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TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF READING:
THE EVOLUTION OF A RESEARCH STUDY

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Abstract

The Conceptions of Reading group is studying the role of teacher beliefs and predispositions within the classroom. This turned out to be a complex task which required adjustment of both conceptualization and methodology during the exploratory year. This paper traces the evolution of the project during its pilot study year (1977-78), discusses findings that emerged from that pilot, and outlines future research directions. The group observed that teachers follow administrative mandates, even those that conflict with their beliefs about how instruction should be managed. Yet in spite of administrative constraints, teachers typically find room to use instructional procedures consistent with their beliefs. The group suspects that consistency between teacher beliefs and administrative policy leads to greater teacher and pupil satisfaction and learning than does inconsistency, and intends to test this hypothesis.

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Teachers' Conceptions of Reading;¹
The Evolution of a Research Study

Rebecca Barr and Gerald Duffy²

Traditional research studies comparing the relative effectiveness of various reading methodologies, approaches, or materials have consistently failed to provide satisfactory explanations for differences in instructional effectiveness (Early, 1976). Educational leaders, in attempting to explain these failures, have indicated that the crucial variable is neither the approach nor the materials, but the teacher (Bond & Dykstra, 1967); more specifically, it is the teacher's belief system or conceptual base which makes the difference (Brophy & Good, 1974; Carroll & Chall, 1975).

The study described here is designed to determine whether teachers possess such belief systems or conceptions (particularly about reading) and, if they do, whether their conceptions influence instructional patterns, ultimately affecting the reading growth of pupils. Like most of the research being conducted at the Institute for Research on Teaching, this study focuses on teacher decision making within the environment of the classroom, with naturalistic studies being conducted to determine the crucial instructional elements which should be contrasted from teacher to teacher.

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These classroom studies, however, have created an evolutionary change in the project. In effect, the reality of the classroom has caused the researchers to make significant conceptual shifts. These shifts and the directions being taken as a result are the focus of this paper.

Early Stages of the Study

The Conceptions of Reading Project is completing its initial operational year; during this time, procedures were piloted and tentative data collected as a means for focusing the study in succeeding years. The project's progress to date can be described in two stages.

The first stage, occurring during 1976-77, involved initial conceptualization of the purposes and parameters of the project. At that time, reading conceptions were viewed in terms of the theoretical models of reading espoused by various reading educators. Literature searches conducted at this stage substantiated that little research had been done regarding teacher conceptions of reading (Belli, Blom, & Reiser, 1977). The literature also offered some support for the apparent existence of at least five major "conceptions" of reading, including basal text, linear skills, natural language, interest-based, and integrated curriculum models.

During the first stage, the project staff piloted two instruments to use in identifying teachers possessing various reading conceptions. The first, a Proposition Sort, ultimately evolved into a Likert scale instrument consisting of 36 statements reflecting the various reading conceptions. This instrument was the initial screening device for selecting teachers to be observed during 1977-78. A modification of George Kelly's Role Concept Repertory Test (Kelly, 1955; Johnston, 1977) was the second instrument used. It was administered as a reliability check to those teachers identified on

the Proposition Sort as having strong belief systems about reading.

In this first stage, the project was viewed as relatively uncomplicated. A linear relationship was presumed to exist between a teacher's conception of reading, his/her instructional practices, and the resultant impact on pupils. To test this hypothesis, we expected that we would only have to identify teachers possessing various conceptions, note their instructional practices, and assess the pupil achievement level.

The second stage of the study involved initial data collection and analysis and encompassed the first half of the 1977-78 school year. During this time, seven teachers in Michigan, one in Chicago, and two in Albany (each selected either by the instruments described above or by nomination) were observed for 10 days during the first six weeks of school and for five additional days during late November and early December. An ethnographic methodology was used, with researchers relying heavily on field notes made during observations. In addition, both pre- and post-observation interviews with the teachers were conducted.

These observational and interview data were the genesis for the conceptual shifts in the project, since it soon became apparent that the teachers' classroom behavior did not fit the researchers' preconceived notions regarding either reading conceptions or the relationship between reading conceptions and teacher practice. Consequently, what began as a relatively straightforward study soon became a complicated undertaking.

While some of the findings which led to the conceptual shifts will be presented in greater detail later in the paper, a few brief examples will illustrate the point for now. Initially, we had assumed that the instructional practices of most teachers were guided by their conceptions of reading, but

we found that some teachers do not have strong conceptions of reading and that some of those who do espouse a reading conception will abandon the principles of their conception when faced with a particular set of circumstances. Second, we assumed that a teacher's reading conception could be associated with one or another of the theoretical views of reading, but we found that teachers reflect combinations of views rather than a single one. It was also assumed that teachers made conscious and reflective decisions, but such was not always the case. Finally, the linear relationship we believed existed between teacher conceptions and teacher behaviors did not actually exist. Conditions outside the control of teachers often intervened between conceptions and practice, influencing teachers as much as (or, in some cases, more than) their reading conceptions.

In short, we concluded that we had oversimplified the nature of conceptions and the nature of classroom operations. Consequently, conceptual shifts were made to match the project with the reality of the classrooms.

Conceptual Shifts in the Project

The conceptual shifts fall into four categories: changes in the overall framework of the project, changes in definitions, changes in hypotheses, and changes in methods of collecting and analyzing data.

Overall Framework

The initial work of the project attempted to impose preconceived theories of reading instruction upon teachers and classrooms. Such a strategy overlooked the necessity for beginning with empirical examinations of the classroom activities of teachers themselves. As Barr and Dreeben (in press) said:

At issue...is identifying the properties of classrooms and of instruction. It makes a difference, we found, if investigators begin with observations or if they begin with a commitment to a conceptual framework, an ideology or a reform. At stake is the description of classrooms and instruction -- the nature of the phenomena themselves -- and the determination of what is problematic about them.

In trying to impose theories of reading upon classroom instruction without first studying the nature of the classroom itself, we were missing the nature of the phenomenon itself. Consequently, the first conceptual shift in the project was to move from the preconceived scheme about codified views of reading to an empirical study of classrooms. As such, our focus shifted from one of "imposing" patterns on teachers to that of "discovering" beliefs and activity patterns that teachers follow when solving the problematic issues arising in their work.

Definitions

Not surprisingly, the shift in focus described above also caused the researchers to revise the definition of "teacher conceptions of reading." No longer could conceptions be defined in terms of the five codified conceptions identified in the literature. Instead, we now view a "conception of reading" as a set of principles which teachers use to make decisions in managing and conducting a reading program. These principles are dimensions which are apparently generic to each of the classrooms we observed, although various teachers may manifest particular dimensions in different ways.

One dimension, for example, is the way the teacher determines pupil reading success. All teachers apparently make decisions of this kind, but along a continuum; some teachers rely on skill-oriented measures while others rely on affective measures. Other dimensions tentatively identified include: (1) criteria used in selecting instructional material, (2) criteria used in

forming groups, (3) allocation of time to various reading activities, (4) allocation of time to pupils of various ability levels, (5) the instructional role played by the teacher, and (6) favored prompts used.

Hypotheses

At the outset of the project, the research questions were straightforward but narrow, focusing exclusively on whether a teacher's conception of reading affects the way the teacher teaches and what the pupil learns. While such questions continue to be of importance, the range of research questions has broadened into five additional types of hypotheses.

The first type of hypothesis focuses on the nature of teacher conceptions of reading -- whether teachers possess conceptions of reading at all and to what degree or at what level of strength they do so. The second type focuses on how teachers react when faced with various mandates or institutional constraints which conflict with their belief systems. Third, a set of research questions has been identified which focuses on how a teacher's conception of reading affects pupils of various ability levels. The fourth type of working hypothesis pertains to the means by which conceptions are developed and modified through experience and training. Finally, a set of research questions focuses on how the observed patterns of teacher conceptions of reading can be meaningfully related to the codified views of reading commonly promoted in teacher education programs.

Data Analysis

The broadening of the study's scope, the definitions, and the range of potential research questions have, in turn, influenced the gathering and analysis of data. Once it became apparent that teacher conceptions of reading could not be limited to codified views of reading, three levels of data

collection and analysis techniques were planned. At the first level, each classroom teacher was to be intensively studied as an individual case to determine the instructional pattern employed and the rationale for decisions. The immediate test of the validity of these studies would be the ability to predict a particular teacher's decision-making pattern on any given day. As this goal was achieved, a second analysis could be applied to determine the common dimensions of decision making employed by all 10 teachers; these would then become the common denominator for comparing the instructional pattern of one teacher with that of another. Finally, at the third level, these common dimensions and the teacher's relationship to them would be used to infer a teacher's conception of reading, which in turn would be used as a basis for revising the Proposition Sort.

To obtain data relevant to these tasks, three types of post-observation analyses are now being used to reduce the data from the field notes. First, a chart is used to display the quantitative aspects of the classroom, including time allocation, time usage, the number of incidents, and so on. Second, illustrative anecdotes are drawn from the field notes, coded, and catalogued in a retrieval system in order to note qualitative differences from classroom to classroom. Finally, a form of "participant structures" is being used to describe the sequence and flow of interaction during the reading period.

Summary

While it is somewhat painful to concede that the research staff did not accurately perceive the complexity of the project or anticipate all the difficulties at the outset, we nevertheless realize that we now have a much more interesting study. Some of the most intriguing results are presented below.

Results From Case Studies

On the basis of our work to date, certain tentative conclusions have emerged which will become hypotheses to be tested during 1978-79. These can be discussed in three general categories: (1) the complexity of teacher beliefs, (2) teacher beliefs and classroom practice, and (3) influences which mediate teacher beliefs.

The Complexity of Teacher Beliefs

As we stated earlier, belief systems are more complex than we initially realized. This complexity was manifested in several ways during the study. The Proposition Sort, our major instrument for detecting teacher beliefs, tapped the teacher's assumptions about the most viable form of reading instruction. Items were keyed into the five positions described earlier and also into a sixth position indicating teacher confusion; however, only the two structured positions and the three less structured positions were found to be independent statistically.

Also, evidence from teacher interviews suggests that teacher beliefs are multidimensional. That is, a teacher's belief about useful instructional materials and methods may not predict the teacher's views on testing or motivation. In order to test for the independence of underlying dimensions, we need to modify the Proposition Sort so that aspects of teacher beliefs are measured independently. Some teachers then may be found to be consistent across dimensions while others who are described as eclectic on the current Proposition Sort will have a dimensional profile detailing the characteristics of their eclecticism.

There are, in addition, at least three areas of beliefs which are not being tapped by the current Proposition Sort, but which are observed in class-

rooms. First, teachers differ in the degree to which they believe that the teacher's guide accompanying reading materials must be followed. On the basis of interview data, three of the 10 teachers felt quite free to adapt and modify instructions and to omit or change the order of reading selections. The remaining teachers followed directions and the order of selections without modification.

Second, many of the case study teachers do not hold a set of beliefs about what constitutes good reading instruction for pupils in general; rather they hold views that are differentiated according to the learning rate of the child and the stage of reading acquisition. Most striking in this respect is a Michigan teacher whose Proposition Sort profile indicates a strong belief that reading materials should reflect natural language patterns of children and that instruction should emphasize comprehension and enjoyment. In the classroom, however, this teacher emphasizes systematic development of basic reading skills, a contradiction she explains by saying that though most of her past experience has been in the intermediate grades, she has been teaching a second-grade class this year and feels that children of this age need a systematic program to develop basic word attack skills. Similarly, the majority of other case study teachers report during interviews that children who acquire reading skills more slowly should receive a structured reading program, whereas faster-learning children thrive with less structure.

Finally, some teachers appear to have predispositions toward certain groups of pupils, those that are particularly slow-learning or particularly fast. Biases can be observed in the manner in which time and teacher supervision are allocated to different groups of students during the course of the day. For example, one teacher consistently meets with the able readers first thing in the morning during prime instructional time, followed by the

average group, and then by the group experiencing most difficulty at the time late in the morning when the incidence of disruptive events increases. The time spent in the small group instructional setting reflects the size of the group; since the less advanced group is about half the size of the other groups, it receives half the time. The teacher also follows the policy of bumping the slower learning group from the schedule entirely on those days when special events occur, and has lately removed herself entirely from the slow group by making her new practice teacher responsible, "because if you can teach the low group, you can teach anyone to read."

What we learned about this classroom in several months was neatly summarized by a boy from the lowest reading group in two minutes. Here is a typescript of his analysis, made during a talk with researcher Carol Spencer:

<u>Interviewer Question/Comment</u>	<u>Pupil Response</u>
I: Do you know anybody who is a really good reader?	P: Mm-hmm.
I: Who?	P: Malcolm.
I: Malcolm's a really good reader? What makes Malcolm a good reader?	P: He's in group one.
I: Anything else that makes him a good reader?	P: He practices more than me.
I: How do you know that he practices more than you do?	P: Cause he goes in a group before me.
I: Why would that...why does that.. Why would that mean he would practice more than you did?	P: Because you see the bigger the group is, the more you gotta work with it.
I: So the...bigger the group is the more you do what?	P: You work with it - the teacher.
I: Oh, I see, O.K.	P: Our group is a tiny one so we don't work very much.

I: So you don't work very much with the teacher? So do you think...so you're saying that Malcolm gets to practice more cause he's in the group more?

P: Yup.

The student observes that the other reading groups meet first and for longer periods of time. He correctly explains that group time is a function of group size. Further, he proposes an hypothesis believed to be important by current educational researchers; namely, that learning is a reflection of instructional time.

In contrast, the slower-learning readers in a Michigan first-grade classroom receive a lion's share of small group instruction during prime time and are never bumped off the daily schedule. This first-grade teacher represents the opposite extreme in resource allocation within the classroom.

Not only are teachers' conceptions difficult to determine because of the multi-dimensional nature of conceptions and their tendency to overlap, but observation reveals that the conceptions of certain teachers will apparently change according to the grade level or the ability level of the group being taught. Other teachers tend not to change at all and some follow the teacher's guide exclusively, abdicating responsibility for decision making.

Beliefs and Classroom Practices

Our data suggest that teacher beliefs affect aspects of classroom practice. For all but two of the 10 teachers studied, beliefs are manifested in practice in one or both of two areas: in selection of instructional materials and/or in the way help was given to pupils during reading.

The degree to which beliefs determine material selection depends on two sets of constraints operating within the school: the availability of materials and whether principals mandate the use of specific ones.

The Chicago teacher, for example, believes strongly in the advantage

of using a highly structured decoding program. As a teacher new to the school, she found only two basal series available. She expressed a preference for Distar materials which she had used successfully in her previous school and her new principal obtained the materials for her from another school. In contrast, one teacher in the Albany sample believes in the efficacy of an unstructured, natural language program, but is required to use a phonics program specified by her principal. As a consequence, she surreptitiously uses materials she believes to be more appropriate in terms of interest and language patterns to supplement the required material.

Descriptive evidence of the way teachers give help to pupils during instruction suggests that belief systems are often manifested in the kinds of prompts teachers use during instruction. Those committed to skill development emphasize decoding and sight word mastery; those committed to reading as a process of communication emphasize comprehension questions and enjoyment. For instance, one Michigan teacher who reflects a belief in linear skill programs spends almost all her instructional time helping her first graders with problems of decoding, spending virtually no instructional time on comprehension. Conversely, a fourth-grade Michigan teacher committed to the concepts of pupil self-selection spends almost all his time conferring with pupils about the content of the books they choose to read; he devotes virtually no instructional time to helping children identify words.

However, beliefs are not always applied to practice. Two deviant teacher cases are of interest in this regard. Both teachers expressed beliefs which reflected interest in general language development and comprehension, but both focused mainly on skill development in classroom practice. The first (cited earlier) explains the deviation as reflecting the basic skill needs of her second-grade pupils. The second teacher is a passive

member of a teaching team; her instructional strategies reflect the belief system of the dominant team member.

Influences Which Mediate Beliefs

While teachers' beliefs are often apparent in their practices, it is also clear that the manner in which beliefs affect practice is conditioned by institutional and classroom characteristics. Four such conditioning influences were identified: the time schedule, required testing, class composition, and constraints on materials.

When school begins, certain events are already scheduled and others are quickly fixed within a time slot. The beginning and end of the school day and the lunch hour are established, as are extra activities such as library visits, music, gym, and art. Recess, laboratory, and special instructional times for learning-disabled pupils, EMH children, disabled readers, and bilingual children are quickly established. Obviously, these fixed events limit the time available for the classroom reading program and for other classroom activities. Teachers differ in how rigidly they schedule their classtime. Our observations revealed that one of the Albany teachers in an open classroom is most controlled by the clock because to keep students involved in a discussion is to encroach upon another teacher's scheduled time. In contrast, teachers in self-contained classrooms seem to feel more free to deviate from their self-imposed schedule periodically for special events or when a discussion is lively.

In five of the case study classes, periodic testing of pupil reading skills is required by the principal or is an integral part of the reading program. In all these classes, teachers administer the tests as directed. Those who value the test information make use of the results, whereas the others simply record pupil responses and deposit the results with the prin-

cipal or reading supervisor. Mandated testing has at least two observable consequences for the reading program. First, time required for testing usurps time that might be used for reading instruction. For example, in the Chicago class, mastery testing occurs in lieu of instruction once every two or three weeks. Second, the occurrence of mandated testing has consequences for the selection and use of curricular tasks; this effect appears to be more obvious for intermediate than primary grade classes.

During a single case study year, it is difficult to disentangle the effect of student ability and interest factors from teacher and other factors influencing the form of instruction. Fortunately, we had observed the instructional program of the Chicago teacher the year before with a first-grade class from a low-income area where children scored very low on indices of reading readiness. The teacher found the Distar reading program to be successful in helping her pupils learn to read. Thus, when she transferred to a new school (as previously mentioned) -- an integrated, middle-income school -- she requested that the principal secure Distar materials. During the first month of instruction, however, she realized that the program was inappropriate for her group of fast learners because most already knew what the program was introducing. She shifted to an available basal series because she felt that these pupils were ready for contextual reading. Soon after, the middle group was transferred to the basal materials, partly at their request and partly because she judged them to be ready for contextual reading. Finally, the week before the Christmas break, members of the slower-paced reading group were allowed to read from the basal as well as from the Distar materials.

(In addition to this direct evidence, indirect evidence for the influence of class aptitude composition on reading programs comes from the different

beliefs that teachers hold concerning what constitutes successful reading instruction for slower-learning versus faster-learning children.)

Finally, the nature of instructional materials influences classroom reading instruction. The way in which mandated instructional materials modify the reading program of the Albany teacher committed to an unstructured reading approach has already been mentioned; the resulting program is a compromise between what she believes in and what the principal desires.

In an even more direct case, materials constrain what goes on during instruction. For example, when the Chicago teacher used the Distar materials at the beginning of the year, the length of small-group instructional time was determined by the Distar script and each group received a similar amount of instructional time. As directed by the Distar guide, the teacher spoke to the group as a whole and pupils responded for the most part in unison. Since the teacher has shifted to the basal materials, however, the length of small-group instructional time is a function of how long it takes each pupil to read a section orally. Because the slower-paced groups have less than half the members of the faster-paced groups, the slower-paced groups receive less than half the amount of small group instructional time. Similarly, the nature of the materials changes the nature of the group interaction: with Distar the teacher talks directly to the group, followed by group unison response, while with the basal material, teacher directions and prompts are directed to a pupil while the pupil is reading orally and the remainder of the group is "following along" silently.

Summary

Despite the exploratory nature of the study at this stage, several provocative findings have emerged. For instance, it has been interesting to

observe that teachers do indeed follow administrative mandates, even those which conflict with their beliefs about how instruction should be managed. But in spite of administrative constraints, teachers typically find room to use instructional procedures consistent with their beliefs. Whether the resulting hybrids produced when a teacher is in basic disagreement with administrative policy have implications for pupil outcomes is a question that we have not investigated. We suspect that consistency between teacher beliefs and administrative policy leads to greater teacher and pupil satisfaction and learning than does inconsistency; we intend to test this hypothesis next year as well as several others which have been suggested by our tentative findings.

Where Do We Go From Here?

A full-scale investigation will follow this pilot study. Although we feel that we have uncovered the parameters of the phenomenon during this pilot year, we are not sure that the evidence upon which we base our current convictions is convincing to others. Thus, we plan to select a limited set of contrast cases to test the generalizability of our conclusions.

Finding appropriate test cases for next year's replicatory investigation will not be easy. We will begin by selecting target schools which are defined both by SES (as an index for class composition) and by mandated materials (as an index for institutional constraints). Only one age group will be studied because belief systems seem to be related to the stage of reading acquisition. We have selected the primary rather than the intermediate level because the greater temporal emphasis on reading instruction should make it easier for us to detect effects when such exist.

Elementary schools will be identified which are roughly comparable in

size but which vary in SES and administrative treatment of primary level reading materials. The revised Proposition Sort will be administered to a large number of first- and second-grade teachers and, from this array, contrastive teacher cases who differ in interesting respects in their pattern of beliefs toward reading instruction will be selected. Age, sex, and years of experience will also be considered in this matching.

Based on the relationships among beliefs, practices, and institutional constraints that have been observed this year, we will predict how each pair of teachers will differ in practice within comparable schools and across schools. For example, given two teachers who differ in preferred instructional materials, we will predict that they will select materials in accord with their beliefs when such are available and permitted. If, however, the latter conditions do not hold, we predict that available or mandated materials will be used, that they will be supplemented with preferred materials when the teacher's conformity score is low, and that the teachers' instructions accompanying the materials will reflect their beliefs. As a second example, given two teachers who differ in the pupils they prefer, we predict that they will allocate instructional time so that preferred students are favored in one or more of the following respects: more total work time, instruction during prime time, work in smaller supervised groups, daily instruction, and instruction by the teacher not the assistant. As a third example, given a teacher who holds different instructional beliefs for subgroups within his or her class versus one who believes in using the same reading approach for all pupils, we predict that they will differ accordingly in the methods and materials they use, unless constraining conditions interfere. In this manner, the next year of the study (1978-79) will be a "confirmation" year in which the hypotheses generated during the exploratory stages of the

study will be tested.

Conclusion

Investigating the role of teacher beliefs and predispositions within the classroom has turned out to be a complex task requiring adjustment of both conceptualization and methodology during the exploratory year. However, because it is the classroom teacher who mediates the priorities and means of the instruction and determines which pupils will receive which resources, it is extremely important to understand how these decisions are made and how teacher beliefs and predispositions influence these decisions.

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