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## Examining the Forces That Guide Teaching Decisions

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## EXAMINING THE FORCES THAT GUIDE TEACHING DECISIONS

Dr. Robin Griffith, Dr. Dixie Massey, Dr. Terry S. Atkinson

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### Abstract

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This study of two successful first grade teachers examines the forces that guide their instructional decisions. Findings reveal the complexities of forces that influence the moment-to-moment decisions made by these teachers. Teachers repeatedly attempted to balance their desires to be student-centered while addressing state standards and implementing their schools' adopted curricula, with varying levels of success. The teachers' professional knowledge was the determining factor in that success. Levels of professional development and the professional learning communities of these two teachers and the contexts in which they were operating influenced their attention to certain forces. Findings from this study indicate that building teachers' professional knowledge through coaching and long-term professional development can improve teacher decision making.

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Teachers, not programs make the difference in student learning (see Allington, 2002; Hattie, 2003), and in an age of increased accountability and scripted instructional programs, mandated curricula often profoundly influence teachers' instructional decisions (Garan, 2002; Griffith, 2008; Yatvin, 2005). At any given moment and on any given day, a classroom teacher makes hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions, some of which relate to managing the classroom but most of which relate to instruction. In those moments, teachers rely heavily on verbal and nonverbal feedback from students (Fogarty, Wang, & Creek, 1983) and tap previous experiences with similar learners to respond productively (Corno, 2008). Characteristically, exemplary teachers make thoughtful adaptations while teaching (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000) and seize teachable moments (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999). Glaser (1977) and Snow (1980) identified teachers who are thoughtfully adaptive as those responsive to the needs of individual students while pursuing the goals set forth by the standards. Furthermore, Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) offered a framework for teaching and learning that served as a conceptual backdrop for this study. As university professors who taught in a master's program in reading at a large state university in the south, we were interested in how these concepts played out in classrooms. Based upon Bransford et al's (2005) conceptual framework, we considered the following external forces that guide teacher decision-making: (a) the standards-based movement (American Federation of Teachers, 2009; Common Core State Standards, 2011; Donnelly & Sadler, 2009); (b) adopted and/or mandated curricula (Shelton, 2005; Westerman, 1991); and (c) student-centered beliefs (Corno, 2008; Gill & Hoffman, 2009).

Existing research on teacher effectiveness lauds thoughtful, adaptive teaching decisions as a key characteristic of effective teachers; yet few researchers have examined the complex decision-making process in great detail. In this study, we examine the sources of information that guided the teachers to make decisions. Rather than simply focusing on managerial decisions related to time, materials, and behavior management (Anderson, 2003; Andrews, 2010), we focused on specific teaching decisions linked to student understanding, particularly those related to literacy. Grounded in observational data from classroom observations, we moved beyond simply identifying teaching decisions to unpacking the forces that influence the in-the-moment decisions teachers make. Specifically, we asked, "Are the teachers' instructional decisions student-centered, driven by the state standards, or influenced by the school's adopted curriculum?"

### **Teaching Is Decision Making**

Shavelson (1973) noted, “Any teaching act is a result of a decision, either conscious or unconscious,” and “*The basic teaching skill is decision making*” (p. 144). Shavelson also posited that every teaching decision is a “complex cognitive processing of available information” about the situation (p. 149). Shavelson and Stern (1981) further described the complex task of negotiating teachers’ own beliefs, the constraints of the curricula, and the goals of the instructional system. Gill and Hoffman’s (2009) study of teacher talk during planning time revealed teachers’ decisions often relate to their beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as their perceptions of the subject matter and their students. Balancing these factors is no easy feat as the negotiation of competing forces often requires teachers to employ “tactical recontextualization and creative adaptation of discourse” (Hansfield, Crumpler, & Dean, 2010, p. 405).

### **Standards Based Movement**

The American schools of the Twentieth Century adequately prepared students for a variety of professions. No one expected all students to attend college or even graduate from high school because agricultural and manufacturing jobs were readily available and respected by society as critical to the success of the nation (American Federation of Teachers, 2009). A century later, American societal norms demand much more. A small minority of students achieving high levels of educational success is no longer acceptable. Rather, post-secondary education is expected to be available and attainable by all. The standards-based movement is an outgrowth of this shift. Policymakers and politicians are advancing this notion with mandates and legislation determining what students at each grade level should know and be able to do (American Federation of Teachers, 2009). Teachers describe both positive and negative aspects of standards-based accountability (Donnelly & Sadler, 2009; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004; Swanson & Stevenson, 2002), with novice teachers typically embracing the standards and associated pacing guides, whereas experienced teachers identify the movement as frustrating due to the loss of their professional freedom (Winkler, 2002).

### **Student-Centered Teaching**

Assessment data used to inform instruction are at the heart of student-centered teaching. Teachers who implement the cycle of *assess, evaluate, plan, and teach* (Jenkins, 2001) are essentially adopting a student-centered approach to teaching. Additionally, student-centered teaching is grounded in the belief that all children can learn (International Reading Association, 2000) and that teaching

should begin with each student's foundation of knowledge whether it is rich or meager (Clay, 1991). By paying attention to individual differences, teachers can adapt and modify instruction to fit the needs of individual learners. Differentiated instruction can be equated with student-centered teaching as it debunks the myth that one method of teaching fits all learners (Pressley, 2007). Instead, student-centered instruction involves teachers who carefully monitor students' understanding and modify instruction accordingly (Duffy, 2003). Teachers who adopt a process-oriented approach to instruction modify their teaching in response to students' reactions. In contrast, teachers who adopt a content-oriented approach focus on covering the required content and do not modify instruction in response to students' reactions (Peterson & Clark, 1978). Such differentiation of instruction is more prevalent among experienced teachers than their novice counterparts (Westerman, 1991) because it requires a negotiation of sometimes competing forces - the curriculum, the standards, and the student.

### **Curriculum-Based Teaching**

Curriculum often refers to the topics taught and the books or materials used. The curriculum might also describe the framework or instructional approach adopted by a teacher, school, or district (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005). Mandated implementation of curricula does not necessarily create a disconnect for teachers who strive to be student-centered, especially when the philosophy undergirding the curriculum aligns with the teacher's own beliefs. Oftentimes, however, teachers feel the curriculum takes precedence over the individual students' needs and does not allow for responsive teaching. After spending almost a full year reflecting on her beliefs about literacy teaching and learning, Miller (2008) noted the struggles between believing what the publishers told her were best teaching practices and what she knew about her own students' strengths and needs. She wrote, "We're the ones in the unique and wonderful position to know where our kids have been, where they are now, and where it makes the most sense to take them next. *Real life isn't scripted. Neither is real teaching*" (p. 17). Clearly, teachers face competing and sometimes conflicting forces as they make instructional decisions.

### **Method**

In this third phase of a thoughtfully adaptive teaching study, we report on the findings of two in-service teachers who completed an online graduate level course in diagnostic reading. During the first phase of the study, we concluded that online courses could facilitate teachers' ability to be adaptive in their teaching

(Parsons et al., 2011). In the second phase of the study, we investigated the lasting effects of the online course on teachers' ability to be thoughtfully adaptive in their instruction (Massey, Atkinson, & Griffith, 2010). Self-reported survey responses, as well as classroom observations and interviews, indicated that teachers who chose to participate in the follow-up study still reported some levels of adaptive teaching, but the degree of adaptation depended upon the context and environment in which they were teaching.

In this phase of the study, we selected a case study approach (Yin, 2003) in order to move beyond simply identifying thoughtful adaptations to unpacking the forces that guide those thoughtful adaptations and instructional decisions teachers make. We no longer relied on self-reported data, but rather engaged in observations of real-life teaching. We collected field notes, lesson plans, debriefing interviews, and the responses from a teacher decision making survey. Specifically, we asked, "Are the teachers' instructional decisions student-centered, driven by the state standards, or influenced by the school's adopted curriculum?"

### **Participants**

We used purposive sampling (Silverman, 2000) to select the two teachers. Leslie and Jessica were identified by their school administrators as exemplary teachers of literacy. They were also participants in phases one and two of this study and were selected for this follow-up study because of their geographic proximity.

Leslie was a fifth - year teacher, in her second year as a Reading Recovery teacher (Clay, 1993) in a Title I school in a small city in the South. At the time of the study, she was a recent graduate of a master's program in reading education at a large state university where we all taught. Her normal school day consisted of teaching reading and writing in a one-on-one setting to four of the most at-risk first graders in her school. Additionally, she taught literacy groups consisting of five to seven students, typically those students who had discontinued Reading Recovery services or who had not qualified for the one-on-one intervention services. Her school had adopted a balanced literacy program based upon the work of Dyson (1982), Fountas and Pinnell (1996), Lyons, Pinnell, and DeFord (1993), Pressley, (2005), and many others. As part of her ongoing professional training related to Reading Recovery, she attended bi-monthly professional development meetings. She also received ongoing coaching from her teacher leader.

Jessica was a first grade teacher in her fifth year of teaching. As a self-contained first grade teacher, Jessica was responsible for teaching all subjects

including math, science, social studies, reading, and writing. She taught in a small city in the Southeastern United States near a military base where the student population, as well as the teacher population, was somewhat transient. As a recent graduate of a master's program in reading, Jessica's principal and colleagues viewed her as an instructional leader in her school. At the request of her principal, Jessica sometimes led professional development sessions for the teachers at her school. Her school did not employ an instructional coach, so Jessica did not receive ongoing coaching or mentoring. The school's adopted curriculum was based upon the tenets of balanced literacy, but some instruction still bore the look of many traditional skill-based approaches.

### **Data Sources**

Data included the in-depth case studies, particularly the thoughtfully adaptive teaching reflections from the first phase of this study. Secondly, data included responses from the *Profile for Teacher Decision Making* (Griffith, 2011). This survey included thirty questions related to teachers' beliefs about decision making and fifteen questions about their decision making practices (see Appendix). Additionally, we observed each teacher's instruction three times for approximately 30 minutes per session. In Leslie's classroom, the observations documented the teaching of her literacy groups, reflecting a variety of literacy components, including small group and individual reading and writing experiences. In Jessica's first grade classroom, we observed three lessons that lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Two featured small group guided reading lessons and the third consisted of a whole group word study lesson followed by small group word study lessons.

We used multiple data sources to facilitate triangulation of the data. Data sources included the *Profile for Teacher Decision Making* responses from each teacher, the thoughtfully adaptive teaching reflections from the in-depth case studies, field notes taken during the observations, teacher lesson plans, and transcripts of the debriefing interviews following each observation. Additionally, discussion notes from our coding meetings served as a data source for this study. Through our data, we provided rich descriptions of the participants by capturing the teachers' points of views and the constraints of the context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred in three phases. We analyzed the data through a qualitative content analysis (Patton, 1990). In Phase I, informal analysis, we

observed the teachers, took field notes, and discussed the observations informally in order to ground our roles as teacher educators and researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In Phase II, independent coding, we coded our data separately, writing analytical and methodological memos on the data sources. We used three primary codes—student-centered, curriculum-based, and standards-based—to code the data, though we remained open to new codes. In Phase III, analytic conversation and category convergence, we shared our results with one another, discussing the coding to confirm and clarify our coding schemes. In places of disagreement, we discussed the coding process and returned to the observational notes. In each case, we resolved our differences or decided to code a particular instance as representative of two or more codes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The common limitation of case studies is the small number of participants in the data set. Although this small number does not allow us to generalize our findings beyond the two participants, we benefitted from the luxury of becoming intimately familiar with the participants' data and discussing each participant in depth.

A further limitation of our study is the variance between the two teachers' classroom settings, and we fully acknowledge that these two teachers were not from perfectly matched contexts. Jessica taught in a typical first grade classroom; in contrast, Leslie taught in a pull-out, small group setting. Leslie's additional training as a Reading Recovery teacher also contributed to her decision-making process.

## **Findings**

### **Profile for Teacher Decision Making**

Results from the *Profile for Teacher Decision Making* (Griffith, 2011) indicated that the two teachers featured in this study shared similar beliefs about the importance of student-centered teaching. Both indicated that they believed the standards and the curriculum should influence teaching decisions to a lesser degree than the needs of their students. Both teachers reported that, in practice, students' responses and needs guided their teaching decisions. A slight difference in their use of standards to guide instruction indicated that as a teacher of struggling readers, Leslie used the standards to guide her teaching decisions to a lesser extent than Jessica.

**Leslie**

A variety of forces guided Leslie's teaching decisions. Students' responses often influenced her decisions and were therefore coded as student-centered. For example, when talking with Laticia about her writing, Leslie said, "I'm looking at your spacing and it's easy to read. Did you put a period to tell your reader you are stopping?" When Laticia added a period, Leslie continued to support her by asking, "Let's see if that's going to sound right – *the leaves turn green and you can swim*. Do you need to stop here or here?" Next, she guided this young writer to refine a writing skill. Through this brief interaction, the teacher validated the student's writing attempts while supporting a new or developing understanding of punctuation. Other examples of student-centered decision making included comments such as, "This is working for this student/this is not 'working for this student," and, "The student understands this concept/this student needs further support on that concept." In addition to knowledge of individual students' academic understandings, Leslie knew each child's behavioral tendencies. She made comments about students' personalities and work styles and how these factors influenced her decisions. For example, when Leslie reflected on how she interacted with the students in the small group, she revealed that one student needed a lot of specific praise in a gentle tone because of her personality and home life, whereas another student needed less attention because he tended to be "very focused and self-directed."

Other times, Leslie based her teaching decisions upon the standards for the particular grade level she was teaching. When the spelling principle of adding *-ed* to words to form the past tense surfaced in a writing lesson, Leslie capitalized on the teachable moment by saying to the group of students, "I like how you are trying [to write] *leap*. Now how do we make it say *leaped*?" When the students added *-ed*, she said, "Smart. It made it easier to think about the first part [of the word]." Throughout the observations, we documented evidence of Leslie's addressing concepts and skills required by the state standards for her grade level. She noted objective numbers and standard principles from the state's standard course of study throughout her lesson plans, but more importantly she captured teachable moments that specifically addressed the standards for her grade level.

The school's adopted curriculum, balanced literacy, sometimes guided Leslie's teaching decisions. Teachers in her school received extensive professional development in the area of balanced literacy and consistent literacy coaching provided evidence of curricular buy-in by the teachers and administrators. Balanced literacy was Leslie's chosen personal curriculum as well as the one adopted by the

school. Thus, she was not fighting against a mandated curriculum in which she did not have faith. She spent many years immersed in the theory and practice of that curriculum, so she made informed decisions about what components to enhance and what components to omit. For instance, when introducing the new book in guided reading, she chose to omit the planned discussion of unusual phrases because she noted that students “caught the gist, so I ... wanted to leave that [out].”

Balanced literacy instruction allowed for great flexibility in terms of teaching decisions, but the school’s mandated use of thinking maps sometimes caused a disconnect for Leslie. During the initial lesson briefing, Leslie commented on the district’s requirement to use thinking maps in all of her lessons. She chose to use a multi-flow map during the interactive writing portion of the lesson because it seemed like the most logical place to insert the curriculum requirement. Yet throughout the lesson briefing and the post-lesson interview, Leslie expressed dissatisfaction with this requirement as it forced her to focus the lesson on meeting this mandate, rather than the more important purpose of advancing her students’ literacy understandings.

A variety of forces influenced Leslie’s decisions, however, her students’ needs guided most of her decisions. In one lesson, we coded her decisions as student-centered twenty-one times; standards-based eleven times; and curriculum-based eight times. When reflecting on the interactive writing portion of the lesson, Leslie expressed surprise at Brianna’s attempt to write the word *man*,

I kind of thought she would get *man* a little bit easier, and I think it was the m that was tricking her. From what I could see with what she was writing, she was trying to figure out how to make it... That’s something I’ll have to watch for next time.

Some of the interactions focused on an individual student’s needs, whereas others focused on the strengths and needs of the group of learners. Leslie was continuously assessing understanding. As she said, “Everyone else didn’t have any trouble because I watched them. They all wrote it fast. They were able to make that link with *can* and *man*.”

Throughout the data, we noted that interactions revealed multiple influences guiding her decisions. In other words, there were multiple forces at work in many of her in-the-moment decisions. For instance, a student in Leslie’s group prompted mention of a particular skill that the rest of the group was not ready to learn yet, but because the teacher knew it was a required standard, she introduced it to the group as if to prime their pumps for learning it later. She used her knowledge of

the standards to guide decisions about what the students needed to know next. While keeping the grade level standards in mind, Leslie gathered information about the students' current understandings. When asked to comment on the modifications she made in the writing portion of the lesson, Leslie explained,

I did not expect her to be able to write it so fast. She is a bit higher than some of the others. She's got a lot [of] higher level thinking going on - I said that before we started - but she also was able to get the *-ed* at the end, which most of the time they just say *-d*. So I wanted to bring that to everyone's attention.

Examples like this one illustrate her tendency to make decisions based upon the standards while maintaining her focus on the responses of the students.

As our coding proceeded, we identified an additional code; professional knowledge that guided many of Leslie's teaching decisions. Initially, we looked for evidence of teaching decisions influenced by the student, the standards, or the adopted curriculum. Interestingly, a number of Leslie's teaching decisions were influenced by another force - the teacher's professional knowledge. These examples included knowledge of formal and informal assessments, knowledge of the developmental nature of literacy, and knowledge of various instructional approaches. She accessed this knowledge when making decisions about an individual child, about the curriculum, and about the standards. Leslie continually puzzled through students' responses that surprised her. In the following exchange, she revealed professional knowledge about the complexities of how words work. When reflecting on Brianna's ability to use the word part */gr/* to write the word *green*, but her struggle to recall if the letter *m* had one hump or two, Leslie stated,

It's very interesting to see the difference in those two levels of words, and how she can know one so well and be able to pull the parts out of it and not distinguish between the *m* and the *n* in the next word.

Interactions like this one indicated that this teacher was aware of the subtleties of students' responses and what such responses meant in terms of individual students' knowledge and understanding.

### **Jessica**

The context in which Jennifer taught was not unlike many other schools across the country. The school's adopted literacy assessment which required students to read both expository and narrative texts at a certain level by the end of the school year profoundly influenced Jessica's teaching decisions. Interactions

with Jessica revealed that her school espoused a balanced literacy approach, but instructional decisions were largely driven by assessment results. Along with the accuracy rates, students' comprehension was assessed with a retelling protocol consisting of counting the number of items/events the students could recall from the passage. The goal of helping her students reach this assessment benchmark influenced many of Jessica's instructional decisions. During the lesson debriefing following the guided reading lessons, Jessica reflected on a time when she modified the lesson or its objectives. She stated,

The objectives stayed the same the entire time because what I want all groups that I'm working on right now, particularly the lower groups, is to learn how to pick out the important information... [to] write down the key words so they can use [them] to retell the story. The assessment that we're going to have to do at the end of the year, the level 15/16 book is a *hard* read and they cannot retell it without those notes.... That's the rationale for what we're doing."

Upon initial analysis, Jessica's teaching decisions appeared to be driven solely by the curriculum, with few instances of student-centered decision making. In one lesson, we coded her decisions as student-centered six times, standards-based two times, and curriculum-based twelve times. After a more thorough review of the data, we came to the understanding that Jessica made her student-centered decisions in light of the district benchmark assessments. Groups of students, rather than individuals, framed her student-centered decisions. As Shavelson and Stern (1981) noted, "Teachers' judgments about students' reading ability directly influence their decisions about grouping for reading instruction. Once students have been grouped, the reading group and not the individual student becomes the unit for planning instruction" (p. 470). For instance, Jessica noted that one student was using the illustrations to retell the story. As she said,

I noticed that she was inserting information into her retelling that wasn't part of the story. Well, it was part of the story but it wasn't part of the *written* text... and so I complimented her on that because I wanted the others to hear that, 'Look. She's using the photographs to help her retell.'

Although her student-centered decision making differed greatly in abundance and in format from Leslie's, we believe that while Jessica gave authority to the curriculum, she was very conscientious about wanting her students to be able to meet the district benchmark. This benchmark was her measuring stick for

success, and she felt committed to help her students reach that goal by the end of the school year. Therefore, every aspect of her reading instruction was colored by the end goal of passing the benchmark assessment.

Jessica's word study lesson, by contrast, provided more examples of a variety of teacher decision making forces. The school did not have an adopted curriculum for spelling or phonics, so Jessica chose to utilize a word study approach based upon the work of Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2008). In the word study lesson, we noted that Jessica responded to students' comments about the spelling principle and chose to seize several teachable moments to clarify the concept for the students. For instance, when studying the spelling principle of dropping the *e* before adding *-ing* or *-ed*, one student offered the word *come* as a word to change to the past tense. In this instance, the students *and* the spelling standards for her grade level influenced Jessica's decision to model how to form the past tense of irregular verbs like *come*. In some ways, the word study curriculum that promoted the discovery of spelling principles through the manipulation of and study of words also guided her decision.

In one of the interviews, Robin took on the role of coach, trying to help Jessica identify places where she made a teaching decision and guiding her through the process of analyzing what forces influenced that decision. In an effort to help Jessica reflect on a decision, Robin stated, "I think, if I'm understanding your objectives clearly, you're trying to get them to pay attention to and gather information from the text and not just the words alone...." After this exchange, Jessica noted, "It's hard, I think, as a teacher to reflect on what you do because you just automatically do it. You don't think, 'Oh, I'm thoughtfully adapting my instruction' because ...for a lot of teachers, it just comes! It's just what you do!" Jessica's response aligns with Parker and Gehrke's (1986) findings that teachers tend to be more aware of decision making when things are going poorly but are likely making many in-the-moment decisions automatically and are therefore unaware of the process. Because Jessica's colleagues viewed her as an instructional leader in her school, she received no formal coaching or mentoring by other professionals. Reflecting on practice, particularly teaching decisions, was not a cultural expectation in her school. While Jessica had reflected upon her teaching practice throughout her graduate studies, such reflection was not as evident in her current classroom practice. Along those same lines, there was minimal evidence of Jessica's using her own professional knowledge, particularly in terms of questioning the curriculum and curriculum benchmark assessments. She knew the measure by

which she and her students would be judged and she implemented strategies to help students reach those curricular goals.

### **Discussion**

Both Leslie and Jessica emerged as exemplary students in their graduate reading education courses by demonstrating strong abilities to be thoughtfully adaptive. However, analysis of observations and interviews revealed striking differences in the decision making forces to which each gave authority. In Leslie's case, her professional knowledge was the determining factor in her ability to make teaching decisions that allowed her to balance her desires to be student-centered while also addressing the state standards using the adopted curriculum. For Jessica, the context in which she taught greatly influenced her teaching decisions. The curriculum assessment influenced her student-centered decisions.

### **Context Matters**

In terms of forces that guide teachers' instructional decisions, the findings from this study indicate that context matters. Throughout this study, we discovered that two teachers who reported very similar beliefs about student-centered teaching, standards-based teaching, and curriculum-based teaching reflected dramatic differences in how they enacted their beliefs into practice.

Leslie's teaching occurred in a small group setting. She had the luxury of meeting the needs of the most at-risk first graders in small groups every day for an intense time frame. She did not have to deal with other classroom obligations and distractions, like keeping the other students engaged in meaningful learning activities. Nor did she have to attend to routine managerial tasks such as noting lunch counts or collecting picture money. She focused only on literacy development, so she could capitalize on her knowledge of the literacy standards for her grade level and use the balanced literacy curriculum to meet the individual needs of her students. Because of this context, the responses of her students drove her teaching decisions.

Jessica's teaching, by contrast, occurred in the real-life milieu of a first grade classroom. She was responsible for teaching every child every subject and was bound by the school's mandated curriculum assessment. As indicated by her responses on the decision making survey, Jessica wanted her teaching decisions to be guided by the students, but the context of her situation indicated that she gave authority to the school's adopted curriculum instead. A closer look at the complexities of her beliefs and practices, however, revealed that her attempts to help students reach the benchmark goal of the adopted curriculum could, in fact,

be considered student-centered practices. She wanted each child to reach the goal and sometimes developed a tunnel-vision approach to helping students obtain that goal. When the context changed and the mandated curriculum and curriculum assessments were minimized, as in the word study lesson, Jessica's teaching decisions became more student-centered and responsive to individual children's responses. In light of these findings, we now understand that the context greatly influences the forces that guide teachers' decisions.

### **Ongoing Professional Development Matters in Teacher Decision Making**

This study also documented differences between teachers who continued to receive professional development in the field and teachers who did not continue to be a part of a professional learning community after leaving their graduate program. The culture at Leslie's school promoted ongoing professional development. In this professional learning community, Leslie received coaching for three years. As a result, she began to coach herself and could readily identify instances when she made a teaching decision, as well as articulate why she made that decision. The lesson debriefings were characterized by self-posed questions that Leslie also answered for herself, as if she was recreating a coaching session like so many she experienced before. Leslie articulated the questions she heard her literacy coach and mentor pose so many times before and used those questions to reflect on her teaching decisions. These reflections were part of the fiber of her teaching self and Leslie's teaching decisions were stronger because of them.

As an appointed instructional leader in her school, Jessica did not receive ongoing professional development or coaching. Therefore, she did not reflect on her teaching in the same way as Leslie. She was clearly a celebrated and respected teacher in her school and was identified as an exemplary graduate student in her Master's program, yet self-questioning was less apparent. Her lesson debriefings became a coaching session of sort as the researcher posed questions about her practice and probed her to think more deeply about a particular line of inquiry related to a student or an instructional decision. She puzzled through how to effectively balance the curricular demands with the needs of the students. After the first two lesson debriefings, the third lesson was characterized by more thoughtful teaching decisions and responsive to the individual needs of the students, indicating that even short, informal coaching sessions can positively impact teacher decision making.

## **Implications**

In this age of increased accountability and less teacher autonomy, we turn back to Dewey's idea of the teacher's professional spirit (Boydston, 1912-1914). We must not forget that teachers' professional spirits are closely linked to their abilities to access their knowledge of individual students, the subject matter they teach, and the standards for which they are held accountable. It is this spirit that allows them to make thoughtful teaching decisions. As students of Marie Clay's (1991, 1998) teachings, we began this study with the bias that student-centered decision making would result in the best teaching decisions. Now, we believe that the best teachers skillfully balance the curriculum and the required standards with individual students' needs. This balancing of forces is only possible when teachers possess a bank of professional knowledge upon which to draw. Additionally, continued enhancement of this professional knowledge, paired with ongoing reflection within a professional community of learners offers teachers the depth of understanding to balance such forces and move students forward as learners.

This study has implication for teacher preparation programs. If our goal is to create thoughtful, reflective professionals who are guided by a variety of forces for decision making, then we need to teach preservice teachers and those who return for graduate study to be keen observers of children, to know the standards intimately, and to understand how curricular programs can be modified. Courses should be grounded in situational contexts that encourage preservice and in-service teachers to unpack teaching decisions in the videos they view, in the classrooms in which they observe, and in the lessons they teach.

Similarly, this study has implication for in-service teachers - those who return to universities for graduate studies as well as those who seek professional learning opportunities in other settings. All teachers need school-based professional development opportunities that encourage them to consider the needs of individual students in light of the demands of the adopted curricula and the mandated standards. Professional learning communities that promote collegial and administrative conversations centered on the use of professional knowledge to make the very best teaching decisions are critical if all teachers are to continue making thoughtful, student-centered decisions.

Finally, we must reflect on how this study influences future research in the field of teacher preparation. As noted by Duffy, Webb, and Davis (2009), teacher preparation programs often promote and assess conditional and procedural knowledge but rarely have the resources to evaluate reflective and adaptive knowledge (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007). All of the research related to

teacher preparation means little if we fail to follow the students into the field to observe the long-term impact of our programs on actual practice. As noted in this study, if we are to help teachers refine their practices we need to understand the contexts in which they operate. Further, we must promote and support engagement in professional learning communities so that teachers continue to refine their teaching craft and decision-making skills. Finally, we must help teachers access their professional knowledge so they can balance the forces that guide teaching decisions such that they and their students can reach their full potential.



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## Appendix

PROFILE FOR TEACHER DECISION MAKING (Griffith, 2011)

### Demographics:

1. What grade level do you currently teach?
  
2. Including this school year, how many years have you taught?
  
3. Select the statement that most accurately describes your educational background:
  - Completed some undergraduate courses
  - Awarded a Bachelor's degree
  - Completed some graduate courses
  - Awarded a Master's degree
  - Completed some doctoral courses
  - Awarded a Ph.D. or Ed.D
  
4. Please describe any other professional development you have received. Include any specialized training and/or leadership roles. (Eg. Reading Recovery trained, instructional coach, lead teacher, Nationally Board Certified, etc...)
  
5. Do you teach in a Reading First School?
  
6. Within the last five years, has your school ever failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)?
  
7. Has your school adopted an instructional program that you are expected to follow? If yes, which one(s)?

**Beliefs:**

**Read the following statements and choose one response that most closely matches your BELIEFS**

1. All students enter school with varying levels of understandings and the teacher has an obligation to understand what each student knows.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
2. It is important for teachers to consider a student's developmental level when deciding what to teach.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
3. When planning lessons, teachers should first think about what the students know and then about what they need to know next.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
4. All students bring some level of knowledge to the school setting.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
5. All students are entitled to work on tasks that ensure some level of success.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
6. When reflecting on lessons, teachers should consider how the class as a whole performed.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
7. When reflecting on lessons, teachers should consider how individual students performed.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
8. When teaching a lesson, teachers should base teaching decisions on the ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) received from students.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
9. Teachers should modify lessons while teaching based upon feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that they receive from students.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
10. When a child enters a classroom knowing less than his/her peers, the teacher should employ strategies that help the student catch up to his/her peers.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*
11. When the school year begins, the teacher should assume that all students are ready for the curriculum at that grade level.  
*I... Strongly Disagree                  Disagree                  Agree                  Strongly Agree*

12. Curriculum standards are essential because they ensure that all students are taught the same material.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
13. Teachers should strive to plan standards-based lessons.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
14. The main goal for teachers should be to plan and organize tasks so that students can attain the standards for that subject and/or grade level.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
15. Teachers should use standards-aligned assessments to guide instruction.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
16. Standardized end-of-grade or end-of-course tests required by the state allow teacher to evaluate students' understandings of the standards.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
17. When planning lessons, teachers should first think about the standards for the subject area and grade level.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
18. A teacher's job is to act as a "more knowledgeable other;" addressing the required standards in an efficient and effective manner.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
19. The state standards adequately address the concepts that are essential for all students to know.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
20. Teaching to the standards is the most effective way to ensure that all students receive a quality education.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
21. Teachers should strictly adhere to the prescribed programs adopted by their schools.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
22. Curriculum pacing guides help ensure that the teacher teach all of the material students need.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*
23. A scripted program is essential for a beginning teacher.  
*I... Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*

24. Scripted lessons help the teacher prepare and deliver focused lessons.  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*
25. Teachers should use program-based assessments to guide instruction.  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*
26. Teachers should trust that instructional programs are designed to meet the needs of all learners.  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*
27. Teachers should trust that modifications for students performing below grade level are adequately addressed by instructional programs.  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*
28. Teachers should trust that modifications for students performing above grade level are adequately addressed by instructional programs.  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*
29. A teacher's job is to act as a bearer of information; delivering the information presented in the instructional program.  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*
30. When making instructional decisions, teachers should trust the experts that designed the instructional programs  
*I... Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree*

**Practice:**

**Read the following statements and choose the responses that most closely matches your PRACTICE**

1a. When teaching, I think first about what my students know and then about what I need to teach them.

*Almost Never*

*Seldom*

*Sometimes*

*Usually*

1b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

2a. When teaching, I base my teaching decisions on ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that I receive from my students.

*Almost Never*

*Seldom*

*Sometimes*

*Usually*

2b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

3a. When teaching, I employ multiple strategies to help students who are performing below grade level to “catch up” with peers.

*Almost Never*

*Seldom*

*Sometimes*

*Usually*

3b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

4a. When teaching, I can identify the strengths and needs of each student in my class.

*Almost Never*

*Seldom*

*Sometimes*

*Usually*

4b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

5a. When teaching, I plan tasks of varying levels of difficulty to address the varying needs of my students.

*Almost Never*

*Seldom*

*Sometimes*

*Usually*

5b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

6a. When teaching, I rely only on the curriculum-based assessments to inform my instruction.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

6b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

7a. When teaching, I stick to the lessons provided by my school's instructional program.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

7b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

8a. When teaching, I only use the modifications and materials provided by the instructional program to meet the range of needs in my classroom.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

8b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

9a. When teaching, I deliver the information exactly as it is presented by the instructional program adopted by my school.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

9b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

10a. When teaching, I trust the experts who designed the instructional program adopted by my school.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

10b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

11a. When teaching, I begin my planning with the standards for my grade level and subject area.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

11b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

12a. When teaching, I diligently address the standards for my grade level and subject area.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

12b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

13a. When teaching, I assume that all of my students are ready for the curriculum at my grade level

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

13b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

14a. When teaching, I view my main goal as planning and organizing lessons that allow students to attain the standards for my grade level and subject area.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

14b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

15a. When teaching, I consult a pacing guide to ensure that I cover all of the required standards for my grade level and subject area.

***Almost Never***                      ***Seldom***                      ***Sometimes***                      ***Usually***

15b. I do this because:

- I believe it is the right thing to do.
- I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.
- It is both the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or adopted curriculum.

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