Learning to Read in the Wake of Reform: Young Children's Experiences with Scientifically Based Reading Curriculum

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In the United States, educators and children increasingly face comprehensive reform measures that require adherence to curricular mandates and accountability regulations (Ryan & Graue, 2009). Since 2001, the U.S. government has provided competitive funding for and greatly increased the presence of early childhood education in broader national reform efforts (e.g., *Early Reading First, Race to the Top State Funds, Reading First*). Although these policies are not monolithic, the current consortium of urban, school-based reforms driving literacy instruction remains tied more firmly to federal policies than ever before (Pearson & Hiebert, 2010). Increasingly, policymakers evaluate reform success by measuring outcomes, whether through "proven instructional and assessment tools" (Reading First, 2001, para. 1) or standardized, "systematic" approaches to the development of oral language and early reading development.

In early childhood classrooms, the emphasis is placed almost exclusively on early reading, prompting skills-based instruction in areas such as phonemic awareness or alphabet knowledge. Often, educators label the children who do not master such competencies within "proper" time as "struggling readers" or "at risk," immediately providing targeted interventions. Teachers face increased pressure to observe children's literacy development through a singular construct: a discrete set of benchmarks taught through explicit academic instruction, and a perspective that not only narrowly attends to those skills that delineate reading success or failure, but also derives from a deficit orientation.

In this article, I explore the interplay between these curricular policies and young children's socially constructed literacy practices. In recent years, researchers have called into question the efficacy of prescribed commercial curricula in early childhood classrooms (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Despite these concerns, federally funded initiatives and such findings as those presented in the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (2008; see http://www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/earlychildhood.html) continue to promote scientifically based reading curricula and exclude the voices of those most affected by these policies, yet least likely to influence the policy agenda—young children.

Using the qualitative data gathered in a year-long ethnographic study, I analyze three first-grade children's literacy practices over the course of an academic year in a New York City public school that had been mandated to use a scientifically based reading curriculum for children identified as struggling readers from kindergarten through the third grade. During the course of that year, the city launched a "coherent, system-wide curriculum for teaching reading and writing…to raise student performance across the board" (Bloomberg, 2003). From the vantage point of one school that experienced this sweeping reform, Public School (P.S.) 999, I explore how young children both made sense of and negotiated the mandated curriculum and developed an understanding of what it meant to be users of language and literacy within a politicized curricular context.

FRAMING AND THEORIZING EARLY LITERACY IN POLITICIZED TIMES

Using a sociocultural perspective (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), I conceptualize literacy differently than our current federal policy. These federal policies inform curricular mandates that privilege a deficit orientation toward early literacy development, omitting research perspectives that highlight multilingual and multimodal literacy practices (Makin & Díaz, 2002; Pérez, 2004), and narrowing what counts as literacy to the exclusion of many out-of-school and family literacy practices (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). These mandates presuppose gaps in children's background knowledge—as well as oral and written language—and do not view children as "members of their communities, [who] are already literate before they can be expected to expand their literacies in ways valued and rewarded by the schools" (Purcell-Gates, 2007, p. 9).

From this sociocultural perspective, literacy learning cannot be scripted or presented along a linear trajectory. Instead, literacy practices take shape within a dynamic context, where—through joint participation—the learner's existing linguistic resources and purposes converge (or diverge) with the expected behavioral norms manifested through the classroom curriculum. As Razfar and Gutiérrez (2003) explain, "A sociocultural understanding of learning and development focuses on the cultural resources that mediate an individual's participation and engagement in a social practice" (p. 39). Classroom pedagogies involve community membership and participation, inquiry-based learning, and connections between home and school literacies.

Convergent literacy practices represent those instances in which both the cultural norms and the intellectual trajectory of the official curricula overlap with children's constructed meanings, communication, and interactions. For example, when a child and a teacher sit side by side and the learner carefully points and enunciates words as the teacher reads aloud, she engages in a convergent literacy practice. In this instance, both participants anticipate similar learning outcomes, social behaviors, communicative norms, and discursive practices.

However, within a fast-paced and socially vibrant space like an elementary classroom, the learning process cannot

always be that predictable. Divergent literacy practices refer to those instances in which children's intellectual and social efforts do not coordinate with a curricular trajectory. For example, Dyson's body of work (e.g., 1993; 2003) repeatedly presents instances where children's seemingly "off-task" behaviors instead showcase children orchestrating a depth of conventional literacy knowledge that serves their broader social and intellectual purposes. Children's literate practices typically connect to their interests, social pursuits, and experiences, but not as a result of the curricular objectives per se. At times, educators label these moments as classroom management issues and call the children's behavior into question. Nonetheless, in both instances—convergent and divergent—literacy practices (and learning) occur. These terms fundamentally suggest fluidity, flexibility, and movement—important distinctions that stand in contrast to the powerful messages about literacy presented by today's policies. Therefore, for educators and policymakers, this concept of convergent and divergent literacy practices offers a useful way to examine children's participation and understandings of official curriculum beyond the confines of the script.

Mandating Literacy

Although no single program has been mandated across states, policies that endorse the use of "proven methods of reading instruction" (Reading First, 2001, para. 1) have become widespread. Such initiatives (including the one described in this article) position literacy instruction as the primary means of preparing children for a globalized, knowledge-based economy. As a result, standardized commercial literacy programs that describe themselves as scientifically based have proliferated substantially in the years since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

Programs that qualify as scientifically based all share the same emphasis: a discrete set of reading skills and knowledge that all young children must master to fulfill the program's definition of proficient reader. These skills can be broken down into five broader

components as delineated in Reading First, a hallmark policy of NCLB—commonly referred to as the "five pillars"—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Second, these programs must follow a predictive sequence, accomplished through systematic and explicit instruction. This sequence is often dictated by a script that accompanies the program, outlining how children should respond and engage in the activity.

The use of a script, the sequencing of knowledge, and the explicit nature of instruction stem from the premise that the learner lacks essential knowledge and, therefore, requires the most systematic and explicit teaching methods to fill this perceived void. In so doing, this process undervalues the broader knowledge a learner brings to the instructional context because the teacher must simultaneously position his- or herself as a conduit between polices and classroom practice (Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008). Consequently, although scientifically based reading curricula remain the programs of choice for current educational reform, they continue to garner heavy critique (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Meyer, 2002).

(Re)claiming Early Literacy

Despite this deficit characterization of the at-risk young child, numerous early childhood literacy researchers have noted the complex and fundamentally social ways that young children engage in early experiences with text (Dyson, 2003; Genishi, Stires, & Yung-Chan, 2001). These researchers argue that, from birth, young children gain "idiosyncratic and varied bits of knowledge" (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 9) about text. They watch, learn, and engage with varied print resources. Based on these interactions, they expand on their ideas, curiosities, and theories about their worlds, often using the multilingual and multimodal practices that they have learned through participation in their home communities. Therefore, the way schools assess children's literacy practices— most often through curricular benchmarks—do not always converge with the way children take up literacy practices on their own.

Using this framework, one firmly rooted in a sociocultural discourse yet set against the backdrop of high-stakes policies and government ideologies predicating what counts as early literacy, I examined first-grade children's literacy practices sanctioned by mandated curricula—in this case, an in-school remediation program that targeted at-risk readers. I asked: (1) What are the "official" literacy practices of the mandated intervention program; and (2) How do children of the study make sense of, negotiate, and appropriate their literacy practices during the lesson?

METHOD

I designed this study using an ethnographic case study methodology (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The study took place in a New York City public school over the course of one academic school year (2005–2006). During that year, I collected data 3 days a week for 3 hours, on first-grade children's experiences with a mandated literacy curriculum, examining the children's multimodal and multilingual literacy practices across instructional contexts. I used purposive sampling to select the primary participants and included the three children who participated in the mandated reading program (called Voyager), their classroom teacher, and the reading paraprofessional. P.S. 999 is an urban, dual-language (Spanish/English) K–8 school, with an overwhelming majority of the students identifying as Latino/a, predominantly of Dominican or Puerto Rican descent. At the time of the study, 96% of the student body qualified as low income, as identified through participation in the federally funded lunch program. The school community valued linguistic and cultural diversity, and the principal and the assistant principal had been long-time proponents and activists for Spanish dual-language programs.

Context, Participants, and Researcher's Role

Prior to this study, I served as P.S. 999's part-time literacy coach for three years. During that time, I witnessed notable changes in the school's cur-

ricular plan due to both national and district-level mandates. In particular, since most curricular materials and professional development were only offered in English, the appearance of mandated reading and writing workshops, uniform classroom libraries, and scientifically based reading intervention most affected the school's dual-language model. I chose the first-grade teacher's—Caroline—children as the focal participants for this study because I was aware of Caroline's strong commitment to following her school district's initiatives while still maintaining teaching practices she described as both "child-centered" and "play-based."

The school had identified the three children from Caroline's classroom as needing to participate in the reading intervention program, using their performance on a citywide assessment as evidence. The assessment addressed segmentation in phonemic awareness tasks, alphabetic recognition, and decoding. Students qualified for the targeted intervention program, Voyager, if (1) fewer than five of six words were segmented correctly on phonemic awareness tasks; (2) fewer than 24 (uppercase and lowercase) letters were identified correctly; or (3) fewer than five real words were decoded. According to the program literature, Voyager provided:

...a proven three-step solution for effective intervention. [Voyager:]

1.   Immediately identifies struggling readers

2.   Intervenes and moves them to grade level

3.   Monitors progress until intervention is no longer needed (Voyager Expanded Learning, 2005, p.2).

Teachers submitted the student data derived from the intervention program to regional offices to be included in a system-wide database; the system would use this data to track student participation and improvement across the city.

For this study, my sample selection represented those children (all

names are pseudonyms)—Beth, Shannon, and Kenny—who had been identified as Caroline's English-dominant struggling readers (with English texts):

• Beth, a 6-year-old Latina/African American girl, had standardized assessments that revealed difficulty with sound–symbol correspondence in reading and writing.

• Kenny, a 6-year-old Latino boy, entered first grade "below grade level" in the following indicators: spelling, decoding, vocabulary, reading accuracy, and comprehension, according to standardized assessments.

• Shannon, a 7-year-old Latina girl, had received additional supports in reading in kindergarten. She had difficulty rhyming and segmenting words and therefore continued with reading intervention into first grade.

Rosa, a first-grade paraprofessional, led the intervention program. According to the curriculum trainers, much of the value of having a scripted program was that any professional in the school building could teach it. Rosa had a soft-spoken and compassionate demeanor, often working one-on-one with children in her classroom, supporting Caroline's curriculum.

Data Collection

For this study, I considered the individual and collective literacy events that Kenny, Beth, and Shannon enacted during their mandated curriculum. I define literacy events as "occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (Heath, 1982, p. 50). I used several ethnographic data-collection procedures: participant/observation, in-depth interviewing with teachers and administrators, and analysis of such documentation as curricular materials and district memos. All data collected were transcribed and/or audio-taped and catalogued chronologically in several large notebooks (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Data Analysis

I used recommendations put forth by Dyson and Genishi (2005), Marshall and Rossman (1999), and Bogdan and Biklen (1998) to inductively analyze these data. I designed a data analysis methodology that represented the overlapping traditions that undergird this study, drawing upon interpretive research methodologies (Erickson, 1986), the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972), and the literacy event (Heath, 1982) as the unit of analysis. Over the course of data analysis, I carefully read and reread through the collected data chronologically, furthering my familiarity with the collected data. When confronted with "linking patterns of symbol systems" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 84) or frequently repeated coded data, I understood these instances to be the "key events" of my study. Guba and Lincoln (1982 as cited in Meyer, 2002) state that "the general resides in the particular…what one learns from a particular [situation] applies to other situations subsequently encountered" (p.9). With this in mind, I attend to the particular, offering a glimpse of how one mandate unfolded in the pull-out room, called "*el cuartito*" [the little room], from the children's perspective. I used the predictable structure of the intervention program's lesson (e.g., Vocabulary Time)—to organize and categorize the events, borrowing Meyer's (2002) approach, using "emblematic" representations of data, guiding the reader through a characterization of the curriculum that stands to represent the daily experiences of those who were involved.

"TIME TO GO TO EL CUARTITO"

For the first-grade children at P.S. 999, the Voyager reading intervention program typically occurred 3 to 4 days per week. Common scheduling conflicts arose that prevented the group from meeting every day, as originally designed. The program provides the following:

A patented data-driven reading

program designed to move struggling readers to grade level. It fits into and strengthens all major reading programs by providing 30–45 minutes of targeted skill development that follows a scope and sequence of instruction. (Passport K–6 Brochure, 2005, p. 2)

Typically, immediately following recess, Rosa took the first-grade children out of Caroline's classroom and escorted them to the *cuartito*, where they received their reading lesson. The *cuartito* was the only space that teachers could use when pulling children out of their classroom for additional instruction. Overcrowded with desks and a few stray musical instruments, it doubled as a book storage room—filled with books and posters that often grabbed the children's attention.

Learning to Read with a Script

A script can be thought of as a written text and, in the case of Voyager, a script that mapped out the language, word choice, questions, and responses to be spoken by the teacher and children accompanied the curriculum. Early on, Rosa expressed hesitation in her new teaching responsibility. She stated, "I have to get used to reading. I am more comfortable in Spanish...I haven't received much training. I just watched the video and I am following the video and the teacher guide." Yet, as a seasoned veteran having worked as a paraprofessional at P.S. 999 and in the Dominican Republic, she knew that the program was a necessary component of the new citywide curriculum. She worried that the children would "fall behind."

Beyond the physical script that accompanied the program, one can also consider the context as scripted. That is, the daily practices that undergird the program were predictable and repetitive; the script specified the exact amount of time each aspect of the lesson should take, but the group rarely kept comparable time. Because of the remote location of the *cuartito* and with the administrator's attention directed toward other aspects of the mandated curriculum, the group developed their own norms of participation

outside the purview of observers. They deviated regularly from the script, following unique predictable timing. The training videos and materials repeatedly attended to the need for the program to be systematic. When asked about these regular diversions, Rosa stated, "Sometimes for them it is not easy to understand what the book is saying. Sometimes I change the way for them to understand." As such, although the program assumed that children and teachers required a script in order to be systemic, Rosa and the children appropriated a script of their own.

Vocabulary Time

Each lesson component correlated with the skills in the Reading First policy documentation; therefore, lessons began with vocabulary instruction. According to the curriculum, "exposure to vocabulary fosters word usage in student's language...engages readers and builds prior knowledge" (Voyager Passport K–6 Brochure, 2005, p. 5). For example, on the day the children listened to her read "Emilio Tries Something New," the vocabulary words were *receive, root,* and *gradually*. Children were to engage in a brief exchange about the words and Rosa was to instruct them to listen carefully for the words as they read. For example, according to the script, Rosa was to do the following:

A. Show the word card. The first word is receive. What is the word? (Children all respond, "receive")

B. Read the definition. *Receive* means "to get."

C. Repeat steps A and B for *root* and *gradually.*

Building our own vocabulary. During Vocabulary Time, script deviations were common, most notably in that Rosa would ask the children to make sense of the words on the basis of their own experiences, rather than telling them the scripted definition. Because of this instruction, all of the children participated to some extent in the vocabulary tasks; however, Beth and Shannon were the first to take the lead

in detouring from the script to their own interpretations. For example, on the day that Rosa introduced the children to the words *receive, roots,* and *gradually*, no one provided the exact definition provided by the script. Instead, Beth stated, "receive means, to receive a letter." Beth's awareness of the word *gradually* encompassed the same definition presented in the curriculum, but she also provided an example of its use in context:

Script: *Gradually* means "little by little."

Beth: It means "a little." Like a plant, when you measure it and it grows.

When asked to define *seed*, Shannon elaborated on her understanding of the word. She built on her knowledge, an objective of the program, yet she did so in a way that deviated from the ways that the script required her to respond:

Como se llama?...Oh! A *seed* is to grow plants...First, you get the little seed from the packet and then you get a little growth—like right there. [She leans in and points to the illustration at the bottom of the book facing Rosa.] And then you dig a little hole, put the seed in and cover it. And water it—every single day. And then the last day....you do not have no more water and it GROWED. It grows BEAUTIFUL!"

In both cases, Shannon and Beth integrated their personal experiences into their interpretations, providing definitions that demonstrated a working knowledge of the academic language presented in the curriculum. In other examples, words lent themselves to conversations that all children could access. The following excerpt shows the children engaged in a lively conversation about the word *tighter*.

Shannon: When you pull something!

Kenny: And grab.

Beth: But very tight.

Shannon:(Shannon takes Isabel's arm and pretends to squeeze it) Grrrrr...very tight. See, holding it very tighter.

Kenny: Like, your belt is on very tight.

Rosa: Yes, tight, very tight.

The script called for Vocabulary Time to be brief. Yet, it rarely was, as Rosa and the children often took this opportunity to engage in conversations with each other, sharing their collective understanding of words. The conversational nature of these episodes was not the primary objective of Vocabulary Time; however, this type of social interaction reflected a seminal aspect of their school's broader attention to oral language development and therefore, it took on a life of its own during the intervention program.

In these instances that one could classify as curricular digressions, the script was never fully abandoned, and therefore presented instances of confusion or nonverbal communication. For example, such words as *pollen, attract,* and *pollinate* left the children with less to say to each other and with puzzled faces. Of the three children, Kenny seemed least likely to participate, responding in silence or with self-doubt. For example, once when asked to define the word *nutrient*, he initially stated, "I don't know," and then suggested, "healthy stuff?" Although this response was not the one in the script, it instigated a conversation in which the children named as many healthy foods that they could recall.

Vocabulary conversations also provided humor. For example, when Rosa searched for the children to define *bare* as "to uncover something," no one produced this response. Shannon, did, however provide fits of giggles when she stated, "Bare. I don't know what that means...OK, it naked. Like if you got no clothes. If you got no pajamas... panties..." In turn, consciously or not, Rosa's digressions seemed to be the place where the children moved closer to this curricular objective; that is, they created a space that allowed for

expanding awareness of and attention to academic language. Although the program assumed a deficit stance, Rosa's and the children's natural inclination to veer off script so that they might mobilize their own understandings of words provided a deeper awareness of the vocabulary presented.

Story Time

Immediately after that session, Rosa read the children a text that embedded the previous vocabulary. Story Time offered "rich content [that] engages readers and builds prior knowledge. [These] daily passages empower students for understanding" (Voyager Passport K–6 brochure, 2005, p. 4). Although the topics—growing a garden, visiting a beach or relatives—were not necessarily unfamiliar, they differed from the topics that the children brought into their play, which typically involved daily interactions with friends and family members, favorite television programs or movies, or memories they wished to reenact, such as family vacations or school moments.

During Story Time, Rosa remained in her seat as the children sat and listened around the small table. She held the book—containing 10 stories titled *Adventures*—in front of her as she read, and the children were instructed to listen to the text for the vocabulary they had just learned. The children's bodies were often seated on the desk or leaning in toward Rosa as she read. The Story Time the children experienced in the *cuartito* was different from the one that Caroline, their lead teacher, engaged in with them on the rug in their classroom. There, Caroline engaged them in animated readings of texts in Spanish and English, soliciting ideas, praising responses, and building community through shared texts. In contrast, in the *cuartito*, the children created new terms for enacting Story Time. Recognizing that Rosa's eyes were on the text for at least 3 to 5 minutes, they took advantage of this portion of the lesson to engage in dramatic play among themselves.

Story time or play time? The first few times that Rosa pulled out the script and began reading, the children

giggled and stared inquisitively because they were not accustomed to someone reading a script to them. Rosa expressed discomfort reading to the children rather than speaking with them, stating, "I don't know if I am doing the right thing." This apprehension seemed to be apparent to the children. They often playfully looked over her shoulder or mimicked her reading along. Beth once told Rosa politely, "Just say it in Spanish," a statement that seemed to demonstrate that she sensed Rosa's discomfort. On another occasion, when reading the text about nutrition, Rosa miscued the word *tummy* to say *mummy*. Without seeing the print, and seemingly not paying attention, Shannon relied on the meaning of the text to correct Rosa's mispronunciation that had otherwise gone unnoticed.

As might be expected in any situation with young children, with the teacher's gaze steadily focused on a text, the children often took this opportunity to engage in play. As Story Time unfolded, so too did the children's play. The children would play by themselves, with nearby objects, and with each other. Using available tools, the children engaged in dramatic play, and, at times, invited a fellow classmate to join in the play. Initially, the children participated in linguistic play, drawing on words or statements that Rosa read. For example, on the day that Rosa read the story "Beth's Garden," the children's ears perked up as soon as Rosa read the title. What started as eye contact was followed by smiles and continued on to be a game in which they would make a surprised face (covering their mouth with their hands) every time Beth's name was mentioned. This act of silently dramatizing the story's events persisted over the course of their sessions. When a story mentioned blooming flowers, for example, Shannon mimicked smelling flowers and, in an exaggerated voice, declared, "Lovely! Lovely!" The children also used imaginary tools and physical postures to entertain themselves and to elicit responses from one another. Shannon, for example, frequently brought invisible nail polish with her to the *cuartito*. Beth and Kenny preferred to mimic having a book in their hands, silently

enunciating each word as they followed along and read like the teacher.

Over time, they began to discretely bring toys or objects with them to the room and pull them out as soon as Rosa began to read. For example, on several occasions, Shannon played with lip balm, a mirror compact, or a comb, pretending to use them. Kenny used his pencil, pretending that it was talking to his finger.

The children's play and social lives often wove seamlessly in and out of the lesson while Rosa followed the script. In so doing, the children used the unintended tools provided by story time—concentrated time to look at each other and interact—as an opportunity to engage in play. Rosa occasionally reminded the children to pay attention. However, by and large, most of Rosa's attention was focused on reading the text audibly and clearly. That the *cuartito* functioned as a book storage room also provided a space worthy of exploration. Shannon and Kenny secretly read books under the table. On one occasion, Rosa confronted Shannon as she sat mesmerized by the book *Nature*. When asked to put the book away, Shannon replied, "But I love—this book. It has trees and pictures and words." Rosa stated, "Yes, but it will have to wait, until after, okay?" On more than one occasion, Rosa reminded the children not to play with or read books under the table. Rosa told the children, "This is the time that you learn to read."

Read and Comprehend

Immediately after Story Time, the children participated in the Read and Comprehend section of the lesson. The children quickly learned the linguistic and social practices needed to engage in the question-and-answer session. That is, they knew that the first question Rosa was required to ask involved providing a summary of the text. For example, "Who can tell me about *Slow Down for Summer*?" "Tell me, what is the story about?" Sometimes a summary involved a short statement that encompassed some aspect of the text, specifically the character and an event.

Rosa: Shannon, what was this story about?

Shannon: It is about a caterpillar that went out into its cocoon and came out with beautiful wings.

During the question-and-answer process, the children recognized that each one of them was required to take a turn responding to a specific question and that Rosa asked the same type of questions. Rosa rarely challenged answers, regardless of their accuracy, a point that highlights her hyperfidelity to the program. Instead, Rosa and the children focused on following the program, fulfilling the requirements of the time and space.

In search of textual clues. At times, this question-and-answer process provided legitimate room for textual inquiry; however, the physicality of materials compromised this inquiry. The children viewed the pictures as an important aspect of the story-time experience, and they moved their bodies in dramatic fashion to see the limited illustrations in the manual outside their immediate field of vision. Furthermore, Caroline, their classroom teacher, often reiterated the importance of illustrations during her storybook reading in the general classroom. However, during this portion of the lesson, the illustrations were not in the foreground of the meaning-making process, and Rosa periodically had to remind the children to sit back or down in order to listen to the story properly.

Yet, on one occasion, the illustration offered an opportunity for legitimate inquiry. On this day, the children heard an expository text about a plant, a common theme within this Adventure. When discussing the text Rosa had just finished reading, the children used the word *hairs* as a substitution for the vocabulary word roots. This choice of word resulted from the similar appearance of plant roots, as depicted in the illustration in Rosa's manual, to hair.

Beth: The story is about a seed.

Rosa: What happened to the seed?

Beth: And, the seed we are talking

about—there (pointing to the picture facing Rosa). It was growing and making a plant. The first thing to grow is the hair at the bottom of the string.

Shannon built on this idea, explaining her experience with *hairs*, plants, and flowers at her uncle's garden where she "always stays in [her] pajamas… and can play because it is nice and warm." In this sense, the children build upon their ideas and previous experiences, functioning as authentic thought partners, working toward worthwhile sense making, possible only because they manipulated the curriculum for their own purposes. Thus, the inclusion of more interpretations than those within the confines of the script may have offered some of the children the opportunity to provide a more nuanced analysis of the text.

Workbook Time

According to the manual, Voyager lessons were supposed to last 40 minutes—10 minutes on the read aloud/vocabulary component, then 30 minutes on the phonics/workbook component. Yet, in most cases, Rosa and the children inverted this, with conversations about the text lasting the majority of time, leaving little or no room for workbook activities that involved manipulating sounds and symbols.

As soon as Rosa signaled that it was time to use the workbooks, the children raced to open their books to the right page. The children unknowingly created a game, testing each others' memory and speed by turning their workbooks to the appropriate page first. They determined this page by opening to the unused page that directly followed the page that they had worked on in a previous lesson. At times, this game became an individual game, involving a quick plea to Rosa not to tell the page number. In other times, this game occurred among each other, a race to be the first to know on what page they had last worked.

Shannon: I know what page it is.

Beth: Don't tell me.

Shannon: I know.

Beth: Stop it.

The children turned the act of opening the workbook into a contest, using the available forms of the curriculum for lively competition. At the same time, in so doing, the children's playful pursuits diverged away from the curricular purpose of the group, using the format to engage instead in what might be qualified as off-task behavior. **Choral reading of story.** The first part of workbook time involved chorally reading a text together—a predictive text that involved previously introduced basic storylines and sounds/letters. Rosa repeatedly reminded the children to read in unison and corrected them for decoding errors and intonation. The children enjoyed the performative aspect of this reading.

Rosa: Shannon, let's read it together, ok?

Children: I am Sam.

Rosa: Who is Sam?

Children: Sam I am!

Rosa: Good. Do you see that when you start a sentence, it is a capital letter? Do you see the period at the end of the sentence?

They noted exclamation points and punctuation marks in their dramatic readings and raised their voice when they wanted public notice of their reading. In addition, they often tried to read quickly to be the first one finished.

After the choral reading, the children engaged in the final workbook activity, one that involved instruction of sounds, letters, and spelling. Rosa began this section by asking the group about the "new sound" of the day. Take, for example, the following example:

Rosa: Ok. Now look at page 33. Let's see if we have a "new letter." Tell me if you see the new letter.

Shannon: O.O.O.

Rosa: O is not a new letter. We have been studying it.

Kenny: L.

Shannon: (to Kenny) That's not a new letter.

Kenny: Well, we already started on C.

Rosa: What about L? What is the new letter? What is the new letter? Shannon?

Shannon: L.

Everyone: L.

Rosa: Very good. Circle the L. Locate l and capital L. Okay. Let's read the letter and the sound. Three times.

As was the case during Vocabulary Time, the program assumed the children's knowledge base to be minimal, and therefore, each new letter presented a new learning opportunity. Yet, the children not only brought an understanding of the letter, but also reconfigured the time and space to playfully interact with one another.

After the children practiced the sounds, Rosa dictated words and the children wrote them in their workbooks. In general, it was rare that the group made it this far in the lesson. Regardless of their previous progress, each day, the group began a new lesson rather than complete the unfinished lesson from the day before. Upon returning to their classroom, the children often arrived after the commencement of the writer's workshop lesson, whereby their classroom teacher would gesture to Rosa or the children to come speak to her so that she could reacclimatize them into the class lesson.

DISCUSSION: CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT LITERACY PRACTICES

In discussing these findings, I present the convergent and divergent literacy practices that occurred during the intervention program. I use the term convergent to mean those times in the *cuartito* when the children either collectively or individually articulated knowledge that correlated with the intervention program's learning goals. Divergent, in contrast, suggests those incidences when the children's practices did not correlate with the lesson plan, but instead the children used, borrowed from, and appropriated their curricular context to (re)create their own literacy and cultural practices within this allotted time and space. Policies predicated both Rosa and the children's participation in the intervention program. However, through the data presented here, we catch a glimpse of the human experience behind this policy, demonstrating that young children will engage in their own literacy practices in spite of and in light of their instructional context.

The children's social and intellectual pursuits converged with the curriculum most notably during Vocabulary Time. Kenny, Beth, and Shannon rarely repeated the definition that Rosa presented, and instead they brought in stories and word associations of their own, drawing connections between words and experiences, seamlessly and consistently. Although they still did not follow the script, the children transformed Vocabulary Time in a way that allowed them to bring their knowledge, extend upon notions of textual audience, and engage in legitimate intellectual inquiry. For instance, in their lively discussion of the word *tighter*, the children uncovered multiple ways to define the word, exhibiting semantic knowledge of a written word. Rather than passively accepting a scripted definition, they demonstrated that words have dimensions of meaning. This awareness that word meaning exists on a continuum underscores Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) view that vocabulary knowledge is not an "all-or-nothing proposition" (p. 9). Rather, the ability to rapidly recall a word's meaning remains largely dependent on context—both of the text and discourse community in which one is using it. Therefore, to define a word based on a scripted definition may present a difficult charge and perhaps, a less than ideal way to teach word knowledge

to anyone, let alone young, bilingual literacy learners. With that said, the children still used the time to build and expand upon their vocabulary, resulting in convergent literacy practices between learner and curriculum.

The curriculum positioned literacy development as an individual dimension (Green & Dixon, 1996), via a series of discrete questions or answers that enhanced the child's progress as a reader. Yet, the children's literacy practices were embedded in social practices that the children appropriated through the script, thereby establishing their own communicative system or discourses (Gee, 1996) in the *cuartito*. The administration and teachers at P.S. 999 valued oral language development, as evidenced in their dual-language mission and in the classroom teacher's emergent literacy pedagogical practices (e.g., Strickland & Morrow, 2000) in Spanish and English (e.g., storybook reading, literacy centers, interactive writing). Despite this, given the English-only approach of the mandated curriculum, the program excluded, for the most part, the bilingual language and literacy resources Beth, Kenny, Shannon, and Rosa brought to the reading intervention program. The curriculum did not invite this type of linguistic knowledge, nor did it make provisions for it in regard to the program's potential audiences.

From a sociocultural vantage point, we know that school policies do not govern children's localized language and literacy practices. In this case, the children shared an understanding of not only how they were to communicate in school (not just in the *cuartito* per se) but also the school mission that valued bilingual and bicultural knowledge. As such, when orchestrating Story Time, they changed the rules—turning their bodies to see the picture, talking out of turn, code switching between Spanish and English—making what Kontovourki and Siegel (2009) described as "local bids for meaningful practice even as they are disciplined by mandates and the institutional arrangements of schooling" (p. 37). While the program intended to be a quick reading of the text followed by oral comprehension questions, it instead supported prac-

tices not sanctioned by the curricular guidelines. Beth, Shannon, and Kenny brought stories of family members, reconciled some linguistic gaps (e.g., hairs for roots), and recontextualized the *cuartito* in a manner that allowed it to converge with the literacy practices with which they were already familiar. Children, including those raised in multilingual and/or urban contexts, are born into families that share and hear stories (Genishi & Dyson, 2009); this fact constitutes part of the wonder of the human experience. These children did just what children who listen to stories do: they made use of their collective social and linguistic resources, approached text reading with a sense of purpose, and physically reimagined the space to suit their experiences and intellectual endeavors.

Other instances revealed divergent practices; that is, instances in which the children's actions seemed to directly contradict the curricular mandate's call for uniformity. Reading—as actualized by a teacher's head turned in the direction of a script—served numerous social functions for the children. As they learned how to blend sounds, read symbols, and answer comprehension questions, they also learned social roles—what it means to be a student, a friend, a jokester, or the quiet one. These three children used the curriculum to facilitate play, to reinvent the structures of the curricular program, and to take advantage of the fact that their general classroom teacher was not in charge. As others have demonstrated (e.g., Dyson, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2009), children intertwine their awareness of literacy development with their broader development as playful beings. In fact, according to Vygotsky (1978), it is through play that the young child often develops both higher-order thinking skills and the level of abstract thought required to understand the symbolism of written language. For the children at P.S. 999, play became a divergent literacy practice, a way for children to work through issues of literacy on their own terms, rather than through the strict script of the curricular mandate.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS UNSCRIPTED TERRITORY

Hidden behind a guise of objectivity, the scientifically based curriculum at P.S. 999 downplayed the knowledge that Rosa and the children brought to the learning context. Children are unpredictable. By finding moments within the curriculum to read a book under the table, extend concepts in the text, or amuse each other with the playfulness of words—Rosa and the children deviated from the script and demonstrated the importance of social interaction in the development of oral and written language (Pérez, 1998). In so doing, the children evidenced a seamless ability to maneuver both the official and unofficial practices of the curriculum, suggesting a deep awareness of their social context and a sense of intuition rarely attributed to a struggling reader (Spencer, 2009; Triplett, 2007). All three children's academic performance allowed them to be promoted to second grade; however, their classification as at-risk readers—per the Voyager-program definition—would continue to follow them.

As policies predicate that children "race to 'conventional' skills" (Orellana & D'warte, 2010, p. 297), early childhood educators need to apply a broad range of pedagogical knowledge, including practices that support the tenets of scientifically based reading instruction. I offer this research as a response to the current policy climate of high-stakes testing in urban public schools across the United States—particularly those with linguistically and racially diverse student populations (Socolar, 2005). As a strong and growing movement toward scientifically based reading curriculum continues to dominate literacy policies, it is important to provide empirical data that reveals the consequences of policies and the particulars of enactment.

Beth, Kenny, and Shannon's experiences highlight the necessity of viewing policy from the perspective of a child. Although they were only one group of children among countless others whose curriculum reflected these mandates, the implications remain substantial. We might use their

stories to not only rethink the literacy gap, but also to interrogate the curricular mandates being heavily promoted and funded in today's early childhood education reform efforts (Teale, Paciaga, & Hoffman, 2007).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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