

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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## **Introduction**

California's elementary school teachers are being sent increasingly mixed messages about how they should develop the literacy of the state's youngest 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. Yet, 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. These contradictory messages come from the same sources: federal, state, and local governments seeking to improve the dismal reading test scores of California students. These messages ultimately impact the quality of instruction students receive.

## **Scripted Curriculum Dictate Teaching**

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's funding requirements, state textbook and testing mandates, and district curriculum reforms combine to prescribe what and how teachers teach literacy. The message behind all these reforms is that teachers, regardless of their years of experience, training, or past effectiveness, are no match for scripted, one size fits all, phonics-based curricula.

In 2002, the federal government initiated its Reading First program (a key component of NCLB), providing more than a billion new dollars for K-3 reading instruction (Manzo, 2004). To qualify for funding, districts must use at least 80 percent of Reading First funding to purchase "scientifically proven" reading curricula, most of which require all teachers to use direct instruction, phonics-centered, uniform methods (Allington & Waimsley, 1995; Coles, 2000; Goodman, 1998; D. Taylor, 1998). Federal officials require that all publishers of early literacy textbooks simplify their materials and provide more explicit instruction to teachers, spelling out

exactly what and how teachers should teach (Manzo, 2004). The districts may use the remaining 20 percent of their funds on professional development, with the caveat that the development only covers scientifically proven reading strategies (Manzo, 2002).

California laws back this federal emphasis. In 1992 and 1994, California students performed the fourth worst and the third worst, respectively, on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Overlooking possible causes such as decreasing tax bases for public education, swelling enrollments, increasing numbers of non-native English speaking students, deteriorating schools, and increasing numbers of unlicensed teachers teaching in high poverty schools, conservative curriculum advocates and policymakers were quick to blame the state's balanced literacy framework (Gutierrez, 2001). As a remedy, they designed and adopted policies that imposed phonics-oriented regulations on teacher training, professional development, and textbook selection (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Stahl, 1999). For example, over the past three years, California has approved only two elementary school reading textbook series; the most widely used series includes daily instructional scripts for teachers (Manzo, 2004).

Further restricting teachers' discretion, several urban districts have adopted strict pacing plans that accompany these curricula. These plans dictate the daily instructional, schedules that teachers must follow. Several districts also have hired literacy coaches to support the implementation of the scripted curriculum through classroom observation and professional development opportunities. This 'coaching' emphasizes the fidelity of teachers' use of the curriculum rather than the development of teachers' knowledge. The coaches also monitor teachers' compliance with the curriculum's scheduling, instructional, and assessment protocols (MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, 2004).

These scripted curricula appear to have had limited effects. California's reading and writing test scores remain among the lowest in the nation. The reading levels of the state's urban elementary school students still significantly lag behind their suburban peers, according to the results of the most recently released NAEP, and reveal limited progress from test scores ten years earlier (Grigg, Daane, Jin, and Campbell, 2003). Moreover, after several years of gains on California standardized tests, this year's elementary school reading scores declined for all grades, except fourth grade, and urban students continued to trail their suburban peers by significant margins (Helfand & Smith, 2004). Middle and high school scores also remain desperately low (CDE, 2004). California students' writing scores are even worse with only 23% of fourth and eighth grades qualifying as proficient or advanced, placing the state in the bottom third of all states (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003).

### **Effective Literacy Instruction**

Behind these struggling scores lies a wealth of evidence about effective literacy instruction. Research 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 Research Council, 1998; Wenglisky, 2000). Effective literacy teachers move beyond skills-oriented scripted curricula, offering their students meaning making opportunities tailored to their specific needs (see, for example, Allington, 2001; Pressley et al., 2001; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Taylor et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, recent studies suggest effective urban teachers who use scripted early literacy curricula believe these programs devalue their professional expertise because the curricula prevent them from meeting the specific needs of their students (Cooper, 1998; Datnow & Castellano, 2000;

MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, 2004; Taylor, 2001). Yet in 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, 2002). These studies, however, do not document their actual in-class responses and their rationales for their choices.

### **Unraveling the Impact of the Mixed Messages**

Specifically, this study tried to fill this gap by exploring how the simultaneous press for highly qualified teachers and scripted curricula came together for teachers who are the targets of both reforms. In particular, the study examined how teachers, all of whom work with diverse students in urban environments, hold teacher credentials, and are considered effective by external recommenders, made sense of the scripted curriculum. The examination focused on the specific ways they interpreted the curriculum in their classrooms and their beliefs about their responses, their overall teaching, and their desire to remain in their classrooms.

### **Research Questions**

This study particularly sought to answer the following questions:

- How do experienced first grade urban educators, identified by university and/or school district experts as effective literacy providers, respond to the mandated use of scripted literacy curricula?
- How does the experience of working with scripted literacy curricula affect these teachers' plans for remaining in teaching and/ or for remaining in urban schools?

## **Theoretical Framework**

I ground my study in a theoretical framework that explores transformative resistance theories. Transformative resistance theories open up the possibility of resistance that alters rather than sustains the status quo (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). Though this theoretical framework has not yet been used with K-12 teachers inside their classrooms, it offers a powerful lens to examine the responses of teachers immersed in environments that challenge not only their beliefs but also the educational opportunities available to their students.

Many critical theorists recognize the vital importance of offering strong literacy preparations to all students. They draw on the liberatory work of Paulo Freire (2000) who links transformative education of the poor to the potential of transforming societal patterns. In designing his adult literacy programs for Brazilian peasants, Freire did not believe merely in providing these new readers with basic skills. Rather, both the curricula and the pedagogy of the instructors provided the students with multiple opportunities to critique the very structures that surrounded them. These opportunities included opportunities for struggle, voice, and critical dialogue.

This framework helps provide a lens for understanding the actions of teachers who move beyond basic skills in their teaching of their diverse students.

## **Design and Methods**

Teachers often create “cover stories” when their own stories of their own beliefs are marginalized by current school reforms (Clanindin & Connelly, 1996). In the case of scripted literacy curricula, the master narrative of reforms focuses on the importance of getting children

to read following “scientifically proven” methods. “Teacher resistance is the maintenance of a story to live by in the face of school change” (Connelly & Clanindin, 1999, 101). Teachers’ own stories, or “counterstories” as Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) call them, are important to uncover for several reasons. They challenge widely accepted wisdom by exposing new views of reality of those living on the margins, in this case the margins of educational reform, and by allowing those people to learn that they are not alone in their struggles. In addition, these counterstories “provide a context to understand and transform established beliefs system” (328).

Case studies are powerful methods to explore the experiences of individual participants within unique settings (Merriam, 1998). Yin (1994) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real context. Multiple case studies are particularly effective in helping researchers probe provide compelling evidence for cross-case comparisons, making for more robust findings (Yin, 1994). Since the mandated use of scripted literacy curricula is a contemporary phenomenon that affects teachers in their classrooms, the case study approach fit my goals of studying how teachers respond to these curricula.

To help me determine the different factors that impact teachers’ responses to mandated literacy curricula, I conducted case studies of six teachers who work with scripted literacy curricula in their urban classrooms. 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, one three, one four, one seven, and one eleven. 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 in Open Court. 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 Open Court 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. I also conducted at least one extensive interview with each participant to garner her perspectives about teaching, learning, and literacy.

My analysis and reporting of these data have attempted to honor the stories these teachers have to offer. From the data about each teacher, I developed individual narratives that detail her departures from the scripted curriculum. I then compared and contrasted these narratives to elicit cross-case themes, using two overall coding strategies. I first coded the narratives according to my literature review and theoretical framework. I then coded by the major ways each teacher departed from Open Court. I also looked at transformative resistance theories' concepts of external and internal resisters. Second, after I performed this analysis, I used pattern coding to organize the data into smaller sets. I separated the data into prevailing content responses, rationales for the responses, and mediating factors, such as personal histories, school context, and peer networks.



## Findings: A Critical Interpretation

Mary believes

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 mirror Mary's sentiments. Like Mary, they do not accept Open Court *carte blanche*, yet they do not dismiss it completely. In fact, regardless of their personal belief systems, educational training, or school site context, each one of my participants uses Open Court materials as a component of her literacy instruction and simultaneously makes significant modifications to the curriculum's instructional, content, and organizational approach. In doing so, they resemble other teachers who daily confront the tension of working with mandated curricula and testing and their own desires to work as professional, effective teachers who help their students succeed (Mathison & Freeman, 2003). None of my participants eschew the entire curriculum; they use it critically. They follow some external mandates of testing, but within their classrooms they act responsibly and capably in meeting the needs of their students.

All six of my participants spend a great deal of time constructing their literacy programs. They have studied Open Court; some have tried parts, others have tried all of it. Catherine did not want to reject any part of Open Court until she had tried it out. Now, a year later, she feels more confident in making her modifications, particularly in extending comprehension, adding spelling and sight words, and providing context for blending words. Lisa and Veronica spent the summer before Open Court implementation studying its curriculum and talking to others about its strengths and weaknesses. Lisa explains, "Over the summer, I went over the manuals and

picked and chose what I wanted to do. We shared ideas at school. We agreed we were going to make major changes.” Veronica says she talked to her sister, a teacher who has used Open Court for three years. “She told me where she thinks it is weak and where it works. I shared this with my friends at school.”

Like other effective literacy teachers, my participants have clear reasons for what they decide to use, alter, omit, and add (Collins-Block & Pressley, 2000; Pressley, Rankin, Yokoi, 1996). Veronica likes Open Court’s blending and phonemic awareness organization, because she knows that her previous approach “was hit and miss, I wasn’t sure if I was ...teaching all the phonetic skills that I needed to teach.” She uses Open Court’s phonetic introduction approach because it’s structured and includes “certain rules and sounds that letters make that I didn’t know before.” All of my participants agree; all use some aspects of the blending component and follow the Open Court order of introducing letters and sounds.

### **Constant Reflection Guides Their Work**

Effective teachers reflect on their work, identifying areas of strength and of weakness, for their students and themselves (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). All of my teachers constantly reflect on their work and on their students’ progress. They design and implement carefully planned activities to address their concerns.

Effective teachers also know how their instructional programs contribute to student growth. They can cite what part of instructional programs or their teaching offerings promote student success (Collins-Block & Pressley, 2000). During all of my interviews, my participants constantly explained their rationales by providing specific examples of effective changes to Open Court. When Veronica realized her students were not grasping how people overcome fears, she brought in her snake. She wanted to help the students experience a fear and discuss strategies for

overcoming it. After her students struggled with identifying the five spellings for the /er/ sound, Beatriz brought in an activity she learned during a master's class that assisted students in linking words that make that sound. Frustrated with using an Open Court story to explore fears, she searched the Internet and found "Eek, went the mouse" which she turned into a series of powerful learning opportunities, including the cortizina bookmaking.

### **Major Modifications to Existing Components**

In addition to adding missing components, all six teachers significantly modify existing components of Open Court. Like the very best teachers, they are very aware of the purposes behind each change (Wharton-McDonald, et al, 1998). Five create must-do centers, five reject the Open Court classroom organization, and all six embed context and prior knowledge development into their phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension lessons. Their rationales for their changes center on providing their students with learning opportunities that explore individual potential, empower all students to participate, nurture interactive learning opportunities, and much more. They enable students to see each other as resources, creating learning communities. They do not separate kids by ability. They help kids who struggle. Their changes, they believe, help create deeper thinking, reading, writing, and speaking students (Gee, 2001). Their changes fall into three categories: instructional, content, and organization.

### **Instructional Changes to Benefit Student Learning**

All six teachers make significant changes to Open Court's teacher-centered instructional focus. Rejecting exclusive transmission models of learning, all of these teachers believe student learning occurs best when students support each other in their learning, and teachers serve as facilitators as well as instructors. These beliefs lead 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 allow the teachers to serve as coaches, a sign of effective teaching (Taylor et al., 2000, 2002, Wharton-McDonald et al, 1998.) They do not lead their students' responses but provide instructional strategies that foster their students' creation of their own knowledge.

Through her instructional day, Catherine, for example, has 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 feels that Open Court's extensive focus on whole group work limits the number of students who can participate, often leaving out shy students. Her use of small group conversations fosters a shared curiosity, and, as she said earlier, "I want my students to feel that they can express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in a safe, non-threatening environment."

#### *Allowing Use of Primary Language*

Even though Open Court does not embed any primary language usage for ELLs, all of my teachers allow students to speak in Spanish in their collaborative work. During a book making activity, several of Beatriz's students speak in Spanish. They discuss different concepts about the animals in the story and then begin writing their books. During her writing and center time, even though she does not speak Spanish, Vicky allows students to speak in Spanish to assist each other, claiming, "They flesh out their ideas in their native language and then translate it back into English. Their writing is much better."

In allowing usage of students' native language, the teachers enable valuable peer assistance and scaffolding learning (Tabors & Snow, 2001). This use of their native language also provides their students with equitable opportunities to understand and learn the necessary content and skills to co-construct meanings in English (Krashen, 1994).

## **Significant Content Changes to Deepen Learning**

### *Integrating Key Phonemic Awareness Skills*

All six teachers criticize Open Court 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 disagree with Open Court's separating phonemic awareness and phonics development from meaning. As much as they like Open Court's organization of sounds and letters, especially the blending components, they all embed significant meaning building activities into the decoding development. Lisa, for example, allows students to discuss the meaning of each blending word, connecting the words to their prior knowledge or looking them up in dictionaries or encyclopedia. Lisa sees how these inclusions of meaning benefits her students' retention of the sounds and letters. Each teacher employs similar sound to meaning connections. These teachers have students work on authentic literacy activities and simultaneously include explicit skills (Pressley, Rankin, Yokoi, 1996; Pressley et al., 2001; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998).

### *Inclusion of Spelling and Sight Word Development*

They also disagree with Open Court's exclusion of ongoing spelling and sight word development, which they and the literature believe assists reading and writing improvement (Ehri, 1993; Perfetti, 1992; Gill, 1992). Because of the spelling program she and her fellow first grade teachers implemented, Catherine notices a tremendous improvement in her students reading and writing. Vicky concurs. Without daily spelling development, she finds that her students never connect blending to specific word presentations, causing their reading and writing to suffer. All six include systematic spelling development that helps students recognize patterns in word formation, a successful approach to long-term reading and writing acquisition (see, for

example, Berninger, 1995; Brown & Ellis, 1994; Templeton & Morris, 1999). Even though they include systematic spelling development, all six teachers allow students to write phonetically in their daily journals and writer's workshop, which allows them to represent the words they do not know in authentic context. Several students reveal the strong benefits of encouraging and permitting students to invent spelling (see, for example, Clarke, 1988; Huxford, Terrell, & Bradley, 1992; and Read, 1986). The middle of first grade is the perfect time for students to write phonetically the words they want to use in their writing while simultaneously providing instruction on spelling patterns (Templeton & Morris, 1999).

### *Deeper Comprehension Strategies*

#### Limiting Re-Readings

All six teachers also depart from Open Court's comprehension approach. They reject the multiple re-readings because their students get bored, and they want to expose their students to other effective pieces of literature. Many studies receive no benefit from re-readings versus in-depth analysis of one reading (see, for example, Homan, Klesius and Hite, 1993). The amount of time spent reading connected text is more important (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). For example, Mary's skit activity replaces a re-reading of the Open Court story. Mary makes this interactive comprehension activity the center of the analysis of the story. She eschews a second reading of the text, knowing that her students will refer back to it when constructing their skits. Mirroring research that questions the value of constant re-reading (a major Open Court method), Mary says, "Re-reading wastes their time and loses their interest. This skit contributes more to their story retention than any re-reading activity."

### *Exploring Prior Knowledge*

Before reading Open Court stories, all six teachers explore student prior knowledge, because they believe that Open Court assumes all students have had the same experiences. They believe students, especially English Language Learners, need to have their background knowledge activated to support vocabulary and comprehension development (Schifini, 1994; Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999). Beatriz devotes a great deal of instructional time to tapping prior knowledge. At times when students do not have that prior knowledge, she gives 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 an Open Court 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.” For a story about kinds of houses, Lisa brought in different home building materials for her students to touch. The materials enable her students to visualize and understand much of the vocabulary in the text.

Along with prior knowledge development, all six teachers scaffold deeper comprehension questions, provide written comprehension practice, and design interactive comprehension extension activities. Effective teachers ask higher level comprehension questions than their less effective peers (Knapp, 1995; Pearson et al., 2000). All of these modifications reveal these teachers’ significant commitment to comprehension development. All design activities that help students probe the story and express their ideas in writing. While doing this, several of the teachers also integrate artwork. For example, in a paper kite making activity, Vicky enables her students to write their responses to key thematic text questions inside a kite they decorate. Every day, Veronica enables her students to respond to three Open Court story-related comprehension

questions. All of these activities allow students to engage actively with text, a sign of exemplary first grade teaching (Pressley et al. 2001).

### *Exposing Students to High Interest, Relevant Texts*

Effective literacy teachers provide their students with high quality, authentic literature (Pantaleo, 2004; Pressley et al., 2001; Wharton-MacDonald, 1998). Basal readers like Open Court often contain stories that do not engage students (Guthrie, 2001); my teachers agree and constantly read their students authentic picture books. This literature engages students and provides excellent literacy models. All of my teachers integrate supplementary texts, from Beatriz's *Eek Went the Mouse* to Mary's *The Wreck of the Zephyr* to Vicky's *The Rainbow Fish*. They select these texts to model particular literary elements, such as Mary who wants her students to notice details. This use of trade books also increases student motivation by simultaneously exposing them to interesting content and effective reading skills (Poplewell & Doty, 2001; Guthrie, 2001).

### *Significant Writing Programs*

Because they find strong connections between reading and writing, all six teachers implement significant writing programs in their first grade classrooms. Beatriz faults Open Court for "focusing solely on reading. Writing is just as important to develop in first grade. First graders love to write." The other teachers agree. Four implement writer's workshops, enabling students to work at their own pace on individual pieces. They include all components of the writing process, including brainstorming, drafting, editing, and publishing. The four present 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 teacher conferences with individual students, tailoring comments to each student's



needs. All of this work greatly helps students to see the connections between reading and writing, to receive expert coaching, and to practice their craft in a safe setting (Graves, 2003; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000)

The other two teachers implement daily journals. While their writing programs are less sophisticated than the workshops the other four use, they nonetheless enable their students to write for 25-40 minutes each day on topics that connect to the students' personal experiences or the stories they are reading. Catherine finds the journals provide her students with low stress, ongoing writing, showing that first graders "have plenty to write about." Each teacher's daily writing, regardless of form, benefits students, because their students become comfortable with expressing their ideas in writing.

### **Changing Classroom and Activity Organization**

Along with their instructional changes, all six teachers make major organizational changes to Open Court's seating arrangement and sequencing of learning activities. Because they believe in student collaboration and community building, five of the six teachers reject Open Court's U shaped seating arrangement, placing their students at tables. At these tables, students assist each other and participate 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," says Beatriz. Because of school mandates, Vicky must use the U arrangement even though she dislikes it. Nonetheless, she allows her students to work with their neighbors and moves them around to different areas where they can work together. Embedding collaboration as a hallmark of their teaching lets 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 change Open Court's sequencing of learning activities. "If I followed Open Court 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 explains. The other teachers concur and provide schedules that shift focus every twenty to thirty minutes.

All of the teachers also start their days with warm-up activities, believing that learning is recursive, not just progressive (Juep & Minden-Cupp, 2001). In these warm-up activities, they embed grammar, comprehension, phonics, and writing, showing students the interconnectedness of all literacy activities. Catherine's students start the day by correcting a morning message and writing a collaborative folktale. Beatriz's students complete reading and math warm-ups. Vicky's students write a daily journal.

### **Enriching Responses**

All six teachers respond to Open Court in ways that enrich their students' literacy development as Table 1 summarizes. Effective learning occurs when teachers utilize a range of tools to assist student learning (see, for example, Gutierrez, et al, 2000). They spend a great deal of time planning their literacy programs. They resist Open Court's instructional, content, and organizational approach to provide their students with what they (and the research) consider to be more effective learning opportunities. Effective teachers use multiple instructional strategies tailored to specific needs of students, particularly those with varying language and cultural backgrounds (Knapp, 1995; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2000; National Research Council, 2000; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002; Wenglisky, 2000, 2002). Diverging from Open Court's isolated, one size-fits all, skills approach, all of my participants integrate reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interacting, an indication of

powerful learning opportunities (Gee, 2001). Their approaches to altering Open Court's instruction, content, and organization contain many similarities, all demonstrating their deep concern for helping all of their students succeed.

Although they agree on many weaknesses in Open Court, their specific responses differ because their students differ. They plan different learning activities; they vary their instructional approaches; they implement different center activities, etc. Everything they do reveals their goals of tailoring their instruction to the specific needs of their students and creating active learning opportunities that engage their students in authentic reading and writing activities, a hallmark of effective literacy providers (Pressley et al. 2001; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002).