

The Impact Of A School's Literacy Program On A Primary Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how my reading instruction had been situated within my school's literacy program. As a way to investigate this study, I employed qualitative teacher research. I used reading theory (Whole Language and Direct Instruction) as the analytical lens for my analysis. The results illustrated how the Direct Instruction aspects of the literacy program permeated into my classroom, altered my teaching practices, and impacted student learning. While there were both positives and negatives to the instructional techniques, teacher and student choice was limited.

Keywords: Teacher research, reading theory, Whole Language, Direct Instruction, reading instruction, literacy program, guided reading, running records, reading levels

Résumé

Le but de cette étude était d'examiner comment mon enseignement de la lecture avait été inscrit dans le programme de littératie de mon école. Pour mener cette étude, j'ai utilisé une méthode de recherche qualitative. J'ai analysé la situation sous l'angle de la théorie de la lecture (Méthode globale et Instruction directe). Les résultats ont montré comment les aspects de l'instruction directe du programme de littératie présents dans ma classe modifiaient mes pratiques pédagogiques, et avaient un impact sur l'apprentissage des élèves. Bien qu'il y avait à la fois des avantages et des inconvénients concernant les techniques d'enseignement, le choix des enseignants et des étudiants était limité.

Mots-clés: Recherche avec les enseignants, théorie de la lecture, méthode globale, instruction directe, enseignement de la lecture, programme de littératie, lecture guidée, fiches d'observation individualisées, niveaux de lecture

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I began my career as a Grade 1 teacher in Mainstream Elementary (pseudonym), and continued teaching there for six years. During this time I taught physical education, Grade 2, Grade 6, and then a combined Grade 1 / Grade 2 classroom. This combined Grade 1 / Grade 2 classroom was the first class at Mainstream Elementary to combine these two grade levels.

In preparation for teaching a combined curriculum, I began looking through the resources allocated to the Grade 1 / Grade 2 classroom. Many of the resources now being used in schools across Prince Edward Island are the result of a provincial educational task force report generated in 2005. At that time (and presently as well), there was a lot of discussion about literacy instruction, especially related to reading in the primary grades. This discussion, taking place in all domains of the educational system, gained momentum and resulted in schools developing literacy programs to address student reading. Such was the case for Mainstream Elementary.

Rationale

This article summarizes the results of a research study that examined my own teaching practices within the literacy program at Mainstream Elementary. During this research study, my reading instructional practices were identified and analyzed in relation to the instructional guidelines established within the school's selected reading program. Also included within this article is an overview of both the selected research methodology and the methods employed for data collection and analysis. The article concludes with a reflection of the research findings and their implications on my teaching.

This research was both timely and significant as more and more reading programs were, and still are, being mandated into the language arts classrooms "in the hope that rigid adherence to a scripted, one-size-fits-all program will lead to better performance and higher achievement" (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007, p. 29). As teachers are faced with the increasing demands in their classrooms, they rely heavily on their classroom programs to meet their students' needs and fulfill curriculum expectations. This situation can result in a conflict between the teacher's pedagogical beliefs and the foundational beliefs upon which the program was developed. This was the situation that I was faced with.

Context of Study

In 2005, the Progressive Conservative provincial government named a task force to examine student achievement and the overall performance of the provincial educational system. This query resulted in the publication of a final report entitled *Excellence in Education: A Challenge for Prince Edward Island*. Within this report were recommended actions to ensure students would receive the best education possible within an efficient educational system.

One significant recommendation developed within this report was that all students were to learn to read by Grade 3. *Excellence in Education: A Challenge for Prince Edward Island* (2005) states, "Learning to read is the single most significant factor in determining a child's success in school and in life. Learning to read by Grade 3 is essential so that students can then read to learn" (p. 24). To meet this objective, the Department of Education planned an investigation into the practices and programs being employed in the classrooms. From this investigation, the work of Fountas and Pinnell was selected as the foundation of reading instruction. As such, there were numerous Fountas and Pinnell resources and materials sent to schools and elementary school teachers received books about reading comprehension and reading strategy instruction.

Fountas and Pinnell's text, *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching For All Children* (1996), was the precursor to the movement toward a balanced literacy program and, more specifically, toward a balanced reading program. This text outlined the structure of an effective reading instruction schedule, as well as the necessary strategies behind such instruction. The requirements of a successful reading program, as outlined by Fountas and Pinnell, centered on the use of guided reading in accordance with leveled text and suitable reading assessment tools. Primary teachers were to structure their daily schedules to reflect these beliefs.

To facilitate the use of Fountas and Pinnell, the Department of Education organized numerous professional development sessions to explain the program, rationalize its selection, provide examples of what the program would resemble in a typical classroom, and provide additional resources for accompaniment. These resources, also developed by Fountas and Pinnell, were multiple and ranged from a comprehensive listing catalogue of leveled children's literature to a detailed description of the skills that must be displayed by students at each reading level.

Shortly after the implementation of Fountas and Pinnell's work, the focus turned to reading assessment tools. There was a desire by the Department of Education to select a common assessment tool that would indicate the reading level of primary students. Having such an assessment tool would provide information regarding students' reading abilities by the end of Grade 3. Based on this desire, the Department of Education introduced and facilitated the use of running records as a means of analyzing and reporting student reading progress. Running records, a miscue analysis used in the Reading Recovery program, became the focus for many professional development sessions. The school promoted consistency amongst its teachers and stated that having consistent reading instruction in primary classrooms would promote positive teaching and student learning.

The use of running records, as described by the Department of Education, would provide teachers with the current reading level of students. This reading level could then be used to monitor the progress of student reading throughout the primary grades. Schools could then assess whether students were reading by the end of Grade 3, a recommendation put forth by the task force.

My school directed primary grade teachers to use running records to support reading instruction. Teachers were to use running records regularly and to report students' reading levels to the board at certain intervals during the school year. These reading levels would then be used to monitor and track students' progress within the board.

In response to the Department of Education and school board initiatives, schools developed literacy committees. At Mainstream Elementary, this literacy committee consisted of the literacy coach; vice-principal; Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 teachers; and the Reading Recovery teacher. The literacy committee met on a monthly basis and the agenda for our meetings was developed between the vice-principal and literacy coach.

Initially, the literacy committee charted students' reading levels, as assessed through running records. The purpose of charting these reading levels was to identify students who were not meeting grade-level reading expectations. Students with the lowest reported levels became a focal point of the committee. From there, the committee began discussions surrounding the implementation of Department and school board initiatives and programs, as well as strategies and materials to support these at-risk students.

As provincial student assessment¹ became commonplace in the educational setting, poor achievement and low test scores highlighted reading as a primary area of need. Schools fell under scrutiny as test results were made public and accountability resulted in the search for improved methods of teaching reading. As a result, schools searched for a program or multiple programs that would lead to better performance and higher achievement. Schools hoped that if these programs were employed, student reading would improve.

My school viewed the work of Fountas and Pinnell to be an effective reading instruction tool. Consequently, Fountas and Pinnell's work was largely the focus of my research.

Literature Review

Caution should be exercised with any program as programs are developed to meet a general need and not tailored toward individual students' needs. Therefore, it is essential that student progress be monitored to ensure the selected program meets the needs of individual students. Flippo (1999) confirms this by stating that no "one method or approach is best, many contexts and practices facilitate students' reading development, and many others would make learning to read difficult for some students" (p. 39). Spiegel (1998) supports the view that there is no one single good method and argues that "not everyone learns in the same way; not every task requires the same strategies; not every teacher has the same talents; not every school has the same combination of learners and teachers" (p. 116). The individuality of the student and teacher must not be overlooked, as both are essential to classroom learning.

Aside from the arguments against the existence of a single right program, there is also substantial research supporting and promoting the effectiveness of teachers over programs. As Smith (1999) explains, "Teaching is a social activity. Pre-designed programs cannot take the place of teachers, even when the programs are administered by teachers" (p. 151). Duffy and Hoffman (1999) make their views explicit about the value of teachers in educating students. They believe that "effective teachers are eclectic" (p. 11) and in many instructional circumstances, "teacher thought made the difference" (p. 11).

An increased demand for "silver bullet" reading programs fuelled what Flippo (1999) referred to as the Reading Wars as researchers and marketers raced to produce fool-proof methods of reading instruction. Because Whole Language (WL) was based upon the interests and engagement of children as individuals, it was much harder to package. As Weaver (1990) stated, "There is no single set of activities, much less a prepackaged program, that could be said to define whole language" (p.3).

Packaged programs also purport easy delivery and step-by-step sequencing of lessons and activities. It is this lack of complication that Chen and Derewianka (2009) claimed policy makers found attractive. Chen and Derewianka also highlighted the perceived benefits of such programs as producing "measurable phenomena that can be reduced to readily digested numbers such as the percentage increase in reading scores" (p. 235). However, these benefits may be misleading.

According to Routman (1991), "teaching discrete skills may yield temporary high scores on isolated subtests, but these results do not necessarily transfer to comprehending meaningful texts" (p. 299). Unfortunately, these temporary high scores reinforce the place of such programs in the education system.

As a means to resolve the battle between Direct Instruction (DI) and WL models for teaching reading, a balanced literacy approach was developed. Using a variety of texts, this

¹ Provincial student assessment was an initiative undertaken by the PEI Department of Education.

balanced approach to reading instruction consisted of read alouds, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading (Rog, 2003). These four types of reading allow for a combination of whole-class, small-group, and independent student reading opportunities. These four types of reading involve decreasing amounts of teacher support, which allows for an increase in student independence (Rog, 2003). In this way, responsibility is gradually transferred from the teacher to the student.

Balanced literacy was considered a compromise between the two competing theories of WL and DI, and was considered by many to meet the needs of all students. Spiegel (1998) supported the balanced reading approach: "Balanced approaches help us meet the needs of most children because such approaches are not restricted to one way of developing literacy" (p. 115). However, despite Spiegel's obvious support of the balanced reading program, some remained skeptical. Duffy and Hoffman (1999) cautioned against the full acceptance of any one program and reminded us that "improved reading is linked to teachers who use methods thoughtfully, not methods alone" (p. 15).

As balanced reading programs made their way into my own classroom I found myself drawn into the debate surrounding reading instruction. I became more cognizant of the fact that the lessons and activities outlined in the programs intended for my classroom were often in conflict with my teaching style and beliefs. As Manning (1991) pointed out:

[T]he view (model, theory) of reading we subscribe to does make a difference. It determines how we organize and carry out instruction, what we judge to be successful reading (evaluation), what are considered to be problems in reading and how we remediate them. (p. 13)

Frameworks

This study is based on two frameworks: teacher research and reading theory. The first framework, teacher research, provided the process through which I examined my reading instruction and, more specifically, helped me understand how the actual events in my classroom corresponded to my beliefs about teaching and learning. This process also allowed me to recognize the reasons behind the teaching decisions I made within my class and to identify the theories on which I based these decisions.

The desire to understand and address my issues led me on a quest to find a practical method that would best meet my needs. I wanted to find a method of inquiry that would allow me to remain a teacher first. As Patterson (1990) stated in *Teacher Research: From Promise to Power*, "I am first a teacher, then a researcher; so my research decisions can never interfere with my students' opportunities to learn" (p. 28).

Teacher research is defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) as the systematic and intentional inquiry by teachers to answer authentic questions derived from real classroom experiences. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) expand on this definition in further detail by stating:

By *systematic* we refer primarily to ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences inside and outside of classrooms, and making some kind of written record. By *intentional* we signal that teacher research is an activity that is planned rather than spontaneous. And by *inquiry* we suggest that teacher research stems from or

generates questions and reflects teachers' desires to make sense of their experiences—to adopt a learning stance or openness toward classroom life. (p. 3)

Each of the three elements discussed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) helped to guide my research study. I began with the inquiry – the questions arising from my teaching. Developing out of this was my intent to examine and understand my teaching practices in relation to the school's literacy program. Finally, the use of a teacher research journal allowed for a systematic method of data collection. The combination of these three elements formed the basis for a qualitative research study.

Qualitative teacher research enabled me to collect data from daily classroom incidents in a real-life setting, recording and examining events as they unfolded. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) consider the gathering of data in real-life settings to be a crucial aspect of qualitative research. Careful classroom observation and appropriate data collection and analysis enable the teacher to develop new ways of understanding classroom instruction and learning (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008). Such an approach to data collection and analysis allowed me to address questions that arose from my teaching.

The second framework, reading theory, enabled me to understand Mainstream Elementary's literacy program in relation to a theoretical perspective. This involved analyzing the components of the literacy program against the two main philosophies associated with reading instruction: WL and DI. WL instruction embodies the philosophy that students be engaged in their learning. Students are able to make choices and have the opportunity to give input into decisions that affect their learning (Meyer & Manning, 2007). DI follows the philosophy that reading instruction leans heavily toward a skills-based approach. In DI, students progress through a series of skills that are then combined for the purpose of reading (Meyer & Manning, 2007).

Mainstream Elementary's Literacy Program

Within Mainstream Elementary's literacy program, the learning process of students resembled the part-to-whole concept of DI. Teaching manuals and guides were used as the basis of reading instruction. Classroom structure, daily scheduling, and the resources used were taken from the work of Fountas and Pinnell. I, along with others, was in-serviced and mentored on instructional methods that were deemed beneficial to student learning. We were told to refer to these manuals for teaching decisions and for support.

Primary teachers in my school were directed to instruct students using the strategies outlined by Pinnell and Fountas (2007). These strategies were touted as strategies used by good readers. I taught these reading strategies to students individually in a predetermined order, as outlined in the continuum. Once students achieved mastery of these skills, I combined the strategies. Students were passive learners as choice was removed from the equation.

Running records, a significant aspect of Mainstream Elementary's literacy program, were frequent in my classroom. The running record is a miscue analysis reading assessment that is used to determine the oral reading level of students. This reading assessment analyzes miscues as: meaning (semantic), syntactic, and visual, as based on the work of Marie Clay (2006). Reading errors that maintain the meaning of the text (ie. car for vehicle) are coded as meaning (semantic) errors. Reading errors that are structurally correct up to the error (ie. the man walked vs. the man was) are coded as syntactic errors. Reading errors based on visual information from the print (ie. horse for house) are coded as visual errors. Errors and self-corrections are then

calculated to determine the easy (independent), instructional, and hard reading levels of students (Clay, 2006).

Although running records, similar to Goodman's miscue analysis (Hall, 2003), originated within the philosophy of WL, the approach taken by the school's literacy program used running records as a form of DI. The purpose of running records was to determine students' reading levels, to track student progression through these levels, and to assist the teacher in assigning students' reading materials.

Reading level, as defined by Mainstream Elementary, referred to the level of difficulty at which a student decodes text independently. This level was often represented by a letter or a numerical value. The letter value was based on the leveling system of Fountas and Pinnell (1996). The numerical values were based on PM Benchmark and Reading Recovery systems.² The primary grades at Mainstream Elementary had a PM Benchmark collection of books used specifically for determining the reading level of students. Books from Reading Recovery were also used to determine reading levels. Within the educational system, and subsequently within my school, reading levels had become an accepted discursive practice amongst educators.

The premise behind reading levels is to ensure that a student has mastered the skills at his/her reading level before proceeding to the next level. This linear model of skill acquisition follows closely with that of DI, maintaining that learning occurs through achieving and mastering a series of individual skills.

My classroom, like other primary classrooms in my school, categorized student reading material based on reading levels: the blue bin was for reading level three, the red bin was for reading level four, etc. The students' reading levels were often discussed amongst other primary teachers, the Reading Recovery teacher, the Resource teacher, and school administration. When questions were asked about student reading, or when Reading Recovery spots opened up, the first topic was the student's reading level.

Once the instructional reading level is determined for the student, he/she is expected to read books from within this level. Levels are determined based on the reading accuracy rate of each student. Percentage of words read correctly is used to determine a student's reading level. A percentage of 95-100 is considered to be at the easy range. A percentage of 90-94 is considered to be the student's instructional level, and any percentage less than 90 is considered to be at the difficult range (Clay, 2006). In this context, guided reading follows the DI approach to reading instruction.

Once a student's reading level was established, the next step in the instructional program was guided reading. Guided reading is the teaching of reading strategies to a small group of students. The small group of students was determined based on reading levels. Teachers were to conduct one if not two guided reading sessions daily during center time, as suggested by the work of Fountas and Pinnell (1996).

² PM is a collection of levelled books used in the primary grades at my school. PM Benchmark are kits that enable the teacher to assess and evaluate student reading levels through the use of levelled books and running records. Reading Recovery is a program developed by Marie Clay to understand and enhance student reading through a process of miscue analysis. This program is a short-term, one-to-one intervention for students identified as having reading difficulties.

Research Method

Classrooms provide teachers with a multitude of research opportunities such as lesson plans, classroom interactions, and dialogue amongst teachers, students, and parents. Classroom events provide rich data for the teacher researcher. Teachers “have sophisticated and sensitive observation skills grounded in the context of actual classrooms and schools” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 7). These observational skills allow the teacher to examine both obvious and subtle events that take place within the classroom. The teacher researcher is able to situate these events within a contextual understanding of the classroom.

I decided to use teacher research to investigate my teaching practices. I wanted to ensure that a rigid adherence to one teaching approach was not detrimental to my students. I was nervous that by basing my entire reading instruction on a published program, I was not addressing individual student needs in the best way possible. Teacher research allowed me to explore this issue without disrupting my teaching or my classroom.

I was able to use lesson plans as well as teaching resources (assessment tools and classroom texts) as a way of researching teaching and learning. Understanding the rationale behind the lesson plans and the actual results from implementing the lessons provide insight into teaching theory as well as the impact of teaching decisions on student learning.

I used a teacher research journal as a way of recording events, thoughts, and questions that arose during the course of this research study. The teacher research journal is a working document that allows the researcher the opportunity to return to the document to reflect, make new connections, and answer questions. Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2008) state that the journal is a “powerful tool for scholarly reflection and professional development, and for collecting, analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting, and extending data” (p. 15). The writing within the teacher research journal can take many forms (objective, subjective, creative, and expressive), each of which provides valuable information (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008). The various forms of writing provide the teacher researcher with various forms of thoughts, thus providing a thorough and multifaceted view of the data.

When I began journaling, I was completely unsure of what exactly I was doing. I felt as though there should be some concrete process to follow, some formula for what I would record and how I would record it. As I became more familiar with the literature surrounding journals as a form of data collection, I learned that no such concrete process or formula exists. No two journals look identically the same and each journal is a reflection of the researcher and the research question(s) being addressed. It took a while before I was comfortable and confident in my skills as a journal-ist. Initially I was recording everything—every minute detail of my day—with little regard or reflection on the relevance of what I was recording. It was not until I began reading through my journal that I realized I was not doing myself any journalistic favors. The entries in my journal were not pertinent to my research question. I did not need a description of every little aspect of my day—especially the aspects that had no bearing on or significance for the issues I was exploring. Once I identified this, it was easier for me to identify what would be useful in understanding my research question.

At this point I began recording events and occurrences from my classroom that were related to my research question. With each event I recorded, I included observations about student engagement or disengagement, interest or disinterest, student learning, and my own personal insights and reflections. I paid particular attention to lessons that had been successful and motivating as well as those that had been less successful. My research journal became a

mirror into my classroom, my teaching practices, and student learning. It allowed me to ask questions, consider issues, contemplate the rationale behind my teaching decisions, and dig deeper for answers.

Sometimes I had recorded things as they were happening—stealing a few moments here and there to jot down essential information. Other times I recorded things during my prep period, after school, or at home in the evenings. Each night I read through my journal and recorded any insights or responses that came to me. I also answered questions that had presented themselves in the journal, recorded any information that shed light on previous issues or concerns, or just continued a dialogue with myself about issues that were not so easily understood and/or resolved.

The next step in my research, an essential component of teacher research, involved analyzing my data. Data analysis and interpretation can occur throughout the duration of the research study (Merritt & Labbo, 2004) so that the data being collected can inform the research decisions of the teacher. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) state:

Analysis is about finding what is ‘in’ the data we collect that seems to us to be significant, and *interpretation* is about saying what this ‘implies’ or ‘means’ for the question or problem underpinning our study. It involves looking for trends and tendencies, patterns and regularities in the data, as well as for what seem to be interesting or significant exceptions and variations to these trends or patterns. Researchers use analytic tools and techniques to ‘work on’ the data in order to find what is ‘in there.’ Analysis is always more than description or re-description. It tells us more than what is simply ‘on the surface’ of the data. (p. 33-38)

Researchers must be responsive and impartial to the data during the analysis. According to Merritt and Labbo (2004), researchers must “see what is there—not what we expect to be there” (p. 408). Researchers must remain cognizant of their biases and not allow speculation to influence the findings.

The researcher must be explicit in how the data is analyzed. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) state:

[I]t has to be clear *how* and *why* other teacher researchers have derived the concepts, categories, patterns and so on that they have from their data. It needs to be clear why they have analysed it one way rather than another, and what ideas and prior experiences or theories have made them decide to approach the data in the way they have. Readers need to know why something was interpreted in a particular way before they can decide whether to accept that interpretation. (p. 19)

Transparency in data analysis is crucial. Not only does this allow for clarity, but also for the believability of the findings.

For the purpose of this research study, I analyzed my teacher research journal to find the themes. The language of the data analysis pertaining to this research study was “coding, identifying emerging patterns, recognizing themes, and challenging interpretations” (Merritt & Labbo, 2004, p. 414). I coded the entries of my journal to identify the themes and patterns that were present: “Finding the patterns within data, viewing each bit of information as a part of a larger puzzle which you must unscramble” (Power & Hubbard, 1999, p. 35) was crucial during the process of data analysis.

My data analysis identified three main themes: reading levels, running records, and guided reading. The themes and patterns revealed during the analysis of my journal allowed me to categorize my data into manageable segments. I examined the themes and patterns emerging from the codification of the journal and considered the underlying notions behind them. I considered how and why these themes emerged, the consequences of the themes on my teaching, and my contribution to these themes as significant classroom experiences. The themes, as well as my reflection and interpretation of the themes, were then considered in regard to the research question.

Research Findings

Samples of the data recorded within my teacher research journal are captured below. These entries demonstrate the impact of reading levels on my teaching as well as on student learning.

One of my journal entries focused on the apprehension I felt when it was my turn to report the reading levels of my students.

I feel horrible. I know that the reading levels of some of my students are not high. I can try to explain the reasons for the lower levels. I don't want my teaching to be judged as ineffective or inferior. I don't want my students to be judged. Is this atmosphere of competition healthy or helpful?

Corresponding to this entry was another reflection recorded in my journal. I was frequently asked for the reading levels of my Grade 1 and Grade 2 students. I was told that this was to monitor how things were going in my classroom. The focus was on the reading level, not the context in which the reading level was determined. I documented my reaction to these interactions:

When I try to illustrate student strengths through other forms of work or assessment, it always comes back to the level. How can this be all that matters? What about the fact that one student is showing great progress on un leveled books from home that are more geared to his interests and hobbies?! I am afraid that we are missing the boat on this one!

This entry reiterated my concern that reading levels were limiting both teachers and students, and exemplified the DI characteristics promoted within such instructional practices. Instead of meaning-making and student interest being discussed, it was the quantification of student reading.

As I began to incorporate reading levels into my instructional practices, I started to witness discrepancies. There was more than simply the leveling of my students that affected their reading progress. The texts, student experiences, student interests, and what was going on in their lives at that moment were some of the key factors that played a role in their reading ability but that were not reflected in their reading level. These were all aspects that became apparent throughout the course of the year. The following excerpt from my journal supported these factors:

I couldn't believe it. I had a student who was reading at a level 13. I knew for a fact that this student was reading at a higher level. However, when I sat down and took a running record, her level was 13. I struggled with this baffling result for a couple of days. I then thought I would try a book about horses. This student loved horses.

I was relieved and amazed at what happened next. The student read the horse book fantastically. The student's reading level was 16.

Was this discrepancy all due to the book selection? What would have happened if I had not tried another book? How scary is that thought?

With levels, as characteristic of DI, students are not permitted to skip steps. Students are to progress through skills in a pre-determined order (Meyer & Manning, 2007). Another journal entry outlined an incident in which a student expressed interest in reading materials outside his level while I was passing out homework books to my Grade 2 students. The following is my reflection about this incident:

I felt horrible for disallowing a student the opportunity to choose their book. This student never showed interest in reading, and the first time he did, I didn't listen. I didn't let him read the book he wanted because it was two levels above his current reading level. Somehow this didn't feel right to me.

This situation was one of many that highlighted the adherence to sequential skill mastery associated with reading levels and DI. Students were to move through the levels when they demonstrated proficiency, not when they asked. This situation caused frustration for both my student and I. This frustration was due to a conflict of philosophy. The student's desire to elicit control over his learning resembled the philosophy associated with WL in which students are active participants in their learning. My teaching philosophy encouraged student choice and interest; however, I was abandoning this belief as it was not reflective of the foundational theory of the literacy program.

Implications

Although my instructional beliefs did not directly reflect those of my school, there were both positives and negatives that I took from the literacy program. My teaching incorporated aspects of Mainstream Elementary's literacy program, while omitting others.

There are some aspects of reading levels that I found to be beneficial. Students reading texts that are neither too hard nor too easy has merit. This would prevent the students from experiencing frustration with a book for being either too easy or too difficult.

Another positive aspect of reading levels was the ability for differentiated instruction. Having identified each of my students' reading levels enabled me to group them based on reading progress, and then to differentiate my instruction based on the need of each student or group. This took the form of guided reading.

While there were positive aspects to reading levels, I had some concerns associated with this instructional practice. Reading levels quantify reading, representing a student's reading ability by a single number. This number is determined based on a running record, which measured only the decoding ability of students and did not include any comprehension component.

Another concern related to reading levels was the restriction it placed upon students, as they were only to read books from their reading level. Their choice was limited to the books within their level, regardless of their interest or experiences. Because students were not able to select their own books, they were often not able to use their interests or experiences to make meaningful connections with their texts.

Reading levels also impacted my decision-making abilities. Instead of basing my book selection decisions on student interests or current events, I had to select books for students that matched their reading level. I also had to modify my instruction to incorporate reading levels that were structured on the belief that learning is linear, and that students had to progress through reading levels one at a time. Also, much in the same way that students had a limited role in their learning, I was somewhat passive in that I was basing my decisions on a program that was developed outside of my classroom.

Reflections

Using reading theory as an analytic lens provided me with the opportunity to situate my teaching practices and those of Mainstream Elementary's literacy program within a theoretical framework. I was able to analyze significant aspects of the program to determine the reading theory—DI or WL—subscribed to, and then compare these findings to the reading theory upon which I based my teaching practices. Within this analysis, I determined that, although running records were situated within a WL belief system, the program was implementing them in a DI manner. Thus, this analytic lens enabled me to explore the foundation of the literacy program, how this foundation was being implemented, and the conflict between this implementation and my teaching beliefs.

Another benefit of reading theory as an analytic lens was how I was able to explore the role of the teacher and student. The program was positioned as the difference maker, not the teacher or students. Teachers and students did not have a voice in this program; both were told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Teachers were facilitators and students were recipients of knowledge.

I have never believed in a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. There is no one right way to teach reading. Every program has some benefit, and when combined with the teacher's knowledge and experience it can be a powerful learning tool. However, having to base my teaching decisions solely on a program with little to no consideration of students' needs created an atmosphere of artificial learning. Neither the students nor I were active decision-makers in this environment. Our direction and path were determined from outside the classroom. Despite my passion and belief that voice and choice should be a vital aspect in student learning, I was allowing my students to be passive in their education. For education to be meaningful, teachers and students must have an active role.

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