

10-1-1986

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Recommended Citation

Shannon, P. (1986). Differing Perspectives on the Goals and Means of Reading Instruction. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 27 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol27/iss1/10

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DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON THE GOALS AND MEANS OF READING INSTRUCTION

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The recent suggestions in reading journals that school and teacher effectiveness research should affect reading instruction in public schools imply that all levels of school personnel agree upon the goals and means of reading instruction (Baumann, 1984; Blair, 1984). Indeed, many reading programs which have recently reorganized according to this literature share this implied assumption (Cuban, 1984; Wise, 1979). That is, the programs are organized upon the assumption that administrators, reading teachers, and classroom teachers agree that high achievement test scores are the important goal for reading programs and that reading instruction should be rearranged in order to promote the greatest student gains on these tests. This study investigated this assumption of consensus within an "effective" school district.

Most research on effective schools and teachers define effectiveness in terms of standardized achievement scores (Brophy and Good, in press). Moreover, state legislators, the media, and the public subscribe to the notion that these scores are the most objective index of graduates' ability to read and write sufficiently well to fulfill roles in the nation's economy (Postman, 1979). With high test scores set as the goal, the findings of teacher effectiveness research point toward the utility of academic lessons which are tightly sequenced and closely monitored (see Otto, Wolf and Elridge, 1984 and Rosenshine and Stevens, 1984 for reviews of this research). Faced with these facts, it seems only reasonable to conclude that school personnel must agree on these issues.

However, recent articles written by teachers from reorganized districts suggest that some teachers do not share this new focus with their administrators (Phipps, 1984; Schmitt,

1982). These teachers object to administrative intervention into their reading lessons, and they suggest that the resulting reading instruction is less humane for teachers and students. My search of recent educational journals for studies comparing teachers' and administrators' views on reading goals and means yielded a few essays, but no research articles. For this reason and because school districts are implementing the findings for effectiveness of research rapidly (Ralph & Fennessy, 1983), a study of the school personnel's views was conducted within a school district which reorganized its reading program a decade prior to the investigation and which served as a model program for its state.

Method

Questionnaires, interviews, and the school district's printed descriptions were used to gather information from school personnel employed in a large suburban-rural school district in the midwestern United States. I adapted 10 items from Ignatovich, Cusick and Ray's (1979) survey of "value/belief patterns" on curriculum and instruction (see Table 1 for items). Five items were rewritten to reflect a "rational monitoring" perspective for reading programs, which closely resembles the findings of effectiveness research--verifiable competence, tightly sequenced and controlled skills lessons, closely monitored student progress and a standard curriculum. Five items were altered to suggest an "affective-communal" reading program, a program which centers on helping students to learn about their personalities and emotions through the use of literature and which recognizes each classroom as a distinct social unit in which the teacher and students negotiate the curriculum, methods, materials, and progress. To check school personnel's ideas concerning decision-making, an 11th item asked respondents to select the most appropriate level at which important decisions about reading instruction should be made at the individual teacher, grade, school, or district level. These questionnaires, including a biographical information sheet requesting numbers of reading courses completed, age, and years of experience, were distributed to 421 classroom teachers, 20 reading specialist teachers and 20 administrators who were asked to rank order the ten items as goals and means for an ideal school reading program.

Table 1

Affective-Communal Perspective

- * 1. Postive relations between teacher and student are more important in reading instruction that achievement on standardized tests.
- * 2. Teachers who concern themselves with humanistic approaches to reading instruction are more effective than those who concern themselves with measured outcomes.
- 3. Good teaching is an art and will remain an art.
- 4. There is too much emphasis placed on the cognitive aspects of reading and not enough on the affective aspects.
- 5. Teachers ought to have autonomy over reading instruction activities.

Rational-Monitoring Perspective

- * 1. District-wide coordination of reading instruction is important to teacher success.
 - * 2. Teachers need to clearly explain the intended outcomes of the reading instruction.
 - 3. A system wherein reading goals and objectives are clearly stated and the relations between them clearly defined is essential to good teaching.
 - 4. Those educators outside the classroom are in a better position to learn about innovations in reading instruction than are teachers.
 - 5. Adminstrators are to have a strong voice in the methods and materials of reading instruction in the classroom.
- * Items used during interviews.

Follow-up interviews were held with 20 classroom teachers, 3 reading teachers, and 3 administrators in order to gather information concerning the validity and reliability of the questionnaire responses and to give these respondents the opportunity to elaborate upon their questionnaire responses. Respondents were asked to sketch and discuss the steps they would take if they wanted to change an important part of the reading program, to rank order and discuss 4 items from the questionnaire, and to define their goals for reading instruction and appropriate means to

reach those goals.

Finally, the many district pamphlets discussing various parts of its reading program were examined to determine the central administration's conception of the program's organization and its goals, means, and effectiveness. Because these pamphlets were published for public as well as school use, I thought the printed statements would supply an official context in which to interpret personnel's remarks.

Results

The district's pamphlets suggested that the central administration organized the reading program according to a rational-monitoring perspective. Among the goals for the reading program were listed many which correspond to those usually mentioned in summaries of effectiveness research--central coordination of reading program, a commitment to a single scope and sequence, a positive attitude toward student learning, a regiment of direction instruction, and an objective monitoring system. Formal evaluations of the program were conducted in five year cycles, when new reading textbooks were adopted. Evaluation committee members--central administrators, principals, reading teachers classroom teachers and parents--were appointed administratively. The scope and sequence of skills listed in the textbook adopted became the reading curriculum for the five years that followed.

Eighty-nine percent of the questionnaires were completed and returned (378 classroom teachers, 18 reading teachers, and 15 principals.) Classroom teachers could be characterized as relatively young and inexperienced; few had taken more than 3 reading courses, and many had not enrolled in any. In sharp contrast, reading teachers averaged over 5 reading courses each, and they were slightly older and more experienced than the classroom teacher. As might be expected, principals were predominantly male, more experienced, but somewhat surprisingly, they averaged more graduate reading classes than the classroom teachers.

The 5 top-ranked items from the questionnaire (of 10) were examined to determine each group's perspective on goals and means for reading instruction. Principals were more likely than the other groups to rank the rational-monitoring items as most important. In fact, principals never ranked an affective-communal item higher than

fourth. Items 1 and 5 from the rational-monitoring perspective appeared listed in the first and second ranks on 12 of 15 principals' questionnaires. When examined as a group, reading teachers appeared to value both perspectives equally. I found it difficult to determine a pattern among their rankings as a group. Classroom teachers averaged three affective-communal and two rational-monitoring items in the top five ranks. As a group, classroom teachers favored items 2, 4, and 5 from the affective-communal perspective and item 2 among the rational-monitoring items (see Table 1). However, only 5 classroom teachers ranked 2 rational-monitoring items that highly.

The groups differed in their opinions about the levels for decision-making. Forty-seven percent of the principals selected the district as the most appropriate level for important decisions on reading instruction and an additional 16% selected the school as the appropriate level. That is, 63% of the principals thought decisions should be made at these administrative levels. Reading teachers split evenly again with 50% selecting the administrative level and 50% suggesting that teachers should be involved (individual teacher or grade levels). Sixty-one percent of the classroom teachers thought that teachers should be involved (36% selected the teacher level and 25% the grade level).

During the interviews, each respondent drew essentially the same linear organization for decision-making with the board of education and superintendent at the top and teachers at the bottom. Most respondents placed the principal and reading teacher at the same level of authority; however, eight teachers placed principals above reading teachers. The administrators (two principals and the reading coordinator) stated that change could be initiated at any level of authority, although none offered an example of a fundamental change in the reading program which teachers started. However, only 3 of 20 classroom teachers agreed with this assessment. The other 17 teachers and the 3 reading teachers characterized the reading program as a top-down process which usually began with the elementary curriculum supervisor and the reading coordinator and then was implemented by principals and reading teachers.

The results of the item ranking during interviews yielded results similar to those from the questionnaire. The administrators ranked the rational-monitoring items

highest (as did 1 reading teacher and 4 classroom teachers). They supported their rankings with discussion concerning the need for central coordination of instruction and for an emphasis upon the outcomes for their student population. The other 2 reading teachers and 7 classroom teachers split the first 2 ranks between perspectives and the remaining 9 classroom teachers ranked the 2 affective communal items as the most important. These 9 teachers stated that the present organization of the reading program with its emphasis on testing worked against the positive relations between students and themselves.

Three statements symbolize each group's definition of goals and means for an ideal reading program. Although these quotations do not capture the flavor of the individuals' remarks, they do summarize the opinions of the majority in each group.

The Reading Coordinator (expressing the sentiment of the administrators) ...reading programs should be designed so that you can keep track of the development of students as they move from grade to grade, or school to school as in our district. Research shows that students need continuity in their reading program, if they are to successfully learn the basic skills. Our program, while not ideal by any means, is the closest we can come, given our circumstances. It is the work of many fine people. Our recent success is due to the careful selection of a curriculum and the materials and the hard work of our faculty. Our students learn to read! Of course we expect teachers to follow the curriculum and to use the materials we supply, but that doesn't mean that's all they should do.

A Reading Teacher (expressing the position of 2 of 3 reading teachers) Not every teacher is happy with the end of unit tests or the recording system. You probably will hear some grumblings about them. But they don't understand mastery learning. Students must master one skill before they go on to the next; otherwise we perpetuate failure. To determine mastery you must test...it's as simple as that.

A Classroom Teacher (expressing the opinion of 16 to 20 classroom teachers) There is too much outside interference. The curriculum is set, the testing is set,

the materials are set, the groups are set, everything is set for the teacher and students...They say that teachers should adapt to students' needs, but how can we, we only have time to go over the basics...on Fridays, I try to work in a little free time reading, but it's like pulling teeth to get them to read on their own. I used to joke that we teach students to read but not what to do with books. Now I'm not sure that's funny, but you know what I mean... I have to yell at them to get them to stop working in their math books, but they have their books away before I even open my mouth after reading period. I don't really blame them; there aren't many fun things to do in reading in this district.

Discussion

The assumption concerning consensus on goals and means for reading instruction appears unfounded in this district. Each indicator--item ranking, selected level for decision making, and definitions of goals and means for an ideal program--suggests that administrators adhere strongly to a rational-monitoring perspective. On the other hand, most classroom teachers support an affective-communal perspective on reading instruction, and the indicators appear mixed for reading teachers. Clearly there was not a simple consensus among personnel.

One explanation for these differences is to examine each group proximity to daily reading instruction. Administrators participate rarely in actual reading instruction, and they must consider the reading program in terms of large aggregates of students and teachers. Administrators are responsible for the articulation of the various parts of the reading program into a coherent whole while remaining within a fiscal budget. More management and standardization become their answers to problems that arise because they must simplify the number of variables they confront in order to make sense of the reading program. For example, for the problem of a mobile student population in their district, administrators imposed a standard curriculum with the expectation that every teacher would follow it closely to make classrooms throughout the district roughly interchangeable. Although this is not the only possible solution, from the distant vantage point of the administrative office, this rational solution and its rational-monitoring perspective seem to be the only way to run a reading program.

Classroom teachers work with the same students every day during reading instruction, and they soon learn that student cooperation is a key to students' academic success and teachers' psychic well-being (Doyle, 1983). This cooperation must be negotiated between teachers and students; it cannot be declared by administrative fiat (Mehan, 1979). Consequently, classroom teachers attempt to initiate a feeling of community among themselves and their students generally and during reading instruction specifically because this subject holds a prominent position within the daily events in elementary classrooms. Teachers often consider administrative overtures toward change as intrusions into the classroom community because at times they work against this cooperative and communal spirit.

Consider the administrative solution for the mobile student problem from a teacher's viewpoint. In order to pinpoint students' positions within the standard curriculum in case they will move, a monitoring system was established which required teachers to use criterion referenced tests periodically and to submit the results to reading teachers and principals. Although the system may make sense abstractly, most teachers considered it undue pressure to push their students along the curriculum regardless of a student's skill development. Teachers stated that this pressure created anxiety among students, caused teachers to neglect reading skills that they deemed important but that were not tested, undermined cooperation between teachers and students, and disrupted the communal environment teachers sought to achieve.

Reading teachers occupied a unique position in the reading program--they were both teachers and administrators. They met daily with students experiencing difficulty learning to read, yet they were also responsible for the school's reading program. Accordingly, reading teachers should understand the perspectives of both groups, and as a group, reading teachers did appear to take a balanced position. However, individual reading teachers did not simply split their rankings of items between the two perspectives when completing the questionnaires. Rather, the 11 reading teachers who had completed 4 or more reading courses listed at least 4 affective-communal items in the top 5 ranks, and the 7 reading teachers who took fewer than 3 reading courses ranked at least 4 rational-monitoring items in the

top 5 spots. Perhaps reading teachers' perspectives on goals and means for reading instruction depended on whether they saw themselves as teachers or administrators.

Conclusion

With a lack of consensus on goals and means for reading instruction, it may be premature to suggest that the findings of school and teacher effectiveness research should direct the organization of reading programs, since these findings are based solely on the notion that high achievement test scores are the goal of reading instruction. If these findings are implemented, it would appear to be an imposition of administrative will on the majority of school personnel. I do not think this is what advocates of effectiveness research have in mind when they suggest that "the most pervasive characteristic is the presence of a strong instructional leader (Baumann, 1984, p. 110). Effectiveness research suggests only what can be done, it does not necessarily follow logically that is what should be done. In other words, effectiveness research begins the debate over who and what should direct reading curricula and instruction; it should not conclude that debate.

Although consensus on goals and means may not be possible due to the different orientations toward reading instruction among the various levels of school personnel, it is certainly worth the effort expended to attempt to reach one. To pursue consensus, the respective positions must be made explicit, then discussed completely. Since many school districts are too large for a purely democratic discussion, the faculty of school or even grade levels in very large schools should meet to discuss their perspectives and then elect a representative of the majority position for a district council. Administrators should do the same, and then meet the teacher representative in an open forum to discuss the reading program entirely. In this way, a reading program based on shared assumptions on goals and means might evolve, or at the very least, the differing groups will come to understand each other's perspective. And after all, aren't reading programs supposed to promote understanding?

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