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The Effectiveness of One School District's Basal Reader Selection Process

Michael A. Tulley

The few studies conducted of the processes through which basal reading programs are selected have been concerned mostly with how these materials find their way into classrooms. Some, for example, have examined the statutes and policies that set the parameters within which state and local level selection processes occur (Tulley, 1985; Farr, Tulley and Rayford, 1987), while others have outlined the political, historical, and economic forces which shape and surround these processes (Bowler, 1978; Keith, 1981). Generally, an unflattering portrait has been painted of basal reader selection in the U.S. State level adoption processes, for instance, have been described as high-profile yet superfluous leftovers of an earlier era which offer little benefit to today's educators (Farr and Tulley, 1985; Tulley, 1989). Studies that have looked at the frameworks erected to support local level selection, meanwhile, have seen processes which range from smoothly-run curriculum review and development efforts to free-for-alls (Farr, Tulley and Powell, 1987; Tulley and Farr, 1990). Perhaps most troubling of all, however, may be the increasingly visible evidence that basal reader selection (and basal content) are often influenced by factors such as tradition, special interest group participation, and marketplace dynamics, which have little to do with reading (Crane, 1975; Tyson-Bernstein, 1989).

Studies such as these have improved our understanding of basal reader selection processes by providing some insights into the actions and interactions of those who participate in them. But these studies have revealed little about the *effectiveness* of basal selection processes – that is, whether they help teachers identify materials which support the type of reading instruction they intend to bring about in their classrooms. A basal reader selection process is, in other words, an arm of curriculum development, and its value must be weighed in large part after the selection process has been completed, the dust has settled, and teachers have begun to use newly adopted readers, workbooks and other materials to undergird reading instruction. It is usually the case, however, that when state or local level basal selection processes are concluded, curriculum directors, researchers, and others fold their tents and move on, leaving unanswered the questions of whether that process aided curriculum development in the way it was supposed to, or whether teachers got what they wanted.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the basal reader selection process in one mid-western school district. The study took place during the academic year immediately following that district's basal selection process, in the midst of teachers' first year teaching with a newly adopted basal reading program, and was guided by two questions: 1) what type of reading instruction did teachers intend for their classrooms when they adopted this particular reading program and 2) was that type of instruction occurring?

Method

This study took place in one suburban central Indiana school district, with a student population (K-12) of approximately 4,500. This district was selected for several reasons.

First, during the mandatory statewide reading adoption of the preceding school year educators in this school system selected a new basal reading program, which at the time of this study was being used by elementary classroom teachers district-wide (see Note). Second was its moderate size (by the standards of this state), which facilitated district-wide data collection. Third, the district had in place a well-defined and organized basal reader review and selection process, typical in many ways of processes found in school systems throughout this state. Fourth was its reputation among area educators and others familiar with its operation as an affluent and academically successful school system staffed by an experienced and stable teaching force.

Data collection consisted of interviews with, and a survey of, elementary classroom teachers. Interviews took place during weekly visits by the author to the district during the period from January through March, 1990, and were conducted with teachers at every grade level in each of the district's five K-5 elementary schools. The purpose of these interviews was to "ground" information related to teachers' participation in the adoption process of the previous year and their reasons for selecting the basal reading program adopted during that process. All interviews were voluntary, conducted individually with teachers at their respective schools, and most were close to thirty minutes in length. Interview data were collected using standard discovery- and naturalistic-oriented techniques (Wolf, 1979), and analyzed using methods commonly employed with qualitative data, such as the formation of categories of responses, triangulation, and debriefings with knowledgeable associates (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Interview findings were incorporated into the design and content of a written survey, which was then distributed

to all regular elementary classroom teachers in the district. The purposes of the survey were to corroborate and to determine the extent to which interview findings applied to all teachers in the district, and to collect additional information related to the two inquiry questions stated earlier. Surveys were distributed in mid-April, 1990, by which time teachers had been using the new basal reading program for more than seven months.

Results

Altogether, 54 (or 57%) of the 95 elementary teachers in this district participated in an interview, and 75 (79%) responded to the survey. During interviews teachers were asked to discuss the type of reading program they had been in search of during the basal review and selection process of the previous year. Analyses of responses revealed that most had intended to adopt a basal that would help bring about four changes in reading instruction. In the survey teachers were shown a list of these four changes and asked to indicate the extent to which each was occurring in their classrooms.

Table 1
Intended Changes In Reading Instruction

Change	As Intended	Opposite	No Difference
Less time spent on skill/ seatwork	24%	29%	47%
More time spent reading	25%	28%	47%
More integration of skills	76%	5%	19%
Higher quality stories	76%	8%	16%

Teacher responses to this question are shown in Table 1. Listed are the four desired changes identified during interviews, and the percentage of teachers who indicated

that each change was occurring as intended, was occurring in the opposite direction, or that there was no difference. For example, 25% of those teachers responding indicated that their students were spending more classroom time engaged in reading than had previously been the case, 28% believed that students were spending less time reading, and 47% believed that the amount of time spent reading was unchanged.

Discussion

During interviews a majority of teachers explained that there were four aspects of reading instruction with which they had become increasingly dissatisfied. Their intent, as they entered the review and selection process of the year before, had been to adopt a reading program which would make possible change in these four areas, and it was primarily their belief that the basal selected would help bring about these changes which led many teachers to support its adoption. First, teachers wanted students to spend more time during reading instruction engaged in reading. This meant that less time would be devoted to the teaching and practice of subskills than had previously been the case; this was a second goal. Third, teachers wanted subskill instruction to be more integrated, so that skills would mostly be taught within the context of stories or text, rather than in isolation, which many believed had been the case with their previous basal. Fourth, they wanted a basal that contained stories of a "higher quality" (a term which teachers tended to use synonymously with "well-known" or "award-winning") than those in their previous basal.

The issue of time spent reading versus time engaged in subskill instruction was for these teachers the most important area of concern. Many referred to the lack of sufficient time for student reading they experienced with their

previous basal, due mostly, they explained, to its heavy emphasis upon "seatwork drill." A number of teachers confessed, in fact, that because of their strong desire to change this aspect of reading instruction, they had not taken the time to review the newer edition of their previous basal, although it was among those on the state-approved list. They assumed it was still a predominantly "skills-oriented" program. Survey results show, however, that where the issue of reading time versus subskills was concerned, most teachers did not believe that students were spending more time reading and less time engaged in subskill instruction and practice than in previous years. Almost half believed that the relative amount of time devoted to reading and subskill instruction was unchanged, and the remainder believed that, since the arrival of the new basal, students were reading even less and receiving even more subskill instruction than before. (With only a few exceptions those who believed students were reading more were the same who believed that there was less subskill instruction.)

Approximately three-fourths of the teachers responding to the survey believed the new basal integrated skill instruction and text more than the previous basal, and the same number believed that the new basal contained stories of a higher quality. One teacher in four believed, however, that the extent to which subskill instruction was integrated was either less than before or unchanged, and the same number believed that the quality of the stories in the new basal was either lower or the same as those in the previous basal. Approximately 90% of all teachers believed that at least one of the four intended changes was occurring in their classrooms, while only 25% believed that all four intended changes were occurring. (Analysis of interview and survey responses on the basis of grade level revealed no significant or noteworthy patterns.)

Clearly, some of these teachers got what they wanted and others did not. The most obvious explanation for this, of course, is that *how* a basal is used is as important (if not more important) as *which* basal is used, and thus teachers are themselves responsible for whether or not reading instruction changed in the way they intended. But at the same time, the way teachers use the basals that schools buy is just one of many factors that can directly or indirectly influence reading curriculum and instruction. Indeed, because the teaching of reading is such a complex and multi-faceted occupation, fingers can be pointed in a number of directions. Moreover, these were experienced and concerned teachers, who expressed clear and precise ideas about what they liked and did not like about the reading instruction they had been providing to students, and how they wanted it to change. An explanation based on teacher decision-making alone seems insufficient, then, to account for the large number of teachers who were unable to create in their classrooms the type of reading instruction they envisioned.

Basal reader selection processes are supposed to help educators shape reading curriculum and instruction. It is legitimate, therefore, to expect these processes to share at least some – perhaps much – of the responsibility for the way reading is taught. The findings of this study show that within this district's basal selection process at least three alternative explanations can be found for what went wrong.

First, it appeared that some of these teachers were careless about their review and selection responsibilities. As a result, many of them may simply have been mistaken when they concluded that of the available choices the basal adopted was the best-suited for, and would be most able to help them bring about, the type of reading instruction they

sought. Interviews with teachers and conversations with district administrators and adoption committee members left the impression that a number of teachers treated basal selection more as a nuisance than as an opportunity, and as though their responsibilities were fulfilled when they expressed their concerns, priorities, and preferences at meetings early in the process and then left it to others to identify and deliver a basal reading program matching that description. Many teachers indicated that they spent only a few hours examining basals, that they reviewed only those texts and other materials corresponding to their grade level, or that they reviewed basals only after the district adoption committee had completed much of its work and had narrowed the list of state approved basals from ten to three. Only one of five elementary principals expressed confidence that all teachers in his building reviewed all state-approved basals, and that was because he maintained a checklist to monitor who had removed materials from the collection of samples housed in his school. Although open to all teachers, meetings of the district adoption committee were attended almost exclusively by committee members. When pressed, several teachers conceded that much of what they knew about the basals under review the year before had been learned by attending meetings, dinners, and presentations hosted by publishing company representatives. In fact, when asked what evidence they had for their belief that the basal adopted would support or help bring about the four changes in instruction they sought, the answer given most often was that the representatives and consultants from the company which published that basal all said it would.

Second, it appeared that the design and management of this district's review and selection process were unable to safeguard against or compensate for any teacher careless-

ness or abdication that took place. To be sure, there were several commendable aspects of this district's selection process. It was democratically and openly conducted; for example, nearly an entire school year and dozens of administrative hours were devoted to it, and there appeared to have been ample opportunity for interested teachers to influence its outcomes. But there were other elements not in evidence which might have enhanced teachers' ability and willingness to participate in it more fully. There was no in-service training in how to evaluate instructional materials, no released time from other responsibilities nor any other form of compensation to offset the many hours that thorough review required of teachers, and no plan for systematic piloting of the programs under consideration.

Third, it appeared that teachers received almost no external, post-adoption assistance when learning to use their new basal. During interviews several teachers noted that after the adoption process and before they started teaching with it, their only exposure to the new basal was the time they invested during the summer months engaged in a self-initiated and self-directed examination of early shipments of new manuals, texts and workbooks. Except for two, one-hour, building level inservice sessions conducted in the fall semester by a consultant made available through the publisher of the new basal, teachers underwent no formal training sequence designed to help them learn to use the new basal. There were indications, however, that teachers would have benefitted from some form of systematic training scheme. In the survey, for example, teachers were asked to estimate the length of time it had taken or would take them to learn to use or to "feel comfortable" teaching with this new basal. Less than half (44%) of those responding indicated that between one and six months was all the time needed, and thus at the time of

this study considered the learning process largely or completely behind them. Over half (56%) indicated, however, that they were still engaged in learning to use the new basal, and estimated that a full school year or more would be needed. (Teachers needing the most learning time were evenly divided among those who did and those who did not believe that most or all intended changes in reading instruction were occurring.) Teachers were also asked in the survey to identify areas of difficulty encountered while learning to use the new basal. Responses showed four commonly experienced difficulties (learning the organization of the teacher's manual, learning to make choices from among many instructional activities and options, learning to teach writing and thinking strategies, and accommodating inconsistencies between the new and the previous basal in the scope and sequence of sub-skill instruction). Any or all of these factors could have presented enough of a distraction or challenge to affect the reading instruction that was taking place in classrooms.

Conclusion and comment

An effective basal reader selection process is one which results in teachers identifying materials that help bring about the type of reading instruction they seek for their classrooms. For reasons both within and outside the control of teachers, the basal selection process in this school district made but a limited contribution to the objectives these teachers set for reading curriculum and instruction, and that process should therefore be considered ineffective.

But ineffective basal selection processes are as avoidable as they are alarming. In this district, a modest investment of resources, coupled with a systematic and coordinated post-adoption inservice agenda, might have helped ensure teachers' more willing and robust participation in review and selection activities, might have helped them

make a smoother transition from one basal to another, and might have increased the likelihood of their being able to shape in their classrooms the kind of reading instruction they envisioned.

Implicit in these findings, too, is that teachers may not have had enough autonomy to fashion the type of reading instruction they desired. For some, perhaps many, of these teachers, bringing about the changes they sought might have required the use of materials or an approach other than what was available on the list of state-approved basal reading programs. True, teachers could adopt any of the basals on that list. But there were *only* basals on that list, which meant that some fundamental decisions about reading curriculum and instruction had been made by others before these teachers had even begun to think about which of those programs was best for what they wanted. Centralized state level control of which materials will be used and when and how they will be selected may inadvertently instill in teachers the impression that their importance and ability to contribute to the curriculum development enterprise are minimal. Unfortunately, the question these teachers asked as they entered the review and selection process was, *Which of these basals do we want?* But with greater professional freedom they might have asked instead, *Do we want to use a basal?*

It is risky to generalize from a single case study of a single school district. But experience and familiarity with selection processes throughout the country suggest that the basal selection process in place in this district is in many ways similar to those found in many other districts, in both adoption and nonadoption states. It may be, then, that there are many teachers who, like those described here, possess a clear vision of the type of classroom reading

environment they want to construct, but who find themselves with a poorly drawn blueprint, and holding the wrong tools.

Note

Indiana is one of the 22 "adoption" states, and each of the 304 school districts in this state are required by statute to adopt textbooks in each subject area on a rotating, six-year cycle. In this state local districts must select textbooks or basal programs which have first been approved by an appointed, six-member state level Advisory Committee on Textbook Adoptions. Statutes empower this Committee to approve "as many textbooks as it finds are satisfactory" (Indiana Department of Education, 1989), and during the 1988 reading adoption ten basal reading programs were approved. Local districts establish their own review and selection procedures, subject to a few state guidelines (local review committee membership must include parents, for example). Basal and other textbooks are usually adopted at the district level, and often districts devote much of each school year to the review and selection process.

In each of the three previous reading adoptions, which stretched back to the early 1970s, teachers in this district adopted the Houghton Mifflin Reading Program. Newer editions were selected each adoption year, though, with the 1983 edition the most recently adopted. During the 1988-89 reading adoption teachers in this district adopted the 1989 edition of the Silver Burdett and Ginn World of Reading program. Teachers not using this basal on a regular basis (e.g., teachers of honors classes) were not included in this study.

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Call for Manuscripts: Themed Issue

The June 1992 issue of Reading Horizons will be devoted to the theme of alternative methods of grouping for reading and language arts instruction. Dr. Mary E. Hauser, College of Education, Western Michigan University, will be guest editor. Contributions in the form of practical articles, research studies, case studies, commentaries, and articles about all aspects of grouping for instruction are welcomed. To submit a manuscript for review, submit four copies, each with a cover sheet giving author names(s) and affiliation(s); subsequent pages should include a running head taken from the title but no references to author identity. Text should be written using gender-free language; references should follow APA guidelines. Include two stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Manuscripts should be sent to Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, Editor, Reading Horizons, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008, postmarked no later than February 29, 1992.