

Chapter 2

Teachers of ELs Negotiating Top-Down Literacy Initiatives in Two Urban Districts

Keywords Teacher agency • English learners • Teacher resistance • Teacher compliance • Literacy teaching • Quality of instruction • Open Court Reading program • No Child Left Behind Act • Teacher autonomy

In the United States, school districts have been mandating prescriptive and teacher-centered instructional programs and approaches to teaching language and literacy. This has occurred in response to the under-performance on high stakes tests of students of color, particularly African American and Latino students. One of the most striking results has been that school districts have been increasingly mandating commercial reading programs (Altwerger et al. 2004). One program that has been widely adopted across the U.S., including in states such as California, which has large numbers of English learners (ELs), is Open Court Reading (OCR) (SRA/McGraw Hill 2004). What is striking about this textbook adoption policy in California is that OCR was not developed for ELs (Rumberger and Gándara 2004), and 25% of California's student population is EL (Achinstein et al. 2004; Gándara and Baca 2008; Moustafa and Land 2002).

Two additional policies have contributed to the utilization of prepackaged programs in California classrooms serving ELs and other low-income students: (1) the California State Board of Education mandated that districts could use state textbook funds to purchase only one of two reading/language arts programs in Grades K-6: *SRA Open Court Reading* (SRA/McGraw Hill) or *Reading: A Legacy of Literacy* (Houghton-Mifflin), both of which were developed for native English speaking children, and (2) the California State Board of Education required schools receiving Reading First funds under NCLB to use one of these state-approved reading programs in grades K-3. Both of these textbook series focus on what has come to be known as the five domains of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). As several reading theorists have noted, these domains reference the generic skills and strategies associated with reading

most texts and not the specific strategies and processes associated with reading a particular text type or genre (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008).¹

Research investigating the impact that these programs have had on ELs' learning has yielded some troubling findings. For example, it has been found that *Open Court Reading* and *Reading: A Legacy of Literacy* have not contributed to the reading achievement of struggling readers, including English learners (Alvarez and Corn 2008; Gutiérrez et al. 2000; McGill-Franzen et al. 2006; Moustafa and Land 2002; Wilson et al. 2004). Also, school-wide efforts to enforce such programming can result in pedagogical environments that jeopardize the literacy learning opportunities available to students, including those serving English learners in high poverty schools (Gerstl-Pepin and Woodside-Jiron 2005; Sunderman et al. 2005).

When policies requiring teachers to use the OCR program were first mandated in our region, teachers shared with us their critiques of the program. Many found the program's prescriptions to be inappropriate when it came to meeting their students' needs. Moreover, they were extremely upset by the loss of autonomy that they were experiencing when it came to deciding what approach and materials would be used in their classrooms. After talking to teachers about these concerns, we wanted to learn more. We wanted to understand how teachers were negotiating this mandate, including what they thought of the mandate and the program that they were required to use, and the impact that the mandate was having on their practice and their students, including the English learners enrolled in their classes. With funding from a grant awarded to us by the Linguistic Minority Research Institute, an organized research unit affiliated with the University of California, we investigated 32 teachers' perspectives on and experiences with instructional mandates requiring them to use the OCR program. All teachers taught in classrooms where English learners of Latino background constituted the majority of students. In this chapter, we report on the interviews that we conducted with the teachers.

Research Design and Data Sources

The 32 teachers whom we interviewed worked in four elementary schools in two urban districts in the San Francisco Bay Area (two schools in each district).² All four schools were of similar size and each served about 400 students; at least

¹ The trend towards utilizing prepackaged programs focused on specific generic language-based skills is also reflected in the 2007 adoption of ESL texts in California. According to Thompson (2009), as quoted in Valdes et al. (2011), these texts focus primarily on the explicit, decontextualized teaching of grammar and linguistic structures.

² In order to maintain the anonymity of those participating in the studies we report on in this volume, we use pseudonyms when referring to teachers, principals, districts, and schools.

90% of all students in each school were ELs of Latino descent. The Webster Unified School District (Webster USD) served just over 48,000 students, while the Montoya Union School District (Montoya USD) served about 13,500 students. Both districts were named Program Improvement (PI) districts the year of our study, which means that the districts had not met testing targets required under NCLB for two years in a row. In both districts, elementary school teachers were required to use OCR or, in the case of five teachers working in bilingual classrooms in the Webster USD, its Spanish equivalent, *Foro Abierto*. District personnel enforced this mandate via periodic monitoring of teachers' classrooms and practices. In addition, teachers were typically required to do the following: (a) adhere to district pacing guides that specified on a daily basis when various components of the program were to be taught, and (b) every six weeks, administer a test that was designed to assess students' knowledge of phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing.

We randomly selected 7–9 teachers from each of the four schools. Our sample included 13 primary grade teachers and 19 intermediate grade teachers, and they shared background characteristics of many elementary grade teachers in our state. For example, most of the teachers were female (75%) and most were of European American backgrounds (69%). Teachers in the Webster USD had taught an average of 14 years, while teachers in the Montoya USD had taught an average of seven years.

We interviewed each teacher using a semi-structured format; the interview questions were designed to capture teachers' perspectives on OCR and how the districts' policies around the program had affected the teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and working relationships. During these interviews, which lasted from 1½ to 2½ hours and were audio-taped, we collected information about decisions the teachers had made around program implementation, the contexts in which they worked (e.g., their professional backgrounds, relationships, understandings, and experiences; their students' communities; and the school and district cultures in which they worked, and how these contexts contributed to their views of OCR). (See Appendix A for a list of the core questions.) We also interviewed the teachers' principals using a similar set of questions, as well as questions intended to elicit information about the principals' enforcement of the OCR mandate.

When analyzing the interviews, we used an inductive, iterative approach outlined by Tesch (Creswell 1994). This involved research team members reading and discussing interviews, creating conceptual memos to note trends in data, and annotating and coding data based on these trends. In addition to developing codes that captured teachers' opinions of Open Court, their views on the mandate requiring they use it, and their level of program implementation, we developed codes that tapped into different dimensions of teachers' experiences, perspectives, and contexts that they stated influenced their views on OCR and their implementation of the program. We began by using the following overarching categories to code these influences: teachers' assumptions about teaching/learning and

knowledge about language and literacy, teachers' education or professional development, teachers' classroom experiences, teachers' life experiences, and teachers' positions and relationships in the workplace. Then, after repeated readings and conversations regarding these different categories, we generated subcategories that captured further distinctions; we subsequently used these subcategories to analyze each of the interviews. Two members of the research team independently coded each interview and we discussed any coding discrepancies in order to resolve them.

Findings

Most teachers (63%) held predominantly negative opinions of the OCR program, and the majority of these teachers (90%) grounded their critiques in situated views of learning and teaching. That is, they thought that some aspect or aspects of the program did not relate to the needs, interests, and/or understandings of their students. For example, teachers commented that the over-reliance on skills instruction was boring to students, the tendency for large group instruction did not meet students' specific needs, and the reading materials were much too difficult for their students (e.g., many students could not independently read the OCR texts, and the reading selections addressed topics that were unfamiliar to or of little interest to students). In addition, five teachers working in the Webster USD complained about being required to utilize an English-medium program with Spanish-speaking students who had little prior experience with reading in English. Also, four of the five teachers who were using the Spanish version complained about inaccuracies in the Spanish translation of the program.

A very large number of the teachers (88%) commented that they were unhappy with some aspect of their professional lives as a consequence of their districts' decision to mandate OCR, with many complaining bitterly that they had lost control over what and how they taught. Seventy-eight percent of the teachers told us that they disapproved of the mandate because they thought that they should be responsible for deciding whether or not they utilized OCR or any of its components. They commented that curricula like OCR should be a resource for them to draw upon when making decisions about how to teach students and how to best meet students' varying academic needs. Even teachers who held positive opinions of OCR shared this view.

In addition to teachers' overall assessment of the program and the mandate requiring them to use it, four additional themes emerged from our analysis of the interview data that elucidate how professional agency and structure (e.g., societal and institutional influences that can support or constrain human activities) were implicated in how teachers negotiated their implementation of the OCR mandate: (1) teachers made principled adaptations to the program, (2) people overseeing teachers' implementation of OCR influenced teachers' actions, (3) administrators

differentiated enforcement of the OCR mandate, and (4) supportive principals and colleagues affected teachers' actions.

Teachers Made Principled Adaptations to the Program

Despite their concerns about working in an authoritarian environment that obligated them to use a program about which they had serious reservations, all but one of the teachers used OCR; however, they commented that they made adjustments to the program in order to better meet the needs and interests of their students. These adjustments included implementing a variety of schema-building and small group activities intended to make the English-medium program accessible to ELs, jettisoning activities that they thought were too hard or too boring for students, taking more time on a unit or with an instructional point that students found difficult, replacing or supplementing the writing portion of the program with another approach to teaching writing, and, in a few cases, using Spanish to explain the English text and vocabulary.

Several teachers also referred to their beliefs about how reading should be taught when justifying an adjustment to or accommodation they made to OCR. For example, ten teachers (31%) talked about how children could not learn to read if teachers strictly followed the OCR program as it is grounded in whole class instruction, uses the same texts with all students, and teaches the same skills and strategies, regardless of students' development and needs. These teachers commented that children learn to read when given texts that they are able to read independently with, when necessary, some support from the teacher. Six of these teachers, all of whom taught at Burgess School, told us that this led them to supplement the program with a small group approach to teaching reading known as guided reading,³ so that children could be appropriately supported when reading books at their instructional level. Interestingly, guided reading had been an approach to reading instruction that most of the Burgess teachers had used prior to the OCR mandate. Similarly, a view that recognizes that reading is primarily an issue of comprehension rather than simply decoding appeared to explain some teachers' decisions to put more emphasis on the reading strategy components of the program; these teachers skipped lessons focused on phonics rules that they thought their students already understood, or spent more time than specified in OCR on reading strategy/reading comprehension activities that supported their students' understanding of the text.

³ Guided reading (e.g., Fountas and Pinnell 1996) is a small group approach to teaching reading that focuses on teaching and reinforcing reading skills and strategies as children are reading. It includes continuously assessing students' reading processes, strengths, and needs through observing children in the act of reading; flexibly grouping students for instruction; focusing on reading for meaning; and using books written at the child's instructional reading level.

People Overseeing Teachers' Implementation of OCR Influenced Teachers' Actions

While most teachers had predominantly negative opinions of the Open Court program and an even greater number were unhappy with their districts' decision to mandate OCR, all but one of the teachers stated that they were complying with district and school-wide policies by using the program. When explaining why they complied with these policies, all but one of the teachers commented that individuals or entities required that they implement the program; over one-third of the teachers said that to do otherwise placed them in jeopardy of losing their jobs. Teachers referenced their principals, district administrators, and district office staff, such as instructional facilitators, when describing the authority figures responsible for making sure that they implemented the program. Several shared accounts of occasions when they had been sanctioned for not utilizing the program as designated in the teachers' manual or in the pacing guide and had been reprimanded by administrators, "written up," and/or involuntarily transferred to another school within their district.

Administrators Differentiated Enforcement of the OCR Mandate

Despite the districts' attempts to have all teachers at a given grade level implement the OCR program exactly as written, this did not happen. Principals were those most immediately tasked with program implementation, but they were not always consistent in how and to what degree they enforced program "fidelity." None of the principals was opposed to the OCR program; however, they varied in their expectations of and actions towards teachers in their schools. For example, four teachers from three of the schools commented that their principals supported their decisions to adjust the program, and differentiated the degree to which they enforced the district mandate. These teachers told us that their principals did not always intervene when they used a practice that their colleagues weren't allowed to use because they taught in ways that the principals admired. This reality is captured in a comment Olga made when explaining why her principal ignored the adjustments she was making to OCR: "The principal has known all year what I do and because she wants me to stay and thinks I'm a good teacher, she cuts me slack." Erin, the only teacher who told us that she had refused to implement the program, said that her principal allowed her to transfer to a position in which she was not required to use the OCR program because her principal admired Erin as a teacher and feared that she would resign if required to use the OCR program.

A careful review of all the interviews revealed further evidence that principals differentiated the degree to which they enforced teachers' compliance with the mandate. For example, teachers in one school reported having very different relationships with the principal, which resulted in different actions on the part of the principal, such as the principal insisting on full compliance with the program in the

case of one teacher and flexible compliance in the case of another teacher. For example, Anna and Diego both had similar years of teaching (27 and 30 years respectively) and both strongly disliked OCR. They also both valued student-centered instruction that allowed them to build on the needs and understandings of students. However, they implemented OCR in very different ways. Diego made only minor adjustments to the program, such as “trimming” a few activities, whereas Anna made more substantive adjustments, which included supplementing the program with additional opportunities for students to read and write and the utilization of a process approach to the teaching of writing. When explaining their actions, the teachers referred to very different relationships with their principal. Diego was an experienced teacher, but was new to the school and had no previous contact with the principal, and by October of his first year at the school, the principal had written him up twice for not following OCR “to the letter.” According to Diego, the principal’s surveillance and monitoring of his teaching compelled him to follow OCR very closely; he engaged in self-monitoring to avoid getting written up again (and possibly being involuntarily transferred to another school), and made only very minor adjustments to the program, despite his concerns about it. In contrast, Anna reported making fairly substantial adjustments to OCR, which she felt she could do because of her longstanding relationship with the principal and her confidence that the principal would approve of the way she was using the program.

Supportive Principals and Colleagues Affected Teachers’ Actions

Half of the teachers told us that at some time or other their principals or other school-based personnel (e.g., literacy coaches) directly or indirectly supported their efforts to make adjustments to the program and/or approved of the adjustments that they were making. This was particularly evident in the case of teachers working at the two schools in the Montoya USD. Both principals were new, as were the literacy coaches. Teachers working at these two schools described their former principals as strict enforcers of the district-wide policy requiring teachers to use OCR, whereas they viewed their new principals and literacy coaches as much less authoritarian. Teachers offered a variety of reasons for the more flexible enforcement under the new administrators, but many teachers attributed it to their principals’ and literacy coaches’ views about teaching and learning, including the role teachers should play in instructional decision-making and the role administrators should play in supporting teachers’ work. Both of these principals confirmed these teachers’ views when they told us that they were more flexible in their enforcement of the mandate than their predecessors. Further, four teachers working in the Montoya Unified school district told us that the adjustments they made were done with the approval of school district administrators as well as their principals.

Teachers also described how their relationships with colleagues at their schools influenced the degree to which they implemented OCR. In the case of the primary grade level team at Burgess School, which was comprised of several veteran teachers who had worked at the school for ten or more years, teachers talked about how they supported one another in figuring out how to effectively implement the program. In addition, teachers talked about teacher leaders at their schools who appeared to have an impact on program implementation. For example, some teachers at Burgess School commented on the influence of veteran teachers with experience using OCR who had been involuntarily transferred to their school when their former school was reconstituted; Amy, a second-year teacher, was particularly appreciative of the support these teachers provided, including teaching demonstrations in her classroom.

Resistance as Principled and Accommodating

When examining occasions when teachers in the OCR study reported taking some resistive action to counter or mitigate the mandate, we found that teachers' actions tended to accommodate the institutional authority of the schools and/or the district within which they worked. This was manifested in their decision to engage in individual, subtle, resistive actions that were not known to district administrators.

Every teacher participating in this study reported making some adjustments to the program (e.g., eliminating program components, utilizing books and other materials that were not part of OCR, replacing the writing portion of the program, and occasionally teaching small groups of students instead of engaging in whole-class instruction). When asked why they made adjustments to the program, the majority of teachers (69%) said they did so in order to better meet the needs, interests, and understandings of their students.

Determining whether or not teachers conceived of their curricular adjustments as resistance was not easy to ascertain in the case of those who claimed that either their principal or literacy coach approved of, or at the very least, condoned the way they were implementing the curriculum. In these cases, it seemed as though the individuals and entities overseeing the teachers' work played a role in their efforts to resist the OCR mandate, albeit via subtle measures. For example, this appeared to be the case with Erin, the only teacher in the study who told us that she had refused to implement the program. Yet, she found a way to do so without disobeying district policies or challenging her principal's authority—she took a job as an intervention teacher working with recent immigrants because, according to district policy, teachers who worked with students who had low levels of English proficiency did not have to use OCR. Erin explained that her principal agreed to assign her to this position after Erin made it known to everyone at Burgess School that she wouldn't stay at the school if she were required to teach the OCR program. According to Erin, her principal's positive opinion of her as a teacher played a role in the administrator's decision to let Erin become the intervention teacher.

In accordance with our definition, resistance also takes the form of making negative views of a required policy known to others in one's workplace. Thirty-four percent of the teachers participating in our study reported conveying negative views about the OCR program and/or mandate to others in their school communities. In most cases, teachers stated that they shared their views with colleagues and/or site administrators. Several teachers referred to costs associated with sharing negative views of the program with others. For example, Steve revealed that he had been involuntarily transferred twice for "deviating from the curriculum," and had decided to remain silent about his views on OCR and follow the program, despite his concerns about it. He said, "So now I do not give an opinion one way or the other. Last year, I was threatened with a letter of unprofessional conduct for deviating from the scripted program." Ellen expressed similar concerns after telling a subcommittee of teachers and school administrators that she would not stay at Burgess School if the Open Court mandate continued to be strictly enforced at that school during the coming year. On several occasions after this event, she told us that she worried that her job was in jeopardy, citing the cases of other vocal critics of the program who had been involuntarily transferred. In one interview, she made the following comments:

You know, people got fired. I mean, I don't think they'd fire me, but I got nervous when Carolyn got let go. I got nervous when Shirley wasn't asked back. I mean, it didn't make sense to me why those people didn't come back... I think I need to be quiet. I think I've made my opinions very clear.

Prior to her involuntary transfer, Carolyn had made her views public to a wide audience when she wrote an article critical of the Open Court program and mandate that was published in an educational magazine. Later, both she and a colleague, Olga, made a presentation at a conference on findings from a research project that they had conducted as members of a teacher research collaborative sponsored by a local university. In their presentation, which they gave the year after both left the district, they reported on how district policies, including the Open Court mandate, had compromised their ability to assess their students' academic progress and engage in instruction that addressed students' needs.

Resignation from one's job can also be conceived of as a type of resistance that accommodates the institutional norms of schools and districts. That is to say, if one will not comply with or abide by a policy or feature of the work environment, resigning one's position can be conceived of as resisting that environment in a way that conforms with its rules. Four teachers at Burgess Elementary School reported that they had decided to resign so that they would no longer be required to implement OCR. In the case of three of these teachers, the district's OCR policy mandate was not the only factor that entered into their decision-making. For example, when explaining her decision to leave the school, Olga referred to the involuntary transfer of her grade level colleagues, the impending birth of her child, and the divisive workplace environment at Burgess School, as the following comments illustrate:

So I think it's created a lot of conflict and, at our school, the whole upper grade team is leaving except for Amy.... and I think that's pretty telling about Open Court when three of those teachers were given involuntary transfers. And I'm leaving because I'm having a baby and I also don't want to teach there anymore. So it's kind of a... I feel like it's sort of like this is what our school has become and if you aren't gonna' be with that, you're either gone, kicked out, or you're sort of leaving by choice.

Conclusion

In examining our interviews with the 32 teachers, we learned that the teachers engaged in largely individual, contained, and subtle acts of resistance. With the exception of Erin, no one told us that s/he had refused to use the curriculum. Instead, all the teachers commented that they made adjustments to the program, thereby accommodating the system within which they worked. While self-report data may contribute interesting insights into the perspectives and actions of individuals, data from classroom observations provides us with a window into what occurs in classrooms. In the following chapter, we focus on the classroom practices of three teachers working in a district with an established history of constraining the actions and autonomy of teachers in order to provide such a window.

Teachers of English Learners Negotiating Authoritarian
Policies

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2012, VIII, 71 p. 3 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-3945-1