

Political tensions: English teaching, standards, and postsecondary readiness

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this paper was to highlight ways two novice secondary English teachers negotiated the politics of college and career readiness along with the literacy needs of students, in the age of accountability. **Design/methodology/approach:** This three-year longitudinal qualitative case study focused on two participants in English teacher preparation and their first two years in the classroom. **Findings:** The findings focus on participants' definitions of college and career readiness as it pertains to their English Language Arts classrooms. Next, the focus is on two themes: tensions these novice teachers experienced as they attempted to build classrooms focused on postsecondary readiness, and the ways in which they worked to bridge the gap between their definitions of college and career readiness and the realities of their classrooms. **Research limitations/implications:** Connections among high stakes testing environments, postsecondary readiness and literacy teacher education are important to the field. Studying the experiences of novice teachers can fill a present gap at the intersection of these concepts. **Practical implications:** Curriculum in teacher education should introduce standards, as well as provide a platform for negotiating and critiquing them. Three focus areas to help pre-service teachers mitigate tensions between minimum skills assessments, college readiness and literacy are personal experience, collaboration and reflective partnerships. **Originality/value:** There has been little to no research done on the tensions between preparing all students to be college and career ready and the minimum skills based priorities that govern many school systems and its impact on novice teachers. This classroom reality is important to literacy teacher education.

Keywords: Critical literacy | English teaching | Literacy teaching | Teacher education | College and career readiness | Literacy | English language arts

Article:

Introduction

In education, literacy is often political. When policies are created, literacy standards are at the forefront of these conversations. Standards are presented as apolitical, fact-based concepts meant to show a mastery of skills. In reality, standards are texts forged in political environments and

frequently used as accountability tools to sort students, teachers and schools into identifiable, punitive categories. Clearly, the personal experiences of students and teachers in schools are housed in larger social and political structures, and the current focus on postsecondary readiness is no different. While conversation around college and career readiness (CCR) accurately highlights the need for collective solutions to collective issues, standards – including CCR standards – can negatively impact underserved students already struggling (Castro, 2013). Decades of research outlines the negative impacts of the standardization of education (Kohn, 1999; McNeil, 2000; Reigeluth, 1997; Valenzuela, 2005); however, the goal of helping students achieve is at the very heart of education. This tension is one that novice teachers must navigate as they become more experienced educators.

In teacher preparation, the politics of CCR can create a tension for literacy faculty. Teacher educators understand the importance of high standards and classroom environments that prepare all students for college and career. Yet, politically forged standards, along with their testing regimes, are used as sorting mechanisms based on mastery, a concept that negatively impacts already underrepresented students. Research on postsecondary readiness often ignores how educational inequities related to race and class affect the “mastery of skills” for many high schoolers (Conley *et al.*, 2011). For literacy teacher educators, the challenge is to build programs that help preservice teachers develop college-ready classrooms that simultaneously resist educational inequities (Castro, 2013).

To address this issue, this study looks at how early-career literacy teachers made sense of CCR alongside state accountability standards and attempted to create equitable classrooms. The research question that drove this study was: In what ways do two novice secondary English teachers negotiate the politics of CCR in the age of accountability, along with the literacy needs of their students?

Literature review

To explore how novice teachers navigate the politics of CCR in secondary English classrooms, the literature review is focused on two areas:

1. origins and definitions of CCR; and
2. navigating educational tensions of standards-based reforms.

Origins and definitions of CCR

In the USA, with the launch of No Child Left Behind and its goal of increasing rigor, Standards Based Reforms (SBR) became widespread. SBR are meant to reform academic expectations, use assessments to monitor performance and develop accountability provisions that reward or sanction schools’ performance (Hamilton *et al.*, 2008). The more recent evolution of SBR focuses on enhancing college access and success. Educators and policymakers argue college completion is now a prerequisite to increased earnings, job satisfaction, higher levels of civic engagement and lower crime rates (Baum and Ma, 2007; Wiley *et al.*, 2010). In response, TX created the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS). Similar to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the CCRS were borne from a recognition that high school standards are not

enough to prepare students for postsecondary pathways, and meant to ensure that all students graduate from high school without needing remediation in postsecondary courses [Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), 2009]. This work coincides with the main goal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is all students graduating from secondary school ready for college and career, irrespective of income, background, race or disability (USA Department of Education, 2010).

CCR is defined as the level of preparation a student needs to enter postsecondary education. Students must succeed without remediation in credit-bearing courses. There are four interrelated dimensions to this definition:

1. key cognitive strategies;
2. key content knowledge;
3. academic behaviors; and
4. contextual skills and awareness (Conley, 2010).

To be college ready, then, students need to understand how to prepare for and enroll in a postsecondary institution and they need to construct a college–student identity during their high school experience to make choices relevant to their future (Hooker and Brand, 2010). Research also shows that postsecondary success is shaped by students’ literacy proficiency in early grades, study strategies and persistence when faced with challenging academic tasks (Dunston and Wilkins, 2015).

Definitions of CCR are strengthened when they are more culturally nuanced (Castro, 2013) to address the specific struggles that minority and first-generation students often have at postsecondary institutions (Hungerford-Kresser and Amaro-Jiménez, 2012; Oseguera *et al.*, 2009; Sólorzano *et al.*, 2005). Underrepresented groups often attend high poverty schools that lack resources, advanced courses and support for college preparation in comparison to more affluent schools (Jerald *et al.*, 2009). While “skills” are often the focus when discussing CCR, academic literacies are equally important. For a student to be deemed “successful” or college ready, he/she must be able to learn the multiple discourses of the institution that change from class to class or group to group (Bartholomae, 2003; Elbow, 1998). Because postsecondary attainment remains stratified by race, ethnicity and class (Rosenbaum and Becker, 2011), scholars argue for an educational climate that helps all students learn and succeed in whatever pathway they choose after graduation (McCaughy and Venezia, 2015), and this has been the focus of CCR in the USA. Thus, to prepare students to be college and career ready, educators must attend to the academic needs of our most neglected students (Castro, 2013) in classrooms. Therefore, it is imperative to enhance discussions of standards and curriculum in literacy education so that teachers are able to navigate the unique needs of students along with standardized curriculum and assessment.

Navigating tensions of standards based reform

There is little research on how teachers navigate CCR; thus, this section is devoted to the broader concept of SBR. Much research has explored this concept with teachers at various points in their career, particularly in relation to high-stakes assessment (Handsfield *et al.*, 2010; Rex and

Nelson, 2004), but the scholarship on early career teachers is particularly relevant. Although teachers respond differently to curricular mandates despite similar beliefs (Dooley and Assaf, 2009), studies illustrate teachers abandon practices and beliefs about “good” teaching to ensure success on assessments (Brown, 2015), and even experienced teachers are not immune (Assaf, 2008). In schools where SBR has been replaced with test-based reform, novice teachers report the need to learn about content, pedagogy *and* how to teach to tests (Hamilton *et al.*, 2008; Massey *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, early-career teachers report fatigue as they teach against the grain and question the authority of curriculum experts in a space that discounts their expertise (Allard and Doecke, 2014). As a result, research indicates half of all novice teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, especially those impacted by the high stakes of SBR (Boyd *et al.*, 2011).

Many teachers are also able to navigate accountability pressures in ways that help them sustain and enact professional beliefs about education. In a study of a novice secondary teacher, findings illustrated how the teacher negotiated ideologies with allies, students and practitioners to problem-solve how to best teach writing to her students (Vetter, 2014). Sleeter and Stillman (2007) reported ten novice and experienced teachers in California prioritized standards to focus on quality rather than quantity, created culturally relevant content, fostered college readiness and engaged students in collaborative and constructive learning experiences. Zoch (2017) found four teachers in their 3rd-6th years of teaching were able to comply with test preparation by covering text features, while also incorporating authentic literacy materials that supported students’ cultural identities. Understanding teachers’ decision-making and negotiations of complex curricular demands offers important insights for teacher education. However, while research speaks to the broad experience of teachers navigating SBR, there is a need for a more specific examination focused on CCR, standards and novice English teachers. To explore that gap in research, this study focuses on how two novice teachers navigate the politics of CCR within their secondary English classrooms.

Method

This study is a three-year longitudinal qualitative study of two novice literacy teachers as they complete their final academic year in teacher education and begin their careers in public schools. The research question that drove this analysis was: In what ways do two novice secondary English teachers negotiate the politics of CCR in the age of accountability, along with the literacy needs of students in their classrooms? The two participants highlighted as case studies were selected because they:

- were finishing their preparation in the first year of the study;
- identified as Latina; and
- planned to stay in the area to teach.

Data were collected by Holly during their senior year, and first two years of teaching.

Case study

This work used case study methodologies. Many case study scholars in education draw from a constructivist paradigm that claims truth is individually perceived and socially constructed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). One goal of the approach is to foster a trustworthy relationship between the researcher and participant so the participant is comfortable telling his/her story. Those stories, or descriptions of the participants' reality, enable the researcher to comprehend participants' actions and better understand a phenomenon within a context.

For the reasons above, case study helped gain a rich and complex understanding of the experiences of these two novice teachers throughout their early teaching career. This method also allowed the researchers to highlight each participant as an individual case, while examining themes encountered across cases. Cross-case analysis helped define and broaden themes that offered insight into how novice teachers make sense of CCR.

Participants

Alejandra's (all names are pseudonyms) parents are from El Salvador. Both are college graduates. Her father has a finance degree, and her mother a marketing degree, though she became a teacher. When Alejandra was two, her family moved to El Salvador and she attended an American school. They returned to the USA by the time she was seven because of political unrest. She graduated from a 3A high school she claimed was about "60 per cent Hispanic and African American". She characterized herself as "Miss 4.0 and valedictorian and stuff" and earned a number of college acceptances. Alejandra chose State University (SU) even though it was close to home because of scholarship money. She argued the full ride was a "good opportunity [she] couldn't turn down". She began pre-med, then decided English teaching was the appropriate degree path because of her passion for literacy, but managed to graduate in four years by taking heavy semester loads and full summer sessions.

Stephanie's family is very proud of her teaching career. She is a first-generation, Mexican-American college graduate. Her mother has a ninth-grade education and her father graduated high school and attended junior college for two years. Her father's work with oil companies meant her family lived in a variety of cities with oil-centric economies. Eventually they settled permanently in the town Stephanie graduated high school in, where her father started a home remodeling business. This town is on the outskirts of a big city near SU, and is now a thriving suburb. While her high school was 4A, Stephanie told me, "[My town] started to get big, but it was just country living pretty much". Her parents encouraged her to apply to college because she was "the most willing to go". Stephanie had a 3.4 high school grade point average and went to junior college before transferring to SU. She opted to finish her degree at SU because her best friend was there. Stephanie started out as a psychology major before gravitating to English Education.

These two case studies were chosen because they identified as Latina. However, the similarities in background end there, and that contrast is what made them ideal cases for this study. Latinx students come from an array of backgrounds with a variety of life and academic experiences. For example, some transfer and some begin as freshmen at four-year institutions. Particularly at large, urban, state universities, these diverse students find their way into English Education, and will be entering our local public school system as novice teachers.

University setting

SU is located in a large metropolitan area in the southwest. In 2014-2015, SU's on-campus student enrollment was 34,868. The six-year graduation rate was approximately 45 per cent. The institution was ranked fifth in the nation for undergraduate diversity, and a Hispanic population of 25.4 per cent earns SU a designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution. At the same time, in 2014-2015, the year the study began, an estimated 43 per cent were eligible for Pell grants and 29 per cent were first-generation college students.

Participants were enrolled in a teacher education program for secondary English Language Arts, Grades 7-12. Holly was their instructor in their methods course (Fall 2014) as well as their supervisor during student teaching (Spring 2015). Curriculum in the methods course was designed to:

- introduce students to the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)* and CCRS while giving them space to critically read standards;
- focus on postsecondary readiness for all students via the English Language Arts;
- highlight critical literacies and the needs of underrepresented students in literacy classrooms;
- give students a place to reflect on their own educational histories and interrogate their personal stances; and
- model strategies for meeting a variety of student needs.

Settings for novice teaching

In addition to collecting data in methods and student teaching, Holly studied participants in their first two years of teaching. Alejandra began teaching at the high school she graduated from, in an English Department primarily populated by her former teachers. She was hired by her former high school principal. Stephanie began teaching at her middle school student teaching placement when her supervising teacher retired. Both women secured jobs by June following their senior year in college. The enrollment demographics of their campuses can be found in Table I.

Table I. Enrollment demographics: novice teaching

Ist year teaching	Student total	Economically disadvantaged (%)	African American (%)	Hispanic (%)	White (%)	Other (%)
<i>Alejandra</i>						
High school	743	69	12.1	57.3	26.9	9.7
<i>Stephanie</i>						
Middle school	872	27.4	18.8	20.5	46.4	14.3

Definitions: Texas terminology

While the CCRS is defined above, other terminology appears in this paper that is specific to Texas teachers. Texas has an involved *accountability system* used to rate and rank schools and districts. The standards used to govern grade-level standardized tests and *End of Course (EOC)* assessments are the TEKS. These standards are considered minimum skill requirements in the

state. The testing system is the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (*STAAR*). Students are tested in reading and mathematics, Grades 3-6, writing at Grades 4 and 7, science at Grades 5 and 8, social studies at Grade 8, and EOC assessments are for English I, English II, English III, Algebra I, biology and US History. Students in Texas must pass all EOC assessments to graduate from high school. In other grades, the STAAR test is used to help determine grade-level promotion or retention.

Data collection and sources

Data were collected over three academic years, beginning with participants' methods coursework (taught by First Author) at SU, followed by student teaching, and then their first two years as classroom teachers (Fall 2014-Spring 2017). Observation and interview data began in spring 2015 with student teaching. Each participant was observed six times throughout the course of the student teaching semester, and then four or five times for each of the next two academic years. Each classroom observation was followed by an interview. Interview protocols were always semi-structured. Standard questions included:

Q1. Can you talk to me about the lesson I just saw?

Q2. What went into planning this lesson?

Q3. How does this connect back to your preparation?

Q4. How do you incorporate CCR or thoughts for your students' futures?

Q5. What kinds of goals have you set for yourself this year?

Q6. What have been your successes and struggles to date?

Q7. Do you have any questions for me or is there anything you'd like my advice or help with?

After the first two interviews, participants regularly came to the interviews with their own notes, thoughts and questions, ready to use the time to their advantage. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. For this analysis, the focus is on the first two years of classroom data, with student teaching interviews to help with background and context. Holly took field notes and kept a reflective research journal throughout the three-year study. These were used to triangulate themes uncovered during data analysis.

Data analysis

Constant comparative analysis was used to compare across cases and look for common themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This is the point when Amy entered the study. Initially, each researcher coded separately, looking for themes highlighted by the participants in student teaching and continuing through their induction years related to how they navigated CCR. Interview transcripts were recorded over three academic years: 2014-2015 (student teaching),

2015-2016 (Year 1 in classroom) and 2016-2017 (Year 2 in classroom). Once all 25 transcripts (12 for Alejandra and 13 for Stephanie) had been coded separately, there was a discussion of codes and beginning themes were developed. Codes included:

- Perceptions of CCR (College and Career Readiness);
- Desire for ASB (Asset-Based Teaching);
- Belief in CL (Cooperative Learning); and
- RP (Reflective Practice).

For example, times when participants explicitly described their understanding and enactment of CCR in the classroom were noted. Most of the codes indicated the ways participants focused on those elements in their classroom design and planning. However, reflective practice was coded both for the ways they encouraged reflective practice for their students, and the focus on reflective practice for themselves as educators. Once codes were combined and discussed, the researchers collapsed Codes 1 and 2 into a single theme, and the themes that emerged were:

- a healthy, skills-based approach to English teaching that encouraged college readiness;
- the importance of a student-driven classroom; and
- a focus on reflective practice.

A data chart was used to highlight each code, connect to the above themes and the associated data points, with a note of any outliers, while meeting regularly to discuss potential implications of the findings.

Once the data were charted, it was clear that in an attempt to build a CCR classroom, participants experienced tensions. Researchers then added a “Tensions” column to the data chart. Points of tension were defined as: moments that placed participants in opposition to something within or outside their classrooms, or anything that appeared to cause mental strain or stress. Then tensions were analyzed to gain a better understanding of how these novice teachers navigated CCR in their classrooms, as described below. Excerpted quotations in the following section are emblematic of larger data themes found via analysis.

Findings and discussion

The following section highlights the ways in which two novice secondary English teachers navigated the politics of CCR in the age of accountability, along with the literacy needs of students in their classrooms. Before discussing those themes, however, participants’ definitions of CCR are highlighted.

Defining college and career readiness

Here, participants’ personal definitions of CCR are highlighted to contextualize the themes that emerged. What follows are definitions crafted during preparation that carried over into the novice years.

Stephanie: a student-led classroom.

During her preparation program, Stephanie listed several characteristics of CCR, such as organization, open-mindedness and flexibility. In her first and second year of teaching, when discussing a CCR classroom, Stephanie regularly focused on one point as a way to foster the characteristics listed above – the need for a student-led classroom (i.e. Field Notes, Fall 2015 and 2016). Stephanie negotiated the concept of postsecondary readiness via an image of a student-led classroom. During student teaching she said, “In a college-ready classroom you would see more student–teacher interaction, a lot of conversation going throughout the room, a lot of debating”. For Stephanie, constructive argumentation is CCR. In her first semester teaching, she encouraged students to justify their opinions: “Tell them why! What personal feelings do you have on that? What made you feel that way? Did something happen? So they’re thinking about the way they’re thinking”. Her student-led classroom was one that is steeped in metacognition, and supported student cooperation, deliberation and debate. Stephanie’s definition informed a primary goal: to prepare students in a low-stakes environment for the kind of arguments they will need to make in a college class (Field Notes, Fall 2015).

Alejandra: the importance of multiliteracies.

Like Stephanie, beginning in her preparation program, Alejandra identified a number of CCR characteristics, such as adaptability and study skills. However, Alejandra regularly talked about the importance of a classroom that helped students with multiliteracies. She defined it in student teaching, comparing it to the kinds of writing for standardized tests her students were completing. Throughout her first two years, Alejandra talked about how to take this approach through writing instruction and often contrasted it to the formulaic approaches of writing for a test:

My role is to prepare them for all different sorts of writing [...] multiple literacies that it’s going to take for them to see anything in front of them and be able to read it and write about it.

Alejandra understood the kinds of issues her students would have in college and career with writing if not prepared. Early in student teaching and throughout her first two years, she was focused on a variety of genres outside the ones dictated by standardized assessments. She wanted them prepared for “all different sorts of writing”, and saw herself creating a classroom that would enhance multiple literacies as part of postsecondary preparedness.

Tensions among competing standards, teaching and testing

Both novice teachers dealt with the politics of the test on a near daily basis, especially in spring semester. Participants felt tensions acutely in the differences between preparing students for postsecondary success and preparing them for the Texas minimum-skills assessments. Even into the second year of teaching, testing and preparing to test – dictated by both district and campus requirements – remained a sharp contrast to their desires for their students, as well as a contrast to the CCRS.

When asked about her biggest struggle of her second year of teaching, in April 2017, Stephanie said:

So I think that's the biggest challenge for me right now is just coming up with ways to keep them engaged and to not put them to sleep going over strategies [...] just to find ways to make them engaged in how to answer questions for the STAAR.

As a very engaging teacher, with a student-led, postsecondary-focused classroom, even Stephanie struggled with testing mandates. She added, "That's kind of challenging, but it's just the nature of the beast. So, I just have to figure out something that is effective for them". Stephanie was frustrated and worried about her ability to engage her students prior to their state exam, but she remained confident in her ability to problem-solve. While it was the "nature of the beast" to have to prepare them for the exam, she also knew she could overcome that tension by creating effective lessons. Later, Stephanie expressed her tension that a single-day exam can be a "make or break thing" for her kids. She added: "STAAR just goes against what a teacher ought to be". Here, Stephanie states that she believes preparation for standardized tests does not match her idea of what teaching should be. Such tensions could have dire consequences for students and for Stephanie's career teaching them.

Alejandra echoed this statement in her final interview of her first year of teaching:

I had a difficult time this year getting through STAAR crunch time [...] I had a hard time with that because I felt like my instruction got really watered down with all the requirements that I had to implement. But I don't know, that could end up getting more political about testing and whatnot so – that was just a rough thing to go through this year. It kind of took away from what I wanted my teaching to be like.

In this first-year classroom, testing had a direct impact on her teaching. Alejandra listed one of her biggest tensions of the year as dealing with "crunch time ahead of state testing". She struggled with prescriptive plans and requirements, so much that she felt it "took way from" what she wanted her teaching to look like. In this exchange, Alejandra clearly named the political tensions and struggles of teachers, and particularly for her as a first-year teachers.

In addition, Alejandra found tension in the ways standardized testing impacted her students' goals, making them focus on passing the test rather than postsecondary readiness. During early spring semester of her first year in the classroom, she explained:

When I talk to them, they're like, "Well, I just need to pass my STAAR, I just need to pass my STAAR, I just need to pass this test". And it's sad to me. They shouldn't have to have that ideology. They should be thinking in of long-term consequences [...] It's hard.

Clearly wanting them to think beyond, Alejandra struggled with her students' singular focus on their state exams. However, at the end of the semester she said, "I just need more strategies for communicating with them like the importance of getting through high school and going on, and thinking beyond just four years". Alejandra experienced tension in the build-up to the test. She explained that testing as a short-term goal leads kids to feel finished and this works against the

long-term goals of postsecondary readiness. However, like Stephanie, she wanted to problem-solve and become more effective in this environment:

I want to foster a growth versus a fixed learning mindset. I feel like a lot of – the way some kids are thinking right now is not, “This is something I need to get incrementally better at”, it’s like, “Okay I know this, I’m done”. So fostering a growth mindset, you know like, “I don’t have all the answers, I won’t have all the answers, I will always have questions that I need to answer”. Making everything more inquiry-based would be nice.

Previously, Alejandra’s desire to foster multiliteracies in her classroom as part of postsecondary readiness was highlighted. Perhaps her tensions with testing are best understood in contrast. In spring of her first year of teaching she stated: “But I feel like because of testing, our curriculum ends up being an unbalanced literacy”.

The tension of standardized testing and postsecondary readiness is an ironic one. CCR and the corresponding state standards are touted and encouraged politically. However, standardized tests are used as political tools to assess students and teachers. The data above indicate a tension in assuming these two tools will conveniently coexist. No matter how strong the novice teacher, these tensions are bound to arise. Tensions with standards and tests are not unique; however, Stephanie and Alejandra’s are specifically related to their desire to encourage postsecondary readiness in their classrooms.

Bridging the gap

Despite those tensions, participants honed in on ways to encourage postsecondary readiness as well as success on state exams. Thus, though they reported feeling stress around testing time and less agency with regard to their own curriculum and planning (Field Notes, Spring 2016, 2017), throughout the academic year these novice teachers were preparing students for the immediate high-stakes goals of testing, while also giving them the tools and techniques for pursuing a postsecondary education.

The (em)power(ment) of personal experience.

One way these novice teachers mitigated political tensions that manifested in the classroom was by relying on their experiences as college students to enhance their teaching practice and to give students the “why” they often need – a “why” that goes beyond “because it’s on the test”. While novice teachers lack experience with teaching high school English, they are still very connected to the realities of college readiness and its connections to the English Language Arts.

Alejandra regularly discussed using personal experience to help her students understand the realities that will face them in the near future, and her class’s place in helping prepare them.

In her first interview during her second year of teaching, she stated:

I do get on my soapbox a little bit about, “I went to high school here and I know what it’s like. I understand the struggles you are facing and what it was like to go to SU”, and I’ve

been honest. I told them, “There were things I was not ready for, and part of that is what I faced in high school, so I want you guys to be able to tell me if there’s something stopping you in that way. But everyone here can do anything I’ve done or better”.

Alejandra felt tension in wanting her students to strive for more than passing a test. Above, she is using her dual experience – as a recent graduate of their high school and a recent graduate of the university – to help her students recognize and overcome barriers.

Stephanie, during her first semester teaching, was able to make connections between her personal experiences in college and their state tests. When teaching her students possible strategies to pull out on tests, she tied this to problem-solving:

I was telling them, “It just helps whenever somebody asks you to do something and you don’t necessarily know how to do it, whether it be the directions on your STAAR test or your college professor telling you to write a paper, you should always have a secure method to go to that’s similar if not exactly corresponding to what they’re asking [...]”

Here she is able to talk about the tests she is preparing them for (“the directions on your STAAR test”) as well as their potential futures in postsecondary education (“your college professor telling you to write a paper”). In the end, she highlighted this ability to make connections as one of her great successes of her first-year teaching and a way she overcame some of the tensions of testing:

[...] I felt like I did an exceptional job at letting them know, “This is why you have to learn this [...] because you can apply it to this part and this part of your life”.

Collaboration as a classroom non-negotiable.

Additionally, both women focused heavily on building collaboration. They felt that it was an important way to emphasize the English Language Arts and prepare students for what would happen after secondary school. The focus started early, but became a thread in their teaching practice as they moved through their induction years. It was often in direct contrast to the lessons their teammates were using, even though they were attaching the same state standards (Field Notes, Spring 2016, 2017).

In her first interview as a novice teacher, Stephanie explained that she thought cooperative learning helped build open-mindedness, a skill she said was central to CCR starting with her student teaching experience:

Because in college when you get in—in most of my classes that I took, everybody was entitled to their own opinion. The professor would tell us, “You can have your honest opinion here” [...] It’s a disability to not be able to hear others’ opinions and not even consider them.

While reflecting on her own college experiences, Stephanie began to realize how unprepared she had been to express her opinions in college classrooms because of the difference in environment

(Interview and Field Notes, Spring 2015). She connected this ability to classrooms with open communication and decided early on to integrate those concepts. One example of the way she put this into practice was via an assignment to learn about editorials and editorializing. She had her students create movie trailers. This was different from what everyone on the English team was doing, but she was teaching the same TEKS, so she branched off into her own assignment. Stephanie explained that in addition to teaching students skills like locating important information and summarizing, it also taught them important skills for being college and career ready:

[...] how to be a contributing partner. It taught them because I picked their partners and I intentionally picked people that I know that they don't ever work with or even talk to for that matter, because I wanted them to have to compromise and communicate [...] So it taught them [...] how to adjust to circumstances that are uncomfortable or foreign and learned how to be accountable and reliable [...] (April 2016)

Under pressure to teach state-mandated skills, Stephanie balanced this tension by enhancing her lesson with knowledge and skills she thought would benefit her students in the long run (“I want them to have to compromise and communicate”). Though focused on teaching what is required of her, “soft skills” are never far from her mind or from getting her students college and career ready. In keeping with the theme above, she also referenced her own college experience as a way of helping her reach her students.

In her first interview as a novice teacher, Alejandra explained that she had learned “the power of having students talk – the social nature of learning”. This realization came about during student teaching, though she indicated it was a concept she remembered from methods but did not understand until her field work (Field Notes, Fall 2015). She kept it at the forefront of her goals for her classroom from Day 1, and when asked early spring semester of her first year what was going well, she discussed classroom talk:

I think that's something that I've worked on really hard with these kids [...] they were actually very reticent at the beginning of the year; they were unwilling to talk to each other very much.

She also began to make connections between cooperative learning and communication and other hard skills students need to succeed, as well as them being important soft skills for their futures:

I think that just being a teacher, I noticed that if they don't have something verbalized it's really hard for them to put it into writing. So that's a metacognitive strategy for writing. And also discussing is just a good thing to exercise every day, especially for shyer more introverted kids. I feel like that is something they will need eventually for any situation be it college or career.

Later in her first year, she was still talking about collaboration as one of her first-year successes: She explained:

Surviving, I mean whether it's career-wise or college-wise, I mean if you don't find a good support group or you're not with your colleagues, you're not on a team [...] I mean there isn't a situation where you're not going to have to work with other people [...] I feel like that's the point I have driven home.

The trajectory of this concept is clear with Alejandra. She heard. She began to recognize the importance. She made collaboration a part of her classroom goals and set about achieving this. Like Stephanie, it was an early epiphany about the importance of collaboration and cooperative learning that led her to focus on it in ways that benefited her students and made her classroom a collaborative space. Her goals were clear:

I want to make sure they're holding each other accountable as group members. And also, this is what I speculate I'll get out of it too, is I want more opportunities where I don't talk and they just kind of take charge of their own learning, because that makes it the most meaningful.

Alejandra wanted her students to “take charge of their own learning” because ultimately that is what makes learning “the most meaningful”. This is certainly true of these novice teachers. They took charge of their own learning and managed to navigate some difficult realities in the classroom, all the while focusing on preparing their students for what comes after secondary school.

Implications

This study illustrated how two novice English teachers navigated the tensions of CCR in the age of accountability. While much research highlights how teachers have dealt with SBR (Vetter, 2014; Zoch, 2017), this study focused specifically on CCR, via English classrooms. Findings described tensions encountered and how participants dealt with tensions in ways that aligned with their beliefs about teaching, learning and college-ready classrooms. While the academic conversation about the negative impacts of testing and standards is not new, the competing tensions with the political movement for CCR for all students is. Studying the impact on novice teachers can inform English teacher education programs, as well as inform literacy educators working in the field in this current climate.

Much of the literature suggested that teacher education should be explicit about helping incoming teachers balance competing demands, create a support system and develop political sensibilities (Assaf, 2008; Vetter, 2014; Zoch, 2017). Zoch (2017) also argued teacher educators need to bridge the gap between university classes and political contexts so that educators leave knowing how to respond to curricular demands in ways that maintain students' cultural and linguistic competence. While this study illustrates similar implications, data also point to three specific areas in which teacher educators could help:

- personal experience;
- collaboration; and
- reflective partnerships.

Personal experience

This study indicates a teacher education curriculum that helps pre-service teachers interrogate the concept of CCR, while focusing on their own educational histories, can help them bridge the gap between competing requirements. Students' experiences demonstrate that classroom tensions borne from competing standards and political movements can be mitigated by their personal experiences and the fresh knowledge novice teachers bring to their classrooms about "actual" college, not merely the one-dimensional standards created to demonstrate college readiness.

As stated previously, these two Latina teachers had very different backgrounds upon entering Urban State University, but were able to draw heavily on their own experiences in public school and at a SU to help navigate classroom tensions. They were able to relate in unique ways to the students they taught, which emphasizes the importance of a diverse teaching field. One question raised from this study, however, includes the ways in which novice teachers' cultural backgrounds and school experiences, in this case being Latina and/or first-generation college students, shaped how they perceived and taught CCR. More research focused on the ways in which Latinx and/or first-generation college students navigate these political tensions could provide teacher educators with specific ways to support novice teachers as they navigate those tensions in their own classrooms.

Collaboration

The experiences of these participants indicate the importance of collaboration in mitigating tensions between competing standards. Both of these novice teachers began experimenting with collaboration in their teacher education program, while they understood the realities of collaboration in their own college classrooms. Thus, novice teachers can benefit from teacher education programs that offer collaborative spaces and strategies for interrogating standards and practices, as well as modeling these kinds of interactive classrooms for future teachers. Modeling collaborative strategies and encouraging them during student teaching can help novice teachers encourage postsecondary readiness even when more seasoned teachers on their campuses do not recognize the benefit. A more nuanced view of what college ready means, based on both personal experience and an understanding of standards and critical literacies, fosters a desire for collaborative classroom spaces.

Reflective partnerships

It is likely that an ongoing mentoring relationship with Holly contributed to keeping the concepts from participants' teacher education program at the forefront of their practice. Meeting regularly to discuss pedagogy and practice can help participants see the value in reflection and mentorship. While not the focus of this study, it remains an important question for both future analysis and future research in the field. For literacy educators working in teacher education programs, what kinds of models can we build to remain active participants in their novice teaching experiences?

Moving forward

While postsecondary readiness for all students remains a political focus, as well as a critical focus for scholars committed to enhancing opportunities for underserved students, it is likely that even the strongest graduating students and/or experienced literacy teachers (Assaf, 2008) will experience tensions between creating quality instruction for postsecondary readiness and meeting minimum skills requirements, both of which are typically sanctioned educational goals. Novice literacy teachers are likely to be hired into high-stakes environments, and experience the tensions of competing goals of minimum standards assessments and college readiness for all students. Teacher education programs are a starting place for equipping novice teachers to navigate these anticipated political tensions in their classrooms.

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