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Grace Kang

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METHODS

Advocacy for Autonomy: Complicating the Use of Scripted Curriculum in Unscripted Spaces

GRACE KANG

"It's interesting because I feel more pressure now to deliver, to show results than ever before . . . it's been made very clear to us as teachers that there's going to be an expectation when we're observed that results are going to be closely scrutinized, by results I mean test scores primarily and assessment data and we'll be held very accountable. And I'm not saying that's a bad thing for teachers to be held accountable . . . but at least here at this school, in this district that we're going to be closely watched, results will be tied to our performance, evaluation. So in that sense, when it comes to the curriculum we teach, there's definitely the expectation in place."

Al, a fourth grade teacher

Scripted curriculum is not a new phenomenon, yet it was created as a way to regulate, manage, and regiment teachers' frameworks and instruction (Doyle, 1992).

They are bound to following a literal script and adhering to the routines and procedures in the curriculum. Scripted and prescribed curricula limit teachers' flexibility and autonomy with delving deeper, encouraging creativity, and asking critical questions within the content (Valli & Buese, 2007). The current sociopolitical climate emphasizes standardized, regimented, and prescribed teaching and learning in order for schools and classrooms to be controlled (Noguera, 2003; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005; Valli & Chambliss, 2007).

In this paper, I dissect various ways a fourth grade teacher worked with the literacy curriculum (Stillman & Anderson, 2011; Yoon, 2013) and at times was able to adapt the scripted curriculum to meet the diverse needs of his students. In this study, the times Al was bound to adhering to strict mandates were related to various standardized timed assessments. However, during literacy instruction there were opportunities where Al negotiated the curriculum and worked around certain parameters and mandates.

Curricular Landscape

In Dewey's (1902) classic and foundational book *The Child and the Curriculum*, the opposing sides of the logical and psychological approaches to curriculum are presented. The logical approach infuses step-by-step and specific lessons for children to master before moving to the next topic. Whereas the psychological approach addresses, "the child is starting-point, the center, and the end . . . It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within." (p13). Curriculum cannot simply be a roadmap for all children, as Dewey put it, "It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning" (pp. 13-14). Most teachers are encouraged to use the district literacy curriculum or may be mandated to follow the curriculum closely in their literacy instruction. If they are mandated to follow the curriculum, they experience pressure to cover it in a set amount of time, and if they do not, they feel they have fallen behind. (Stillman & Anderson, 2011). This leaves limited opportunities and time to uncover and build upon students' interests, questions, prior knowledge, and funds of knowledge (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Moll & Gonzales, 1994). Moreover, teachers lack the autonomy to make daily curricular decisions on ways to build upon students' interests and to capitalize on students' contexts and cultures to make learning more meaningful and appropriate (Comber, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

It is all the more challenging because these pressures and mandates are most impressed upon teachers in urban low-performing schools with largely marginalized populations (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Because of this many teachers are forced to go against their own philosophy of how children learn to read and write or to leave the profession (Bomer, 2005; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001). Marginalized students are continually disadvantaged by promoting fragmented, skills-based, and/or scripted instructional approaches, which potentially increase the distance between their lived

experiences, languages, and cultures and the curriculum (Noguera, 2003; Rose, 1989).

Cochran-Smith (1991) elucidated the limited opportunities teachers have as they work with a scripted and enforced curriculum, "What is missing from the knowledge base of teaching, therefore, are the voices of the teachers themselves, the particular contexts in which teachers work, the questions teachers ask of themselves and others, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the ways that teachers interpret experience as they strive to improve their own practice" (p. 2).

Figured Worlds

From a sociocultural perspective, each classroom and school has its own culture that is co-constructed by both the students and teachers within a particular context (Bakhtin, 1986; Freire, 1970/2010). However, cultural practices are not neutral; they are full of values about what is meaningful, appropriate, and natural to the identity of the particular community (Miller & Goodnow, 1995). Cultural values and beliefs are gleaned through social interaction and participation in a community. These values and beliefs transform and recreate cultures, which make the notion of culture a dynamic, shifting, and ongoing process (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) notion of figured worlds provide a lens to illustrate how teachers improvise and create spaces for their own agency in planning their instruction. Holland et al. (1998) define figured worlds as "the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts" (p. 51). They further describe that the individuals involved in a figured world carry out its tasks and have "styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it" (p. 51). The elements of a figured world are meaningful and relevant to its members. The ability to sense the figured world becomes embodied over time through continual participation. It is situated amongst the larger landscape and considers the larger power structure and forces at play. Recent scholars (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2008; Flint, Zisook, & Fisher, 2011; Pennington, Brock, & Oikonomidou, 2012; Whitecotton, 2013) have utilized theoretical insights from Holland et al.'s (1998) figured worlds' framework to explore elements of teachers' dynamic professional identities and teacher agency.

A Case Study of a Fourth Grade Teacher

Al is a White fourth grade male teacher at Frost Elementary School in a small urban community in the Midwest. It was not uncommon for the principal to ban extra recess or

any celebrations from the school because of the need to improve test scores. She also would randomly visit classrooms to ensure that teachers were getting students ready for various assessments or in her words, "teaching with integrity." Like other teachers around the U.S. (Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Stillman, 2011), teachers at Frost experienced the high-stakes pressures through the use of scripted curriculum, standardization, and imperative growth in progress monitoring.

Data came from a larger study that examined the focal teacher's collaborative opportunities, literacy instruction, and his interactions with his students. A case study approach highlighted the culture in the school, as well as investigated the focal teacher's perspectives, interactions, and meaning making for six months (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The research question that guided this smaller study was: What is the nature of the teacher's agency over the literacy curriculum?

Participants and Site

Al (focal teacher). Al Miles has taught fourth grade at Frost Elementary School for all 14 years of his teaching career. He was a journalist and then decided to enter into the teaching profession because of his experiences working with children in athletics. He has been at Frost the longest amongst his fourth grade team and has the most background in literacy, as well as the strongest understanding of the district's literacy curriculum. I traced the focal teacher across contexts (e.g., school-wide professional development, collaborative sessions, classroom instruction). I observed his interactions with fellow fourth grade teachers and his classroom students. In Al's classroom, I observed particular students more closely based on types of practices that were discussed in the grade-level collaboration meetings, as well as specific students who were referenced or discussed in the meetings. I collected reading and writing artifacts and recorded students' interactions with their teacher and classmates.

Focal classroom. Frost Elementary School was located in a small urban town in the Midwestern part of the United States. It served 400 students from kindergarten to fifth grade. Al's fourth grade classroom was diverse and predominately low-income. Demographic information is described in Table 1. Thus, there was immense pressure for schools in the district to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and a strong emphasis to improve literacy achievement. Frost is a Title I school so it received federal funds to meet the needs of students who are labeled "at risk." In 2013, 41% of Frost's students who took the state test met or exceeded standards. This average was similar to Al's classroom at the beginning

of the year. This was one of the lowest percentages in the district; the performance level contributed to the district closely monitoring Frost.

Although the focus of this paper is not on assessments, I would like to highlight the numerous timed assessments that

Table 1

Demographic Information of Focal Classroom and School

Race/Low-Income/Gender	Total Number (out of 22)	Percentage in Al's classroom	Percentage in the school (2012-2013)
European-American	8	3	41
African-American	8	36	41
Mixed Race	5	22	7
Hispanic/Latino	1	4	6
Low-Income	15	68	7
Gender	F-9 M-13	F-41 M-59	F-N/A M-N/A

Al was mandated to administer and the lack of connection between mandated assessments the district impressed upon the teachers and what was taught during literacy instruction. There were strict district guidelines for the administration and documentation of literacy assessments, however, on the other hand there was space for Al to revise and alter his curriculum. Although Frost's principal would regularly do drop-ins, as long as the teachers were teaching guided reading, using Daily Five, and administering the timed assessments she did not monitor what additional resources were being used or how closely the teachers were using the curriculum. Additionally because Al taught at the school for over a dozen years the principal gave Al more autonomy and flexibility with how he used the literacy curriculum. Compared to his fourth grade teammates he had the strongest understanding of literacy because he was a journalist prior to becoming a teacher and he knew the literacy curriculum well from using it for many years.

As Al reviewed, planned, and prepared for literacy instruction, he was able to critically look at the standards and curriculum to best meet his students' needs and interests. This was similar to Stillman and Anderson's (2011) recommendation on using the prescribed curriculum as mediating tools, not rules. Although the literacy curriculum was mandated at the district level, the teachers were not monitored on how they used it. Al was at a point in his teaching where he was able to use the literacy curriculum as a starting point and then

build off of his students' interests and co-construct the teaching and learning together. This aligns with Feiman-Nemser's (2001) continuum of central tasks of learning to teach where teachers that are beyond their 7th year of teaching have developed a sense of mastery, knowledge about curriculum, and solidified instructional approaches. Teachers that are in the induction years are developing a thorough understanding about the curriculum and students as well as enacting a beginning repertoire. He did not feel bound to the curriculum, which allowed him to appropriate it based on his students' reading levels, prior and background knowledge, and interests. When asked about his literacy curriculum, Al said:

I, of course supplement [for reading] a ton with other book sets in the collections that I've gathered over the years. And I have to supplement . . . I probably use nonfiction more than a lot of teachers do, especially with the achievement, literacy gap that we are facing, where so many kids are without the experiences and the background knowledge that I think non-fiction can really help in that area. So I try to use non-fiction on a regular basis. For writing, Units of Study by Lucy Calkins, has been for years our mandated official writing program in the district. . . but I do Lucy Calkins [Units of Study] as best as I can, as often as I can.

When asked about flexibility he shared, "I think we get a lot of flexibility in how we teach our literacy curriculum. They want us to be using the reading curriculum, but how we do that is—up to us." Al was able to improvise the literacy curriculum as he had agency to author his instruction in his figured world within the larger structure (Holland et al., 1998).

For instance, Al regularly used the picture books suggested by the reading curriculum for read alouds (i.e., *Boundless Grace*, *Mrs. Katz and Tush*, *The Old Woman who Named Things*, *The Bat Boy and his Violin*), yet he rarely looked at the teacher's manual during the read aloud. He created his own discussion questions, practiced reading strategies that were appropriate for his students, and followed the students' comments and interests during discussion. Al read, studied, and marked up the teacher's manual and curriculum thoroughly. After practicing a reading strategy or skill during the read aloud, Al would continue to reiterate the same strategy or skill during guided reading groups.

Negotiating the Curriculum

Al felt that Calkin's (2006) Units of Study was a challenging curriculum for teachers to use and why he thought

many teachers in the district struggled to use the curriculum. He expressed:

I'm someone with a writing background . . . Units of Study was the single hardest curriculum in any subject area that I've seen come through this district in the 14 years that I've been here. The presentation of it was not efficient, I mean there are good elements to it, excellent elements, but in a very user-unfriendly way. It's very text heavy, very dense . . . These lessons are very burdensome to read, to understand, and to interpret for the classroom.

He carefully read, examined, and studied the curriculum guides for nearly ten years. In addition to Al's highlighting and note taking (see Figure 1), he also negotiated the curriculum as he read through it, used it over the years, and came to understand what was helpful and appropriate for his students (see Figure 2). When Al said, "It's very text heavy, very dense..." he did not simply digest the information as is. Instead, he thought through what worked for him and what would be meaningful for his students, which differed year to year. As he taught these lessons he tried to figure out what would be the best order and flow for the particular unit and in his words he tried to "interpret" it for his classroom.

Figure 1. Al's *Launching the Writers Workshop* manual (from Units of Study) with his detailed notes.

When asked about what helped him with Units of Study through the years he said, "I just think from doing it several times over, I've learned what works for me and what doesn't and I think that's the case with a lot of this curriculum, teachers need to figure it out, but with this one in particular." He struggled with using the direct quotes and examples from

Units of Study because these were not appropriate for his students' levels, interests, and experiential knowledge.

Figure 2. Al's personal negotiation of the curriculum.

Teacher agency over the literacy curriculum. Al was able to exert agency to negotiate and alter the literacy curriculum to the needs of his students. Al believed it was critical for students to be aware of what was going on in the world around them, so he used sociopolitical practices in his instruction. He incorporated local news, current events, and controversial issues into his instruction and opened it up to discussion with his students. A gun control debate ensued after a discussion about John F. Kennedy and Martin L. King's assassinations. The students were very intrigued by this topic, so Al decided to pursue this further as they started their *Breathing Life into Essays* (Calkins & Gillette, 2006) unit. Calkins and Gillette (2006) encourage teachers to start this unit with a comparison of the narratives they have written to larger essays they will investigate. They say:

We write lots of things—songs and speeches and picture books and essays—we write in lots of ways. Today we are going to begin writing in a radically different way. Instead of writing stories, we will write essays. Instead of writing about small moments, we will write about big ideas (p. 2).

They go on to say the teaching point is to "Tell the children the story of a writer who first observed, then pushed herself to develop insights, and then recorded those insights" (p. 2). However, instead of doing this Al appropriated this lesson to the interests and understanding of his students. He introduced the new unit and provided background information (see Figure 3) on gun control. Although he did not follow the scripted curriculum, he still adhered to the central teaching point that essays include writing about big ideas.

Figure 3. Background information on gun rights.

Figure 4. Sentence starters on the Gun Rights Conversation.

The next day Al presented the opposing perspectives of gun control and had the students break up into small groups to use sentences starters on the gun rights conversation (see Figure 4) to fully understand both sides.

Then they came back as a class to discuss their thoughts on gun rights and if they had changed their thinking after the small group discussion (e.g., "Did this conversation make you change your thinking about gun rights?; Why did it or why did it not?; If your opinion is different now, in what way is it different?; Write a sentence telling me what your thoughts are right now about gun ownership in our country."). This provided an open-ended space where both the students and teacher co-constructed knowledge and created a culture where their values and beliefs were equally

considered. Calkins and Gillette (2006) offer their own mini-lessons, stories, and strategies, yet Al chose to build off of prior discussions to engage them in the new essay unit. As he negotiated the curriculum, the students participated in authentic unscripted space for meaning making through joint activity and construction (Rogoff, 2003). These negotiations also corroborate Stillman and Anderson's (2011) suggestion of "providing unscripted spaces where students can make meaning on their own terms and draw more openly on their full linguistic toolkits" (p. 29).

Al was not just a product of the school culture; he was a responder to the situation and "critical appropriator" of the cultural artifacts that he, his colleagues, and students produced (Holland et al., 1998). Al exerted agency through improvising the literacy curriculum and creating spaces for the students' interests (Pennington, Brock, & Oikonomidou, 2012). Al was also learning and developing through his negotiation and changing participation in the sociocultural activities of his classroom. Although the district placed value on meeting AYP through standardization, Al saw value in the process of improvisation where he used the curriculum as a starting point, considered his students' interests, and capitalized on his prior knowledge and experience of teaching writing. Because Al was continuing to use the district mandated literacy curriculum they did not oppose his approaches or strategies.

Implications

In our high-stakes accountability driven times, national, state, and district policies play a role in how teachers teach literacy. With that said, there may be districts and schools that offer more flexibility in how teachers use the curriculum or teach literacy instruction to best fit the needs of their students. However, this may not be the case in schools that are being closely monitored to meet AYP and improve test scores. Not only do some teachers experience the accountability pressures, they may often adopt reductionist notions of what literacy instruction looks like in order to meet the requirements of the school or district. Teachers may also engage in practices that oppose their professional values and beliefs about effective and meaningful literacy instruction in order to meet the demands of the sociopolitical climate created by the leaders of the school reform movement.

However, there are teachers that adhere to their own ideologies of teaching and learning and are able to use, adapt, and appropriate the literacy curriculum for their diverse

student populations. Teachers are at different stages of their careers and are learning various approaches and growing in their instructional practices. Teaching literacy is complex and involves numerous factors—this is not to say that some children may thrive with a more structured curriculum, but as teachers of language we must consider the diversity of learners, language variation, and cultural factors that require varied support and resources alongside the mandated curriculum. Thus, literacy instruction cannot be reduced to following a curriculum, method, or a series of skills, but more so viewed as an individualized dynamic decision making process.

Highlighting Students' Interests and Backgrounds

As literacy educators we are all too familiar with a new approach or fad that is encouraged and then shortly afterward there is a push for a different approach. Whether you believe in whole-language or are student-centered in your instruction or a process-oriented teacher, children should not be left out of these approaches and methods to instruction. Children offer immense differences in their backgrounds and cultures that can be seen as assets and resources to draw from in our literacy instruction (Ball, 2009; Dyson, 1992; Kinloch, 2011). There is a need for teachers to be knowledgeable in asset-based pedagogies where students' backgrounds and home languages are celebrated in the classroom and seen as resources rather than deficits (Kirkland, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1999). This is not to say scripted curriculum is favorable or unfavorable, but unless we are teaching students from the same backgrounds, in the same contexts with the same home languages then it may not be appropriate to lean on the same curriculum for all students.

Offering a Critical Perspective in Teacher Education

Dyson (1986) poignantly stated "the reduction of curricula and teaching to activities" offers a challenge for those involved in teacher education (p. 136). Instead of a focus on the perfect method to use or scripted recipe to follow, it's vital to offer a framework and perspective for making decisions. Thirty years later we are at a similar crossroad to equip teachers of literacy to question and think critically about pedagogy and instructional materials based off of the classroom context, students' backgrounds, and academic abilities. Caughlan and Cushman (2013) implemented a pilot study on

teaching preservice teachers to teach diverse learners at the middle and high school levels. Preservice teachers were introduced to culturally sustaining and asset-based pedagogies, which were paired with placements with diverse populations. Although teacher candidates often request the how-to's and best method for teaching reading or writing, it is imperative to help them see the rich differences students bring into literacy classrooms and how to use these aspects as strengths into the instructional content, which will always look different based on the classroom context.

Conclusion

Al had capital in terms of his teaching experience, tenure, and knowledge of the school and curriculum, which at times enabled him to alter, negotiate, and exert agency over the curriculum. Al exhibited his own agency over some of the mandates he faced and tried to combat many top-down decisions based on his past professional experiences, wealth of teaching experience, and past and present professional development opportunities. He developed agency overtime as he negotiated his identities and voices that developed through personal and professional interactions with others. Al and his colleagues experienced the interplay of human agency and numerous structural constraints. This experience resulted in negotiation through the larger school and district mandates and political landscape as they planned, taught, and assessed (Levinson and Holland, 1996).

Moreover, in this era of standardization many teachers lack the autonomy to even make daily curricular decisions in ways to build upon students' interests and to capitalize on students' contexts and cultures to make learning more meaningful and appropriate. Undoubtedly, teachers will face tensions with the curriculum, administration, and testing measures. However, the unique cultural, social, and experiential knowledge and backgrounds students bring into the classroom cannot be ignored. As teachers develop more agency and build their teaching repertoires, it is imperative to navigate the scripted spaces to highlight students' voices and practices as assets alongside the curriculum.

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- Grace Kang** (gykang@ilstu.edu) is an assistant professor of Elementary Literacy Education. She teaches literacy courses and conducts research in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University.