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THE SHAPING OF CLASSROOM PRACTICES:
TEACHER DECISIONS

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Abstract

Based on the premise that teacher decision making significantly influences instructional effectiveness, this study gives the reader some insight of teacher decision making as it shaped the course of reading instruction in four teachers' classrooms. During an entire school year, the author used the fieldwork method of researcher as participant observer, to discover the decisions teachers made and to describe how these decisions were reflected in their classroom practice. The four teachers made testing, grouping, materials, and management decisions within the first month of school. By observing and reflecting on the four teachers' decision making and through discussion with the teachers, the researcher concluded that the underlying purpose of their decision making was not instructing students, but rather effectively managing them.

THE SHAPING OF CLASSROOM PRACTICES:

TEACHER DECISIONS¹

Sandra Buike²

Background

Previous research on reading has focused on how teachers act or perform in classrooms. Only in recent years has the focus of inquiry for general research on teaching investigated how teachers think about their students, how they instruct them, and how they make judgements and decisions (Shulman & Elstein, 1975, p. 3; Brophy, Note 1, p. 5; Morine-Dershimer, Note 2, p. vii). These works are based on the notion that aspects of the teacher's mental life and decision making significantly influence instructional effectiveness (Clark & Yinger, 1979; Shulman & Elstein, 1975; Shulman, Note 3). Some even go so far as to say that decision making is the most important teaching skill (Shavelson, 1973).

Since reading and related activities often consume more than half the school day of teachers and students, it appears worthwhile to investigate the following questions: (1) how do teachers decide what comprises a program of reading instruction? and (2) why do teachers make particular sets of decisions about reading instruction?

1. This paper summarizes Sandra Buike's doctoral dissertation submitted to the College of Education, Michigan State University, 1980 and supercedes R.S. 79 of May 1980.

2. Sandra Buike was a research intern with the IRT and is now with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of teacher decision making as it shaped the course of reading in four classrooms. Specifically, through analytical description (McCall & Simmons, 1969) of the patterns of teacher decision making, the study identifies and classifies the decisions the four teachers made concerning their reading instruction and described how these decisions were reflected in the course of their classroom practices.

Research Questions

Specifically, the study focused on providing answers for the following research questions:

1. For each of the teachers studied, what were the decisions they made that appeared to shape the course of reading instruction in their classrooms?
2. For each of the teachers studied, how were these decisions reflected in the course of their classroom practices?

Design of the Study

Sample Selection

The four teachers selected for this study were chosen from among the 23 teachers studied as part of the Conceptions of Reading Project. The project is one of the working groups sponsored through the National Institute for Education by the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University. During the 1977-78 research year, 10 teachers were selected both by nomination and from data obtained from instruments and interviews.³

³The data collection techniques were a Propositional Inventory (Duffy & Metheny, Note 4) and a structured interview based on a variation of Kelly's Role Concept Repertory Test (Johnston, Note 5).

During the 1978-79 research year, 13 teachers were selected by the type of school they represented and their reported practices in reading.⁴

The four teachers selected for this study taught first, second, or third grade. They were solely responsible for the reading instruction in their classrooms.

Data Collection Procedures

The study reflects two years of investigation of four classroom teachers in a suburban and rural area near a large midwestern university. Using the fieldwork methods of the participant observer, data were collected four times during the school year for each of the teachers studied. The first cycle of data collection was in September; the second in November-December; the third in February; and the final cycle in May. Classrooms were observed three to five half days and one full day per cycle. Interview materials were collected before and after school during each cycle.

The activities, sights, sounds, and feelings of the classroom were recorded in field notes and audio recordings of reading groups, and audio records were made of teacher interviews. Maps of the rooms and samples of the children's work were also collected. These materials served as the data base for subsequent analysis.

⁴The type of school was determined by both Michigan State Education Department data regarding socioeconomic status and by school district policy regarding the presence or absence of instructional/curricular mandates. Teacher practices were determined by responses to the Propositional Inventory and by interview.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed according to a three-stage qualitative process. First, the interview data were analyzed to identify the decisions that teachers stated they had made and that appeared to shape the course of reading instruction. Secondly, the field notes of each teacher were analyzed to identify the instructional practices each one used during reading instruction. Finally, the decisions and the instructional practices were compared in order to infer how teacher decision making appeared to shape the course of reading instruction (Buiké & Duffy, Note 6).

Integral to the analysis of the data was Denzin's (1970) principle of triangulation. The collection of observation data were used to validate and corroborate inferences drawn from the interviews. The interview data served to substantiate findings inferred from the observational data.

Definitions

The following terms are relevant to the proposed study and are defined here.

Decision is the stated or inferred thought behind an observed teacher activity or teacher utterance (Shavelson, 1976; Morine, Note 7; Yinger, Note 8).

Instruction is an umbrella term (Durkin, 1978-79) referring to the various activities and procedures designed to increase a student's ability to read which occur under the direction of a teacher.

Assumptions and Limitations

The major assumptions underlying this study are (1) the teacher is viewed as a decision maker who, through the process of "limiting

and structuring the environment in which he or she must act" (Clark, Note 9, p. 4), influences the instructional practices to which students are exposed, and (2) teacher decision making to a large extent depends upon the context in which it occurs.

The major limitation of this study is that observer bias is virtually impossible to eliminate in participant-observation studies where the observer is an instrument for data collection.

Major Findings

Since teacher decision making depends to a large extent on the context in which it occurs, brief descriptions are included of the teachers and classrooms studied. From analysis of the data, four case studies were developed describing each teacher's decision making and classroom practice. Although the case studies described are unique to each classroom, the four teachers were strikingly similar in the decision making that shaped reading instruction.

The findings indicate that the four teachers did make decisions concerning their reading instruction and that those decisions were based on a mental framework or image consisting of their beliefs about program selection and the teaching of reading, and their goals for the year. Teachers made four kinds of decisions within the first month of school. They included testing, grouping, and materials and management decisions.

The decisions were reflected in teachers' classroom practices during the second phase (third week of school to mid-spring). During this time teachers implemented and modified the decisions they had made within the first month of school.

Implementation of first month decisions resulted in a routine pattern of organization of the school day. Teachers instructed students in a reading group setting. From analysis of the data differences emerged between the time allocated for high-level and the time allocated for low-level reading groups; between the activities planned and presented to high-level and those to low-level reading groups, and between teacher roles and expectations for high-level and those for low-level readers.

When presented with new information based on student performance, teachers revised some of their first-month decisions and changed some students' placement in reading groups.

Teachers made on-the-spot decisions if students expressed difficulty with a particular lesson. This usually resulted in more time being spent on a lesson. Eliminating particular skills lessons and determining group meeting times were also categorized as on-the-spot decision making.

During the last six weeks of school, teachers began to reflect upon or evaluate their students' progress and performance during activities based on the decisions made in the first month (planning phase). Teachers judged the success of their readers according to the students' progress through materials, and according to the goals stated by the teacher in the first month.

Contributors To Success or Non-Success of Readers

Several factors were attributed to the low-level performance of some readers: learning disabilities, home problems, low motivation, limited materials, and mainstreaming. High levels of

performance were attributed to the reading program and to students' ability to learn by themselves.

Teacher Roles During Different Phases

Analysis of the data provides characterizations of the roles of the teachers assumed during each phase. During the first month teacher roles could be viewed as, "teacher as thinker, planner, and decision maker."

The combination of the routineness of the classroom practices and the fact that most of the teachers appeared to "pilot" students through materials led to the portrayal of the "teacher during the second phase as technician."

During the last six weeks of school, teachers evaluated student progress and use of activities based on the decisions made in the first month. This phase could characterize the "teacher as evaluator."

The major decisions concerning students reading occurred within the first month of school. These decisions served as the basis for the organization of the teachers' reading programs for the remainder of the school year, as the basis for modifying and making on-the-spot decisions, and as the criterion for teacher evaluation of student performance.

Although the study shows that the four teachers made similar decisions, one teacher's approach contrasted with the other three teachers. This teacher differed from the others in all four decision areas of the first month. For example, testing was not confined to the first month of school. As a result children were regrouped more frequently than in the other three classrooms. Also, due to the management structure (team teaching) an equal amount of time was

spent on each reading group and students were exposed to a variety of materials regardless of their reading ability level.

Conclusions

Teacher Decision Making in the Classroom

It appears that the decision making required to maintain the flow of classroom life took precedence over instructional decision making. That is, the four teachers appeared to abdicate their instructional decision making to the publishers of commercial materials to maintain a well-managed classroom routine.

Rather than being concerned with instructional planning, teachers used testing, grouping, materials, and management decisions to facilitate effective classroom management. Even though one teacher perceived her decision making and implemented her decisions differently than the other three, still her purpose was to facilitate effective classroom management.

Materials were also assigned importance by the teachers. They perceived that materials would provide additional structure and organization for the flow of activities and aid in effective classroom management.

Each teacher relied exclusively on the teacher's guide to direct the flow of activities during reading group sessions. Little attention was given to the actual content of the lessons. In fact, the selection of textbooks was based on the quality of the teacher's guide versus the content of the lessons. Not only did a good teacher's guide provide the teachers with structure and organization during reading lessons, it provided the overall framework needed to keep their classrooms well managed. The observation that teachers rely

on materials to direct the flow of activities leads one to conclude that well-managed activities were of greater importance than the quality of teacher-student interactions during reading instruction.

Instruction for the purposes of this study refers to the various activities and procedures that occurred under the teachers' direction and were designed to increase students' reading abilities. I assumed that activities in general were intended to provide students with the opportunity to practice a newly acquired skill. Further, I assumed that teachers actually involved in teaching or providing instruction would (1) have a good notion of what they wanted to teach students and why, (2) be able to establish for students a purpose for learning a particular skill or concept, (3) demonstrate their personal knowledge about the skill or concept they were trying to teach, (4) develop the lesson in logical, sequential steps, and (5) collect information from students about their knowledge and understanding of the new skill or concept; then, and only then, (6) provide activities for students to practice their new found skill or concept.

Alarmingly, only in the contrasting case did some instruction occur, as outlined above, within the reading groups. For the other three teachers, instruction most often came in the form of the teacher simply reading directions from a workbook page or a ditto sheet. Students in these classrooms were typically observed participating with the teacher in a recitation format of instruction. This style of instruction required students to recite answers for the questions the teacher asked concerning a particular skill or concept. However, the teachers seldom (if at all) were observed providing direct

instruction for the skill or concept about which they questioned students. Although the contrasting teacher varied her instruction method somewhat from that of the other teachers studied, she, like the other teachers still relied extensively on materials to direct the smooth flow of activities during reading group sessions.

Why do teachers apparently allow management concerns to dominate their decision making and instruction so that they abdicate teacher decision making and instruction to the publishers of commercial materials? It appears that instruction for these teachers could best be described as classroom management by keeping students busy with a variety of activities.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that reading educators focus on the reading process in their methods courses rather than prepare teachers to think about the reading process combined with the realities of classroom life where they implement their theoretical training. Or perhaps the causes are rooted in the role perpetuated by the teacher next door, principals, and parents who have defined a good teacher as one who has a well-organized and managed, smoothly running classroom. Have teachers, in the attempt to fit this role model of a good teacher, sought out materials that provide structure for their classrooms in order to achieve purposeful, productive "learning" as their teaching ideal? Have teachers been pushed to be accountable to the point that they rely on publishers to make their decisions and to instruct for them because they have lost confidence in their ability to make decisions or provide instruction for students? Or is instruction merely a technical process, and one from which we can hardly expect anything more?

The question as I see it now becomes, how will changes come about if this is, in fact, an accurate picture of the world of teaching? Abolishing and changing materials or disbanding reading groups solves nothing. Materials serve a purpose in the instructional process just as grouping solves a management problem. Perhaps the teacher training process in which instruction for both pre-service and in-service students needs a change of focus in the management responsibilities connected with teaching. Or perhaps parents, principals, and other administrators need to be re-educated that teaching is more than a smoothly-run, well-managed classroom.

The Nature of Decision Making

The findings here suggest that a model of teacher decision making should be based on the realities of classroom life. Observations in this study revealed that teacher decision making is dependent upon the context in which it occurs. In the press of classroom management, teacher-student interactions, teacher role and expectations, and heavy reliance on materials, teachers eliminate the selection of alternatives that focus on the learners. Consequently, it is overly simplistic to assume that there is a linear relationship between deliberate, conscious, teacher decision making and classroom practice. In view of the present context in which teachers make decisions, perhaps the rational model of decision making is virtually impossible for classroom teachers to put into practice.

Implications

This study has implications for teacher educators and researchers.

First, understanding the dynamics of classroom life provides the teacher educator with a link between the theories underlying developmental reading and the realities facing classroom teachers.

Second, identifying crucial variables of teacher decision making provide insights that can lead to the development of a reading education model and teaching of reading education courses.

Third, this study into teacher decisions, an integral operation in daily classroom life, provides an area for further research of teacher thinking in general and reading instruction in particular. Further, the alternative strategies or methods of reading instruction presented in reading courses could best be introduced to teachers within the framework of the management conditions which are required to carry them out in classrooms.

Jackson (1968) in his book Life in Classrooms claims that we hardly know what goes on in the classrooms. Research that is located within classrooms makes it possible for us to understand the complexities of teacher decision making, the contextual influences as they interact with teacher decision making, and the consequences of teacher decision making on student learning. Coming to understand what it means for teachers and students to collectively share a life in reading classrooms holds the promise that research one day may truly influence the teaching of reading in classrooms.

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