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Cover Page Footnote

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Policies, Practices, People, and Places: How Elementary Preservice Teachers Learned Literacy Teaching

by Chad H. Waldron



Chad H. Waldron

Over the last decade of educational reforms, elementary literacy teachers have been challenged to manage the successes and constraints of the educational policies and instructional mandates (Pardo et al., 2012). The local decision-making of teachers is enacted within highly institutionalized contexts and has been characterized as a “bricolage” (Levi-Strauss, 1968, cited in Erickson, 2004). In other words, teachers are working to create meaningful tools to solve local problems regarding available resources in the setting (Florio-Ruane, 2010). However, such activity is generally occurring “beneath the radar” of on-going policy and assessment (Erickson, 2004), meaning the teacher’s decision-making and choices are happening daily in their classroom contexts, thereby making it more difficult for the preservice teacher interning within an institutional setting to learn merely by watching the mentor. It remains unapparent how and what preservice teachers glean from other sources as they work to develop their pedagogy for literacy instruction. As such, teachers, across their experiences in the profession, face the tension of simultaneously meeting the needs of their students and the requirements of literacy policies and curriculum.

Teachers are dealing with mandated literacy curriculum

in different ways. Our research questions for this study centered on preservice teachers’ contexts for literacy instruction and the occasions in which preservice teachers witness and/or attempt local decision-making in response to mandated goals, materials, and assessments in their design of literacy curriculum and instruction. In our research, we inquired about elementary preservice teachers’ local decision-making and what learning experiences were valued as they interacted within various educational contexts and formed relationships with a variety of people during their internship year.

Review of Literature

Teachers often discover how a student’s literacy learning is shaped by cultural and social assets, which cannot be separated from their context for learning (Cambourne, 2004). This negotiation of system-wide requirements within local circumstances to produce coherent curriculum and meaningful instruction is at the heart of teaching, and identified by literacy researchers as “best practice” (Madda, Griffio, Pearson, & Raphael, 2011). Yet, these opportunities for identifying “best practices” may be limited for preservice teachers depending on the opportunities they have to witness their mentor teachers’ thinking aloud or the degree to which they participate in planning instructional experiences with their teachers (e.g., Zeichner, 2010). As well,

transitioning to the classroom context presents new and often unexpected challenges to the preservice teacher. In the preservice experiences of student teaching or internship placements, the preservice teacher is confronted with the challenge of learning how to teach “on the job” for the first time, and thus, they are learning daily how to navigate the classroom context as they are simultaneously learning to teach. Long-term, mentored placements in classroom contexts are situated experiences that require interns to access knowledge of the community’s practices and provide opportunities for the preservice teacher to actively apply this knowledge into their work in the classroom (Cuenca, 2011). These authentic socializations in learning to teach, while also teaching students, create opportunities for preservice teachers to learn the balancing act of meeting instructional demands and their students’ needs.

Preservice teachers also face the tasks of developing their teacher identity and sense of agency in literacy teaching, managing an effective literacy classroom, and learning the curriculum specific to their school and classroom. The identity of a preservice teacher is dynamically shaped by their teacher education preparation, their current contexts for teaching, their own career goals as a teacher, their prior experiences as a learner themselves, and their professional experiences with children (Olsen 2008). The cultural tools and mediational systems of a specific context, such as a required literacy curriculum or educational policies in place, may guide how a teacher will enact agency over their students’ literacy learning (Lasky, 2005; Wertsch, 1993; Wertsch et al., 1991). These factors of teacher identity and agency may impact the ways in which a preservice teacher interacts with and uses their literacy curriculum.

Previous research has demonstrated how preservice teachers struggle with the tension of whether to follow a mandated textbook or teacher’s manual with fidelity or to abandon these materials if they do not match best practices for instruction learned through teacher education (Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988; Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006). Recently, there has been an increased emphasis on curricular materials that has created influential curriculum mandates and contexts

in which preservice teachers are being apprenticed into teaching and impacted the ways in which preservice teachers perceive instruction. For example, Pease-Alvarez and Samway (2008) found that a top-down reading mandate within one elementary school context created an environment in which novice and expert teachers alike either abandoned best practices in literacy instruction to follow the new curriculum with fidelity, partially abandoned some practices while maintaining others for literacy learning, or enacted resistance towards the new curriculum mandates in favor of maintaining their literacy instruction in a “business as usual” fashion. Each of these scenarios creates complexity in how a preservice teacher is apprenticed into teaching literacy in the elementary school classroom (e.g., Lortie, 1975).

Preservice teachers in elementary education need opportunities to learn how to negotiate the demands of curriculum materials and educational policies to support their students’ academic achievement as they work in classrooms where they are increasingly expected to teach to educational standards often linked to externally-mandated literacy curriculum, yet required in professional courses to teach in effective ways tailored to meet the needs, interests, and prior learning of their students in literacy (Madda, Griffin, Pearson, & Raphael, 2011). These opportunities are limited in contemporary classroom contexts of top-down reading policies and requirements (Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2010; Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin, 2011). Understanding how elementary preservice teachers learn to teach literacy in their interning experiences is critical to their short- and long-term success. This understanding can also help us to see the instructional practices they may adopt and keep as new literacy teachers from these varied learning experiences.

The Study

The research questions for this study were: (1) *What are preservice teachers’ contexts for literacy education* and (2) *On what occasions do preservice teachers witness and/or attempt local decision-making in response to mandated goals, materials, and assessments in their design of literacy curriculum and instruction?* A multi-method study

was used to capture patterns and trends within a large group of elementary preservice teachers completing their internship program within one academic year. The research worked to discover the local variations and opportunities in preservice teachers' teaching contexts, learning experiences, and local decision-making in literacy. This study used survey, think-aloud and focus group interviews, as well as analysis of texts (both interns' written unit development work and the text materials they used) to capture the perspectives of interns as they taught elementary literacy instruction. Surveys, think-aloud interviews, and focus groups were primary sources of data. Additionally, instructional documents were analyzed, and data was collected in several classrooms, schools, and communities. Six preservice teachers, selected voluntarily, served as the case studies to investigate the research questions. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identity and this research was approved by their university's Institutional Review Board.

The elementary interning teachers were assigned by their university to work in two large metropolitan areas located in one state in the industrial Midwest. During the year of the study, unemployment in the state was 10.2% and in the two cities anchoring the metropolitan area schools was 8% and 11.4% respectively (e.g., U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). These high rates of state and local unemployment reflected, at least in part, the near collapse of this state's core industry. We cite these statistics to foreshadow one of our study's key findings—the role of poverty, both sudden and chronic, in the transformation of elementary literacy learning and teaching experiences for both interning teachers and their students.

We proposed to investigate the thought and action of these interns as they surveyed the contexts in which they were working in terms of the resources and requirements for literacy education. Additionally, they were asked to design a two-week literacy unit in which they attempted to reconcile tensions between instructional mandates of educational policies and required literacy curricula. To address our questions, we collected and analyzed the data through using a triangulation of evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1978). The analyses

of the data included multiple iterations of open, axial, and closed coding to refine our coding scheme and begin theory building for the results (Charmaz, 2004). We formed grounded theory in relation to our research questions and linked it back to our theoretical framework/review of relevant literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1978). These theories were also developed through the individual case studies and thematic cross-case analyses within our multiple case studies (e.g., Stake, 2006). This iterative process enabled us to revise, elaborate, or reject inferences. It also enabled us to draw from multiple sources when crafting analytic descriptions (e.g., Erickson, 1986) to report our findings.

Results of The Study

This study's findings show that the contemporary problems faced by our elementary preservice teachers are contextualized and historicized within the educational policies, instructional practices, educational texts, and competing interests preceding their entry into teaching. We found four styles of teaching that our six interning teachers adopted to bring relationship and coherence to their literacy instruction using mandated literacy curriculum. The four styles of teaching adopted were: (a) coping with the status quo in their literacy curriculum; (b) going outside the literacy curriculum; (c) hybridizing the literacy curriculum; or (d) bricolaging the literacy curriculum. These styles were contextualized to their classrooms, reflective of the policies, practices, and place in their field experience. Their teacher identities often influenced the style enacted within their classroom context. Their agency as a teacher, or their sense of influence over their literacy curriculum, was limited or maximized, depending on the contexts for teaching.

Going Outside the Status Quo

Two styles of literacy teaching, coping with the status quo and going outside the literacy curriculum, reflect how some of the six preservice teachers shaped teaching and instructional opportunities within their classroom contexts. In coping with the status quo of the literacy curriculum, the interning teachers interviewed for this study reported struggling to negotiate space or create hybridity in their literacy instruction within their class-

room when they were asked to design a developmentally appropriate literacy unit of study. Catherine, an intern teacher in a fourth-grade classroom in a suburban school context, struggled to implement literacy centers to reinforce literacy strategies learned within the new basal reading series. She stated that her “mentor teacher said I went above and beyond and that it was something that could not be maintained because it was just, I mean, focusing on a small group. It required extra planning and work beyond what the basal was having us teach.” She also lamented how “I learned at the university how to teach comprehensive literacy, but now I am only using the basal reading program and it is not comprehensive. But it’s a district policy and we have to follow it.”

Another intern, Kim, who worked in a first-grade classroom within a large urban school district, has a similar story of coping with the status quo. She commented, “We have a very strict pacing guide that we are, you know, checked up on” by district literacy coaches. When they followed the established literacy curriculum as prescribed in their school, they were able to make limited contributions to the literacy curriculum or instructional design. Kim and Kloe, another intern in a second-grade classroom within the same school district, also tried out the style of going beyond the literacy curriculum. Kim developed a writing unit of study for her first-grade placement, centered on the fictional stories of Dr. Seuss. She stated, “My kids really loved it! It was so different from the writing we do for our basal series.” Kloe, alternatively, developed a poetry unit with reading and writing activities for her students, even when she lacked support around her. “I didn’t have the freedom with my mentor teacher in teaching literacy beyond this unit. We didn’t make time for writing and I wanted my students to be better writers.” In the end, Kloe’s poetry unit was well received by her mentor teacher and “it benefited our students’ writing—we could see it in everything they wrote...and I planned other writing units after it.” These examples demonstrate to us how the spaces for learning and teaching literacy were vastly different for our preservice teachers.

Spaces Between the Extremes

It was only in the space between these extremes, and by

drawing on a varied assortment of resources for support, that the other preservice teachers we studied were able to cope with this dilemma (i.e., hybridizing their literacy instruction in ways that adhered to mandated standards) and used required curricular materials, yet crafted in their own instructional activities other texts, professionals and peers, or past experiences as learners along with their strong pedagogical content knowledge (i.e. bricolaging their literacy instruction). These subsequent teaching styles of hybridizing the literacy curriculum or bricolaging their literacy curriculum created new possibilities of engaging and motivating their students in the process of literacy learning.

Beverly and Kathy, intern teachers in a sixth grade, suburban English-Language Arts block and in an urban kindergarten classroom respectively, became experienced in how to hybridize their literacy curriculum. Hybridizing literacy curriculum allows a teacher to pull upon “the strengths of their previous best practices [learned] and the policy requirements [of the curriculum and/or materials] to create an original pedagogy” that leads to high-quality teaching (Kersten & Pardo 2007). Beverly decided to also develop a poetry unit of study, using the themes from the district-developed literacy curriculum but with different resources. “It was Jack Prelutsky, the Shel Silverstein, you—the rhyming for little kids. These were sixth graders and I wanted them to see different versions of ‘poetry’.” She used adult poetry writers like Maya Angelou, song lyrics, and other relevant styles of poetry to read and model exemplar poetry, which in turn supported her students in their poetry writings, to meet the district instructional goals. “I pulled a lot from my poetry course that I took [at the university]. It helped to plan this unit.” Kathy had similar experiences in her kindergarten classroom as she planned to use two basal reading series, an original basal series to the district and a new pilot basal series. “We pick and choose what to use with our students. The phonics instruction was very repetitive. We choose what our students needed and the stories with more student involvement. I also used trade books and other literacy resources from the Internet to enhance our units.” Kathy, using her additional training as an early childhood educator, recognized the literacy

curriculum for the students must have diversity and that it was acceptable and “important to take the ideas they [the basal series] have and bring in my own stuff.” These two preservice teachers were different as they recognized the demands of educational policies and curriculum along with their developing senses of identity and agency to create literacy learning experiences for their students.

Bricolaging the literacy curriculum was different from the work of our other preservice teacher candidates, particularly those who hybridized their teaching. Levi-Strauss (1968) stated bricolage could be likened to a mosaic of available resources, or “tools,” orchestrated masterfully to support or create a new learning. In our study, Mike, one of our interning teachers in a 3rd grade classroom within a large urban school district, demonstrated what we liken to bricolaging. He also demonstrated a great deal of strong pedagogical content knowledge, or mastery over his content area of literacy in both teaching strategies and content awareness (Shulman, 1986). His unit theme of risk and consequences brought together the stories in their basal reading program, the writing resources that he found online, the grammar book that his mentor teacher had as a supplemental text, and the use of new literacies through technology communication with pen pals. He said, “I wanted to use the stories that my students were reading, and I realized that they needed some work in writing. We always focused on reading. I felt some writing would do them good. I designed my unit to include both reading and writing.” His teaching identity and sense of agency affected the instructional practices and materials used with his students. Mike’s bricolaging of a variety of instructional resources, along with his infusing of his own pedagogical content knowledge of literacy for third graders, allowed him to create authentic literacy learning experiences, free of one text, program, or policy.

Contextual Tensions of the Classroom and School

Consequently, the styles of teaching enacted by the preservice teachers were also linked to the contextual tensions in their classroom and in the school. The elementary interning teachers immediately experi-

enced instructional and pedagogical tensions when they entered the classroom context. Focus group and interview data analyses indicated that they did not feel well-prepared to teach using the required, pre-packaged reading program materials. These pre-packaged curricula were often heavily laden with numerous materials, aimed to be comprehensive, yet not necessarily coherent, as reported by five of the six teachers. Artifact analyses also demonstrated how the materials included in the reading programs used were often not linked or not aligned with the instructional objectives found in state-level academic standards for the grade level. The teachers found learning to use the materials difficult, especially under the pressures of building and district level monitoring (i.e., instructional pacing charts or guides). In the focus groups, several of our teachers reported district literacy coaches or administrators coming in with “checklists” to see what instructional activities or pages were being completed on any given day.

The interviews and focus group revealed how the impasse in which they were left limited intern teacher voice and agency and induced guilt about not giving their students the very best literacy teaching. These interns were faced with this impasse yet held accountable daily to the classroom in which they were placed. They often lacked experiences and discourse about how to effectively weave coherent, responsive literacy teaching with the curriculum provided. Some interning teachers acknowledged that they would take the safe path of teaching the basal reading program as prescribed in their teachers’ manual. Catherine stated, and others agreed, “I was told to do something as the teacher’s edition stated and not to change it. This is different from what the university taught me about comprehensive literacy teaching.” Others attempted to hybridize their curriculum in various ways, drawing on resources including the Internet, their peers, and their prior knowledge and their own creative energy. This finding of negotiating between styles of teaching literacy begins to demonstrate how tacitly limiting the texts for teacher learning to prescriptive curriculum manuals affects research-based best practices in instructional pedagogy or their students’ interests and skills for literacy learning (e.g., Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006).

Concluding Thoughts

We set out to inquire about elementary preservice teachers' local decision-making and what they learned of use in this process from the various educational contexts and relationships in which they participated in during their internship year (e.g., university courses; direct classroom teaching; conferences with mentors; the Internet; discussions with peers, past experiences as students). We wished to better understand, as teacher educators, how to best prepare our preservice teachers for teaching literacy in today's complex educational climate of educational policies, various instructional practices, and diverse places, all for the benefit of students' achievement and literacy learning. This led to exploring the learning of a complex practice within the context of both institutional knowledge and local action for making substantial contributions to social theories of education, the practice of teacher education, and teacher learning in literacy.

Our multiple case studies found, first, an increase in the use of basal reading programs in suburban and urban school settings. This shifts educational and social theory on how mandated curriculum is only found in "urban" contexts. We found many suburban school districts moving toward mandating and scripting how literacy instruction was delivered across their classrooms. It is rather reflective of changing educational expectations and the presumption of how "fidelity to the curriculum" will lead to students' achievement in literacy (Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin, 2011). Basal reading programs or other forms of literacy curriculum are not inherently faulty or bad, but rather the teacher understanding, school leadership, and strict use after their implementation within classroom and school settings influenced their usefulness.

Second, the interning teachers who used basal reading programs equated them to the "literacy curriculum." This view of curriculum diverged from the university's setting where comprehensive literacy and best practices in literacy instruction within a wide variety of instructional materials, including basal reading programs, were advocated and emphasized (Madda, Griffio, Pearson, & Raphael, 2011). This leaves much to question and

research to further address the ways in which teacher preparation programs, field instructors, and mentor teachers can guide preservice teachers in using required literacy curriculum.

Third, we found the interning teachers were given limited access to teaching literacy and best practices in literacy instruction through required literacy curricula and other pre-established literacy instructional methods. This returns to the need for both local and global considerations of how to effectively select mentor teachers, support on-going mentoring, and select valuable clinical field placements that help prepare teachers for their future work in classrooms (Zeichner, 2010).

The fourth and most essential finding of our study, the ways in which interns managed their impasses on their own terms—a finding which challenges conventional wisdom in both mentoring and course-based teacher education. The styles of teaching (coping, going outside, hybridizing, and bricolaging) literacy provide lens on how preservice teachers were constrained or negotiated educational policies, required curriculum, and their own identity and agency as elementary teachers. Further research is needed to explore how these styles of teaching, particularly those of hybridizing and bricolaging, can be introduced in teacher preparation programs to ease the transition of preservice teachers from guided university experiences to their often independent first years of classroom teaching.

Learning to teach literacy is a complex, multifaceted process in and of itself. Educational policies and movements, such as *No Child Left Behind* and the *Common Core State Standards*, can potentially complicate how preservice teachers are apprenticed into their roles as literacy teachers at the elementary level. Learning to teach literacy, as exemplified in and across the cases in this study, is context-specific, resource-dependent, and policy-driven. This study helped us to learn how preservice teachers were dealing with mandated literacy curriculum and educational policies in very different ways. In supportive contexts and with the application of knowledge of teaching and subject matter, interns can experience agency, enhanced relationships with

students, and a sense of curricular coherence, reflecting both mandates and their own ideas. Mentor teachers, school contexts, and the teacher preparation programs must work better together to create more robust, positive, and open opportunities for the development of our nation's future teachers.

Act Now!

- 1) **Create opportunities to “think aloud” with the interning teacher on the literacy curriculum and policies in your school.** Just as we “think aloud” with our students to allow them to see our in-the-head processes of literacy learning, our preservice teachers need to learn what it is like to “think as the teacher.” Take opportunities during instructional planning and teaching to make visible and clear your decision-making for your teaching. “Thinking aloud” can help your preservice teacher to learn routines, strategies, and skills faster for more immediate application with the students. It also allows them to see behind the curtain of what it takes to teach.
- 2) **Return to the high leverage practices (e.g., using comprehension strategies with students) your interning teacher knows and help them apply these practices to your classroom instruction.** High-leverage practices, those practices shown to have high frequency in classroom teaching and shown to improve student achievement, is the common language shared by mentor teachers and preservice teachers (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Teaching Works, 2021). Such practices as using reading comprehension strategies or teaching students' vocabulary within a text have been shown to improve student achievement. You can help to bridge the university setting to the elementary classroom by talking about these instructional strategies and practices with preservice teachers to help them implement them within their own teaching.
- 3) **Talk about your own “agency” and “identity” as a literacy/classroom teacher in your**

school. Simply put, a teacher's agency focuses on their sense of input or control over their curriculum and teaching. A teacher's identity deals with examining your own beliefs, practices, and ideas you hold about teaching, learning, and literacy. If you make your own agency and identity clear, you can help your preservice teacher to begin to articulate theirs and help them to become more fully aware of what makes them a “teacher.”

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