The Impact of Scripted Literacy Instruction on Teachers and Students

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Scripted reading programs have had a negative impact on teachers and students around the country. Many school districts have adopted these programs as a way to comply with state and federal mandates (Griffith, 2008; Milosovic, 2007). This move from teacher led to scripted instruction has left teachers feeling powerless and overwhelmed. They are often caught between what they are asked to do and what they know is right for their students (MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004). It is even more problematic for teachers when they see that English learners and other students with special needs are not meeting their academic goals.

The question educators ask is what makes a student a proficient reader? Last fall a young woman approached me and asked me if I remembered her. Minerva was one of my fifth-grade English learning students and was now a senior in college. She fondly remembers our fifth-grade class, including the plays, songs, and book clubs. She was the lead actor for one of our plays that dealt with the American Revolution. That year the students read many selections related to this historical period and later wrote a script for the play. In middle school, Minerva joined the school theater and participated in several performances. Even though she was not proficient in English during the fifth grade and she came from a family that had limited resources, she was able to

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achieve her educational goals, including becoming a proficient reader. Like Minerva, children around the country can become avid readers if they learn to enjoy reading.

Today, effective and creative teacher designed instruction is being replaced by scripted reading programs. These programs are changing the role of the teacher in the classroom from professionals to mere transmitters of knowledge. The idea that the role of the teacher had changed became evident while conducting a study with elementary school teachers from a local school. The five participating teachers were concerned about their English learners (ELs) not meeting their academic requirements. They attributed their students' low-test scores to the fact that a large number of them were proficient decoders, but struggled with reading comprehension and content knowledge. They felt that the scripted literacy program was rushed and did not give them enough time to take a closer look at students' individual reading needs. This article begins with a brief overview of the initial study and presents some of the unexpected findings. The article also explores some of the unintended consequences of scripted reading programs as well as the claims made by some proponents. At the end, it provides some alternatives to scripted instruction.

The Study

This was an Action Research study. In action research, the goal is for teachers and the researcher to work together to identify the problem, formulate the research question, collect and analyze the data, and interpret the findings (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007). The participating teachers did not think the scripted reading program they were using was effective in that a large number of students had difficulty comprehending text and remembering complex concepts. In an attempt to address these needs, this study examined the impact of blending two well-known teaching methods, Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading. The goal was for the participating teachers to learn how to imbed these two methods into the scripted reading program and across the curriculum. Scripted reading programs are commercially designed and "scientifically-based" literacy programs in which language instruction is highly controlled (Milosovic, 2007, p. 28). Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading were selected because it has been noted that instructional methods that deal with the integration of two types of knowledge: (a) declarative knowledge (knowledge of concepts and principles) (Chi & Ceci, 1987; Heibert, 1986), and (b) linguistic content knowledge (academic language) (Cummins, 2000) are most effective (Dresser, 2000).

Reciprocal Teaching helps students develop knowledge modules

in long-term memory that can be accessed by the learner when needed (Brown & Palincsar, 1985; Lubliner, 2001). Students learn cognitive strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing. They work in groups of four where they discuss the reading selection. Each student is responsible for one of the strategies. Learners who master these strategies tend to have better reading comprehension skills (Brown & Palincsar, 1985; Takala, 2006). The goal of Narrow Reading is to increase vocabulary and content knowledge by reading selections from one genre, author, or theme (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Schmitt & Carter, 2000). This recycling provides the reader with familiar context, background knowledge and vocabulary, which increases reading comprehension and learning (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen) as depicted in Figure 1.

An integrated thematic language arts and science unit was designed and implemented in all fourth grade classes in an inner city elementary school for six weeks. The science component for this unit consisted of rocks and minerals, which is aligned with the California science content standards for public schools for fourth grade (http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/sciencestnd.pdf). Three pre and post-tests (Qualitative Reading Inventory [QRI], an essay, and a content area teacher-designed test) were administered to all students. The QRI includes a collection of expository and narrative reading materials. It assesses students' prior knowledge, reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, retelling and their ability to respond to implicit and explicit questions (Leslie & Schudt Caldwell, 2005).

As teachers predicted, the pre-tests showed that 18% of the students were decoding below grade level and had limited comprehension. Seventy-one percent of the students were decoding at grade level; in contrast, they were at a frustration or instructional level in reading comprehension. Eleven percent of students read at an independent level and were at an instructional or independent level in reading comprehension.

At the beginning of the study, teachers and students participated in Reciprocal Teaching reading activities. Once students understood their roles and learned how to use the reading comprehension strategies, they read in small groups. A large collection of books, videos and a list

Figure 1
Comprehension and Learning

Comprehension and Learning		
Familiar Context	Background Knowledge	Vocabulary

of websites that dealt with rocks were made available for students and teachers. The students read several selections on rocks and minerals, participated in experiments, drew the rock cycle, classified rocks, developed vocabulary lists, and wrote predictions, questions and summaries. They also viewed videos and used the Internet to access websites. At the end of the study, the data were collected, coded and analyzed. The results showed that 12% of the students were decoding below grade level and had limited comprehension. There was a small improvement among this group of students. The fact that they were limited English speakers may explain why they had difficulty reading and writing. The intermediate English learners made the largest gains. Seventy percent of the students read at grade level. Only 5% were at a frustration level in reading comprehension whereas the rest of the students achieved an instructional level. The students reading at an independent level rose from 11% to 18%. A majority of these students achieved an independent level of reading comprehension.

The first assessments showed that students had little or no knowledge of rocks. They responded to the content knowledge questions (What is a mineral?) with one or two word responses ("big, a lot") or they wrote, "I do not know." At the end of the study, students responded in complete sentences and used the vocabulary related to rocks and minerals. Daniel wrote, "Some of the things [materials] you might find in rocks are lava, soil, and minerals." They wrote summaries that demonstrated their understanding of rocks and minerals. Mayra wrote:

> I have just read the article Magma. It says that when magma rises up to the surface [of the earth] it makes cracks to make space. The magma might melt some parts of the rocks, then it cools down. The crystals have time to grow because the magma cools slowly. Granite is one that cools slowly. Pegmatite and gabbro are also rocks that form when magma cools down. (M. Martinez, personal communication, March 24, 2009)

It was evident that Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading had a positive impact on students reading comprehension and content learning. Nevertheless, once the study was over only one of the teachers occasionally continued using Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading.

Unexpected Findings

The participating teachers attended three professional development sessions at the beginning of the study to learn how to teach and imbed Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading into the curriculum. Throughout the training, they were involved and responsive. An unexpected finding, however, emerged from this study. The teachers' eagerness dissipated

soon after they realized that the study required teacher -designed lessons and assessments. Their role slowly morphed from active participants into passive deliverers of instruction. The week that the study was going to begin one teacher dropped out complaining that he had too much work. The other four teachers commented that they did not have enough time or the proper materials to design the lessons and assessments for the study. They requested that I teach the new methods to the children. They also asked for the complete set of lesson plans and materials needed for the duration of the study. The requests were granted. The two methods were introduced to the students and the initial lessons were taught. Additionally, a series of interdisciplinary language arts and science lessons, including materials, were provided.

A year after the study ended, the teachers were contacted and asked to provide feedback on the interventions. The teachers found these methods to be valuable and engaging. One teacher wrote,

> I really enjoyed using Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading. I liked that each student had a specific role in reading the text and applying a reading strategy. It engaged all students and made difficult texts (e.g., science) more readable. (M. Rosell, personal communication, April 15, 2010)

Another teacher offered,

> My students definitely became more independent learners. They sort of internalized what it means to take charge of their own education and how to learn without the constant guidance of a teacher. (A. Campbell, personal communication, April 19, 2010)

It is unfortunate that these teachers did not continue implementing the interventions. They all felt these methods had a positive effect on student achievement and interest. Nevertheless, they expressed their inability to add new instructional methods to what they were already doing because of their many responsibilities and time constraints. One teacher commented:

> I am not using Reciprocal Teaching right now because of my hesitation with setting up a new system [program]. [I] am too caught up in the day-to-day and managing my current systems [scripted program] that I haven't found an opportunity to push it in and keep it going. (M. Rosell, personal communication, April 15, 2010)

One cannot help but ask what made hard working and dedicated teachers arrive at a place of such powerlessness and reluctance towards teacher-designed instruction? I have taught literacy courses for over ten years at a State University in Northern California. The last eight

years teaching these courses has become more and more challenging. Student teachers often comment that the effective practices they learned in class do not match scripted reading programs they are asked to use in the schools. They argue that the current educational trend has left them trapped into program and test driven instruction. Teachers feel that these programs do not take into consideration their professional judgment or the individual needs of the students (Moustafa & Land, 2002). A teacher candidate shared:

> I believe that these various teaching styles [methods] are a wonderful idea but the school districts are not implementing them into the schools. As teachers, our hands are tied and we are told to teach to the test or give our students countless assessments both formal and informal. It appears that these teaching styles/methods are conceptualized [contained] within universities. Our school districts and the education system are not in tune with both teachers and students. (F. Burnham, personal communication, September 18, 2010)

The Unintended Consequences of Scripted Programs

Scripted reading programs like *Open Court*, *Reading Mastery*, and *Success for All* have been around for some time (McGraw-Hill Companies, n.d.; Business Roundtable, n.d.; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2002; U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2006). The push for these programs, however, began with the release of a study by the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 2000 in support of systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction in early grades (McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petrosko, 2008; Milosovic, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Service, 2000). The NRP panel was not able to identify with certainty the type of activities, strategies, and interactions that were most effective (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Additionally, the panel did not endorse a particular scripted program and cautioned that more research should be done in this area. In spite of the qualifications of the report, the findings of the NRP study in support of systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in the early grades were utilized as a foundation for endorsing or promoting *Reading First* (Griffith, 2008). *Reading First* under Title I of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) includes a section that states that research-based programs and materials must be used to ensure that every child will be able to read at grade level by the end of third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.27). Furthermore, school districts that adopt scientifically based reading programs for students in kindergarten through third grade receive

funding. This resolution limits school districts to commercially designed reading programs and narrows the selection of teaching methods that can be used.

Schoolteachers are currently dealing with the unintended repercussions of the NCLB legislation. The drive to comply with federal and state mandates has left teachers in dissonance between their own philosophy of education and that of their schools (MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004). They are asked to follow reading programs step-by-step, treating teaching like a mere cooking recipe. Giroux (2010) calls these classrooms a "dead zone" where critical thinking, self-reflection and imagination are being left to outside sources. There is no room for creative methods of instruction like those used in Minerva's class. Scripted instruction takes the place of the teacher. The program determines what the teacher will say and do, as well as the pace of the lesson (Hall, 2009; MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004).

Teacher candidates first feel the clash between what they learn in teacher preparation programs and what is done in schools when they enter the teaching profession. Many novice teachers, who are forced to shift from designing instruction that targets the individual needs of the students, often resist "a one fits all" instruction that relies on external solutions (Griffith, 2008; MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004). Some of the teachers fight back and try to design more individualized curriculum, but later surrender after they are admonished for not following the school's adopted scripted program (MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004). The drive to scripted instruction is contradictory to what researchers have found to be effective. It is well known that it is not the program or method of instruction that makes an impact on student achievement. It is a knowledgeable and effective teacher who makes a difference (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Griffith, 2008; Milosovic, 2007; Ruddell, 2006).

Not only does it appear that scripted literacy programs interfere with and undermine a teacher's ability to teach literacy, but in fact evidence shows that scripted programs negatively affect students' reading development. Research indicates that students in schools where scripted programs were used for ten years or more tend to lag behind students in schools with non-scripted programs. Moustafa and Land (2002) conducted a study in California with second through fifth grade students from 153 schools. They found no evidence that the *Open Court* program promotes higher early reading achievement among children from low socio-economic groups. Instead, their results showed that students in non-scripted programs outperformed students in schools using *Open Court*. Other researchers have conducted similar short-term studies and found no significant difference between students in phonics-driven

programs and those in non-scripted programs (McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petrosko, 2008).

A major concern educators have about scripted reading programs is that they can take up to three hours per day, leaving little time to teach other subjects (Milosovic, 2007; Moustafa & Land, 2002). Even though there is a block of time allocated for language arts, many teachers complain that the lessons are rushed. There is not enough time to revisit complex concepts students have not mastered. In many low-income schools, the time allocated to subjects like science, social studies, art and physical education is minimal or non-existent. This can increase the gap between underrepresented and more affluent student populations. For example, English learners using *Open Court* have been found to lag behind English speakers (Lee, Ajayi & Richards, 2007). One of the main problems these students are facing is that they are not acquiring the necessary academic language required for them to succeed in school (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummins, 2000). The only way the students can achieve high levels of language and content knowledge is if they learn the content and the language related to all subjects. For instance, it is difficult to understand why the arts have been one of the most ignored content areas in schools in the last few years. The arts promote interest and learning across all areas of the curriculum (Appel, 2006, Dresser, 2003; Eisner, 2003). Through the arts, students can learn many things including mathematics (e.g., shapes), vocabulary (e.g., perspective, rhythm and surface), discipline and creativity. Brouillette (2010) found that the arts promote socio-cognitive understanding among English learners. Students learn that comprehension and expression are influenced by culture. This can help English learners adapt more easily to a new culture and language.

Supporters of Scripted Programs

Supporters of scripted instruction claim that these programs are effective and user friendly. *Open Court Reading* is described on their website as a research-based curriculum grounded in systematic, explicit instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics, word knowledge, comprehension skills, inquiry strategies, and writing (Open Court, 2002). The website states that students will "master virtually every sound/spelling in the language" (http://www.opencourtresources.com/ocr/about/about.html). Some teachers like the fact that these programs promote direct phonemic instruction and have helpful graphic organizers (Griffith, 2008). Teachers who have had minimal experience teaching reading and literacy find scripted reading programs helpful because they come with

a teacher's guide, students' textbooks and workbooks. Most important of all, novice teachers like fact that many programs include pre-designed lesson plans. Some argue that teachers can always enhance scripted instruction like a talented actor who brings the script of a play to life (Commwyras, 2007). Supporters of these programs affirm that the results can be measured objectively. Additionally, some scripted programs have demonstrated an increase in literacy rates (Milosovic, 2007). McIntyre, Rightmyer, and Petrosko (2008) caution that there have been many studies conducted on the effectiveness of scripted programs. However, only a few of the articles that emerged from these studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals. The majority them have been published in journals from the universities where these programs were developed.

Alternative to Scripted Programs

Many districts are using scripted programs as a panacea to solve the academic problems of the students. Duncan-Owens (2009) quotes an old Chinese proverb as a metaphor to scripted instruction. The proverb states that giving a man a fish only solves an immediate problem. Teaching the man to fish prepares him for a life of success. Instead of relying on expensive commercially designed programs to educate children, districts and teacher education programs could form partnerships that support teachers during the induction part of their careers (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008; Hamos, Bergin, Maki, Perez, Prival, Rainey, et al., 2009). The purpose should be to gradually release the novice teacher into the challenging profession of teaching without having to rely on a pre-packaged kit to teach reading (Barry, 1997; Commwyras, 2007).

In 1988 the California New Teacher Project (CNTP) lead a study and found that novice teachers do benefit from a mentoring program during their initial years working in the classroom. Based on the research findings of the CNTP study, the state senate passed Senate Bill (SB) 1422, which created the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) Induction program (Lovo, Cavazos, & Simmons, 2006). BTSA provides individualized support and formative assessment for newly-credential teachers (California Induction BTSA Beginning Teachers Support Assessment, 2008). In 1998, subsequent legislation (SB 2042) changed teacher recruitment, certification and licensing. Traditionally, colleges and universities were responsible for the education of teachers. Due to the shortage of teachers during the 1980s, the state approved multiple pathways to certification including the contexts to teacher preparation to school districts and county offices of education (Hafner & Maxie, 2006).

The Senate Bill SB 2042 extended the efforts of SB 1422 by forming an Advisory Panel for Development of Teacher Preparation Standards.

According to the Development of Teacher Report to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (2006), the panel was responsible not only for developing the teacher preparation standards, but also for:

> redesigning teacher preparation programs to ensure the integration of subject matter studies and professional preparation, including a standard-based teacher performance assessment, and providing a two year induction program for all new teachers as a means to earn their California Clear Credential.

The objective of BTSA Induction programs is for teachers to have a smooth transition from their teacher preparation programs into the classroom. Candidates work with veteran teachers who are primarily responsible for providing rigorous individualized support and mentoring (Meckel & Rolland, 2000). Some additional important goals of the program include teacher retention, and student achievement through an inquiry based professional development model (Lovo, Cavazos, & Simmons, 2006). Current legislation encourages the collaboration among school districts, universities, and county offices of education.

The NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel Report (2010) proposed another model, a clinical teacher education program that goes beyond induction. This rigorous clinical program provides teacher candidates with the opportunity to learn about theory, research and content while they are teaching. The panel recommends that teacher education programs and districts form partnerships with a common mission that includes careful selection of teacher candidates and clear expectations. Accountability is evidence-based in that the measurement of teacher candidates' effectiveness is based on student outcome. Partnerships such as the one proposed by the Blue Ribbon Panel can serve as a bridge that helps beginning teachers connect course work with classroom practice. This clinical model provides opportunities for professional training and support for teachers, which will result in academic achievement for students (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008).

Aside from strong induction teacher education programs novice teacher benefit from: (a) developing a sense of mission (Banks, 2001; Nieto, 2005); (b) becoming knowledgeable (Ruddell, 2006); and (c) developing a sense of moral and social responsibility (Freire, 1970; Nelson & Harper, 2006).

Sense of Mission

Teachers who view teaching as a mission tend to have a higher sense of satisfaction and as a result can be more effective. They are dedicated

individuals who have a sense of perseverance (Ripley, 2010). This means that they address everyday challenges with determination and maturity. They are flexible and understand the importance of looking at the world from different perspectives (Dresser, 2003; Doll, 1993; Freire, 1970; Nelson & Harper, 2006). They have student-centered classrooms where student interest and experiences are taken into consideration to design instruction. The teacher knows the curriculum well, but encourages students to take the initiative. They know that learning occurs when students are involved and challenged (Vygotsky, 1962). This was difficult to do in Minerva's class because there were students at different linguistic and academic levels. However, teachers can adapt the curriculum, materials and practices to make it interesting for the students and to ensure academic success. It is important to view learning as an ongoing process not only for the children but also for teachers (Ada, 2003). Teachers with a sense of mission are constantly looking for ways to improve. Teachers required to use scripted literacy often lose this sense of mission when they feel that their knowledge and expertise are not valued.

Knowledgeable Teachers

Effective teachers are knowledgeable about their students and the curriculum. They know the students' linguistic and academic levels (Nieto, 2005; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). These teachers are aware of their students' physical, emotional, social, and academic strengths and needs. They challenge students to view issues from complex and different perspectives (Nelson & Harper, 2006). They encourage learners to be critical thinkers and to question the status quo (Doll, 1993; Dresser, 2003). These teachers know that for students to do well the students must be active learners instead of passive receivers of knowledge. Students need to be involved in curriculum development and evaluation.

For example, Minerva and her classmates chose to write a script and put on the play as part of their social studies final. Teachers who work at schools where they play a pivotal role in curriculum development and implementation tend to be open to change and are more pleased with their profession (Griffith, 2008). They design instruction that is rigorous yet flexible enough to include the interests of their students (Doll, 1993; Gándara, 2004). They use textbooks and materials as resources to enrich instruction. Teachers should be able to adapt the curriculum, including scripted reading programs, to meet the needs of all learners. They should have time to engage in meaningful discussions and learning activities with the students.

Moral and Social Responsibility of Teachers

Teachers with a sense of moral and social responsibility are proactive agents of change. They appreciate their students' linguistic and cultural differences and they see those differences as assets instead of weaknesses (Banks, 2001; Ford, 2010; Unrau, 2003). They prepare students to be responsible citizens of the world. They look at ways to extend instruction beyond the classroom to help children see that they are part of a larger complex society. These teachers use technology and other resources to make learning and teaching alive.

Most importantly, dedicated educators understand that their responsibility goes beyond the classroom (Nieto, 2005; Shor, 1992). They are involved in school as well as local associations and organization as a way to impact educational legislation. Many teachers using scripted programs are afraid to reject or even question school district adopted programs, even when students are failing. Instead, they comply and follow a limited prepackaged model of education.

Conclusion

There is a need to look carefully at scripted programs and their impact on students and teachers. The drive for standardized curricula has left many children unprepared and teachers disillusioned about their profession (Griffith, 2008; Milosovic, 2007). The effectiveness of these programs has been questioned as some evidence indicates they have not been found to meet the needs of individual students. Scripted programs keep education and learning at a superficial level in that they narrow opportunities for teachers and students to be innovative. They cannot deviate from the scripted curriculum to explore or answer a question they might have or to include students' interests. Teachers feel that there is not enough time to review or to revisit some important concepts. Nelson and Harper (2006) call this approach the "Cliff Notes" method to education, which leaves little room for deeper levels of thinking and "processing which shortchanges the students by providing an impoverished educational experience" (p. 7).

Motivated and knowledgeable teachers, who are asked to relinquish their views on best practices to follow a scripted program, feel overwhelmed and frustrated. Even though the study on Reciprocal Teaching and Narrow Reading referred to earlier showed a positive impact on students' reading comprehension skills, vocabulary development and content learning, the teachers felt they had no option but to revert back to their scripted reading program. As Marta commented, they "had no time to try new methods" (M. Rosell, April 15, 2010, personal communication).

A better option to scripted instruction is to prepare teachers with the necessary knowledge, dispositions and skills to succeed. District personnel and teacher preparation instructors need to take a closer look at ways to ensure a more secure and successful induction path for teacher candidates. It is essential for teachers to learn and also to receive the message in return from their school districts that they play a pivotal part in students' success (Nieto, 2005). Similarly, teachers must understand that being good teachers is not enough (Jong & Harper, 2005). Educators must become advocates for their students by searching for ways to impact legislation.

I was a schoolteacher for many years and remember well my first year of teaching. I had a class of 32 very energetic fifth-grade bilingual students. One of the most energetic ones was Minerva. The students were all English learners with different linguistic ability levels in English and Spanish. I began the school year with nothing in the classroom but student desks and a ball. The district gave me $92 dollars to purchase materials for the year. Many of my students were already involved in gang-related activities. For many of them education was not a priority because some of their basic needs like food and shelter were not met. One of my students was shot during a fight among rival gangs next to our school. The principal was caught selling drugs to an undercover police officer. These were only a few of the problems I had to endure as a novice teacher. The only way I was able to make social studies and other content areas relevant for my students was through the arts and other related activities (Dresser, 2003).

I know, therefore, how difficult it is for teachers to take time off from their busy schedules to participate in other activities aside from their classroom responsibilities. However, the only way legislation can change is if educators, administrators, and the community make legislators aware of the problems with scripted instruction. New instructional models, in which textbooks and other materials are used to enhance learning, need to be designed. Strong partnerships between colleges of education and school districts must be in place as a way to provide support to teacher candidates through long-term mentoring models. More short term and longitudinal research needs to be conducted on different language and literacy models. Finally, it is critical that the teaching profession be returned to the true experts, the teachers.

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