

Two Educators' Experiences of Double Dose Reading Classes

Victor Malo-Juvera
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain knowledge of the phenomenon of double dose reading classes. A reading coach and a reading teacher were interviewed. Data revealed teachers navigate a complicated set of negotiations in order to deliver quality instruction while simultaneously satisfying mandated requirements from supervisors.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Race to the Top Fund have put extraordinary emphasis on students' test performance as an indicator of improvement and teacher effectiveness. Nowhere is this pressure felt more than in urban schools that are "failing." These schools are often faced with a myriad of problems each day that their affluent suburban counterparts need not overcome, such as the depressing effects of poverty, high student mobility, crumbling buildings, high crime rates, teacher shortages, high teacher to student ratios, inexperienced teachers, high teacher turnover, and a drill and test curriculum (Brophy, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Lippman, 1996; Moll, 1990). Research has shown that a disproportionate number of students who attend inner city schools, especially African American males, are placed in special education classes, enrolled in lower level and remedial academic courses, suffer more frequent and serious disciplinary actions, and have a higher dropout rate (Murrell, 1992).

With high stakes emphasis on reading tests, data driven instruction has become the educational fad du jour. Teachers are chronically subjected to meetings where their students' scores are analyzed question by question and teachers are interrogated as to how they plan on making their students achieve "proficiency." Many schools require teachers to not only teach to the test, but to follow a curriculum based on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) Benchmarks as opposed to the Sunshine State Standards, which are the standards set by the state legislature.

Many schools are embracing scripted curricula in the forms of instructional pacing guides and weekly benchmarks. Although academic freedom is protected for many teachers, few are willing to openly challenge their administrators and face retaliation. Teachers who do not follow the prescribed curriculum or those whose students fail standardized reading tests face an impressive array of punishments such as being assigned undesirable classes, losing supplements, and being passed over for department chairpersonships. With an impressive array of punishments available for schools and teachers whose students fail standardized reading tests, it is reasonable to wonder why any teacher would want to put him/herself in such an unenviable position. The position that students occupy is no more enviable.

The picture painted for reading classes is not always a pretty one. Teachers who are forced to adhere to mandated curriculum and then face ramifications if their students do not show improvement and students who lose electives in order to take mandatory reading classes, are all in one room. With so much riding on the results and considering the tenuous position that reading teachers occupy, it is important to get a fuller and deeper understanding of the phenomena of reading classes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater knowledge of the phenomenon of double dose reading classes in South Florida secondary public schools.

Research Question

What are the experiences of reading coaches and/or teachers in mandatory double dose secondary reading classes?

Method

The participants in the study were two female educators in the Miami Dade School System. One was a reading coach at a Title I school who has over twenty years of experience in the school system as a social studies teacher, a reading teacher, a curriculum support specialist at the region and district levels, and as a reading coach. She was interviewed twice in her office at her school during school hours.

The other participant was a newly appointed reading teacher at a magnet school; she had over fifteen years of experience teaching elementary school. She was interviewed twice, both times in a conference room at Florida International University.

Consent was achieved by verbal agreement on the recorded interviews at the beginning of each interview. Participants were guaranteed that their names would not be used, that their places of employment would be referred to in the most general terms to protect their privacy and that any names they referenced in the interview would be blacked out on transcripts and given pseudonyms in the research report if they were used.

Data Collection

This ethnographic case study utilized interviews as the method for data collection. Ethnographies attempt to paint a picture of a cultural setting (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), and in this study, the culture of mandatory double dose reading classes were investigated.

The interviews were semi-structured with a tree and branch approach that allowed the researcher to touch upon four major categories within the phenomenon of double dose reading classes: reading curriculum, instructional techniques, student-teacher interactions and assessment.

Researchers must “guard against their own biases” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 38). I started the research project clearly biased against reading classes. I felt that they did not show the promised effects on reading comprehension, that they were taught at too low a level to students, and that the reading selections were not culturally relevant and were not worthy of students sacrificing electives. Rubin and Rubin recommend that researchers use reflective practices to become cognizant of their own biases and then use this awareness to devise questions that offset these biases (2005). In order to deal with this, I consciously began my interviews on the mechanics of reading class curriculum and instruction as opposed to asking value questions. I let the interviewees work their way toward that area so I would minimize my influence on their answers.

This research study incorporated member checks in order to increase trustworthiness. Rubin and Rubin urge researchers to have interviewees examine reports so they can provide insights as to where the researchers have been accurate and to identify places where the writing may not accurately reflect their point of view (2005). One of the interviewees was given a fully transcribed and coded copy of her interview. She was allowed to read it and encouraged to make comments and corrections on the transcription and the coding. The other interviewee was contacted and in a face to face conversation reviewed the interview and the major codes derived from it. Peer review was conducted by discussing interview questions, raw data, transcription

codes and findings with colleagues enrolled in a qualitative research class at Florida International University.

The use of a research journal also increased trustworthiness. Maintaining self reflective journals is a common practice in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008). Ortlipp recommends that instead of trying to control for the values of the researcher through methodology, that researchers consciously acknowledge their values (Ortlipp, 2008). The research journal chronicled my theoretical orientations, my biases and my challenges while conducting the research.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded to look for major themes. Both interviews were recoded in reverse order. I utilized what Rubin and Rubin (2005) refer to as open coding, which is when a researcher codes the transcription as they read through it without any preconceived themes. Open coding is more effective in short projects where the researcher is familiar with the subject (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Because my research project was short, with just two interviewees, I felt justified in choosing this approach.

Open coding is part of the grounded theory model which argues that coding, recognizing concepts and themes, and theory development are all an integrated process and that concepts and themes should arise from the data without the influence of literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Because I conducted the interviews and coded them before doing a thorough literature review, I found my data analysis to fit the paradigm of the grounded theory model.

Themes

Analysis of data via coding revealed three themes: (a) teachers experienced intimidating visits by those charged with enforcing the scripted curriculum, (b) the scripted curriculum itself was problematic, and (c) teachers exercised resistance to the scripted curriculum.

Intimidating Visits

The concept of intimidation from supervisors was found in both interviews. The Reading Teacher described her experience with visitors whose main purpose was the enforcement of the curriculum:

...other people from the State have come in and said, your room must look like this, you must do this, you have got to have that, you can't do this. And because of those stipulations, whether they're valid or not, people feel pressured to do something that they're uncertain about because they don't have the depth of knowledge. (Reading Teacher)

The Reading Coach described how reading teachers are critiqued by supervisors for their performance:

They don't have the passion for it. They don't have the experience. But yet they have to do these things, and they're held accountable for it. They're brought down to the principal's office at the end of year. Oh, your students only had 19% gains, so you can't ever teach an advanced class. (Reading Coach)

The visits from supervisors and from people who are viewed to be above the teacher in the educational hierarchy such as reading coaches, department heads, region curriculum specialists, and state level curriculum specialists were not viewed as helpful or positive.

Scripted Curriculum

The supervisory visits discussed by both interviewees were focused on checking to see whether a mandated curriculum was being followed. The mandates were to carry out scripted curriculums and the dynamics of teaching a scripted curriculum was another major theme. The Reading Coach described her attitude toward scripted curricula from a teaching perspective:

Now that we have programs, we have to mold the student to fit the program, versus mold the program to fit the student. I want the program to fit the student. If I ever find myself not being a reading coach, put me back into a social studies classroom, because I just can't [teach reading].... I probably shouldn't be saying that. I believe that there are some students who are going to be successful with the program. I believe there are teachers who are going to be successful with the program. But knowing me and my personal philosophy and how I teach, I can't teach in a box. (Reading Coach)

The scripted curriculum appears to have taken the creativity out of teaching reading. It attempts to make all teachers and students fit into the program and differentiated instruction is not part of the scripted curriculum experience. The Reading Teacher also expressed problems with the scripted curriculum at her school using the scripted reading instructional program Jamestown Navigator:

The way I know which skill I am going to teach that week is because I have a pacing guide. So that's already been determined. All you have to do is read the pacing guide. It's idiot proof - it tells you what's the object, the page number, the book to use, it even tells you what questions to ask. You're just literally reading it, like a recipe - that's it.

She continued to describe the way her requests for data that confirmed the program's efficacy were rebuffed by supervisors:

Honestly, I don't like the program. I've asked, can I see the data that shows how using Jamestown Navigator does improve the FCAT scores? And when I ask for certain things those questions aren't really being answered. I just keep hearing, well it's mandated by the state. (Reading Teacher)

Resistance to Scripted Curriculum

The way teachers handle the scripted curriculum was also of great importance to both interviewees. The Reading Coach expressed dismay but also understanding that teachers had issues with teaching from a script:

Another teacher thought it was stupid. They didn't want to follow the script. They're bored. They wanted to be creative because it was all about the teacher, rather than the student needs. And they thought, this is below the students, it's embarrassing, the students won't want to do it. And it's not true. Students will do what their teacher pushes them to do when they respect the teacher. If the teacher does not respect the program, the students will not respect the program, and then everyone loses. (Reading Coach)

The Reading Teacher provided good insights to how teachers alter the program behind closed doors to help the students get the education they feel the students deserve:

RT: I was told to and I do put it up on my board every single day, because I like to write up on the board what today's lesson is. And I always put Jamestown at the end and I always say we didn't have a chance to do it.

Even though she used a curriculum she felt was most beneficial to her students, she described how her newness to the school made her keep her instructional choices covert:

I'm not really being that assertive about it because this is my first year there but that's what I've always done in the past. Once you have that seniority and you're in a school, people will respect you because they know at the end you're a good teacher and the kids are doing well. But it's a different situation for me now because I'm not permanent there. So I really do play by the rules, at least enough to cover myself so it looks like [I am following the rules].

I was told I needed to have pacing guides in my lesson plans because the district will be coming in and the district will be expecting to see those pacing guides. So yes, I photocopy them, I include them in my lesson plans and then I don't look at them. So yes I do cover myself...

Discussion

The data reveal that reading classes entail a complicated set of negotiations for teachers in order to deliver quality instruction for their students while at the same time satisfying mandated requirements from people perceived as higher-ups.

The perception of visits by supervisory personnel as not welcome and intimidating is critical to examine. The physical appearance of a reading classroom became a topic discussed by both interviewees. Supervisors, whether local, district or state, all seemed to examine the décor of reading classrooms closely. Differences on learning styles and teaching styles appear to be ignored by supervisors who may be seeking to institute a one size fits all approach to teachers.

The décor of rooms may be so important because it is easy to check. Anyone can be given a checklist of what should be on walls and go into any room and check off the list. It makes supervision easy; however, having benchmarks written on walls is not linked to student achievement. It is important that students know why they are learning something but that is a far cry from knowing the state standards and reference numbers that correlate to it. The amount of energy that a teacher spends covering him/herself by writing lesson plans that are not intended to be adhered to and putting benchmarks on boards that have nothing to do with the lesson makes one wonder if that time could be better spent.

Perhaps the reason for the visits is to intimidate the teachers into embracing the scripted curriculum or at least to quell resistance to it. Is the resistance displayed by the Reading teacher warranted? Scripted instruction is more effective with lower order skills that are readily assessed with standardized tests (Sawyer, 2004). It is no wonder that scripted instruction is at the heart of reading classes designed to satisfy NCLB requirements.

Scripted curriculum was at the center of both the interviews and the Reading coach and the Reading teacher had different views of it. Teaching in a multicultural city such as Miami would make it difficult to find a scripted curriculum that could meet the needs of such a variety of students and the actions of the Reading Teacher are an attempt to save her urban students from a drill and test curriculum that is ubiquitous in urban schools (Brophy, 1990). Teachers should be able to construct lessons that will be engaging to their unique students; ergo, they need to have a curriculum that is flexible. Scripted lessons designed for mass distribution are unlikely to provide these opportunities (Ede, 2006). The actions of the Reading Teacher are consistent with the findings of Fullan, who describes the goal of curriculum change as not the continuous adhering to the specific innovation but a continuous commitment to student learning (2008).

Conclusions

More fundamentally is that even the more prescriptive models that get short term results, do not last. The reason they do not last is that they make routines predictable while making teaching and learning boring. They do not last because they should not last. (Fullan, 2008, p. 118)

The experience of a reading teacher is a balancing act between the prescriptive curriculum that is dictated by superiors and the teacher's attempts to provide a quality education for his/her students. With a constant onslaught of supervisory visits, reading teachers must jump through hoops to prove they are adhering to edicts in order to survive professionally. Classroom visits are

not opportunities for collaborative learning but are chances to suffer reprimands for even how one's walls are decorated.

The results show the need to continue research into the experiences of reading teachers. As data driven instruction continues to dominate the political landscape more and more, prescriptive programs will be introduced across academia in all subjects. If research continues to show that these scripted curriculums stifle the ability of teachers to teach and force every student to learn in the same learning style, then the adherence to these programs should be vociferously questioned.

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