recommendations include: embedding significant

comprehension development strategies from kindergarten and up; including silent, independent reading for entire classrooms; assisting children both directly and indirectly in developing vocabulary, integrating high quality literature; and rejecting assisting struggling readers with more of the same.

The Conflicting Impact on Teachers

Not surprisingly then, recent research studies suggest that many effective urban teachers using these scripted early literacy curricula feel devalued as professionals because the curricula prevent them from meeting the specific needs of their students because the curricula prevent them from meeting the specific needs of their students (Cooper, 1998; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Taylor, 2001). They often leave their urban classrooms for more affluent, less structured districts. Researchers note different responses from teachers, responses that often depend on the teachers' school culture and individual belief systems (Acker, 1997; Osborn, 1997). Even some teachers with strong belief systems resist the curricula in less supportive school environments, but they experience significant consequences, including increased anxiety, stress related illnesses, and demoralization because of their lost ability to make instructional and curricular decisions (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Addock & Patton, 2001; Campbell & Neill, 1999; MacGillivray, Skoda, Curwen, & Ardell, 2002; Troman & Woods, 2001).

Thriving Urban Teachers

Yet in urban districts around the country, preliminary evidence shows that many of these effective teachers are staying within their schools and continuing to provide high quality literacy instruction to their students (MacGillivray, Skoda, Curwen, & Axdell, 2003). While studies respond to teacher self-reports, none include detailed observations of teacher practice to find how and why they respond to scripted curricula.

Methods

Interested in examining the ways teachers respond to mandated literacy curricula, I conducted case studies of six teachers who work with scripted literacy curricula in their classrooms in a large urban district in southern California. Because there are strong correlations between teacher quality and experience (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, 2002), I only included in my study teachers who had completed at least one full year of teaching and held a clear teaching credential before I observed their teaching. Two of my teachers had two years of experience (Mary and Catherine), one three (Beatriz), one four (Lisa), one seven (Vicky), and one eleven (Veronica). Moreover, because the scripted

literacy curricula are particularly controlled in the early elementary years, I focused on six first grade teachers; first grade is a critical year in literacy acquisition.

I used multiple case study methods to gather my data, including observations, interviews, and document gathering. Over the course of fourteen months, I visited each teacher for several consecutive days as she worked through at least one complete story cycle during the second half of the required curriculum. Each teacher used the same program, which is the most widely used scripted program in California and the nation. Before observing each teacher, I conducted an indepth semi-structured preliminary interview to gain background information and overall teaching and literacy beliefs (See Appendix A for preliminary interview protocol).

I took in-depth field notes of each day of instruction I observed, focusing on how the teacher presented her instruction and student responses, especially as compared to the program's teacher's edition and other instructional requirements. After each day of observation, I interviewed the teacher in person or via email regarding specific questions about her instructional decision making practices that day (See Appendix B for post observation questions). I also conducted at least one extensive interview with each participant to garner her perspectives about teaching, learning, and literacy.

Findings: A Critical Interpretation

Mary believed:

There's actually no curriculum I think would be able to meet every need of every single student in every single classroom... I think that's just almost impossible, so I don't think there is such a curriculum that would do that. But I do believe that the (scripted literacy) program, it has flaws, and I think every curriculum will have flaws and strengths, but it definitely has strengths that I think work well with students, but whatever it lacks, you know, I try to supplement in my own way.

All six teachers in my study echoed Mary's sentiments and had clear rationales for each instruction decision they made. Like Mary, they did not accept the mandated literacy program *carte blanche*, yet they did not dismiss it completely. In fact, regardless of their personal belief systems, educational training, or school site context, each one of my participants used the program's curricular materials as a component of her literacy instruction and simultaneously made significant modifications to the curriculum's instructional, content, and organizational approach. More specifically, these modifications included arranging desks in groups, using a variety of instructional approaches, incorporating meaning and decoding, incorporating enrichment opportunities, integrating daily writing, providing separate science and

social studies, creating their own order of teaching, and targeting ongoing ELL development. Table 1 demonstrates this cross-case adaptation of the scripted curriculum. In actively adapting the scripted curriculum, the six teachers resembled other teachers who daily confront the tension of working with mandated curricula and testing and their own desires to work as professional, effective teachers (Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Wharton-McDonald, et al, 1998).

TABLE 1
Cross Case Instructional Responses

	Beatriz	Vicky	Mary	Catherine	Lisa	Veronica
Place Desks in Group Setting	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Use Variety of Instructional Methods	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Integrate Meaning and Decoding	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Embed Enrichment and Remediation for All/Use Center Approach	Yes/ Yes	Yes/ Yes	Yes/ Yes	Yes/ Yes	Yes/ Yes	Yes/ No
Integrate Daily Writing/Writer's Workshop (WW) or Daily Journals (DJ)	Yes/ WW	Yes/ DJ	Yes/ WW	Yes	Yes/ WW	Yes/ WW
Separate Science and Social Studies	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Create Own Order of Daily Teaching	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Target ongoing ELL Development	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Instructional Changes to Benefit Student Learning

All six teachers made significant changes to the scripted program's teacher-centered instructional focus. Rejecting exclusive transmission models of learning, all of these teachers believed student learning occurs best when students support each other in their learning, and teachers serve as facilitators as well as instructors. These beliefs led them to move away from teacher-directed whole-group instruction to include small groups, interactive whole-group, and collaborative individual learning opportunities for their students. These interactive teaching approaches allowed the teachers to serve as coaches, a sign of effective teaching (Taylor et al., 2000, 2002; Wharton-McDonald et al, 1998.) They did not lead their students' responses but provided instructional strategies that fostered their students' creation of their own knowledge.

Through her instructional day, Catherine, for example, had students engage with partners to discuss various topics ranging from

meanings of individual words, predicting story plots, to brainstorming adjectives for a collaborative story. Catherine felt that the curriculum's extensive focus on whole group work limited the number of students who could participate, often leaving out shy students. Her use of small group conversations fostered a shared curiosity, because, as she said, "I want my students to feel that they can express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in a safe, non-threatening environment."

Significant Content Changes to Deepen Learning

Integrating Key Phonemic Awareness Skills

All six teachers criticized the curriculum for isolating skills, mirroring studies that show effective literacy teachers embed their literacy instruction (see, Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Wharton-McDonald et al. 1998). First, they disagreed with the curriculum's separating phonemic awareness and phonics development from meaning. As much as they liked its organization of sounds and letters, especially the blending components, they all embedded significant meaning building activities into the decoding development. Lisa, for example, allowed students to discuss the meaning of each blending word, connecting the words to their prior knowledge or looking them up in dictionaries or encyclopedias. Each teacher employed similar sound to meaning connections.

Exploring Prior Knowledge

Before reading the curriculum's stories, all six teachers explored student prior knowledge, because they believed that the program assumes all students have had the same experiences. They believed students, especially English Language Learners, need to have their background knowledge activated to support vocabulary and comprehension development (Schifini, 1994; Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999). Beatriz devoted a great deal of instructional time to tapping prior knowledge. At times when students did not have that prior knowledge, she gave it to them. "Without it, my students do not have any idea of what the stories are really about." Because none of her students had ever gone camping, for example, she created a camping experience for them in her classroom before reading a required story, in which characters sleep outside. She brought in a tent, set it up in the middle of her classroom, and had students sit inside it with flashlights. "None of my students had gone camping. Now they have."

Significant Writing Programs

Because they found strong connections between reading and writing, all six teachers implemented significant writing programs in their first grade classrooms. Mary faulted the mandated curriculum for

“focusing solely on reading. Writing is just as important to develop in first grade. First graders love to write.” The other teachers agreed. Four implemented writer’s workshops, enabling students to work at their own pace on individual pieces. They included all components of the writing process, including brainstorming, drafting, editing, and publishing. The four presented targeted mini-lessons to assist student development, focusing equally on craft and mechanics. They read supplementary texts to highlight the connections between reading and writing. Each met individually with students about writing and tailored comments to each student’s needs.

Changing Classroom and Activity Organization

Along with their instructional changes, all six teachers made major organizational changes to the program’s required seating arrangement and sequencing of learning activities. Because they believed in student collaboration and community building, five of the six teachers rejected the program’s U shaped seating arrangement, placing their students at tables. At these tables, students assisted each other and participated in joint activities. “I don’t want them to think that all learning happens in the front of the room; it happens where they are,” said Beatriz. Because of school mandates, Vicky had to use the U arrangement even though she disliked it. Nonetheless, she allowed her students to work with their neighbors and moved them around to different areas where they could work together. Embedding collaboration as a hallmark of their teaching let students know that they belong to a community that values their voices and their role in learning (Griffin & Cole, 1984).

In addition to changing the physical layout of their classrooms, all six teachers changed the mandated curriculum’s sequencing of learning activities. “If I followed (the program) from beginning to end, from blending to reading to worksheets, my students would have to sit still for 90 minutes; that’s impossible and unnatural for any first grader to do,” Vicky explained. The other teachers concurred and provided schedules that shifted focus every twenty to thirty minutes.

Discussion: Teachers Whose Resistance Fuels Their Desire to Remain Teaching

Many teachers required to use scripted curricula experience significant feelings of loss, grief, and depression (see, for example, Nias, 1989; Troman and Wood, 2001). My six participants revealed a different story. While my six participants believed that the curriculum they must use, one of the most widely used scripted curricula, limited their literacy delivery, they did not internalize those feelings into a sense of loss, grief, or depression. Rather they felt committed and optimistic. They retained their feelings of creativity, professionalism, and independence. They

mirrored other effective and resistant teachers who are professionally confident and exercise professional judgment to provide their students with powerful learning opportunities (Helsby, 1995).

Moreover, my six teachers' responses did not cause them to alter their goals of providing their students with quality literacy instruction. That does not mean that they did not experience frustration; they did quite often. Yet their frustration was externally located; they disliked parts of the curriculum, the pacing plan, and the frequent assessments. Recognizing the limitations of the curriculum, they drew on different resources and take actions. These actions provided their students with powerful literacy opportunities, thereby reenergizing the teachers' desires to continue teaching in their urban schools.

Turning Frustration into Positive Action

Their frustration often fueled their desire to learn more and to increasingly tailor the curriculum. Like other effective primary grade literacy teachers, they adapted their instruction to meet their students' needs, not allowing the script to stem their efforts (Collins-Block & Pressley, 2000). Even Vicky, who worked in the most restrictive school environment, harnessed her feelings of being overwhelmed with the pressure of having to use several different curricula programs into finding new and better ways to assist her students. During my visit, for example, frustrated with writing and comprehension deficiencies in the curriculum, she introduced two new non-mandated curriculum activities: doodle-loops and the kite making activity. Both activities departed significantly from the required curriculum, providing her students with valuable interactive, creative, and comprehension building opportunities. This quest for more effective strategies energized her.

Rather than dread going to school, my participants looked forward to teaching each day as Veronica so powerfully demonstrated when she said, "I can't wait to get to school." She eagerly awaited her daily writer's workshop, a significant departure from the scripted curriculum, "almost as much as the kids do." The teachers primarily anticipated working with their students on activities they tailor or create. Mary could not wait to "see my students act out their skits" or "listen to their unique responses to the stories. Their minds are always buzzing." Beatriz said she could not sleep the night before she set up the tent for the mock camping activity. "I was so excited about watching the kids respond when I set up the tent in our background. I knew they would love it." The day after she learned about cortizas in her book making class, she spent the night "thinking of how I could use it with my students." She implemented it two days later, and she felt her students created tremendous books that "show their understanding of cause and effect in a visual and written manner. It was such a fun activity."

A Tremendous Joy in Their Teaching: A Commitment to Continue Teaching

All fully credentialed, my participants taught in high-poverty schools that serve large numbers of ELLs. They remained committed to their work, and despite fewer options for sustained professional growth, they actively sought professional development opportunities. For these teachers, the only block to their continued effectiveness was their own lack of professional knowledge. And they actively pursued ways—both internally and externally—to better meet their students’ literacy needs and their confidence and capability in doing so.

This is not to say that they did not face obstacles, including pacing plans, frequent assessment requirements, and site leaders committed to strict program implementation. Many did. But they refused to allow these obstacles to deter their efforts.

Implications: Honor the Roles of Experienced, Creative, Professional Teachers

As my study shows, when faced with implementing a rigid literacy program, these six teachers balked because they identified key weaknesses. Using their experience and professional knowledge, these teachers made significant modifications. While their overall changes contained many similarities, each one created lessons that appealed to her unique group of students. Each teacher derived great pleasure from the creative aspect of designing lessons that stimulated and pushed her students. So, at the same time they should heed the collective messages these teachers send about the significant limitations of scripted, one size fits all curriculum, policymakers need to honor the individuality behind effective teaching and question continued reform efforts that script teacher behavior. Sarason (1999) calls effective teaching a true performing art in which teachers create lessons that reflect a combination of their knowledge and their students needs. And it is, as these teachers revealed in many of their proactive adaptations of the scripted literacy program. Rather than continuing to hold deficit beliefs about teachers, policymakers should find ways to respect and honor the individual expertise of teachers who remain committed to providing urban students with high quality literacy instruction.

Notes:

1. The University of California Consortium for College Access provided partial funding for this study.
2. In the scripted literacy program, each first grade unit follows a similar approach. Organized around a theme, each unit lasts approximately four weeks and contains several stories and poems that connect to the theme. Detailed instructions come in prose and table form before the unit, sets of

stories, and individual stories. The unit then proceeds into specific lessons, organized around individual stories. For each piece, the curriculum guide provides detailed teacher directions for each lesson that ranges from one to five actual days. However, the text does not provide recommended amounts of time teachers should devote to individual components of each lesson. Four of the schools I visited followed a sub-district pacing plan that details each day what lesson teachers should be one and a school breakdown for different daily components. Three of the five schools allotted daily times; one school's literacy time lasted three and a half hours, another three hours, and the two hours. The curriculum structures each day around three sections, preparing to read, reading, and language arts. The first section focuses on phonics, fluency, and preparing to read. The second section emphasizes reading and responding to text, including building background, previewing, and key vocabulary. The third section includes workbook activities for spelling, word analysis, writing process strategies, and English Language conventions. Each section provides detailed directions to the teacher; whole class instruction dominates each section, except for extension activities during the reading section and individual phonics and grammar reviews in the first and third sections.

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Appendix A

Preliminary Interview Protocol (Before my first observation)

1. What made you want to become a teacher? An elementary teacher? An urban teacher?
2. Where did you receive your credential? What was the focus on the courses you took that addressed literacy and student development?
3. What goals do you set for yourself as work with your students on their literacy development?
4. What different factors contribute to this goal setting?
Prompts—curricula, personal knowledge, professional knowledge.
5. Describe how you plan your daily literacy lessons with your students.
6. What resources do you draw from in constructing these lessons?
7. Describe how this work impacts the rest of your planning.
8. What are your greatest joys in doing your literacy work?
9. What factors contribute to these joys?
Prompts—students, colleagues, community, curricula, teacher educators, personal knowledge, school context
10. What are your greatest challenges in doing your literacy work?
11. What factors contribute to these challenges?
Prompts- students, colleagues, community, curricula, teacher educators, personal knowledge, school context
12. How do these challenges impact how you feel about
 - a) your students
 - b) yourself as a literacy provider?
 - c) yourself as a professional?
13. How do you form your short-term responses to these challenges?
14. How do you form your long-term responses to these challenges?
15. What signals about literacy instruction do you get from
 - a) your principal
 - b) your literacy coaches
 - c) your district
 - d) your peers
16. Do you feel supported in your literacy efforts? If so, by whom? How?
17. Do you ever depart from expectations? If so, how?
18. What kinds of responses to you get? From whom?
19. How do you respond externally to these responses? How do you respond internally to these responses?
20. If could waive a magic wand and impact literacy instruction in your school, what would you do?
21. What keeps you from doing that now?
22. How is the rest of your day impacted by the time you spend with your literacy instruction?

Appendix B

Interview After Unstructured Observations

1. What went really well in the lesson?
2. What factors contributed to this success?
3. What areas proved to be somewhat challenging, if at all, in the lesson?
4. What factors contributed to these challenges?
5. Is there anything that you did today during your literacy instruction that you wouldn't have done if a literacy coach or other district curricular representative had been in your classroom? If so, what? Why?
6. How will your work today affect your work with your students tomorrow?
7. How do this work impact how you planned the remainder of your instructional days?
8. Additional questions related to specific actions of day