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"What We're Saying": Teacher's Perceptions of 'Success for All'

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"What We're Saying": Teacher's Perceptions of 'Success for All'

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"I'm sorry, I have still never seen a program that works 'as is' for all children" (Datnow & Castellano, 2000, p790). Scripted education is becoming more and more the norm in the United States, and in some cases is placing teachers in a backseat role of educating students. As one teacher included in a study of the effects of scripted education stated, "Okay, the teacher's absent. We can just put the lesson plan in and anybody can do it…. I give myself more credit than that" (Ibid). Teachers in many schools are given a manual and told to "teach"; to teach the book, by the book. They are oftentimes criticized for deviating from the script, and are not expected to supplement the lesson. This new system of educating contrasts with more autonomous methods in which teachers control what their students are learning and are given the responsibility to determine the best means of educating. Teachers' professional autonomy is compromised with scripted education and instead, teachers are expected to implement programs they did not have a hand in developing, and may be criticized for deviating; even when students benefit from such deviations. Classroom teachers are not included in the development process and as a result struggle at times to implement a program that does not apply to their students, classroom, or educational goals. As the main implementers teachers have more contact with the programs being implemented and gain a broader perspective of the strengths and weaknesses of the scripted programs; so what *are* they saying about scripted education?

My research stemmed from my interest in reading, teaching children how to read, and more specifically the resources available to assist and support teachers in the process. In many cases administrations and schools are forced to adopt a scripted reading program

to level the playing field and establish standards to ensure that all students are being given equal resources and opportunities to succeed. One such program that is available to schools is Success for All (SFA). My research focused on the SFA reading program and how it has affected the teachers in a Connecticut school district. I spent the majority of my research observing and interviewing teachers who use the SFA reading program in their classrooms to discover what their perceptions were of the program. My research not only gave teachers the opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns, or support for the program, but is also useful to developers of scripted educational programs to draw attention to perceptions from the teachers, the main implementers of their very programs. I was interested to know what they believed the strengths and weaknesses are of SFA, how it could be improved, and if it wasn't working, why, and who could it work for? The intent of this research project was not to determine if SFA was working in the schools by raising students' reading achievement levels, but rather to voice the opinions of the teachers regarding the SFA program; what they like, don't like, what they would change, why, and how. Based on teacher's perceptions of SFA and observations of their classrooms, it is apparent that teachers perceive 'Success for All' as failing to address the specific needs and conditions of the schools it targets because it was developed idealistically and structured around an ideal model. SFA does not realistically confront the specific context and challenges of the schools and communities it is meant to serve. The program was designed with the hope of becoming a cookie-cutter, transferable from state to state, city to city, school to school. While this may be ideal in terms of scripted education programs, it is not realistic because no two states, cities, or schools exist in the same context, nor do they face the same challenges, or have the same needs. If education

is going to continue to move in the direction of scripted education it may be useful and worthwhile to include teachers and true educators in that process to create the most successful, and realistic, program.

Success for All originated at John Hopkins University in 1986 under the direction of Professors Robert Slavin and Nancy Madden, and was first implemented in a pilot school in Baltimore in 1987. As a result of the initial apparent success in raising students' reading achievement scores, the program was implemented in other Baltimore schools the following year. SFA continued to spread and based on data from 2005 is currently being used in over 1300 schools in 46 states (www.successforall.net), making it one of the most widely used reading programs in the United States. However, in order to adopt the program, schools must first vote and SFA is only implemented once 80% of the teachers and administrators vote in favor of the program. The SFA program is organized such that each consecutive reading level builds on the one before, beginning with level 1.1 up to 6.1, providing students with a solid base to develop their reading skills. The structure is consistent throughout and is grounded in daily ninety-minute comprehensive reading sessions in which students are re-grouped according to reading ability. As a result of regrouping the entire school engages in SFA together at the same time everyday. All lessons are designed to encourage cooperative learning, effective instruction, and the use of ongoing assessment. Students are evaluated in eight-week cycles to determine and identify those students who need to be regrouped or perhaps spend time with a one-on-one tutor (Slavin et al., 1996). The goal of SFA is to see all students reading at their age-level by the third grade through means of prevention and early intervention when students fall below the standard reading level for their age (Ibid). The program

incorporates the use of one-on-one tutors and Family Support teams, claiming they are essential to the success of the program by providing individual attention and instruction, as well as reinforcement and continuation of reading in the home.

"If your school does not vote for SFA… that does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that you can continue to use what you are using now" (Chedekel, 5/27/99). While SFA is not mandatory in the Connecticut school district in which I conducted my research, under the direction of a new superintendent the schools were required to adopt a reading program, and if they chose SFA they were supplied with the necessary manuals and materials for implementation. The superintendent pushed hard for SFA for this reason, but also because of the 1997 Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act, which mandated that underperforming schools would receive additional state funding if they adopted a reform model that was "successful, externally developed, comprehensive school-reform approach backed by rigorous research" (Greenlee & Bruner, 2001). Slavin, SFA's co-founder, is the leading researcher for the SFA program, initiating, conducting, and funding numerous studies examining the effects of the program. Not only does this potentially call the results of the studies into question, but of increased importance SFA now has the greatest amount of scientifically-based research of any scripted program to back its claims of fostering "success for all," increasing the number of schools adopting the program as a result. Based on this, there were few other programs on the voting ballot for teachers to consider; hence SFA became the program adopted district-wide.

The overall trend of the body of scientific research investigating the effectiveness of SFA generally supports the program, finding that those schools who implement it

experience a gain in their students' reading abilities compared to those that do not; this gain however is smaller than the gains reported in Slavin's initial research. Slavin's longitudinal study included in his book, Every Child, Every School: Success for All, states that students enrolled in the program had significantly increased reading levels across every measure, and in every grade, compared to those not enrolled in SFA (Slavin et al., p.199). Borman et al. (2005) however, argues: "Studies of comprehensive school reform programs conducted by the developers tend to report higher estimates of the program's effectiveness on achievement outcomes" (p.3). Borman et al. (2005) was one of the first studies to test the effectiveness of SFA in an actual experiment using random assignment, pretests, and posttests to determine exactly how effective SFA is and in what ways. The results differed from much of the published "scientific evidence" by Slavin, and instead found that SFA does not increase reading achievement across the board, but is more specific such that students excel at one aspect of reading and not another. For example, Borman et al. (2005) found no significant differences in students' letter or word identification ability, or passage comprehension between schools that had or had not implemented SFA. The fact that Slavin has had primary responsibility over the SFA research conducted is something to consider when evaluating the evidence in support of the program. As a Professor of Education from the University of Illinois stated, "My view is that a contract letting Success for All evaluate Success for All is like asking General Motors to determine if their cars are better than Fords and Toyotas" (Viadero, 2005). However, to other researchers it is not merely about having or not having the program; it is about its implementation.

The level and quality of implementation is arguably one of the most important factors concerning whether any intervention or program is going to be successful; the same holds for SFA. Datnow and Castellano (2000) studied teacher's responses to SFA and found that 'teacher buy-in' was one of the most important factors and affected how successfully SFA was implemented in the schools studied. Most of the teachers included in the study had altered the SFA program in some way to fit their classroom and in some cases clashed with the administrators and program facilitators as a result; even if their adaptations had improved or made the program more applicable to their students (Datnow & Castellano, 2000). While the research recognizes the importance of the teachers as the programs implementers, it does not explicitly express the teachers' perceptions of the program in terms of what does and does not work. Datnow and Castellano (2000) alluded to the fact that teachers altered the script but did not say in what ways. As an extension of the work Datnow and Castellano (2000) began, it is important to examine how teachers' perceive the program to ultimately discover the ways in which teachers would change SFA to make it a more effective and realistic program. Classroom teachers are the people most familiar with the setting in which SFA operates and the students it targets; doesn't it follow that they too should have a say in the script of the program? That was the aim of this research; to gain teachers' perceptions of SFA to determine what aspects are and are not working in their classrooms and schools. This not only helps the teachers by giving them the chance to voice their suggestions and concerns regarding SFA, but the findings can also be used by SFA developers and schools to improve the program, ultimately helping students become avid and successful readers.

I conducted my research at Dorr Elementary School in Connecticut, where I observed classrooms and interviewed teachers about their experiences with the SFA program. I restricted my interviews to teachers because their perceptions of SFA were the focus of my research; not whether the students like it or are excelling as a result of SFA. I originally intended to interview administrators as well, however as I narrowed my focus their perceptions did not seem relevant as I aimed to stay centered on the teachers and the classroom. I did however interview the SFA coordinator at Dorr to better understand his position and to gain information about the assessment process as well as general information about SFA at Dorr. I interviewed six teachers and chose them based on their willingness to be interviewed, the number of years they had been teaching at Dorr (in order to see if longevity played a role in their perceptions), and the level of SFA they taught. My questions were focused on their perceptions of SFA, what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses of the program, whether or not they supplemented the program, etc. A more complete list of my questions is attached as Appendix A. I would also like to note that I was in email correspondence with one teacher and the SFA coordinator who both offered to be "on-call" so to speak, to answer any additional questions I had. In the end the teachers I interviewed ranged from being in their first year of teaching at Dorr to having taught when SFA was first implemented in the 1998-1999 school year. Likewise, the teachers I interviewed and my observations from their classrooms are representative of the range of SFA reading levels including observations from 1.2, 2.2, 3.2, and 6.1 classes.

…they have already read the stories…

Dorr Elementary school sits in the center of arguably one of the roughest cities in the Northeast; its iron gates a constant reminder. The Hispanic grocery store across the street accurately represents the neighborhood and majority of students that attend the school. The elementary school is identified as being 98.9% minority, (86.5% Hispanic, 11.6% Black, and 1.1% White), and serves 530 students in grades kindergarten through sixth. There is no green grass, no trees; the swing-set hangs vacant over pavement. In 2004, 95% of students were eligible for free lunch and 73% of students spoke a language other than English in their homes (Public School Profile). Teachers are often drowned out mid sentence by the distinct wail of sirens as police cars and ambulances fly past the school.

Inside, the walls are strewn with students work and projects, serving both as reward and motivation for the students; "See Miss Jen, that is my project…I got an "A" on it 'cause I worked really hard." Linda[1] is in 3rd grade and cannot wait to be a frog scientist; it's all she's ever wanted to be, which is evident from her poster of where different colored frogs live. Walking down the hallway, the wooden floorboards creaking announcing our approach, Linda showed me to her teacher's classroom on my first day of observing. I would later discover that this fall marks Linda's third session of being in Mrs. Keiser's 1.2 SFA classroom; and Mrs. Keiser is running out of books for her to read.

The SFA levels range from 1.1 to 6.1 and can be thought of in terms of "first-half" and "second-half." In other words, level 2.1 represents the first-half of second grade while 2.2 is the second. As such, it is considered "normal" for students to spend a half a year (2 eight week cycles) at each level (Reilly, 11/30/05). Spending over two

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[1] All names are fictitious unless otherwise noted.

sessions in a specific level however results in Linda's situation; her teacher is out of new

books for her to read, so she's starting over. Mrs. Keiser explained,

> Well, see, because this is Linda's third time at the 1.2 level and I only have
> enough material for two sessions…you know, because that is all the curriculum
> has because after two they are supposed to move up…anyway, so I have new
> kids and repeaters, so I have to go back to the beginning. Linda has already
> read this story, and the one after that, and so forth….The kids don't all advance
> in the expected time-frame… SFA doesn't deal with that well (Interview,
> 10/18/05).

Unfortunately, Linda is not alone. SFA is designed based on the assumption and ideal

that students will advance levels at least after sixteen weeks (two sessions), but at Dorr

the reality is they aren't, leaving teachers with minimal variation of the materials and

ultimately resulting in students rereading many of the stories. Mr. Wyatt has been

teaching at Dorr since SFA was first implemented in 1999, and while overall he likes the

program and has experienced a lot of success with it in his classroom, he too is

discouraged by the limited materials and equates it to students loosing interest in reading;

"Too often students who have been in this SFA program and not progressed have been

rereading the same text and stories and students are quickly turned off by the 'same old

fucking story'" (Email response, 12/2/05). According to the SFA coordinator at Dorr,

about 40% of students are reading at grade level which means that while students may

advance, it is taking many of them longer to get there than the SFA cookie-cutter

program anticipates. As he stated, "The November test did not show much improvement.

We stayed at about 40% reading on grade level…you've heard a lot about the problems

about kids not moving up and it's true…when students stay in the same level for a long

time teachers do run out of materials and end up repeating the same stories" (Interview,

11/30/05). SFA does not provide adequate resources for teachers to deal with the

situation, leaving many between a rock and a hard place; wanting to provide students with new materials but required to follow the script.

Ms Monroe teaches the 6.1 level and while this is her first year teaching at Dorr, she too faces the same challenge as Mrs. Keiser even though she has the highest SFA level;

> …I don't really know what to do, this is the highest SFA level (6.1) and there are a couple students who have been in here for over a year and they have already read most of these stories…but then I get a few new ones after 8 weeks and we have to sort of start over. This isn't meeting their needs or making them better readers… there is little challenge, they don't have to try. I am not supposed to add any new stories because they won't have the script like the others…something about controlling and monitoring what I am teaching. I am supposed to be getting some new materials, but who knows if that will happen. (Interview, 11/15/05)

The 6.1 has the most extensive curriculum of any level because it is the last, and highest, and therefore requires an expanded curriculum to accommodate students that reach the 6.1 level before, or even at the beginning, of 6th grade. Even so, Ms Monroe is at a loss like Mrs. Keiser about what to do once the students have read all the books. In closure to my interview with Ms Monroe she stated:

> SFA is designed for an ideal place—students steadily moving up the levels. But that is not how it is working here. If we are going to keep this program we need to figure out a way to make it work for our students and our school. Having students read the same books for over a year is not making them better readers, or better students for that matter" (11/15/05).

SFA is an idealistic program. It has all the components of a good reading program and given the ideal situation chances are it will generate success and results. However, based on the teachers perceptions of the program at Dorr it is not forgiving of the reality of the context and environment of the schools in which it is implemented.

…they won't even share pencils…

Mrs. Alley is a firecracker. She is quick to smile, to laugh, and always seems to have a hundred different places to be and things to do, but yet she never misses an opportunity to sit down and connect with a student. She is a special education teacher and also co-teaches a 2.2 SFA classroom with Ms White, a fellow special education teacher at the school. Her classroom is smaller than others with no carpeted area for the students to gather on the floor, there are fewer desks, chalkboards, and limited places to hang and display students' work. This is her second year at Dorr but she is no rookie to education, she worked in another Connecticut school district for 10 years before coming to Dorr.

It's Friday, her room is a buzz of activity, the twelve students arranged in clusters of four; their teams for the remainder of the lesson on prediction, which should only last a week—they're into week number two. The students read aloud to the class and then transition into pair-partner reading and team-task questions, "Now remember, 3 before me if you don't know something. Ask yourself, then your partner, and then me," are Mrs. Alley's words to remember before sending the partners off to work together. Both Miss White and Mrs. Alley circulate around the room checking in with groups and making sure students understand the story. The students are hesitant to work together with one another and once they begin I see why "3 before me" was the last thing Mrs. Alley said. Instead of working together to find the answers, every student in the room has their hand in the air waiting for Mrs. Alley or Miss White to answer their question.

Later, during my interview with Mrs. Alley I asked her about SFA in the classroom and

she spoke of the challenges involved in getting the students to work together;

> Some of these kids have been in the SFA system for six years now, and they
> still can't work in teams?!? I just wonder if they ever looked at the culture of
> these kids before they developed and implemented this program…. I mean a
> lot of these kids used to take home every book, pencil, stuff their bags…and
> now you want them to let their guard down and work with a kid they don't
> know, share answers, work together… they won't even share pencils for
> God's sake! When they answer questions wrong the other kids laugh and
> make fun of them…. You can't bring in this white-bread system for 90-
> minutes everyday and expect them to accept it if once the time is up they are
> back to their reality. (11/1/05)

By culture Mrs. Alley does not necessarily mean race or ethnicity, but rather the specific

context of the school and community and the challenges within. In other words, she is

referring to the overall situation and the conditions that separate Dorr and its community

from other schools and communities. Mrs. Alley did not teach SFA in the other school

district she worked in and recognizes it was because the district was affluent and

performing well above average. While Mrs. Alley acknowledges the need for a program

in schools that are underperforming with students reading well below grade level, she is

discouraged and frustrated with the SFA program and its inability to recognize and

accommodate the challenges of the schools and students it is meant to serve.

She talked at length about the books her students are reading, "…here we are

reading books about beaches and rainforests, which is great and interesting, but many of

these guys have never been to a beach, let alone the rainforest, so they aren't going to be

able to relate or connect to the story as much as a kid in another school who has"

(Interview, 10/31/05). Mrs. Alley perceives the program as being "white-bread" because

it was developed from and now represents something very different from the setting in

which the program operates. The materials are not in line with the students who use

them, focusing on beaches and rainforests that they have never seen. Likewise, the idealistic model the program was developed around does not translate to the reality of students remaining in one SFA level for over a year. In Mrs. Alley's eyes something has to change in order to align the school and students with the program, and she doesn't see the students in this community waking up one morning to an entirely new life and setting anytime soon.

…yeah, right…

"I'd never gone to the SFA training before this year… I actually had to go and specifically ask for them to send me." Ms White has been working as a special education teacher at Dorr for three years and currently co-teaches a 2.2 level classroom with Mrs. Alley. She has taught SFA in the past but this is the first year that she, as she says, "had any sort of legitimate idea about what I was supposed to be doing." Under the program all teachers are supposedly required to attend a training session to not only become familiar with the program, but also to learn specific techniques and strategies for the classroom; clearly this doesn't always happen. During the training Ms White gained a more complete view of what SFA is meant to look like in practice, and in so doing came to realize how slim the possibility was for Dorr to replicate it; "During training we were shown a video of what a classroom is supposed to look like and what a lesson looks like. We had to turn it off because everyone was laughing so hard. The presenter asked us for comments; all I said was, "Yeah, right"…. I don't know where that classroom was, but I'm sure it wasn't in Dorr" (Interview, 11/14/05). The model classroom presented during

the training was so far from the situation and experiences at Dorr that she was unable to even really relate to it. The model was not representative of the situation, the students, or the community at Dorr, which means that by implementing a program based on that ideal model, Dorr implemented a program that doesn't address their specific needs.

As mentioned previously, two major components of SFA are the one-on-one tutors and Family Support Teams. The tutors work with students in twenty-minute sessions to help them stay on pace with their reading teams by providing extra instruction, time, and support. (Slavin, 2001). Likewise, the Family Support Teams act as a bridge between families and the school, working to get families involved in the school and with their child's reading and education (Ibid). As two key components of the program, it is to Mr. Wyatt's discouragement that neither of them are in place at Dorr Elementary School;

> A vital element is the parent involvement that at first was stated to teachers that the district administration was going to go door to door to ensure parent involvement—this was never done….. We don't have one-on-one tutors, don't have family support teams—those are integral parts of the program and we don't have them. Why are we spending all this money on something we don't even have the resources to support? (Email response, 12/2/05).

This was a selling point to get the teachers to vote in favor of adopting SFA in 1999, making teachers believe that they would have the support and increase the involvement of parents in student's education. It costs approximately $80,000 per school, per year, to support and run the SFA program (Borman et al., 2005). While a majority of the money is coming from Title I funds and other grants, it is still a rather large price tag, and still it is not enough to run the program based on the fact that Dorr doesn't have two of the major components of the program. "[The district] simply does not have the funding for enough tutors" said the SFA coordinator Mr. Reilly in an interview (11/4/05). The model

presented in training, as well as the prescribed tutors and support teams are things Dorr Elementary School is not realistically able to replicate, demonstrating yet again SFA's inability to address the specific needs and challenges of the schools it targets.

…Success for All unless-you-go-to-a-school-that-needs-it program…

Mrs. Alley smirked before answering my question; "I would rename the program 'Success for All unless-you-go-to-a-school-that-needs-it program… sounds catchy!" (Interview, 11/1/05). Based on my interviews and observation of SFA classrooms, it is apparent that teachers question the program's applicability to the students and communities it is striving to serve. While SFA has all the elements of a good comprehensive reading program, it lacks realism and the program model is unable to be transferred to the classroom "as is." As one researcher stated, "[SFA] is sold everywhere as if it would work magic. That is unrealistic" (Frahm, 1999). The program was developed to serve underperforming, high-poverty schools, and while it may be working in one state, district, or school, it is important to remember that not all states, districts, or schools face the same challenges or have the same needs, and as a result what works in one is not necessarily going to work in another. Teachers had various recommendations as to what they would change about the program from doing more projects that show the enjoyment of reading, to incorporating theatre and performances, to increasing the amount of time allowed for interactive discussion. Mostly however, teachers want a hand in developing the program and making it work for their students. As Mrs. Gillian, a 4th grade teacher who has been at Dorr since SFA was adopted stated, "Well, let's just say SFA has all the *components* of a good reading program; the kids are doing what they

should be doing—reading. Do I think it is perfect? Absolutely not. Are there things I would change? Absolutely" (emphasis added, Interview, 10/28/05). Effective and complete implementation, along with teacher buy-in, may very well be some of the most important factors in determining whether or not a program is going to effective, as Datnow and Castellano (2000) claimed. However, implementation is not enough. In order for a scripted program to generate the desired results, the program needs to realistically address the specific needs and challenges of the school and community it is being used in. Teachers are the greatest resource for program developers based on the fact that they want their students to succeed and are most familiar with the needs and context of the school. In order to develop a realistic program it would be to the developers' advantage to incorporate teachers' perceptions and recommendations; after all, they just might know how to make a program work for all.

Additional Materials:

Appendix A is a more complete list of questions used during interviews with teachers. Not all interviewees were asked the same questions, however Appendix A serves as a general reference to the types of questions asked.

Appendix B is a copy of the informed consent form obtained previous to conducting the interview to meet with ethical guidelines.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Background: What brought you to where you are today? How long have you been teaching? Teaching at Dorr? What grade levels have you taught?

Adoption: How did Dorr become involved with SFA? Were other reading programs considered? Were you in favor of SFA? Why or why not? What would you say the overall attitude of the teachers was regarding the adoption of SFA?

Implementation: What steps were taken to prepare teachers for the implementation of SFA? How helpful was the required training? Do you feel supported? How would you characterize your relationship with the SFA coordinator at Dorr?

Effects: Since the implementation of SFA has the school changed? Are students receiving a better education? Worse? The same? What has the impact of SFA been on your teaching? Has it made it more or less difficult? Enjoyable?

Supplementation: Have you adapted/supplemented the program to fit your students? What problem were you trying to address? What was the reaction of the SFA coordinator?

Materials: How appropriate are the SFA materials for the students at Dorr?

Strengths/Weaknesses: What do you see as the strengths or benefits of SFA? The weaknesses? What challenges have you faced?

Change: If the developer of SFA, Robert Slavin, were here right now what would you say to him? What kind of feedback would you give? What changes would you like to see in the SFA program?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

<div align="center">INFORMED CONSENT</div>

I, _____ (please print name) hereby consent to my participation in this research project.

This study involves an investigation of the Success for All reading program. I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. I further understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty.

The benefits of this project are to assess the impact of the Success for All reading program in the classroom setting. There are no potential risks anticipated, however, I understand that if I do feel at risk in any way I am free to withdraw from the research and any contributions I made up to that point will only be included with my permission.

If I have any questions regarding this project or wish to have further information, I am free to contact Professor Andrea Dyrness in the Educational Studies Department at Trinity College (860-297-2323) or researcher Jen O'Donnell (860-297-2983) or by email: jennifer.odonnell@trincoll.edu.

_____   _____
Signature   Date