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# Navigating the Changing Face of Beginning Reading Instruction: Am I Right Back Where I Started?

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Navigating the Changing Face of Beginning Reading Instruction:

Am I Right Back Where I Started?

DeAnna M. Perry

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Navigating the Changing Face of Beginning Reading Instruction: Am I Right Back Where I Started?

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This self-study explores my experience as a beginning reading teacher over a span of more than 30 years. It includes a brief look at theoretical models of reading and philosophical movements that impacted my experience as a classroom teacher and then lays my classroom experience and practice against the literature and historical background related to beginning reading instruction. The question studied is “How did the district-mandated curriculum in each era shape me as a literacy teacher and literacy instruction in my school context?” The purpose of the study is to unearth the impact of educational policies on my classroom practice. The methodology of self-study was employed to explore the tensions brought about as changes occurred.

The study focuses on seven areas of educational change that influenced my practice in beginning reading instruction over three eras, the first being the late 1970s, the second the late 1990s, and the third beginning about 2008. The areas discussed include embedded beliefs about student achievement, mechanisms driving instruction, instructional approaches employed, reading program characteristics, assessment, professional development, and collaboration. All three eras contained experiences of personal and professional growth. In the first era, autonomy was a characteristic of almost every theme. The second era was characterized by the purposeful focus on professional development and support of student growth. The third era featured an increase in assessment and oversight of the mandated program implementation. Teacher capacity built in the second era enhanced my use of the commercial reading program mandated in the third era. While my current context seems similar to the first era, because of the richness of my experience, I am not right back where I started.

Keywords: beginning reading instruction, self-study, change, basals, core literacy programs, CELL/ExLL

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Public policy on the teaching of reading impacts the practices of classroom teachers. Although many trends in education have been passionately presented as *the* best way to teach reading, recent emphases in education have had relatively short life spans before others became popular (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000). With each “fad” educators are expected to change instructional approaches. My experience as an elementary teacher spans more than 30 years of teaching in multiple schools and districts, and I have found that the field is constantly in a state of flux as educators attempt to improve reading instruction. I have experienced many changes in reading instruction, assessment, philosophies, and programs (Afflerbach, 2007; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; Bullough & Kridel, 2003; DuFour, 2004; Fenstermacher, 1990). This constant barrage of change led me to wonder how I, as a classroom teacher, have juggled the demands of practice mandates with my own beliefs about literacy instruction. My contemplation surfaced contradictions in my beliefs about beginning reading instruction and my practice. These reflections prompted the question that guides this study: How did the district-mandated curriculum in each era shape me as a literacy teacher and literacy instruction in my school context? This study may be helpful to others since this is a challenge that many teachers encounter during their careers as educators, and the process I went through may provide a model for teachers interested in examining their own experiences.

### Statement of Problem

As I embarked on my career as an elementary teacher, I was eager to try the methods that I was taught during my university preparation. My first job was in a small rural community in the western United States. The students that I teach now are very different from those in that first



class in the late 1970s. I currently teach in a mid-sized town in the western United States.

Although the times and the students have changed, there are some things that seem strikingly similar to my experience in the 1970s. I am not sure what has surprised me more: how much of what I do is similar to what I did in the 1970s, or how much is different.

Throughout my years as an educator I have received extensive professional development and training through a combination of in-services, conferences, and university courses. I have added three endorsements to my elementary degree: English as a Second Language, Reading, and Early Childhood Education. I have been involved in coaching others in literacy. I purposely sought out courses to improve my classroom instruction in order to meet my students' needs. I had always assumed that this added education and training would make me a better teacher.

However, nearly thirty years after I began teaching, I noticed the trainings were sounding very familiar to me. I expected reading instruction to continually evolve, as many things do. I believed that change is an integral part of learning. Therefore, I was surprised that the recommended instructional techniques of this new century sounded so similar to those I had first learned in the 1970s.

The reading program provided in my first teaching experience supported the strong phonics emphasis I experienced in my university education. I was willing to believe in the phonics-first approach to beginning reading instruction and believed that if I could figure out the correct sequence in which to teach phonics, then I would be able to teach any child to read. I used the basal reading program as the core of my instruction. Later in my teaching career, I was educated by my school district on how to plan a curriculum and implement a variety of instructional approaches to teach reading. These techniques relied more on teacher knowledge and required that I knew how children develop literacy, and the strategies and techniques that

might move children forward in their development. Later, as I attended trainings to stay “current” in my teacher knowledge, I noticed that following a commercial reading program “with fidelity” was being put forth as the most effective way to teach reading. The earlier professional development and the change in theoretical emphasis on reading instruction had changed my practice. Now the political pressure on education to produce higher test scores was once again having a significant impact on classroom instruction. I found myself in the awkward position of having strong beliefs about what constituted effective reading instruction while (at the same time) being told by literacy leaders in my district that I must use systematic and explicit instruction as outlined in a commercial reading program. The district literacy leadership pushed a single approach toward developing the literacy of all children and retreated from a position of educating teachers about literacy development and allowing them to design instruction based on their understanding of children and learning.

The situation of being caught between district policy and my own theoretically grounded beliefs created a contradiction in my belief system and my practice as an educator. As the school literacy coordinator, I was also expected to promote the reading approach the district literacy leadership adopted. Some of the very practices that I had given up in the name of improving my instructional practice were being put forth as the best way to increase student learning. This was confusing to me since I had worked so hard to learn how to integrate curricula, use teacher-designated instructional materials for guided reading, allow a high level of student input and choice, and use the students’ assessment data to guide my instruction. I began to wonder why the district literacy leadership advocated a return to teaching methods that I had used decades earlier. What happened to the direction from the district literacy leadership that teachers should look at the state core curriculum and their students’ needs and then select materials that would best

support their instruction and student learning? Had all the education and training I received in the last two decades been a waste of time? If I had been resistant to change instead of diving in and learning new methods, would I have been spared the stress and extra work?

My perspective in beginning reading instruction began with my university experience, followed by my first experiences teaching in the late 1970s. After taking time off to raise children, I returned to teaching in an elementary school in the 1990s. The field of literacy in general had stepped away from mastery learning, and the whole language philosophy gained prominence. This was quickly followed by a balanced literacy approach.

Balanced literacy encouraged reading and writing to, with, and by students. There was a place for skills instruction, but only within the context of authentic literacy activities. Judging from the amount of professional development provided, teacher knowledge and professionalism were keys to successful implementation. Through school district and school in-services, I had been taught characteristics of a good reader and a variety of teaching methods, including the power of being responsive to student interests. Teacher performativity and authentic literature were so valued in my school as to almost totally shut out the use of basal readers. There was nearly exclusive reliance on trade books organized into classroom text sets and libraries for shared and guided reading.

Following the release of the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child and Human Development, 2000), my reading instruction became more assessment driven. The analysis of the data provided by assessments helped me approach reading instruction from a component analysis view. This was a gradual shift from my previous perspective but still allowed me to use my experience to meet needs identified by assessment. The evolution of my definition of reading brought me to a place where I felt confident in many areas of instruction.

However, I felt conflicted by the announcement that the school district would no longer use guided reading with authentic literature and would instead implement a basal reading program—now referred to as a core reading program. I saw the pendulum swing back to former approaches. I felt that the teacher knowledge and student interest that I was convinced were crucial to high levels of learning were being lost. The new reading program drove all instruction with the promise that it would improve reading scores on tests. I found myself frustrated and confused by this new look at old practices.

In this self-study, I examined various aspects of teaching practices that evolved through several decades of my lived experience. The areas that were considered include my belief about student achievement, the mechanism driving instruction, the type of instructional approach, characteristics of the reading program used, the impact of assessment, the motivation for professional development, and the role of collaboration. I discovered a profound contradiction between my beliefs and the mandated practices.

### **Statement of Purpose**

By looking historically at teacher practice and the educational climate, this self-study brought to light the impact that educational policy reform had on classroom instructional practices and beliefs through the lens of a practicing elementary teacher. Loughran and Northfield (1998) asserted that participation in a self-study is an indication of willingness to “accept experience as a major source of improvement in personal practice” (p. 8). In the emergent field of self-study of practice, the definitions of self-study vary. However, several characteristics of self-study have been agreed upon. LaBoskey (2004a) identified

five features of the methodology: it is initiated and focused on self; it is improvement aimed; it is interactive at one or more points during the process; it employs multiple,

primarily qualitative, research methods; and, it achieves validation through the construction, testing, sharing, and re-testing of exemplars of teaching practice. (p. 813)

These characteristics guided my pursuit of understanding the tensions that I felt as the educational environment changed. The findings of this self-study will guide my practice as I encounter future educational reform. They may also be of use to others facing similar changes. The purpose of this study is to better understand how I became the educator that I am so that I can integrate new developments in education with my past experience in the interest of student learning. Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998a) wrote of

allowing [those involved in self-study] to rethink and potentially open themselves to new interpretations and to create different strategies for educating students that bring their practice *into concert with moral values they espouse*. (p. 2; italics added)

Perhaps the results of my self-study will help other educators recognize the impact of policy reform on personal practice. This may prepare them to participate in the process of reform, with the benefit of a broadened perspective.

In order to understand how I came to a state of contradiction between my beliefs and my practice, I looked back at my growth as an educator over the last three decades (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Specifically, this retrospective self-study 1) considered shifts in professional development, the political climate, and the field of reading in general and 2) examined my classroom practice to consider how these shifts have come together to create my belief system, shape the current climate in my school district, and inform my classroom practice. I explored the contradictions I found between my beliefs, the school district's mandates, and my practice. I determined how I arrived at a point in which I believed one thing and did another.

Self-study provided a forum for introspection and analysis that aided me in my quest for understanding my practice and the dissonance between my practice and my beliefs. According to Russell (1998), “Self-study is about the learning from experience that is embedded within teachers’ creating new experiences for themselves and those whom they teach” (p. 6). I welcome this learning.

### **Research Question**

The question posed in this self-study is “How did the district-mandated curriculum in each era shape me as a literacy teacher and my literacy instruction in my school context?” As I studied this overarching question, I also considered my practices, the educational atmosphere, the educational policies that influenced my teaching, and the political circumstances of various eras. This question, along with the considerations mentioned, guided my collection of data and the data analysis as I looked for themes in my experience.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Any experience as an educator stems from the context and development of educational theories and policies. My experience as a beginning reading instructor is immersed in the debate between three theoretical models of reading and the educational philosophies that came out of these theories. My earliest teaching experience came out of phonics theory. I had brief experience with whole language. The bulk of my teaching experience occurred while balanced literacy was prevalent. This era left a lasting effect on my own reading philosophy. Then, I experienced the re-emphasis of phonics with the return of a commercial reading program.

This review of literature will provide an overview of trends in the history of reading instruction, with particular emphasis on the early 1960s and into the beginning of the new century. First, prominent theories on how reading develops will be discussed with attention to the implications of such theories in reading instruction. Second, I will address movements in education philosophy that impacted my reading instruction.

#### Theoretical Models of Reading

Over the last century there have been a variety of theoretical models of reading instruction in use. These models fall into three main categories: the bottom-up model, as purported by Gough (1976) and LaBerge and Samuels (1974); the top-down model, as forwarded by Goodman (1976); and the interactive model, described by Rumelhart (2004), Stanovich (1980), Sadoski and Pavio (2004), and Rosenblatt (2004). An understanding of these theories provides a common foundation of reading development and teaching on which to build. The theoretical model of reading instruction found in favor at any one point in time had strong implications for my own classroom practice.

**Bottom-up theory.** The bottom-up theory of reading has a linear approach. This theory proposes that the reading process is dependent on following a prescribed set of skills sequentially. Picture the bottom-up models like an assembly line: the reader follows the process precisely to get the end result, and all the final products look the same. Gough (1972) and LaBerge and Samuels (1974) advocated the bottom-up theory of reading.

One theory proposed that children are born with a pattern recognizer, a lexicon (Gough (1976). Gough also identified “the place where sentences go when they are understood” (p. 518) in an attempt to explain comprehension. His model links with a mastery learning approach, which encourages mastering the sub skills of reading; however, he also said the alphabetic code should not be taught. The incongruence of having a code to read, yet not teaching the code directly, is one of the limitations of his theory. He did not acknowledge the part letter recognition plays in reading. Some instructional applications of Gough’s model could be synthetic phonics— associating a symbol with a sound (although he recommended a linguistic approach), and a letter of the day.

An alternate type of bottom-up model was proposed by LaBerge and Samuels (1974). Their model relies on the letter-by-letter or sound-by-sound process of putting words together. Reading happens when letter/sound recognition becomes automatic. This model uses the concept of “attention” and capacity limitation. The authors also use visual, phonological, episodic, and semantic memory. Limitations of this theory include the serial, sequential approach and the narrow definition of episodic memory. Reading instruction based on this model would teach and test all the subskills as children proceed through the reading process.

**Top-down theory.** A different approach to understanding the reading process was put forth by Goodman (1976). He promoted a top-down model, in which higher processes affect



lower processes. This model also uses linear processing, but changes the direction. Readers in this model read for meaning, not accuracy. Goodman believed that meaning was in the authors' and readers' heads, not in the print. One of the limitations of this theory is that it is based on what proficient readers do and does not account for beginning readers who struggle. Instructional applications based on this theory would include the use of authentic text, development of oral language, use of read alouds, and attending only to miscues that interfere with meaning.

In implementing reading theories that are linear in nature, such as top-down and bottom-up models of reading instruction, it stands to reason that the teacher provided the materials and sequence to the learning experience, much like a technician. Reading instructional approaches that used linear theories of reading instruction would include the explicit phonics instructions approaches and the top-down model of the whole language approach.

**Interactive theory.** The interactive theory of reading involves using parallel processes, where readers are thought to use more than one process at a time to make sense of print. While the top-down and bottom-up theory of reading are linear—they assume that readers follow a prescribed sequence of processes—the interactive theory of reading proposes that readers use simultaneous processes in different orders to make meaning of print and to develop as readers.

Interactive models were argued for by Rumelhart (2004). He criticized bottom-up theoretical models of reading, suggesting that syntax and semantic features affect the perception of letters. He believed that readers use a variety of cues to make sense of what they are reading. Some basals were built on the interactive model but not always implemented that way. Rumelhart's model is limited in that it does not take into account prior knowledge or cultural context. It also makes many generalizations without adequate explanation. Classroom

implications include varying instructional techniques, explicitly teaching phonics while using authentic texts, and building oral language while focusing on specific comprehension strategies.

Another advocate of interactive models of reading criticized the top-down theoretical models of reading (Stanovich, 1980), suggesting that readers use information from all levels simultaneously to arrive at the probable interpretation of text. Stanovich believed that a deficit in any knowledge source would lead to reliance on another source. This meant that, unlike in the bottom-up theory, poor readers actually use context to make sense of text. He argued that the ability to identify words with automaticity improved comprehension. Like the limitations that have been identified with the model of Rumelhart (2004), limitations of this model include the lack of any reference to the position of background knowledge or cultural context in the reading process. Reading instruction designed by Stanovich (1980) would include finger tracking by beginning readers only, leveled texts, phonics and fluency instruction, the use of wordlists and phrases, and emphasis on accuracy, with little concern for the type of text.

Additionally, an interactive model of reading was promoted by Sadoski and Paivio (2004). They believed that readers use verbal and non-verbal codes to create meaning. This is referred to as dual coding. They proposed that attending to the sequence of sounds and words (logogens) and making mental images (imagens) of the content being read happen simultaneously. Limitations of this model include the need to address the background knowledge of beginning readers and ELL students. Some instructional applications include teaching mental imagery, improving fluency, and teaching concrete, imageable words to improve comprehension.

A transactional model was proposed by Rosenblatt (2004). Originally, she felt it was a new category of reading model. She acknowledged that the same text could mean different things to different readers or even have a different meaning to the same reader on a subsequent

reading of the same text. She believed that readers are in a transaction with the author and that meaning could change depending on whether the reader had an efferent or aesthetic stance. She wrote of a semiotic formulation involving sign, object, and interpretation. Limitations to Rosenblatt's theory include the need for greater attention to the problems of beginning readers and an understanding that writing and reading are not portrayed as equal players. Instructional applications would include building prior knowledge, literature discussion groups, access to many books, and backing up ideas with the text.

The interactive model of reading instruction required teachers to guide students in accessing various aspects of learning to read. The balanced literacy framework, used to support an interactive model, required teachers to design curriculum and instructional methods to meet the needs of students as such needs presented themselves. This approach to reading instruction placed more responsibility on the classroom teacher to be professional, requiring teachers to match their knowledge base to student needs and then reflect on the outcome and adapt as needed.

**My use of theoretical models.** The different approaches to beginning reading instruction have impacted my classroom instruction. My experience in teaching beginning reading instruction progressed in the same order in which I presented the theories. First, I used a bottom-up, phonics-driven model. Then, as I returned to teaching, top-down models were just beginning to transition to interactive models. I used an interactive model of reading instruction with a balanced literacy approach for many years. Lastly, I used an interactive model with a strong phonics and bottom-up approach. These experiences helped to shape my philosophy of beginning reading instruction.

## **Philosophical Movements in Education**

In order to understand the various movements that have been inspired by education policy, it is important to consider the historical context. This review will focus on the movement among the philosophical views of phonics first, whole language instruction, and the perspective provided by balanced literacy. The act of repackaging former programs and a summary conclude this section.

To place myself in the larger tapestry of reading reform, I will provide an overview of reading instruction in the United States beginning in the 1960s. I began my elementary experience in the early 1960s. It has been noted that teachers tend to teach how they were taught (Kennedy, 1999; Lortie, 1975), so I begin when I was a student in the public school system.

**Phonics.** In the late 1950s public education was under criticism precipitated by the launching of the Soviet Union satellite Sputnik. This single event marked the start of the space age and a major federal influence in education. “The Cold War stimulated the first example of comprehensive Federal education legislation, when in 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (National Defense Education Act, 1958) in response to the Soviet launch” (United States Department of Education [ED], n.d.). This act set a precedent for increased federal influence in education, which proved to have a significant impact on education in subsequent years (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; Ogle, 2008).

Previous to the 1960s there was a focus on whole word instruction. The early 1960s saw a return to the phonetic method where teachers relied on basal reading programs that emphasized understanding and teaching the “code” of reading, or phonics. This word learning had various designations: word analysis, word attack, decoding, and the alphabetic principle (Walker, 2008).

In the late 1960s, when Chall (1967) published *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, there was an immediate effect: a stronger and earlier emphasis on teaching the alphabetic code in reading basals (Walker, 2008). As part of the three-year research study sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Chall (1996) “found that beginning readers learn better when their instruction emphasizes learning the alphabetic code, one that places first importance at the beginning on learning the relationship between letters and their sounds” (p. 2).

During the same time period mastery learning gathered momentum (Smith, 2002). The combination of single-component tests, mastery learning, and synthetic phonics instruction produced an environment of bottom-up reading programs. This approach fit well with the views of behaviorists, such as the well-known behaviorist, B. F. Skinner. “Skinner (1958, 1965) viewed learning as stimulus-response, a view that supported synthetic phonics instruction and the skills movement” (Walker, 2008, p. 37). Smith (2002) described the mastery learning approach: “If a complex domain could be decomposed into manageable subcomponents, each of which could be taught and learned to some predetermined level of mastery, then most, if not all students should be able to master the knowledge and skills in the domain” (p. 426). Publishers packaged and marketed this approach (Allington, 2002).

Research showed that attention to the alphabetic principle had a greater impact on reading achievement in beginning readers than other approaches. Walker (2008), in *An Essential History of Current Reading Practices*, reviews the progression of phonics instruction. She refers to Gibson’s (1965; Gibson & Levin, 1975) findings “that readers used distinctive features of word units rather than word configuration or recognizing the whole word” (Walker, 2008, p. 39). Gibson’s (1965) research was believed to endorse all sound-symbol relationships and resulted in a plethora of basal reading programs. Walker went on to note that the behaviorist viewpoint

dominated in the 1970s and had a growing influence on reading instruction. Task analysis was used to break reading into its component skills with its sequence of subskills on the premise that the accumulation of subskills would “produce a reader.” Another common approach was the use of synthetic phonics programs, with explicit phonics or code-emphasis approaches.

**Multiple elements.** The federal government commissioned a study to find which method was best to teach reading (Walker, 2008). *The Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction* (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), commonly known as The First Grade Studies, considered a myriad of programs to understand their contributions to reading instruction. It was concluded that “no one approach is distinctly better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively” (p. 123). They went on to suggest that “perhaps an instructional program which incorporated the most effective elements of all the approaches used in the study would be a more effective method of teaching than any currently in use” (p. 124). The First Grade Studies pointed out “the importance of elements in the learning situation over and above the methods employed” (p. 123) and suggested the necessity of training better teachers rather than relying on reading instruction materials to ensure reading achievement. This study suggested that the best method was not a single method, but an integration of a variety of methods. It also emphasized the importance of teacher capacity.

**Whole language.** Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the phonics-first programs decreased in use as the cognitive revolution emerged. Not all educators believed in the synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction. Goodman (1967a) put forth that learning to read was natural, like language acquisition (Alexander & Fox, 2008). He also introduced the concept that reading errors can provide insight about the strategies readers use to figure out printed text. The

new emphasis was in comprehension and constructing meaning. Trade books were advocated in preference to basal readers. The whole-language movement flourished. This brought up questions about where phonics instruction fit in with whole language and if it was necessary at all. Although parents and even many teachers were concerned about the lack of phonics instruction, advocates of the whole-language approach professed that whatever phonics was needed could be picked up through interactive writing and shared reading (Walker, 2008, p. 42–43). In the midst of the whole-language movement, Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985), in the federally-funded *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, reported that “classroom research shows that, on the average, children who are taught phonics get off to a better start in learning to read than children who are not taught phonics” (p. 37). This opened the door for phonics instruction to gain prominence.

**Balanced literacy.** The field of beginning reading instruction was about to gain a new perspective. In her meta-analysis on response to disputes about approaches to teaching beginning reading, Adams (1990) wrote that “the [reading] process cannot be divided into ‘key’ and ‘support’ activities. All of its components and skills must work together within a single, *interdependent system*” (p. 122, italics added).

Balanced literacy was a response to the swings of the instructional approaches of previous decades. It was seen as a voice of reason amidst the cry for “only skills” or “only literature.” A concise definition of the balanced literacy approach is taking the various elements of reading instruction and using them in concert to teach children to read. Pressley (2002) put it this way:

I make the case . . . for a balanced perspective on reading instruction, rather than stressing either a whole-language or skills-first instructional orientation. Balanced-literacy teachers

*combine* the strengths of whole-language and skills instruction, and in so doing create instruction that is more than the sums of its parts. (p. 1; italics added)

This new approach was supported by research studying teachers who were identified by their supervisors to be highly effective in developing primary-level literacy (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997). Common characteristics were found in the instructional approaches of these teachers. Wharton-McDonald et al. (1997) reported, “the instruction of the very best teachers was characterized by a high level of balance. These teachers demonstrated the integration of explicit skills instruction and authentic reading and writing experiences” (p. 519–520). The value of a balanced approach to literacy was recognized.

This idea built upon the findings of *The First Grade Studies* (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). Adding to the idea, Wharton-McDonald et al. (1997), found that

The instruction of the very best teachers was characterized by a high level of balance. These teachers demonstrated the integration of explicit skills instruction and authentic reading and writing experiences that the surveyed teachers had described. Moreover, the integration of skills instruction and authentic activities in these classrooms was deliberate and well planned. These teachers [teachers producing consistently high reading levels] believed in the necessity of this integrated approach for developing literacy in their students. According to Ettenberger, the process “is a fine balance-between immersing the child in whole language and teaching through sounds, going back to using skills.” (p. 519–520)

Pressley (1998) reiterated this finding in his book *Reading Instruction that Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. The concept of balanced literacy was not simply a meeting in the middle of two extremes. Rather, it pulled elements from both whole-language and explicit phonics



instruction within a literacy-rich classroom environment. Explicit teaching, teaching of reading and writing in context with other reading and writing activities and in isolation, various types of reading, various types of materials read, making literacy and literacy instruction motivating, and accountability all interacted simultaneously (Wharton-McDonald et. al., 1997). As the 1990s came to a close, there was a growing consensus that explicit phonics instruction did have a place but did not stand alone. More attention was given to interactive theories.

As the new century approached there was more attention to the idea of drawing from the strengths of various reading theories. The balanced approach to reading instruction valued teacher judgment in designing curriculum to best identify and meet the needs of individual students in their particular culture and environment.

**Return to phonics.** The surprising district change from a teacher-directed balanced literacy framework to a commercial reading program was brought about by research-based recommendations. A major event that impacted classroom instruction was the U.S. government's enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind, 2002). This act funded the Reading First Initiative, which provided grants to schools using "scientifically based" reading programs. The initiative "channeled more money into using explicit phonics instruction in beginning reading instruction, often to the exclusion of reading literature and reading information" (Walker, 2008, p. 47). Allington concluded, "publishers repackaged their 1970s programs and touted them as explicit approaches to teaching phonics" (Walker, 2008; see also Allington, 2002). The trickle-down effects of this initiative are what prompted me to do this study. I found myself surprised at the familiarity of the curriculum and methods espoused as scientifically based reading programs. I wondered if all the education and training I had received

in the previous decades were wasted since I seemed to be using the repackaged program I originally started with in the late 1970s.

### **Summary**

In this literature review I have discussed prominent theories on how reading develops with attention to the implications of such theories in reading instruction. This was followed by a discussion of phonics, whole language, and balanced literacy. It concludes with mention of repackaged programs.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The methodology selected for this study is self-study. It is ideal for the area in which I planned to refine my thinking. My natural inclinations are toward the more traditional methods of quantitative analysis, both in mental habit and actual computation. The combination of analytical and reflective thinking used in self-study was overwhelmingly foreign to me.

However, I was motivated by the need to understand where my many years of experience as an educator fit in the landscape of educational reform. As Bullough (1994) stated,

I prompt them [education students] to reconstruct these assumptions [that compose their theories about teaching and themselves as educators] in ways that are likely to lead to increased control over future professional development. In particular, my aim is to enable them to develop a kind of understanding of self as a teacher that will enable them to establish a role in a school and within the community of educators that is educationally defensible and personally satisfying, congruent with a desired teaching self. (p. 108)

I have learned a great deal along my path as an educator and want to use this learning to benefit current and future students. When popular instructional mandates are required of me, I need to be able to use what I have learned to empower me to navigate the changes in a way that will best benefit my students. LaBoskey (2004b) talked of “believing that teacher knowledge develops through a better understanding of personal experience—by cycles of critical reflection on that experience” (p. 843). This study is part of that reflection.

The strengths of self-study of practice research are so intensely crucial to what I need to learn that, with the help of experienced teacher educators, I have delved into this foreign area in order to attain my goal. As pointed out by Clandinin and Rosiek (2007),

The regulative ideal for inquiry is to generate a new relation between a human being and her environment—her life, community, world—one that “makes possible a new way of dealing with them, and thus eventually creates a new kind of experienced objects, not more real than those which preceded but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive” (Dewey, 1981, p. 175). In this pragmatic view of knowledge, our representations arise from experience and must return to that experience for their validation. (p. 39)

Through the use of self-study, I will generate a new relation between myself as an educator and the educational climate in which I practice. The hope is that this new relation between myself and my educational context will support me in finding the positive aspects embedded in any new educational programs while perpetuating previously gathered insights that add power to student learning.

### **Definition of Self-Study**

The methodology of self-study is an emerging field and has experienced changes in definition over time (Loughran, 2004). In order to add clarity to my methodology, I will use the definition put forth by Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998b). They define self-study as

The study of one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas, as well as the “not self.” It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political and it draws on one’s life, but it is more than that. Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered. These are investigated for their connections with and relationships to practice as a teacher educator. (p. 236)

This definition is inclusive of the kinds of approaches that I need to use in order to understand how I have become the educator I am today and to empower me to influence the future direction of reading instruction in my realm of practice.

### **Purpose and Scope of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to help me navigate the barrage of changes that are inevitable as I go through my teaching career. My research question is “How did the district-mandated curriculum in each era shape me as a literacy teacher and my literacy instruction in my school context?” As a new educator in the late 1970s, I sought “the way” to be a highly effective teacher by learning instructional approaches that were effective. I thought that if I found and mastered that magical instructional approach I would be a great teacher. I had grown up in an amazing scientific era in which incredible advancements in science culminated in landing men on the moon! If we could send men to the moon, then certainly we could find that one elusive method of teaching that would ensure academic success for all children. My main focus was on reading instruction and helping beginning readers to gain independence in reading. As more than thirty years have gone by, I now find myself in a different place, a place where I have experienced a variety of teaching approaches, each with their own optimistic promise of success.

In order to be clear about what I am studying, it is helpful to point out what I am not studying. I am studying my own practice and the influence of the districts I have taught in and state mandates on my reading instruction practice. I am not discussing how students responded in each of the eras. I will not be discussing students’ attitudes, performance, or motivations in relation to each era or in response to each theme. I do not have a consistent form of student assessment that covers the span of my experience. My study is limited to my beginning reading instruction practice and how my practice was shaped.

## **Background of Study**

In this study, I will take the reader along my path as I reflect on three major eras of my teaching experience. The lines between the eras, although designated by years, are fuzzy. In my experience, teaching practices tend to transition rather than to have clear-cut beginning and ending dates. In the discussion of eras, I refer to them as first, second, and third to distinguish the flow of practice, but in reality, there is considerable overlap in each era.

The first era is when I enthusiastically entered the role of a public school teacher in the late 1970s with my first teaching assignment as a second grade teacher in a small rural community. The second era is when I returned to teaching after taking a break to raise my family. The public school in which I was assigned to teach first grade was in a mid-sized community where the school district was transitioning from practice based on a whole-language philosophy to a teacher-guided balanced literacy approach. Finally, the third era began with the return of textbook-driven teaching methods similar to those provided in my earliest teaching experience. These methods led me, as a teacher, away from the teacher-directed balanced literacy approaches I had come to value (Allington, 2002). The mandate by my school district to teach the new reading program “with fidelity” caused a contradiction with the professionalism that I had so diligently sought to embed in my instruction. This study enabled me to explore the contradictions in my understanding and practice of reading instruction in my pursuit of what is best for students.

## **Participants**

The primary participant in this study is myself as an elementary teacher in a public school, acting within the structures of my local school district, as well as looking at my practices in a former district and former schools. This study will provide a snapshot into the life of a

classroom teacher as educational policies and mandates on beginning reading instruction filter down to classroom and student levels.

### **Limitations**

A self-study, by nature, is qualitative with a small sample size. The self-study aspect of this work will reflect my perspective of the impact of educational policy on my classroom instruction. My perspective permeates the entire study. Much of the data are based on recollections as I endeavored to make sense of my experience as a classroom educator.

Recollections are not as strong as data from current records. However, recollections can have the added advantage of time as a filter in recognizing the significance of particular events. This study was designed to help me understand how I came to the place I am currently at in education so as to enable me to navigate future educational changes in beginning reading instruction. Findings may be of interest to others facing similar transitions.

### **Five Characteristics of Self-Study Methodology**

The five characteristics of self-study methodology are described by LaBoskey (2004b): 1) self-initiated and focused; 2) improvement aimed; 3) interactive; 4) employing multiple, primarily qualitative methods; and 5) using exemplar-based validation. Each of these characteristics moves the understanding of my thinking and practice forward, creating epiphanies through newly considered perspectives.

Self-study is self-initiated. This characteristic is well accepted by experts in the field of self-study. Referencing the eight chapters in the *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices* (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004), LaBoskey (2004c) commented that the characteristic of “self-initiated and focused” was common to all eight chapters of contributors in Section 3: Representing Self-Study in Research

and Practice. This universal acceptance of “self-initiated” as a characteristic of self-study methodology is indicative of how necessary it is to a trustworthy self-study.

This study of how to use my experience to navigate future changes in the educational landscape was prompted by my desire to understand the contradictions that became obvious in my teaching experience. In searching for a way to resolve tensions between the practice expected by my local school district and the practices I had come to believe in and rely upon, I chose to study my own experience as an educator to discover the “aha” moments that would refine and reveal my thinking, development, and practice. This study demonstrates the characteristic of being self-initiated in my personal desire to make sense of my experience.

Part of having a rigorous and trustworthy self-study includes being “improvement aimed” (LaBoskey, 2004b). The primary reason for reflecting back on my practice and considering the various literacy approaches that I have used throughout my career was to assist me in my future efforts as a teacher. I needed to better understand my past experience in order to help me navigate changes in literacy instruction specifically and district policy, programs, and practices generally. Self-study methodology supported my desire to focus on how I could use the new understanding I gained in this study to make sense of inevitable curriculum and policy changes and provide the best possible literacy education for my students based on my professional knowledge and experience.

Self-study requires “collaboration with others in the practice, with other researchers, and with the data sets produced” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). In this study I looked at literacy trends historically and laid my experience against those trends as I looked for themes and wonderings. This interaction with the professional literature helped me to reframe my thinking and challenge assumptions that I did not know I had. My goal was to move trustworthiness



forward as I brought my assertions for understanding into conversation with existing related literature and with professors who supported me in this project. One area of collaboration that I did not address at this point in my search for understanding was collaboration with others in the practice. Although I have many colleagues with whom I could have established regular communication for this purpose, because of the scope of the project it was not feasible to add this to my current study.

The next area of self-study is “multiple, primarily qualitative methods” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). My goal for this study was to use only one methodology: self-study. However, within the parameters of self-study methodology many data collection methods are employed. Because this research involved a study of my life experiences as an educator, there were snapshots of a timeline. I used data analysis strategies from the field of narrative inquiry with written documents, such as journal entries and reflections. This methodology was well suited to bring to light the authority of experience.

As I proceeded in my self-study, I used methods that supported the study of a living contradiction. The contradiction that lies at the heart of my self-study of practice is between my lived experience of the quality of the balanced literacy program I implemented in my classroom and the new reading program that was mandated by district literacy leadership. My research question highlights the living contradiction I explored. The data I collected to explore this contradiction coalesce nicely around what Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) detailed as the “so what” of an experience ripe for self-study of practice. Following the components listed in their book, I used data collections methods that justified my work and described the phenomena I was studying.

As part of my contemplation about the tension I felt between my teacher knowledge and the school district mandate to use a commercial reading program to guide my instruction, I began wondering about the events that provoked my desire to do a self-study. I discussed with my thesis chair the questions that arose as my school district took a turn in the literacy instructional approach required of teachers. I then continued with an exploration of the resources to connect my ideas with larger literature and decided what was worthy of study.

Upon identifying the focus of my study I used the Framework-for-Analysis of personal practice and research and Framework-for-Inquiry planner (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) to consider how to study the question (see appendixes A and B). I then had to reconsider the data collected and move between the data collected and the texts to ensure that my evidence represented the research undertaken.

Next, I considered if the analysis of my data supported the assertions for action and understanding. I studied the description of ethical action in Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) to be vigilant in ensuring I adhered to ethical action. Lastly, I presented my work to situate it publicly and invite colleagues into a shared conversation. As part of this process, I reviewed and negotiated my findings with researchers, fellow teachers, and an administrator.

The fifth characteristic of self-study is the use of exemplar-based validation, which recognizes the authority of experience as a warrant for knowing (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Self-study participants need to be transparent and rigorous in their study to establish trustworthiness. This is one area that traditional researchers have found difficult to quantify and accept as a true form of research. In self-study, experience counts as a way of “knowing.” These characteristics, identified by LaBoskey (2004a) and reiterated by Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009), guided my study of self.

As I proceeded on the path of self-study to discover insights on how to navigate the changing face of beginning reading instruction, I adhered closely to the characteristics of self-study, which have emerged as pioneers of the methodology have visited and revisited the process. In addressing the characteristic of exemplar-based validation, I turned to Loughran and Northfield (1998) who purported that

reliability and validity are enhanced if the report includes sufficient detail of the complexity and context of the situation for it to “ring true” for the reader, provides and demonstrates some triangulation of data and a range of different perspectives around an issue, [and] makes explicit links to relevant educational literature and other self-study accounts and literature. (p. 13)

Accordingly, attention to exemplar-based validation was given to add to the reliability and validity of the study and add to the strength of the authority of experience. The characteristics of self-study methodology provided a platform for presenting my experience, thinking, and learning about beginning reading instruction as it related to continuing changes in the field.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data in the form of written reflections, in-service listings, journal entries (written and voice memo), analytical memos, and grade report forms from my personal experience as an educator. Table 1 details the primary sources that informed this study. See Appendix C for secondary sources.

I analyzed these data in search of understanding the role I have played as I have experienced various trends in beginning reading instruction. As I reflected upon and analyzed the data that I collected, I documented my responses in the form of analytic memos.

## Data Analysis

In order to identify the contradictions between my classroom practices and the district mandates for literacy instruction, I reflected and responded on my experience, analyzed past data sources, and created new artifacts. Through this process, I was able to narrow my self-study themes to those specifically influencing my reading instruction.

Table 1

### *Primary Data Sources*

Data Type	Time Period		
	First Era	Second Era	Third Era
Written reflections	14	14	8
In-service listings	1	2	1
Written journal entries	0	0	50
Voice memo journal entries	0	0	18
Analytical memos	7	7	7

First, I asked myself if I did have an actual contradiction worth studying and what good it would do to study it. I followed this with brainstorming ideas that I felt were obvious contradictions. For example, it was shocking to me that the district would look at using a commercial reading program after training me to design curriculum based on student needs. I then analyzed various data sources including forms for student reports, in-service records, and journal entries and looked for changes in the eras that affected beginning reading instruction. These artifacts and written reflections allowed me to think more clearly and critically about my

beliefs regarding reading instruction. Recursive analysis of these artifacts and my written reflections served as the first stage of my data analysis process.

Next, I proceeded to make sense of my written reflections. I created a table representing the themes in the narration as I started arranging and rearranging data (see Appendix D). Then I refined themes into significant changes in the field of education that influenced my beginning reading instruction practice, eventually arriving at seven major themes.

Then, I formatted the table so that the themes were represented as rows and the time periods were represented as columns. The three time periods were when I first entered the field as an educator, when I returned to the field after a significant break, and when the school district mandated that teachers use a commercially prepared reading program. This gave a clearer picture of the themes with which I worked and where I needed to add more detail so as to address each theme in each time period. I returned to my data sources for more information and also reflected on my experience to establish consistency in my understanding. This exercise was systematic and added rigor to the study. The table produced represented the eras of reading instruction and the themes that I felt were influential in my literacy instruction.

I refined my research question to reflect the new tensions and wonderings that I identified in my first stages of data analysis. Additionally, I made observations about the changes over the three eras. Producing this table helped to solidify my thinking and define the contradictions and tensions I felt as I was mandated by the school district to change my reading instruction.

After I identified the themes, I began to explain and explore them. Particularly to reveal the differences that occurred across time, I rephrased each theme as a series of questions (see Table 2). In the far left column I listed the themes. In the next column, I initially attempted to define the themes, but I found that, in order to unpack my understanding of what the themes meant,

Table 2

*Themes and Guiding Questions*

Theme	Guiding Questions
Student achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was reading achievement determined?</li> <li>• Who played a role in student reading success?</li> <li>• How was the responsibility to help students achieve reading success perceived?</li> </ul>
Mechanism driving instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What influences guided instructional decisions?</li> <li>• How did I determine whether my instruction was appropriate?</li> <li>• Who was responsible for student failure?</li> </ul>
Instructional approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of instructional approach was used?</li> <li>• How much support was given to encourage the use of recommended instructional approaches?</li> </ul>
Reading program characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of support was included in the reading program provided to teachers?</li> <li>• What was valued in the reading program?</li> <li>• How did the reading program support individual learning?</li> <li>• Was the use of the reading program mandated or monitored?</li> </ul>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role did assessment play in instruction and what was the impact of assessment results?</li> <li>• Who created or provided the assessments? Were the assessments required?</li> <li>• How were teachers and students perceived as a result of the assessments?</li> </ul>
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was kind of professional development was offered?</li> <li>• Was professional development embedded into the school schedule? Was it required?</li> </ul>
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the focus of collaboration?</li> <li>• Was collaboration monitored? What action was required due to collaboration?</li> </ul>

developing guiding questions helped to clarify the theme and supported me in examining responses. For example, as I originally conceptualized student achievement, it became evident that student achievement was a wide theme and included aspects of literacy instruction and assessment. As a result, I narrowed my scope by developing guiding questions that focused and strengthened my understanding. Each theme was addressed in a similar manner. Guiding questions defined the parameters of the theme and revealed differences in my practice across time.

Designating time periods to describe the eras in this study seemed simple in the beginning. However, as I responded to my experience in regards to each theme in the various eras I often found overlap. Originally, I selected the time periods based on when I changed schools or districts. As I was analyzing data I realized that for a more coherent discussion I needed to designate the eras by the major changes in reading programs that I encountered in my experience. The first era was obvious, as it was so far removed from the other two eras. However, the line between the second and third eras was fuzzy. As I examined data from the two eras, the reading program designated by the school district had a significant impact on my classroom instruction and made for a relatively clear line within that theme. When examining other themes the line jogs back and forth a little as some aspects of literacy overlap between the two eras. I decided that the first era encompassed the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the use of a basal reader. The second era was from the late 1990s and into the next century, with the California Early Literacy Learning/Extended Literacy Learning (CELL/ExLL) Framework as the primary reading program. The third era began about 2008, with the return of a commercial reading program. The reader will want to keep in mind the overlap between the second and third eras.

This study coincided with my job as a literacy coordinator in my school where I was instructing others to change their practice to a method that I didn't believe in myself. This contradiction caused high levels of tension both in terms of my personal teaching practice and in how I worked to prepare teachers to meet the school district mandate. Recognizing these tensions and contradictions spurred me to further my self-study endeavors.

The process that I went through to identify the themes within the three time periods increased my understanding of why I felt frustrated with the mandated, commercially prepared reading program. When I was informed that we would be required to teach the program "with fidelity" I was shocked. When literacy coordinators from each school were first asked to look at a commercial reading program we were told that it would be a resource, not that it would be the core instruction. However, after many years in education, I have come to realize that change is part of the field and that, rather than resist changes as they come, I need to use my teacher knowledge to navigate the changes and provide the best learning experience possible for my students.

The reflective look at my experience was purposeful and the analysis of my experience allowed me to surface contradictions in my practice and my beliefs. This enabled me to understand the authority of my experience. The use of the self-study methodology was invaluable in documenting my experience in a useful manner. I especially was drawn to the characteristic of "improvement-aimed."



## Chapter 4

### Findings

This chapter identifies and clarifies themes that I uncovered as I examined my experience as a beginning reading instruction teacher over three time periods. These themes are clarified by guiding questions that emerged as I examined my data. While the themes are the same across the three time periods, my response varied in each time period. This became evident in the discussion of the research question within the context of each theme.

#### Guiding Questions

The themes that were uncovered as I examined my experience were embedded beliefs about student achievement, the mechanism driving instruction, the instructional approach, characteristics of the reading program provided, assessment, professional development, and collaboration. Each of the themes is listed with its guiding questions in Table 2.

#### Differences in Themes Across Time

In the following section I present the seven themes across three time periods. To begin I clarify each theme and then move from themes to questions in order to report my findings, articulating how I answered the guiding questions differently in each time period. It was difficult to choose a time period cutoff that brought conclusion to all the approaches of one era, so there was a little give and take as one era transitioned to another.

**Embedded beliefs about student achievement.** In this section I consider my understanding of student achievement within the context of the mandated reading program in each era. This prompted the questions, “How was reading achievement determined?” “Who played a role in student reading success?” and “How was the responsibility to help students achieve reading success perceived?” This section captures my understanding of the assumptions

about literacy and literacy development embedded in each mandated reading program. I do not consider actual student achievement in this discussion. I will now discuss how I determined the students' reading achievement, who played a part in the students' reading achievement, and who was ultimately responsible for reading success in each era.

***Determination of reading achievement.*** As my experience and education increased over the years I found that my perception of reading achievement morphed from using teacher judgment to determine achievement to using data and set criteria to determine reading achievement. The following is a discussion of how the determination of reading achievement was influenced by the reading program in use.

*First era.* In the first era, I had not been introduced to diagnostic assessment, and neither the basal reader nor my educational preparation provided tools to guide my assessment of student proficiency. The reading program had only one basal and no guidance about how to determine at what level students were achieving. Therefore, I evaluated, gauged, and determined the reading proficiency of my students by using my own judgment. I listened to the students read and compared the student I listened to with the reading performance of students across the whole class. The primary facet of reading I used in their determination was actually reading fluency, since I thought a good reader would be able to easily read text in a grade level basal. Using this method I placed the students in high, average, or low reading groups. After listening to all the students I decided that the students in the middle were at grade level, so I labeled the students who were in the middle group as being at grade level. Even at that time, I was concerned that this was an arbitrary method for determining student achievement but I did not have experience with other methods. I also felt that the process indicated how a student performed in comparison to his or her peers.

*Second era.* During the second era reading achievement was measured by research-based assessments provided by the school district to support our use of the mandated curriculum. In order to place students in reading groups, I administered diagnostic assessments and grouped students according to their level and their needs. These assessments, including the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), coupled with the previous year's state Criterion-Referenced Test (CRT) results, helped me determine if a child was reading on grade level. In addition, the school and district provided criteria to determine the reading competence and level of each child. These concrete benchmarks were critical to my determining whether a student was performing at grade level. I was more consistent, considered more criteria, and relied on research-based data sources. This contrasted with my early teaching experience where my judgment of student achievement in literacy was mostly subjective and idiosyncratic.

*Third era.* The third era was a time of no excuses with NCLB: "All students will meet or exceed the state's standards" (NCLB, 2002). Although there was some overlap between the first and second eras, there was more overlap in the second and third eras. Some practices carried over from the second era into the third era. The research-based assessments and the state CRT were still influential in determining student achievement; additionally, the commercial reading program provided a placement test, weekly assessments, unit assessments, benchmark assessments, etc. Reading achievement was measured by research-based assessments, commercial reading program assessments, and the state CRT. The number and kind of assessments required of me reduced the amount of time that was available for teaching children. At the first of the school year I administered a battery of assessments required by the school district and school, including a reading placement test provided by the commercial reading program. I had information on the students' reading level, their reading skills, their reading

fluency, and how they performed on the previous year's state CRT. It was surprising to me that using an oral reading fluency assessment in the third era, such as DIBELS, was frustrating to me considering that in the first era I used my informal assessment of oral reading fluency as the primary means of determining reading achievement. By this point I realized that oral reading fluency was only a portion of what made a good reader. In the third era I felt the need to have many sources of data to determine student reading achievement and was frustrated when oral reading fluency's status in evaluating reading achievement was accorded high stakes status.

*Summary.* In summary, the similarities and differences in how reading achievement was determined are as follows: 1) all three eras had a state mandated end-of-year assessment; 2) the first and third era both had reading assessments that were included with the commercial reading program; 3) the second and third eras both used diagnostic assessments; 4) only the third era had all three types of assessments present—teacher judgment, diagnostic, and reading program assessments; and 5) only the first era relied completely on teacher judgment. The various eras each played an important role in my view of reading achievement.

*Persons involved.* The number of people involved in the process of guiding students to reading success had changed dramatically over the years. It ranged from as few as three or four to as many as ten people providing direct involvement.

*First era.* During the first era my personal practice was quite an isolated experience in comparison to the eras that followed. The people who played a role in my students' reading success were few. I, as the classroom teacher, provided daily instruction guided by the commercial reading program. The parents were encouraged and expected to support the school system. I had a teacher aide to assist me with my classes of up to 34 students. The teacher aide assisted by managing students doing independent work while I provided reading instruction.

Each year a couple of students received special education services in a pull-out program that was not tied to classroom curriculum. No additional support about how to help struggling students or what responsibility I had to increase their reading success in the form of discussions or mentoring came from the principal or other school support personnel. My perception was that I was responsible for student achievement and that I would have some students who might not be successful.

*Second era.* In the second era I gained experience working with others. I was introduced to three-tier instruction and the idea that about 5% of my students would struggle even after multiple exposures to a concept. I implemented additional instructional time for struggling students. The number of people playing a role in students' reading success transitioned to a more school-wide effort. The school provided instructional aides specifically to assist the classroom teacher with small-group reading instruction. Special education aides were included in the effort. Grade level leaders reported to the school instructional improvement team how the grade level as a whole was progressing. Parents were partners with the school and expected during parent-teacher-student conferences to sign documents agreeing that they would read with their children at home at least five times a week or take part of the responsibility for reading failure. In general, the second era was quite collaborative with multiple partners having responsibility for and commitment to students developing strong literacy skills.

*Third era.* The third era saw an increase in the number of parties interested in the success of every student. The classroom teacher, paraprofessional, parent, student, special education coordinator, literacy coordinator, data specialist, grade level teachers, and principal were regularly informed about student progress and actively collaborated to help struggling students. The district literacy leadership monitored the use of the commercial reading program and

required that weekly assessment data from the reading program be accessible to the district. The school required that I identify students who were at risk for failure and report their progress and the interventions provided at least two times a term. Intervention plans for the students not on grade level or perceived as not progressing toward grade level quickly enough were updated and reported. The classroom teacher in many cases directed special education services. I increased the number of interventions and adapted the class schedule to support the interventions. For example, I assigned our class paraprofessional to oversee the opening morning routine while I worked with students individually for ten minutes at a time to give targeted support to struggling students. This was not part of the commercial reading program but an effort on my part to provide the most qualified teacher for the most struggling students. The parties interested in the success of my students had greatly increased, and teacher responsibility to produce student performance and report interventions and progress also escalated.

*Summary.* Many people played a role in student reading achievement: 1) the classroom teacher and teacher's aide were common to all three eras, with the additional role of the teacher aide assisting with reading instruction added in the second era and which continued in the third era; 2) expectations for parental support and a sense of parents as shared partners were strongest in the second era; 3) special education services were present in all three eras, but the implementation of special education services changed from the first and second eras to the third era; 4) school instructional improvement or school leadership teams were present in the second and third eras; and 5) district monitoring of progress was present in the second and third eras, with an increase in monitoring and reporting occurring in the third era. Each of these persons contributed to the quality of instruction students received.

*Perception of responsibility.* The responsibility for student achievement has shifted across the three eras. The expectations of parents, teachers, the student, and school support personnel have always played an important role in student achievement. The following is a discussion of how the responsibility shifted from an era when informal assessment of reading ability determined success to a time when more systematic reporting and measurement emerged.

*First era.* In the first era the classroom teacher was expected to provide appropriate instruction, but if the student didn't learn, this was considered a deficit in the child's potential, as if reading ability were an inherited condition. I remember thinking that it was "unfortunate" that a particular student was not able to read well. I did not consider it my responsibility to make up for the limitations with which the child struggled. I had not thought through what my actions were saying about my beliefs.

*Second era.* During the second era reading instruction was approached with diagnostic assessments in the belief that all students could be taken from where they were and moved forward. Basically, a teacher employing the experience and knowledge gained from the teacher development in-services could help all students learn and move their literacy skills forward. I had the basic belief that all children had strengths which could be used to support the child in learning to read and that a child could compensate for a weakness in one area with strength in another. I believed that most, but not all, of my students would be on grade level at the end of the school year because I believed that every student was capable of steady progress with the help of targeted interventions and parental support. I perceived my responsibility as that of supporting student growth, not necessarily for every child to read on grade level.

*Third era.* In the third era there was a switch from the teacher being an expert curriculum maker to meet student needs to the teacher being monitored in the use of a commercial reading

program wherein adhering with fidelity to the reading program would ensure that all students would achieve reading success. As a classroom teacher, I now had the responsibility to rigorously adhere to the system provided by the commercial reading program to teach reading and provide interventions. The district literacy leadership required full implementation with fidelity. The reading program was now the expert. However, the classroom teacher and the school system were held responsible for the students' success.

*Summary.* In the first era, the students' inherent abilities ultimately determined if they could read; in the second era, teacher expertise was required to analyze student needs and move students forward towards reading on grade level; and in the third era, the reading program was responsible for students' literacy success. If students failed, teacher fidelity in implementing the program was seen as a possible source of failure. It was the classroom teacher and school system's responsibility to use the program provided to ensure every child read on grade level.

**Mechanism driving instruction.** Throughout my experience in beginning reading instruction, I found that how I delivered instruction was greatly influenced by the decisions of school and district leaders. As a beginning teacher I did not realize the impact of district, state, or national decisions on my instruction. However, when I look back at my experience, I can see that my classroom instruction changed as I experienced their influence around the eras in my teaching career. Questions that guided study of this section included "What influences guided instructional decisions?" "How did I determine whether my instruction was appropriate?" and "Who was responsible for student failure?"

***Influences on instructional decisions.*** The types of instructional approaches commonly advocated in the three eras had a great deal of influence on the kind of instruction delivered to my students. I experienced total reliance on a commercial reading program, developed my own



program, and then dragged my feet as I returned to a commercial reading program. In this section I will discuss the influences involved in the transformation of my instruction from total confidence in a prescribed program to the confidence developed from understanding the elements of literacy and student strengths and weaknesses followed by the school system having total confidence in the program rather than my knowledge and skill.

*First era.* In the first teaching era, the primary mechanism driving my instruction was the commercial reading program provided by my school. The state core curriculum was not yet a factor in my curriculum planning. My university experience included courses on phonics instruction and comprehension. However, with my belief in the effectiveness of the reading program provided and the effort expended to plan for my own class for the first time, I relied more heavily on the reading program than my own limited expertise. I gave total authority to the commercial reading program.

*Second era.* The second era of my teaching experience was an era of teacher education. For more than five years our district focused on educating teachers on how to use a balanced literacy approach to plan and deliver reading instruction. This new instructional method was a framework for instruction and did not include instructional materials. Teachers used the balanced literacy framework and the state core curriculum to design instruction. There were intensive school and district in-services with follow-up observations by the school literacy coordinator and other teachers on the grade level to ensure that the various elements were present and delivered appropriately in the classroom.

At the same time, teachers were taught how to administer diagnostic assessments in order to understand student needs. Teachers used this understanding to plan curriculum that targeted student needs and connected the curriculum to students' lives. Instruction was designed to be in

the students' zone of proximal development. Curriculum was designed to coincide with local culture and traditions. For me, this was an exciting era. I loved learning new methods for delivering instruction. Although I really did not like to be observed myself, I learned much from observing other teachers. On the whole, I felt much more professional as I used diagnostic assessments to determine student reading levels, then planned and implemented intervention techniques and strategies. During the second era building teacher capacity to design instruction tailored to student needs drove my instruction.

*Third era.* In the third era the school district returned to a commercial reading program directing beginning reading instruction. Although the new program exhibited many similarities to the reading program that I used in the late seventies, such as direct instruction, the use of basal readers, and worksheets, there were some stark contrasts as well. (For more detail, see the section "Instruction Approaches.")

During this era there was continued reliance on diagnostic assessment with the addition of assessments perceived by some teachers as more useful to parties with oversight than as support for classroom instruction. The new commercial reading program provided benchmark, weekly, and unit assessments, as well as fluency and running record assessments. This was the first time in my experience that results on classroom assessments were reported weekly to the school district. Principals viewed student and teacher data more regularly. The district literacy leadership mandated that the new research-based reading program be taught with high fidelity. My personal instruction changed. Whereas I had previously looked to the state core curriculum, the scope and sequence developed to support the state core curriculum, and student needs to plan my instruction, I now felt compelled to prepare students for the weekly assessments required in the commercial reading program rather than focusing more directly on moving children's literacy

development forward. Therefore, I altered my approach. Rather than considering student literacy development, I looked at the weekly assessments to decide which concepts to focus my instruction for the week.

Another change was that not all items on the assessment were part of the state core curriculum and, at times, student needs did not match the curriculum. However, since my students were required to take the weekly assessment, I felt the need to prepare them. For example, although it was not in the state core curriculum, my first graders studied present and past tense verbs in plural and singular form. Even as I taught these concepts, I felt like I was not being an advocate for my students since I did not think the instruction would appropriately move my students' developing reading skills forward.

In addition, on occasion I made decisions about what to teach based on how I thought it would affect me personally. I did not want to stand out as a teacher whose class did poorly on the weekly assessments that were viewed by district leaders and the building administrator. For example, when new concepts were introduced one week and then the program moved to different concepts and a new assessment the next week, even though I felt the need to solidify learning of a concept to support students' long-term literacy growth, I did not always take time to reteach the concept. I had to move on to keep up with demands of the commercial reading program assessments. Unlike my experience in the first era, I now felt conflicted rather than confident about using mandated assessments and allowing a commercial reading program to drive my instruction.

*Summary.* During the first era I was totally comfortable with allowing a commercial reading program to drive my instruction. During the second era I learned to assess students' needs, and then, by using the elements of balanced literacy and the information from the

diagnostic assessments and materials that I orchestrated to meet student needs, planned my instruction to move students forward on their level. In the third era I felt a great deal of conflict as I returned to the mandated use of a commercial reading program to guide my instruction. I was frustrated with using assessments that were not tied to the state core curriculum or that were not clear indicators of how students were progressing in developing literacy. The knowledge and expertise I had gained during the second era was denied in the third era.

***Determining the appropriateness of instruction.*** The method of determining if instruction was appropriate has changed over the years. My first experience was simple as I relied totally on a basal reading program. However, the second era involved a high level of complexity in preparing and delivering reading instruction. Although in the third era I returned again to a commercial reading program, the simplicity of the first era did not return. There were numerous assessments that influenced my classroom practice. The following is a discussion of the influences for determining the appropriateness of instruction in each era.

***First era.*** During my first experience I used only teacher judgment to decide if a student was on, above, or below grade level. I started with whole group instruction. I then provided instruction in three reading groups using the same basal reader. I used retired basal readers of varying levels of difficulty for independent reading. Although I knew that this did not meet the needs of all students, I felt the instruction was appropriate. I never had any oversight in my instruction. I never received the scores from the state end-of-year assessment so they did not have any influence on my classroom instruction.

***Second era.*** During the second era I used diagnostic assessments and the state core curriculum to plan instruction. I judged the instruction as appropriate if I attended to student needs as determined by the diagnostic assessments and if students made progress in developing

literacy. The state end-of-year assessment scores had limited influence on my instruction. I looked at the scores from the previous year to see, in general, where I could improve my instruction. The principal from one of my schools told the faculty on more than one occasion that regardless of what the scores showed that we were all good teachers and that we knew what was best for kids. However, at the tail end of the second era, state CRT results gained influence as the effects of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were more apparent. These scores were used to rank and rate schools, so the status of the state CRT was increased. During the second era reading instruction revolved primarily around student learning, but was soon to head in a new direction.

*Third era.* The third era saw increased oversight and collaboration. This meant that more parties required reports about teacher implementation of the reading program and student assessment scores. Instruction was considered appropriate if mandated assessment results were on grade level. Teachers were required to use the commercial reading program with fidelity and student scores on weekly assessments were the proxy for fidelity. Thus, the reading program played a major role in what was considered appropriate instruction. Also, because the state end-of-year assessment determined whether our school made AYP, it was incredibly significant. Assessment results determined if instruction was appropriate in the third era.

*Summary.* The appropriateness of instruction was judged differently during different eras. In the first era I felt that my instruction was appropriate because I was using the commercial reading program provided to me. The second era was totally different from the first era in that teacher knowledge had authority and teachers' documented judgment of students' progress in developing literacy determined if instruction was appropriate. The third era saw a turn back to a commercial reading program for instructional guidance with weekly reporting of students' scores on mandated assessments. However, the results on mandated assessments and students' scores on

the state end-of-year assessments are what determined whether the teacher had provided appropriate instruction. There was an implicit assumption that if teachers implemented the mandated curriculum then children could progress. If children did not progress there was an implicit assumption that the teacher's instruction had failed rather than that there was a failure of the curriculum.

***Responsibility for student failure.*** This section deals with what was perceived when a child was not considered a successful reader in each of the three eras. I was surprised that I had not previously recognized the conclusions that I, as well as others, came to when a child did not thrive in the instructional environment provided.

In the first era there was a shared responsibility between the teacher and student for the student to learn to read on grade level. After the teacher delivered instruction, the students' innate ability level was ultimately considered responsible for the level of reading success. I viewed student failure as a deficit in student ability. The second era was marked by an increase in teacher education and collaboration. Teachers were responsible to meet the needs of their students in concert with the school and family. During the third era, when assessment results on mandated tests were the determining factor for reading success, teachers were ultimately responsible for providing appropriate instruction through the use of the mandated commercial reading program and mandated assessments.

***Summary.*** Mechanisms for driving instruction varied across the eras. The first and third eras relied on a commercial reading program to drive instruction, with the addition of extensive assessments to document student progress in the third era. In the second era teachers relied on their ability to assess student needs and meet those needs. Instruction was characterized as appropriate in the first era by the teacher's judgment that she had followed the commercial

reading program, in the second era by if the teachers planned and implemented instruction targeting diagnosed student needs, and in the third era by teachers following the prescribed commercial reading program, including its continuous assessment. The responsibility for student achievement in the first era was a combination of teacher instruction and student ability. The second era achievement was perceived as the responsibility of the teacher, student, parents, and school community to move student literacy skills forward. The third era student achievement was perceived as the responsibility of the teacher and school system to move the child to grade level. A student's lack of progress was attributed to the teacher or school system rather than the curriculum offered.

**Instructional approach.** This section discusses the kinds of instructional approaches and support for teachers in implementing the approach. Guiding questions for this section included “What kind of instructional approach was used?” and “How much support was given to encourage the use of the recommended instructional approaches?”

**Kind of instructional approach.** Instructional approaches have differed through my years of teaching. I started with a whole group direct instruction approach and loosely leveled small group independent reading. Then I went to an instructional model with a combination of exploratory and direct instruction with the use of highly interactive whole-group and more precisely leveled small-group instruction. Then I returned to a reading program model of primarily whole-group direct instruction coupled with loosely leveled small-group instruction.

*First era.* When I began teaching in the late 1970s I used the teacher manual from my commercial reading program as a guide. I then presented whole-class direct instruction and practice in phonics and reading skills using worksheets. The class would receive reading assignments in their reading book and complete the questions at the end of the story. After the

whole-class experience, I would then deliver additional instruction to what I thought were small groups (I had more than 30 students separated into three reading groups) using the same basal reader for each group. In addition, I used retired books from a previously used reading program to provide materials to the groups for independent reading. Other than the sets of retired basal readers, I did not have a class library. My only expectation was that students kept reading for the specified amount of time. No school leaders seemed to be concerned about the approach that I used to teach reading. I basically did whole-class direct instruction coupled with some limited instruction on three levels.

*Second era.* When I returned to teaching in the late 1990s, my approaches to beginning reading instruction varied. I started with direct instruction using the same basal reader for all students. However, a colleague introduced the reader's-workshop approach, which responded more to student interests, so I implemented this approach. Almost as soon as I became comfortable with this approach, the CELL/ExLL framework for balanced literacy was introduced in our district. This occupied the majority of our in-services, observations, and classroom instruction for more than five years. This approach was based on the idea that you start where the child is and move the child forward from that point. The framework proposed that daily elements of reading instruction be implemented with fidelity in response to the literacy needs of individual children. These elements included interactive whole-group instruction combined with leveled small-group instruction. After assessing students' reading levels and diagnosing their strengths and needs, I found myself suddenly needing seven reading groups instead of a few large reading groups. Sometimes, it seemed nearly impossible to meet with my seven small reading groups every day. I had to rethink how to structure my instruction to support small-group instruction for so many groups.



I learned about activity centers and training my class to work appropriately and independently as I worked with small groups. The students were assessed regularly and regrouped according to their current strengths and needs. Teachers developed their own curriculum maps using the state core and the district-provided phonics scope and sequence. Teachers also started collecting leveled books for their classroom guided-reading libraries. Schools developed guided-reading libraries to support instruction to students at various reading levels. Teachers were not supported in using a commercial reading program. During this era quality teaching was dependent on the teacher's ability to assess students and design and deliver appropriate leveled instruction.

*Third era.* The third era brought a big surprise: the district leaders did a complete about-face in their philosophy towards reading instruction by adopting a new commercial reading program. At first the program was adopted specifically for Title I schools but was provided to other schools as a resource. However, by the time the materials arrived, implementation with fidelity was required of all schools in the school district. Suddenly, teachers who had designed their own curriculum and collected their own materials were required to use a commercial reading program. The structure of the mandated program was officially deemed superior to all programs based on teachers' skill in assessing and meeting individual children's needs. This was a difficult transition for many teachers who had made tremendous efforts to create their own units of study within the CELL/ExLL framework and promote individual students' progress as readers.

The new program used explicit instruction for whole- and small-group instruction. The program addressed the district goals to provide a district-wide scope and sequence, ample instructional materials, and consistency for transient students within the school district. Although

the program included a mix of fiction and non-fiction trade book anthologies, no novels were included. Small, thin readers were included to support instruction on three pre-designated instructional levels, with additional materials for English Language Learners (ELL). The program included numerous student workbooks and an array of assessments. I supplemented this program with additional levels of reading groups. The commercial reading program materials were designed to support a direct, explicit instructional approach in support of the commercial scope and sequence. The district encouraged the use of balanced literacy elements as the “how” to deliver instruction and the commercial reading program as the “what” to deliver. However, future support was for the “what” to deliver with little mention of the “how.”

*Summary.* In the first era the mandated reading program included direct, whole-group instruction, which I supplemented with the use of retired basals and practice on three levels for independent reading. The second era saw highly interactive whole- and small-group instruction that was matched to students’ reading levels. I ended up with seven small groups as opposed to the three groups I had previously used. In the third era the reading program supported explicit whole-group with small-group instruction on three pre-designated levels. I supplemented the program with additional levels of instruction.

*Teacher support.* This section refers to the amount of support provided to teachers to implement the mandated reading program.

*First era.* In the first era I had very limited support in implementing the commercial reading program. The only support that I received was the teacher’s manual for the commercial reading program. No teacher in-service or mentoring of any kind was offered. No one came to see if I was using the program appropriately.

*Second era.* The second era saw numerous teacher in-service trainings to support instruction using a balanced literacy approach. Teachers, along with the school literacy coordinator, were required to observe their peers demonstrating proficiency in various elements of balanced literacy as a means of improving practice. In-services on balanced literacy continued for more than five years. Each literacy element was the focus of teacher development as teachers gained competence in implementation. The focus of professional development continued to support each element as it was revisited over the years. In reflecting on the process of learning to implement the balanced literacy element of Shared Reading, I recalled that the literacy coordinator explained the research behind the element, explained what to watch for as she modeled a Shared Reading, and then modeled how to do Shared Reading. She then proceeded to show a variety of types of Shared Readings. Next, we were assigned times to model and observe a Shared Reading. The school literacy coordinator and the teacher on my grade level assigned to observe me arrived and I demonstrated a Shared Reading with my class. Afterwards, we conferenced for a few minutes so I could reflect on what went well and set goals for improvement. This approach to reading instruction required successful collaboration. Because the balanced literacy approach was a framework and not a commercially prepared program, teachers, schools, and districts worked together to provide access to the teaching materials needed. There was tremendous district and school support for this instructional approach.

*Third era.* In the third era, the instructional approach was one of direct, explicit instruction. The program included many supportive instructional materials. The district literacy leadership provided training to the schools prior to the arrival of the materials, with additional training in implementation as needed. The faculty was concerned about the kinds of materials that were mandated for use and the many assessments that were included with the commercial

reading program required by the school district. The district literacy leadership sent in teams to observe teachers on multiple occasions, not to train, but to ensure teachers were using the instructional materials and techniques mandated by the school district. The principal and school literacy coordinator also did walk-through observations to see if teacher use of the reading program was evident.

*Summary.* In the first era, teachers were not strongly supported in their use of the provided reading program. In the second and third eras teachers were highly monitored for the kind of instructional approach and materials used, but the motives behind the monitoring were different. The teacher observations in the second era were intended to support teacher growth through reflection and goal setting. The teacher observations in the third era were intended to see that the commercial reading program was being used in classrooms.

**Reading program characteristics.** As I reflected on the records of my experience through the eras I found that the reading program provided by the school district greatly influenced my reading instruction and that the structure and content of the different reading programs varied widely. The questions that guided my exploration of the reading program were “What kind of support was included in the reading program provided to teachers?” “What was valued in the reading program?” “How did the reading program support individual learning?” and “Was the use of the reading program mandated or monitored?”

**Kind of support.** In this section I will discuss the kind of support for teachers provided within the reading program.

*First era.* The reading program used in the first era was a commercially produced program with a teacher’s manual, student basal readers, and phonics and grammar worksheets. The program supported the direct instruction approach. Therefore, in my practice I used direct

instruction with an occasional diversion from the question-and-answer format. This was followed by worksheet support of the concept being discussed. I remember always having a large stack of papers to take home and score each night. I used the same basal reader for all three reading groups. I set different expectations for each group and the groups moved through the same text at different rates. At the end of each story was a set of comprehension questions, with a combination of literal and inferred questions. I would base my evaluation of whether the students read the story well by whether they could answer the questions well. However, at that time I still gave credence to the idea that a fluent reader was a good reader, even if the student did not score well on the comprehension questions. During the first era the commercial reading program provided the teacher's manual, basal readers, questions, and worksheets to practice phonics and grammar. With the strong phonics approach to reading instruction I was primarily using a bottom-up model of reading instruction.

*Second era.* During the second era, rather than providing a commercial reading program, teachers were educated in assessing and delivering reading instruction in an integrated, connected framework of elements. Students were assessed and diagnosed for strengths and weaknesses in reading strategies and skills. Materials were collected and actually designed, frequently by the classroom teacher, to meet the instructional needs of individual students. The school invested heavily in creating leveled libraries to support guided reading. This also included a small read-aloud library and classroom libraries for independent reading. Frequent, informal assessment was used to understand student needs and plan instruction. Teachers learned techniques to build students' literacy skills and teach comprehension strategies. This era was an era of teacher education, on-site mentoring, and training in identifying student needs. All this effort was put toward one purpose: to identify and meet individual student needs to move

students forward. This use of a variety of assessment data and the use of the balanced literacy approach to reading instruction was evidence of a responsive and interactive model of reading instruction.

*Third era.* The third era showed a return to a commercial reading program. This program came with ample materials to support instruction. It included materials for explicit, whole-group instruction as well as small-group instruction on three levels and ELL materials. The unique aspect of this era was the extensive use of assessment embedded in the program. There were weekly assessments, unit assessments, benchmark assessments for whole-group and individual assessment, and fluency assessments. The weekly, unit, and whole-group benchmark assessments were available in both written and online formats. The district literacy leadership mandated the use of weekly assessments and monitored student proficiency results, as well as ensured that each school was using the new reading program. The program promoted the use of direct instruction and leveled instruction, as well as suggested interventions for students who needed additional instruction. This reading program used elements of balanced literacy and phonics instruction. It was an interactive model of reading instruction with a strong bottom-up model component.

*Summary.* During the first era the commercial reading program included a teacher's manual, basal readers, worksheets, and assessments. In the second era in-services and observations built teacher capacity to meet student needs. Schools provided leveled libraries and teachers created their own curriculum. The third era saw a return to the commercial reading program, which included teacher manuals, basal readers, leveled readers, many workbooks and assessments, and district access to weekly class assessment results.

***Program premise.*** As I reflected on the reading programs that were implemented in each of the three eras, it became apparent that each program valued different parts of the educational process. The following is a discussion of the influences of the reading program.

***First era.*** In the first era, the commercial reading program provided assessment questions at the end of each story in the basal reader. The questions were a combination of literal and inferential questions. In addition, performance on phonics and grammar worksheets was assessed. Since the reading program provided materials at only one level, the program premise was that all students should perform at the same level.

***Second era.*** In the second era, the teacher knowledge gained from the in-services provided by literacy experts in our district was valued. This knowledge was valued for the ability it gave the classroom teacher to understand what students already know about reading, where to start instruction, and what to teach the student next to build student capacity, with the ultimate goal of moving student learning forward. Student progress in literacy development was the most important factor in reading instruction.

***Third era.*** The third era saw a turn away from valuing teacher knowledge to valuing the commercial reading program with its computerized assessments, observations of teacher use of the program, and other required assessments. Test results were the most important factor in reading instruction. Teachers reported their data regularly and explained what they were doing for students who scored below level on the assessment. The assessment data was the driving force in reading instruction.

***Summary.*** In reflecting on my experience of what was valued in the reading program provided in each era, the program went from assessing student comprehension, to valuing a reading program designed by the classroom teacher based on student needs, and then back to the

commercial reading program and the required assessments to guide my instruction—this time feeling conflicted about the program itself. This was the first time I felt that the program I was provided did not support my beliefs about student learning.

***Support for individual learning.*** This section discusses the kinds of materials that were provided in each era to support individual learning needs. The kind of materials provided influenced my classroom reading instruction and whether I had the resources to meet student needs. The materials provided for individual support with the mandated reading programs varied widely.

*First era.* During the first era I was aware of programs that were driven by students' individual needs, which were in use in some districts. However, the materials provided in my experience were not individualized. The commercial reading program provided a common basal reader for all students with no consideration for students who were above or below grade level. In order to accommodate students' varied abilities, I supplemented the program with retired basal readers during independent reading, which provided more variability in reading materials.

For reading practice, I divided my class into three reading groups. I would start the high group towards the middle of the retired basal readers for the current grade level and then move them into the retired basal readers from the next grade level for independent reading time. I would start the middle group at the beginning of the retired basal reader, and I would use a retired lower grade basal reader for the lowest group. Independent reading time looked different from what I referred to as independent reading in the second and third eras. In the first era my students would sit in a circle with their group and read silently to themselves with the retired basal readers. As long as the students looked like they were reading I assumed that they were getting the reading practice they needed.



I used the comprehension assessment and teacher observation for the purpose of grading students and reflecting on the effectiveness of my instruction. The results of the assessments did not inform my instruction for the set of students assessed. Student learning was supported by exposure to the program in the form of direct instruction, with student learning being dependent on individual student ability. Individual needs were not addressed in the reading program that was provided by the school district. Special education services were provided at the school in pullout format and were not connected to classroom instruction. This was an era where special education services provided interventions, with very little intervention by the classroom teacher.

*Second era.* The second time period focused on student learning. As mentioned earlier in the instructional approach section, the in-service instruction in our district prevalent during this era continuously built teacher knowledge in balanced literacy elements and the ability to assess student needs and modify instruction to meet students' instructional needs. Students were assigned to reading groups as determined by their strengths and weaknesses. The number of reading groups in my classroom went from the traditional three groups (below level, on level, and above level) to seven reading groups. These groups had as few as two or as many as seven students. The whole-group instruction was very interactive and purposefully designed to meet the needs of students at various stages of learning. Assessments were used to diagnose where the students were, where to take them next, and to determine if students were on grade level. The classroom reading program was structured to support individualized learning. Special education services were provided by the school but were rarely tied to classroom instruction.

*Third era.* During the third era the reading program was designed to provide whole-group instruction and, after assessing the student levels, to divide the class into three levels of instruction—below level, on level, and above level. Materials were also provided for English

Language Learners (ELL). A program linked to the regular education program was available for purchase to support instruction for students with special needs. The reading program guided small-group instruction. Small, thin readers were provided on three levels. Students on grade level were given instruction in phonics, high frequency words, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Students in the below level were provided extra practice in phonemic awareness and phonics with less focus on comprehension. Students in the beyond level group were provided instruction with a primary focus on comprehension and writing with very little focus on phonics or phonemic awareness. The end-of-week assessment provided feedback on student learning and suggestions for reteaching. The commercial reading program provided a starting place to meet students' individual needs.

Although materials in the third era were provided on three levels, I actually had six or seven reading groups, meaning that this reading program did not sufficiently support individual learning. The three levels of materials supported instruction for all but the highest and lowest groups. I provided materials from other sources for these groups. In addition, although we were mandated to use the commercial reading program with fidelity, at times I replaced the provided reading material with actual trade books, including novels, and taught the same comprehension skill using these materials. This would happen most frequently with the higher groups. The higher groups could read through and discuss the concepts in the commercial program easily in two days, so additional reading material was needed each week to keep student interest and provide reading practice. These strategies tended to reinforce knowledge. I borrowed materials from a lower grade class to use with the variation in students reading below-level.

Another reason I supplemented the reading program with other materials during the third era was to connect the reading instruction to students' lives. I would often provide reading

materials on a topic that was of interest to the students at that moment in time. For example, the reading I assigned during October was related to fall and Halloween in an effort to increase motivation by connecting with the excitement students exhibited for that time of year. The commercial reading program supported instruction for the majority of my students, but, based on my learning from the second era, I found it necessary to supplement the program to make the instruction more relevant and motivating in students' lives.

*Summary.* In the first era, the commercial reading program provided materials for grade level instruction; however, it did not provide materials to support students above or below grade level. In the second era the reading program was specifically designed to meet individual student needs through the use of diagnostic assessment and the balanced literacy framework. The curriculum was also designed to connect to students' lives. In the third era, the commercial reading program provided instructional materials on three levels, which met the needs of many of my students. However, based on my knowledge of literacy I found it necessary to provide additional materials for those students who were more than one grade level above or below grade level. I also supplemented or replaced texts to connect the instruction to the students' interests and lives.

*Oversight.* When I began my first teaching experience I dreaded official observations. As I went through the three eras of my career I became more accustomed to, but not comfortable with, the oversight required in the latter two eras. Monitoring of practice using the mandated methods and materials became the norm.

*First era.* In the first era I accepted the authority of a basal reading program and I was grateful to have a program to guide my instruction since in my teacher preparation program I had learned only generalities and few specifics. No one checked to see if I was using the materials. I

had not yet developed the expertise to create my own curriculum at that point. There was very little oversight or support. I felt like it was assumed that I would use the reading program provided, and it never occurred to me to do otherwise.

*Second era.* During the second era district efforts concentrated on building teacher capacity to design curriculum using a balanced literacy approach, with the greatest focus toward moving student learning forward. Teachers were educated in how to understand student needs and how to meet them. Unlike the majority of in-services that I experienced during my career as an educator, the balanced literacy approach in-services had longevity and continued for more than five years, with the purpose of building teacher capacity.

The quality of the elements of balanced literacy used in the classrooms was monitored through observations by the school literacy coordinator together with other teachers on my same grade level. The debriefing sessions focused on my understanding of my strengths and weaknesses as an instructor. The second era had considerably more oversight than the first era. I had extensive training in instructional techniques and diagnostic assessments. The literacy coordinator and a teacher from my grade-level team scheduled a time to come on several occasions to observe how I was doing at implementing the various techniques. The observations always made me feel nervous but helped improve my teaching.

*Third era.* Oversight by the school and district in the third era continued to grow, but in a different way. Whereas in the second era the oversight was primarily in building teacher capacity, the third era concentrated on following the commercial reading program with fidelity and providing interventions to move students toward benchmarks based on assessment results. As the commercial reading program was first introduced, the school literacy coordinator and the principal did walk-through observations to see environmental evidence of use of the reading

program in the classroom. Then district teams went to the schools to see the reading program in use. The teams observed teachers during instruction, noted evidence of the program in the classroom environment, and asked students questions about the program.

In addition, the commercial reading program included weekly assessments that were mandated by the district literacy leadership to be administered and the scores reported. The assessments could be taken in a paper/pencil fashion or on the computer. In the second year of the reading program implementation, the school district purchased the rights for all the elementary schools to take the assessments online and required that all schools take the weekly assessments online. For the first time the district literacy leadership had the ability to view scores from common weekly assessments in a district-wide format. The district literacy leadership was able to monitor that each teacher had given the assigned assessments and view the results of the assessments. This contrasted with the second era where teachers provided student data on a quarterly basis. This was the widest and most frequent monitoring of student learning that I had experienced.

Due to the large amount of material presented each week in the reading program, I learned to look at the weekly assessment rather than student needs to guide what I would focus on for a particular week, even if I felt it was not in the best interest of my students' literacy development to go that direction. The third era was highly monitored and altered my instruction in a direction that made me uncomfortable. Because I put so much effort into following the reading program that dictated what I would teach, I had less energy to focus on the literacy development of individual students and designing instruction that moved students' literacy skills forward.

*Summary.* The amount of administrative oversight in the three eras has differed greatly in amount and purpose. The first era was extremely limited. The second era had greatly increased oversight with the purpose of increasing teacher capacity to move student learning forward. The third era continued to exhibit substantial oversight, however, the focus changed to evidence of program use and interventions to move students forward to meet benchmarks.

*Summary.* In summary of the mandated reading programs, during the first and third eras a commercial reading program was provided. Both programs used a whole-group direct instructional approach and provided basal readers. A notable difference in the programs was the addition of three levels of readers for group instruction and the increased number of assessments in the third era. The balanced literacy approach used in the second era, on the other hand, required that teachers have the ability to assess and teach to student needs. This came in the form of extensive in-service and mentoring opportunities.

During the first era I valued the knowledge and expertise of the publishers of the commercial reading program. In the second era I learned to value my own expertise in diagnosing and teaching to student needs. In the third era, due to the use of district-monitored weekly assessments, I valued preparing my students for the weekly district mandated and monitored assessment.

The reading program used in the first era supported only students on grade level. Students who had individual needs outside the grade-level curriculum were not supported. In the second era meeting individual student needs and moving all students forward was the primary focus of the reading program. In the third era, the commercial reading program supported students on grade level, students one grade level above or below grade level, and ELL students. A program

for students with special needs was available for purchase that connected to the curriculum in the regular education classroom.

During both the second and third eras teachers were mandated to use the espoused program and the use of the program was highly monitored. Assessments to diagnose student needs were prevalent in the second era. There was a greater emphasis in testing results and interventions from the reading program assessments in the third era.

**Assessment.** The role of assessment exhibited an incredible amount of variance over the three time periods. Since assessment is often used to determine student achievement, I recognize that there is some overlap between these two themes. Guiding questions for this section included “What role did assessment play in instruction and what was the impact of assessment results?” “Who created or provided the assessments?” “Were the assessments required?” and “How were teachers perceived as a result of the assessments?”

**Role and impact of assessment.** Assessment had a role in all three eras of my teaching experience. The impact of testing on my classroom instruction varied according to the type and purpose of the assessment.

*First era.* As I reflected on my experience in the first era it was apparent that assessment was minimal. At the time I did not think that to be the case. However, I had no perception of what was to come. I assessed reading units with the assessments provided in the reading program, usually the questions in the book after each story. I did not follow up with reteaching after the assessment during this era. I used the assessment results to assign grades to report student reading ability to parents. At the end of the school year the class took a state mandated end-of-year assessment. It was a fill-in-the-bubble test that assessed reading. I had no knowledge of what was going to be assessed; only that part of the assessment tested reading. I

never found out the results of the end-of-year assessment for my classes so it had no impact on my instruction.

*Second era.* In the second era, the influence of assessment had greatly increased. I administered the end-of-year state criterion-referenced test (CRT), which was aligned to the state core curriculum. The results of this assessment were not used for reteaching since the final results were not available to schools until after the end of the school year. The state CRT was selected as the tool to measure school effectiveness and was used to determine if schools made AYP. At the same time, the school and district required a battery of assessments to assess various elements of reading, such as the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)/Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Benchmarks and Progress Monitoring, High Frequency Words, Quick Phonics Screener, and Sound Sense. These regularly scheduled assessments were used to inform reading instruction during the school year and track student progress. At the end of the school year the scores were entered on a composite sheet with the purpose of informing the subsequent teachers' instruction for the new school year.

Teachers also used running records to monitor student progress and ensure that the instructional materials used were a good match to the students' reading levels. During this era teachers relied on data from diagnostic assessments to instruct students at the appropriate instructional level. This reliance created an instructional environment that was highly responsive to student needs. The diagnostic assessments in the second era were used to place students, to plan curriculum and interventions, to indicate student progress in literacy development, and to report student achievement to parents.

*Third era.* The third era saw the largest impact of assessment results of the three eras. There was an increase in the reporting of scores to the school, district, and state. This meant that



there was greater oversight in classroom instruction in relation to the scores of the students within the classes.

During this era I saw a change in assessment collection and use. Initial assessments were used for placement and to set a baseline to check for progress throughout the year. I still administered the annual end-of-year state CRT assessment. Some assessments that were previously used by many of the schools for diagnostic purposes, such as DIBELS, and the phonemic awareness assessment, had become district-required assessments. Another type of assessment that was added was the commercial reading program weekly assessment. The reading program's weekly assessments provided feedback on a regular basis but did not always correlate well to reading instruction in the classroom or students' literacy development. In addition, the assessment techniques were not necessarily developmentally appropriate.

Teachers often felt a disconnect between assessment and individual student needs. For example, even if I felt that my students needed reinforcement on a particular comprehension strategy, such as making inferences, because of the mandated weekly assessments and their possible effect on student self-concept, as well as weight in determining my competence as a teacher, I felt it was necessary to move to the next strategy in order to keep up with the demands of the reading program to prepare my students for the next assessment. I also worried about the complexity of a first or second grader typing a response to a comprehension question. I did not feel that the stress and limitations set by the children's lack of keyboarding skills would give a good representation of their understanding.

Teachers were responsible to report student assessment results to the school and to the school district at regularly scheduled intervals. Scores were used by the teacher and grade-level team to coordinate intervention efforts across the grade level and to report student achievement

to parents. Common grade-level assessments were created and administered at each term to monitor progress towards the grade-level learning essentials. The state CRT was a major concern for teachers and administrators. It was during this era that the Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) changed from a school-required fluency assessment to a state-mandated assessment. This moved the DIBELS assessment from a tool to guide and support teachers' instruction to a high-stakes assessment.

*Summary.* Overall, my experience with the role and impact of assessment was that it represented an area of tremendous change. Teachers' experience with assessment requirements went from there being practically no formal testing to a situation of extensive formal testing that was reported regularly to grade-level, school, and district personnel. The commonality found throughout the eras was the presence of a state-mandated end-of-year assessment. Similarities existed between the second and third eras in that both eras had continuous assessment throughout the year and included individualized testing, which was reported to the school or district. In contrast, other than the state end-of-year assessments, I did not report any scores to the school or district in the first era, whereas in the second and third eras I reported many diagnostic and outcome assessments to the school or district, starting in the second era and increasing during the third era. Basically, in the first era there was loose monitoring of general progress. During the second era, assessment was a diagnostic tool used by teachers to guide instruction, coupled with high-stakes testing to indicate summative performance. In the third era assessment was used to track student proficiency and teacher use of the designated reading program, as well as summative performance. The overall number of assessments increased greatly.

**Source of assessments.** The sources of assessments used in the three eras influenced how they were perceived. Some assessments were created for and required by the state. Others were selected from research to diagnose reading strengths and weaknesses.

*First era.* The assessments used in the early era were created by the commercial reading program to test the weekly and unit skills. I was never instructed to use these assessments. Since they were part of the reading program provided, I assumed that the assessments were necessary. They provided information upon which to grade students and report their reading achievement to parents. I don't remember having any direction from or accountability to school leadership about how I assigned grades. I do not know the source of the state mandated end-of-year assessment during my early teaching experience. As a classroom teacher I was not aware of any repercussions from either high or low testing results.

*Second era.* The assessments used in the second era were primarily research-based assessments designed to diagnose specific reading strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of guiding instruction. These assessments were required by the district literacy leadership or school. Researchers of various origins designed the assessments. The state, district, or commercial reading program did not design these assessments. The assessments were selected by the district or school for the contribution they made in teachers' ability to understand students' reading strengths and weaknesses. The state CRT, which was administered at the end of the school year, was created specifically for the state to measure competency in the state core curriculum. It was a state-required assessment.

*Third era.* The assessments of the third era included the state CRT, designed to align with the state core curriculum. During this era the state CRT results were available within a few weeks of the assessment. The state norms were not set until later in the summer, but the raw data

was available to classroom teachers sooner than in previous eras. Additionally, there were assessments that were created by the commercial reading program to support its program, which were required by the district. There were also assessments in use from the second era that were diagnostic in nature and created by various researchers which continued to be required by the school or school district.

*Summary.* The first, second, and third eras each had state mandated end-of-year assessments. Both the first and third eras had assessments created for the reading program with no input from the classroom teacher. In the second and third eras the use of diagnostic assessments developed by researchers was common. The first and second eras had very little in common other than the end-of-year assessments.

*Perception of teachers.* The perception of the teacher and student in regards to assessment results changed as the eras transitioned to more specific assessments. The responsibility for improving scores and the degree to which they were expected to improve were not static. Each era had its trademark reaction to assessments results, particularly if the results were poor.

*First era.* In the first era, despite my novice status, I felt as if I was perceived as a professional who knew how to teach reading. If a student did not learn to read or score well enough on assessments, it was commonly considered that the student had a deficit in learning ability, not a lack of appropriate instruction on my part. I had fulfilled my responsibility by providing instruction.

*Second era.* In the second era, I was expected to be educated in curriculum design, literacy elements, and diagnostic assessment. My job was to use this knowledge to design curriculum that connected to students' lives, included the fundamental elements of balanced

literacy, and delivered instruction that was in the zone of the child's proximal development. Then, according to diagnostic assessment results obtained throughout the school year, I provided targeted interventions to increase student achievement. If a child did not show improvement, then additional time, resources, and methods were considered to push the effort forward. The parents and school community were also involved in the effort to help the child succeed. Student achievement was perceived as a collaborative effort between the child, the home, the school, and the teacher.

*Third era.* In the third era, the classroom teacher, through the use of the commercial reading program, was responsible for student achievement. If a child did not score well in the third era then it was perceived as a teacher and school failure, not a child or family issue. At this point in time, the schools' rating as making or not making AYP was a common topic of discussion. As Internet access was extremely prevalent in this era it was easy to look up and check how a school was rated. If a child attended a school that was rated as low performing, parents had the right to apply for school choice for their child to attend a school within the district that was not low performing. I felt like, even though the students came to me at a variety of reading levels, it was my job to follow the commercial reading program, provide the designated instruction, and correlate interventions to bring every child up to grade level.

*Summary.* During the first era, poor student performance on an assessment was attributed to a deficit in the student. In the second era, poor student performance on an assessment was viewed as information to guide the next step of instruction for the teacher and to elicit support from collaborators. In the third era, poor student performance was viewed as a failure by the teacher to provide appropriate instruction.

**Professional development.** As I looked at the variation in professional development over my experience, I realized that my professional development impacted my instruction. Guiding questions in this section included “What kind of professional development was offered?” and “Was professional development embedded into the school schedule? Was it required?”

***Kinds of professional development.*** This section discusses the kind of professional development that I experienced in each era. It concludes with a summary.

*First era.* Professional development in the first era of my experience was practically nonexistent. During the two school years that I taught I did not have any in-house in-service trainings. The principal invited me to attend a course in precision math teaching that met once a week after school for four weeks in a neighboring district. Other than that, I was not aware of any local professional development opportunities.

*Second era.* The second era was rife with in-service opportunities. The school district offered classes regularly to district employees, most of which were free. Teachers new to the school district were required to take a principles of effective teaching course. The neighboring districts offered in-services and courses at minimal cost which my district or school would cover for employees. The state offered courses annually to increase teacher knowledge and improve practice in a variety of areas, with a focus on integrating language arts or numeracy into the core content areas. The local university offered summer courses. The school provided in-house in-service on a regular basis, usually once or twice a month. The school district had annual in-service trainings to start the school year and frequently had follow-up in-services during the school year. I attended many elementary in-services related to the elements of balanced literacy found in the CELL/ExLL framework, curriculum mapping, writing assessments, and Professional Learning Communities. It was during this era that I took courses to obtain

an English as a Second Language endorsement. It was a time when many resources were invested in teacher improvement. The school district, universities, neighboring districts, and online options also provided abundant in-service opportunities.

*Third era.* In the last era the literacy in-services in our school focused on how to implement the new reading program and how to administer the new required online assessments. The district leadership team provided a focus on Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to support Response-to-Intervention. During this time, the school district, universities, neighboring districts, and online opportunities continued to be abundant.

*Summary.* In-service opportunities varied in the three eras. During the first era professional development was nearly nonexistent. During the second era, the school and district provided and required participation in many in-service opportunities. The required literacy courses were focused on building teacher capacity to design curriculum and understand student needs. In the third era, plentiful in-service opportunities continued to be the norm. However, required literacy in-services focused on implementing the new reading program and learning to use new online assessment tools.

***Structure of embedded professional development.*** This section discusses the scheduling of professional development, focusing on how the professional development was planned to be part of the teachers' work day.

*First era.* In the first era professional development was close to nonexistent, with a few classes offered after school in a larger, neighboring district. There were no mandates for professional development.

*Second era.* In the second era, professional development was worked into the daily schedule, with observations taking place during the school day and professional development

taking place in regularly scheduled faculty in-service meetings twice a month. There were also a few “No School” days scheduled to provide all-day in-service training for teachers. Attendance during any school-time in-service was required and monitored. In-service courses offered by the school district, neighboring school districts, or state were plentiful. Participation was optional.

*Third era.* In the third era, the observations and professional development were scheduled during school time and after school at the usual in-service times. They were monitored and required. In-service courses offered by the school district, neighboring districts, or state were plentiful. Participation was optional.

*Summary.* The way in which professional development was provided to teachers had a notable influence on my classroom practice. During the first era professional development was not part of the school day, nor was it conveniently located. During the second and third eras, professional development was scheduled both as a part of the school day and as after school inservice meetings. Additionally, many inservice opportunities were conveniently available. The ease and availability of professional development helped me to increase my teacher capacity.

**Collaboration.** Collaboration is another theme that had tremendous variation throughout the eras. Guiding questions for this section included “What was the focus of collaboration?” “Was collaboration monitored?” and “What action was required due to collaboration?”

*Focus of collaboration.* This section describes the focus of collaboration in each era. Collaboration was a term that I did not hear often in education until the second and third eras.

*First era.* In the first era collaboration was very limited. No formal collaboration was organized so there was not a particular focus. It was more of a congenial atmosphere of friendship within a building than an actual collaboration or mentoring situation. I felt like if one teacher had a great idea for a project that I could not use that idea because that would be stealing



her idea. So I really did not go to other teachers for instructional ideas. In the first era teachers were congenial but collaborated professionally about very little.

*Second era.* During the second era the role of collaboration had changed a great deal. Unlike the first era, we had weekly team meetings and monthly instructional improvement team meetings, which included the literacy coordinator, numeracy coordinator, administration, and a grade level leader from each grade level. The team meetings were in the format of a PLC in its infancy and progressed toward data and intervention discussions. Even though the principal and leadership team steered discussion to student data and I routinely used informal on-going assessments to guide work with individual students, I had not caught the vision of using the data to drive instruction across a grade level. Much of the discussion continued to be centered on balanced literacy and its implementation. Teachers openly shared ideas on integrating curriculum and books they discovered to support various curricular subjects or instruction in literacy elements. The district leadership had monthly meetings with the numeracy and literacy coordinators from each school. I now felt that I had many avenues of support as I endeavored to teach my students to read.

During the second era, I was also assigned a mentor on my grade level as I started back into teaching. In addition, there were two other teachers on the grade level that came to my room nearly every day after school to see if I needed anything and to share ideas. I was surprised to realize that the sharing of ideas was open and friendly.

*Third era.* During the third era I experienced the most organized collaboration of any era. In addition to regular PLC and team meetings, the teachers on the grade level worked together to provide similar opportunities in each class on the grade level. Interventions, methods of implementation and assessment, creative unit ideas, grade level and personal supplies, and ways

to integrate various subjects were freely shared in a two-way fashion. Grade level collaboration was deeply entrenched in the school system in general.

At first the PLC was a time when teachers reported scores and the planned interventions to the school leadership team, with very little time left for discussion. Later, this information was provided to the administration by computer with occasional visits from someone on the school leadership team. Teachers collaborated on learning essentials and developing common assessments. Assessment results were reported to the school and the school district.

In order to facilitate the PLC meetings, specialty schedules such as art, music, PE, etc., were coordinated to accommodate grade levels meeting during school hours. Later, with the support of the administration, many grade levels worked out interventions across the grade level rather than class-level interventions. The weekly PLC meetings were moved to after school on an early-out day, which had been a team planning and preparation time for teachers. Team planning was moved to after school and teachers moved their preparation time.

*Summary.* Collaboration differed in each era. During the first era I experienced very little professional collaboration. In the second era, collaboration increased as teachers met to share ideas. Some discussion of student data took place, but it was not the focus of the meetings. In the third era, PLCs were more established, and student data, learning essentials, and common assessments were discussed regularly.

***Oversight and impact.*** This section addresses the amount and kind of oversight provided in each era.

*First era.* In the first era collaboration was an unusual event for me. If I had a mentor I did not know it. Although the faculty was friendly, I felt very removed from any teaching support. I did not experience any collaboration that affected my classroom instruction.

*Second era.* In the second era team meetings were held weekly but were not monitored at all until we switched to a PLC format. Then the literacy coordinator, special education coordinator, and occasionally the principal would visit the team meetings and discuss student data. Later, the visits were replaced with common spreadsheets for reporting scores in a way that school-wide personnel could access the data in one location. Interventions were reported for students who performed below grade level.

*Third era.* In the third era the common data sheets continued to be used for reporting common assessment data. In addition, PLC/team-meeting notes were sent every other week to the principal. Interventions and common assessments were typical topics of the team meetings.

The third era also had greater collaboration than the second era, and this collaboration was mandated and monitored. Some grade levels worked so closely together that they taught the same curriculum practically at the same time. Teachers also shared project ideas so that student displays were coordinated by grade levels. Some teams worked out grade-level intervention times and shared the responsibility for students across the grade level. In addition, student data was freely discussed. Common assessments were developed so that teachers had the same essential learning goals. In my experience, this was the most collaborative era. I collaborated with my team nearly daily on curriculum and weekly about student data. We coordinated grade-level projects and purchasing supplies. Collaboration was a continual two-way process and my instruction was influenced by collaboration.

**Summary.** Collaboration in the first era was nonexistent. In the second era collaboration focused more on curricular matters and team concerns than actual student data. The school leadership team guided the teams toward looking at data, but it took time for teachers to transition from reporting data as a top-down instruction to actually using the data to provide

appropriate instruction. In the second era my instruction was enriched by collaboration with my grade-level team. In the third era, teachers were accustomed to discussing student data and considering ideas for interventions. My instruction was enhanced almost daily by the collaboration with my grade-level team and the weekly discussion of student data.

### **Summary of Themes and Questions**

The seven themes that I identified across three eras were embedded beliefs about student achievement, mechanism driving instruction, instructional approach, reading program characteristics, assessment, professional development, and collaboration. As I reflected upon my teaching experience over the years, I found that these areas greatly influenced my teaching and beliefs about student learning regardless of era. Each has played a profound part in my development as an educator. Through the experience that I have gained in these areas, I am better prepared to navigate future changes in beginning reading instruction in a way that I feel will be of the most benefit to my students.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss what I have learned, share implications for practice, and present final conclusions from studying my experience as a beginning reading instructor over three eras. Suggestions for further research will complete this study.

#### Identified Themes

I feel fortunate to have three eras of teaching experience to draw upon as I continue to teach beginning reading to my students. Having this perspective of teaching and experience allows me to reflect on and pull the best and most effective practices from each era to enhance the reading program I am mandated to use.

**Beliefs about student achievement.** I did not realize at first that I had transformed my beliefs about student achievement. I thought I always believed that all students could be successful readers. In reflecting on my practice, I realize that I am still in the process of deciding on this issue. In my first era of teaching, although I thought I believed all children could learn to read, my practice shouted that only children who were smart enough would learn to read. I did not have systems in place to address struggling students and thought that if a student did not learn to read it was a deficit on the child's part. During the second era I still thought I believed that all children could learn to read, and my practice demonstrated that most children could learn to read on grade level but some would always be a little behind. In the third era when NCLB demanded that I teach every child to read, my philosophy that every child can learn to read was challenged. I had to face the fact that I have not always taught every child to read on grade level. I had to deal with the contradiction in my mind when the NCLB Act demanded that every child must meet or exceed state standards. I realized that in practice, although I believed that nearly all

students could learn to read on grade level, some students needed more help than I could give to any one child. I am still in the midst of this struggle in practice. I want to believe that every child can learn to read. In striving toward this goal, I will continue to look for ways to improve my instruction to narrow the incongruence between my desired belief and my practice.

**Mechanism driving instruction.** Reflecting on my experience through the three eras in regard to what drove my instruction was enlightening to me. I thought I might be a lemming that always followed what the school asked me to do. That was until the third era, when I was mandated to return to a commercial reading program. I was fully aware that I was not a lemming and that I was conflicted about the mandate to teach the commercial reading program with fidelity. In the second era I had learned to tie my instruction to the state core curriculum, which supported the elements of balanced literacy. I had also learned to diagnose student needs and reading levels so that I could provide appropriate and targeted interventions to move student learning forward. I had learned to connect the curriculum to the school culture and traditions in order to make it relevant in students' lives. The new reading program was not organized around the lives of my students so the topics were presented without concern for the degree of relevance to the students. In order to make the material as engaging as possible, I looked for ways to make the assigned weekly topics as relevant as possible. Using what I learned in the second era helped me navigate using the new program to teach beginning reading. I needed to look at individual needs, concentrate on designing a curriculum that would scaffold learning, and then connect learning to the reading program. The program used in the third era had a strong bottom-up theoretical approach, but it moved too quickly for some of my students. As a professional teacher, it was my responsibility to step back, look at the overall child, and draw from all my

knowledge and resources to help each child be successful. I could not allow a commercial reading program to drive instruction and allow my struggling students to flounder.

**Instructional approach.** In my experience I have used bottom-up theoretical models of reading instruction with the commercial reading programs. I have also used a balanced literacy approach to reading instruction. Balanced literacy has resonated with me as I have worked with children. The interactive features of balanced literacy have helped my students' literacy development. I frequently saw children read words that were beyond their ability to decode when they combined context with their decoding skills to make sense of what they were reading. I have taught my students to use their resources to solve problems. I expect students to be able to draw on multiple skills, whether bottom-up or top-down skills, to make sense of the text. I have learned from working with my students that there are many factors that help readers understand texts.

**Reading program characteristics.** I have gained insights into reading programs through this study. In reflecting on the reading program in the first era I realized that the program had limitations and that when I followed a program precisely I limited my students' progress.

During the second era I learned about individual student achievement and how to design curriculum. This knowledge helped me to move more students forward in their reading achievement. Some of the important skills that I discovered during the second era were being able to connect reading to the students' everyday lives; integrating curriculum so that all subjects were tied together and learned simultaneously; having access to appropriately leveled texts so every child could read successfully every day; and using flexible grouping. These parts of reading instruction were important to me and I wanted to take them with me to any reading program that I was required to use.

In looking at the reading program in the third era, I felt that one of its strengths was to provide small-group materials on three levels, plus ELL materials. Although this did not meet the needs of all students, it provided core instruction that was appropriate for most students. This was the first reading program I used that actually provided small-group materials on a variety of levels. In using previous commercial reading programs, the struggling students advanced at a slower pace on the same materials. I am hopeful that the trend to provide small-group materials on a variety of levels will continue.

One of the critical practices that I used in the third era was not actually part of the reading program, but an idea I learned at an in-service in the second era. I had heard that we want the most challenged students to have the most qualified teacher, which was meant to point out that struggling students were frequently taught by the teacher's aide. So the idea was to bring the most qualified teacher to the struggling students. I implemented this approach by having the instructional aide work through the class morning routine in a whole class approach while I worked with struggling students. Another practice that I wanted to continue from this era was using small snatches of time to provide interventions to students on a variety of goals—reading, writing, math, etc.

**Assessment.** In reflecting on my experience using assessment in the first era, I am amazed that the assessment that drove my instruction was so arbitrary. It also gave me very limited data. So I am thrilled to have so many assessments currently available. My desire is to have a series of assessments that are quick, reliable, and fair to the children that will show growth on a regular basis. This kind of assessment would be feasible and inform my instruction. The battery of DIBELS assessments has met this need in some instances. However, the fluency



component often cuts off the assessment before mastery can be assessed, so I find it necessary to use mastery tests in addition to fluency assessments with children who struggle in this area.

I was surprised to see the affect of having online assessments. At first I was a proponent for computer testing because I was sure that the online assessment would save me time grading and entering scores. It would also give me a printout of how each child did on the assessment. What I didn't realize was that the district literacy leadership would also have easy access to my class scores. This aspect ended up affecting my classroom instruction in a way with which I am uncomfortable. I will be more thoughtful about online options in the future.

My hope is that I can find a way to have a voice in the assessment choice. For example, my district frequently asks for feedback on new district assessments the first year that they are implemented. This gives teachers a chance to try the assessments with their students and give valuable feedback about the content and feasibility. I need to be part of this process.

**Professional development.** When I first began teaching I did not even know that there was a possibility of faculty in-services. I started with that lean beginning in professional development, and now our school has regularly scheduled in-service meetings during most months. In-house in-services are very convenient for teachers and an easy method of including the entire faculty.

In-service is usually attached to the adoption of a new reading program. I have experienced four reading adoptions. The district literacy leadership provided introductory in-service training on two of these adoptions. The school had minimal follow-up in-service training during the first year. After that, the only follow-up in-service training was on how to use the online computer testing that was added to the program of the most recent adoption. The adoption that had the most influence in my thinking was the one that had continuous school and

district in-service support for more than five years. I evaluated reading programs by how they fit into the framework I studied in the second era. Reflecting on these reading adoptions, it is apparent that the extended in-service on a reading program had a long-term effect and teacher buy-in from me.

Additionally, another way that I could move professional development in a direction that would help me meet student needs is to have open discussions with my building administrator and be proactive in suggesting topics that would move me in the direction I want to grow. In my experience, my building administrators have been very open to input on how to improve student learning.

**Collaboration.** I have learned that developing a good collaborative environment takes time but is worth the effort. Since I changed schools during the second era, I was part of two different schools' efforts to transform weekly team meetings from meetings where housekeeping items (coordinating schedules, arranging duties) and curricular ideas were discussed to meetings where student data, student growth, and interventions were discussed. After observing these transitions, I learned that I needed to be patient as the administration guided our focus and as we, team members, slowly changed the way we approached our PLC meetings. Discussing student data benefited my students and provided a forum to discuss instructional techniques that were found effective by teachers on the team. Although it took time to fully implement, learning to work together as a PLC has benefited my students and me.

In the first and second eras, parental support was relied upon as playing a part in a child's reading success. Although I worked in a location where parental support for education was at a high level, the beginning reading instruction provided in my class needed to be strong enough to move a child to read on grade level without relying on support from home.

## Reflection on Identified Themes

I originally thought that I experienced the most growth in the second era, but that is true only from the perspective of professional development. In the first era, I made the transition from working with educational theory at a university to educational practice in the classroom. For the first time I worked with real children and I felt completely responsible for them. I planned the classroom environment, the management system, the curriculum, the class schedule, the materials, and myriad other preparations that any new teacher encounters in her first classroom. I would be remiss in saying that I had more growth in the second era. In the first era I experienced continuous growth as a new classroom teacher. However, this paper concentrates on the aspects of teaching that have changed over my years of experience and that influence beginning reading instruction. In that respect, the first era provided a starting place for future changes to be placed alongside for reflection.

In the second era, I had tremendous professional growth. The continual in-services with follow-up observations forced me to learn interactive methods for delivering reading instruction. I really did not like getting observed, but preparing for observations raised my level of concern enough that I pursued improving my practice. The reflective debriefings after the observations facilitated goal setting to target areas for growth. A factor that was influential in my growth in the second era was the longevity of the in-service focus on balanced literacy elements, by far the longest of any professional development I experienced.

I also received professional development in the use of diagnostic assessments during the second era, which helped me to be more aware of skills that supported students in becoming good readers. The assessments included proficiency levels that I used to consistently determine where students were in their reading achievement. The diagnostic nature of the assessments

helped me plan instruction for my students that would be in their zone of proximal development, so as to move them forward to greater reading success. I have concluded that diagnostic assessment is very helpful in guiding students to reading success.

While the second era was the most influential in developing my philosophy about beginning reading instruction, each era made contributions that have added to my understanding of teaching reading as I considered the themes that have surfaced in the study. One of the major contributions of the third era is the contrast with previous eras that caused me to reflect on my experience and philosophies.

**Summary of eras.** As I looked at the overall picture of the three eras, I made myself a snapshot of understanding of my experience in teaching beginning reading in each era. The next three paragraphs are my snapshots.

**First era.** In the first era I had lots of teacher autonomy. I had the basal reading program to use as a guide, but I pretty much had freedom to do whatever I wanted. There were not a lot of mechanisms in place that formally held me accountable to anyone. I determined if the students were on grade level and if I was competent. The only external evaluations of my competence were the principal evaluation, which did not address reading instruction, and the state end-of-level assessment. I assumed that if there were significant differences in my test scores in comparison to the other teachers' test scores that someone would have talked to me, but I was never informed of my classes' test results. Professional development and on-going support in professional growth were extremely limited.

**Second era.** When I think of the second era, I see myself attending teacher in-service meetings to increase my professionalism. It is a stark contrast with the sparse professional development opportunities of the first era. I also picture myself working with students in small

groups or one-on-one with a student, using materials that I had put together on various students' reading levels, and using the balanced literacy framework. Student growth was celebrated! I was working on an ESL endorsement at this time so I had the added support of learning to meet diverse student needs. Assessment was used to locate a comfortable place for students to begin and then I moved them forward in their literacy skills. The school community worked together to provide a nurturing environment for students and teachers. Parents partnered with the school to promote reading success. I actually participated in team meetings for the first time. This was a time to celebrate teacher and student growth!

**Third era.** In the third era, my picture changed. The focus in reading was to implement the new commercial reading program. This was a difficult transition for me because I valued the balanced literacy framework and personal responsiveness of the second era. I was accustomed to creating my own curriculum map that aligned with the state core curriculum, scope and sequence charts, and the interests and culture of our community. All of a sudden my reading curriculum was already set up for me and I was required to teach a curriculum that was only partially aligned with the state core curriculum. Furthermore, any alignment of the curriculum to student interests and the local culture was by happenstance.

The part of the picture that was most challenging to me was preparing first grade students to take a weekly online assessment. I had three issues with this weekly assessment. First, not all the questions aligned with our state core curriculum. Second, I was compelled to match my instruction to the weekly assessment whether or not I felt it was in the best interest of my students. And finally, it is not developmentally appropriate to ask a six-year-old to type fully formed sentences on a keyboard that they have not been taught to use. The upside is that the website provided quick scoring of the assessment and made beautiful charts. The downside for

me was that now the district could see how my students performed every week. It made me uncomfortable to have my weekly class assessment results viewed so easily by others.

### **Implications of the Reading Programs Within Themes**

In the study of my experience, I strove to answer the question, “How do I, as a classroom teacher, juggle the demands of current practice mandates with my own beliefs about literacy instruction?” As a teacher, I need to reposition myself and reconsider how the child leads me. I cannot let reading programs, instructional approaches, or assessment distract me from my most important job: teaching children to read.

Along the same lines is the responsibility to help teachers, district personnel, and policy makers to realize that they have the possibility of changing the instructional climate in the classroom. Whenever policy change is considered, it needs to be considered that it will affect real humans—in my current circumstances, real six-year-old students. The following is a discussion on the themes and possible implications in my study.

**Beliefs about student achievement.** I have discovered that the reading programs I have experienced each were built on a belief about student achievement. This means that as I encounter various reading programs it is important to identify the assumptions about student achievement. For example, the reading program I used in the third era assumes that all children fit into one of three reading levels and are able to progress at the rate predetermined by the publisher. Since I know that not all of my students will fit into one of these categories of readers, then I must plan to supplement the program to meet the needs of all learners.

**Mechanism driving instruction.** The reading program that was supported or mandated by my district had a notable influence on my classroom instruction. For example, in considering the new commercial reading program used in my third era, in addition to supportive instructional

materials, the program had a plethora of assessment options included. Although these options could be viewed as supportive of individual instruction, I found the opposite to be true. I found that the ease with which the district leadership could monitor classroom instruction through weekly computer assessments made teaching the concepts on the test more important to me than following my preferred curriculum map, which had room to respond to individual needs. I have found that staying true to what I believe is often difficult, and monitoring my curriculum through district required and reported assessments often places me in vulnerable and conflicted circumstances. Also, if teachers and schools are held accountable for student achievement then they should have a voice in how the required curriculum is delivered.

One of the characteristics that was enticing to me as I considered which reading program would be a good adoption for our school district was the abundance of literature on various reading levels in the selected program. Although I did not see the need to adopt a new reading program, I thought that having access to such a great resource would be helpful to me and to the teachers at our school. There were also wonderful basal readers that provided practice on phonics and high frequency words. There were colorful alphabet cards, letter cards for making words, photo cards for phonemic awareness, and many other helpful instructional tools. Most of the program was available online. As a teacher, I was constantly looking for appropriate, leveled materials to support my students' literacy development. At first, the district offered the reading program as a resource. However, after the school board invested in the program, the district mandated that the program be used with fidelity in every elementary classroom. The district oversight through weekly and unit assessments that were immediately reported to district offices was an unforeseen result of the reading adoption. I had never experienced this kind of oversight

before and could not have predicted the effect of weekly, district-wide assessment on my instruction.

I think that most teachers are in the position of already using a reading program that has been provided by their school district. If teachers look at the reading program, their own implementation of the program, and the school district expectations of the program, then the driving mechanism of the program could become apparent. Looking at the program from this perspective might help teachers to realize possible trickle-down effects on their students. This was particularly true for me as it became apparent that the district leaders believed that absolute fidelity to the program was the best way to support literacy development rather than teacher-informed decision-making.

**Instructional approach.** The reading program that I was provided in the third era used explicit instruction. The explicit instruction approach was a bottom-up theoretical model mingled with balanced literacy. It was a stark contrast to the previous era of balanced literacy and diagnostic assessment that used a balanced, interactive model for teaching reading. As a professional educator, I brought a depth of knowledge and experience to the implementation of the new reading program. This richness of experience was helpful in transitioning and supplementing the new reading program. The process of learning how to use the elements of balanced literacy in concert with a new program to my students' advantage is a continuous learning experience. I wonder how teachers manage when they do not have that foundation and must take the program at face value.

**Reading program characteristics.** The commercial reading program that the school district mandated to be used in my third era of experience considered a large number of criteria in designing the curriculum. The program had great depth and included many support materials.



This was my second commercial reading program adoption experience. With both of the commercial reading programs, the teacher manuals and supporting materials were overwhelming. As a teacher, my experience suggests that, regardless of the reading program adopted, I need to be able to evaluate the program, check for the underlying assumptions, and choose the best that the program has to offer in implementing instruction for my students. I need to remember that a reading program is a tool to teach reading to students and that teacher efforts should focus on the child developing skills as reader rather than be distracted by the program's assessment tools. I feel that teacher education and experience should have authority over a prescribed reading program in guiding the curriculum. The teacher's ability, in concert with teachers, leaders, and parents, to orchestrate the many resources available to deliver instruction to her students, should be valued.

**Assessment.** When I first started teaching, assessment was a small part of my decision-making process. In the third era I allowed the weekly or unit assessment to become the controlling factor in decision-making regarding beginning reading instruction. Reading assessment is a tool to help teachers serve their students' needs. It is also a tool for administrators to monitor student achievement. In my district and state, reading assessment has experienced radical changes recently and will continue to change. I need to recognize which kinds of assessments help me understand my students' strengths and weaknesses so that I can be responsive to student needs. I have sacrificed instructional time in order to meet the assessment expectations of the state, district, school, and myself. I need to be able to narrow assessments to those which provide essential data and be a strong voice for limiting or consolidating assessment. I truly believe in diagnostic assessment as a tool to guide instruction. However, I also know that instructional time is valuable and that it needs to be protected. In addition, I need to recognize

that administrators in this era need to know how students are doing throughout the year so that there are not any surprises when the end-of-year testing takes place. In order to preserve instructional time and keep assessments to a minimum, I need to narrow assessments to those that help me understand the child and those that inform stakeholders.

**Professional development.** Professional development has helped me to improve my classroom instruction. I became a better teacher when I had teacher in-services that helped me understand and implement the elements of balanced literacy instruction. I appreciated the in-service instruction that increased my understanding of my students' needs and helped me measure their progress. I also applied the knowledge I gained from the in-services on literacy elements that were presenting in the second era.

On the other hand, the observations in the third era made by the district when they came to see evidence of the new reading program being used at our school were not particularly helpful to me as a classroom teacher. I think that the walk-through observations must have been something that was viewed as important to those with oversight. I did not receive any feedback to help me in my instruction. It appeared that the observations were more to check for evidence of implementing the commercial reading program than to improve my practice.

In my experience, teachers can have a say in the kind of professional development that is provided at their school. It would be in the best interest of my students if I were more vocal about the kinds of in-service that help me move students forward in their literacy development.

**Collaboration.** The changes in collaboration that have occurred over the three eras are impressive. When we put the most knowledgeable minds together to solve instructional issues regarding student achievement, then we can expect that students will make gains. As I have grown in my conception of collaboration from a congenial conversation after school to a meeting

focused on students' needs and how to provide for those needs, it is clear that working with others made me a stronger teacher. I attribute any success to the many people who have helped me improve. I also feel that there is great benefit to students as I work with other teachers as a professional learning community to target essential student learning and respond quickly to student needs. Unlike the first era, where I sometimes thought, "Oh, that poor child just didn't get it," in the third era I now say, "Hmmm. My instructional approach was not effective with that child. What interventions could I use to scaffold the child's learning?" This was a giant step forward for me.

## **Conclusions**

Although the study of literacy reform over various time periods is extremely complex, learning from past reform efforts can be an avenue to improve future beginning reading instruction. Self-study provided a framework to introspectively analyze the influences on my beginning reading instruction practice over time. This methodology added depth and trustworthiness to the experiences that molded my philosophy in beginning reading instruction. The time that I spent reflecting on my experience and considering the artifacts from the various eras has helped me understand how I have become the teacher that I am now.

The question that I set out to answer in this study is "How did the district-mandated curriculum in each era shape me as a literacy teacher and my literacy instruction in my school context?" As I reflected on my experience through the three eras, it became clear that the era that had the most profound influence in shaping me as a literacy teacher was the second era. There were many factors that worked together to create a climate of teacher development that was focused on understanding student literacy development needs. The longevity of the in-service support for balanced literacy, the addition of diagnostic assessments to guide my instruction, the

freedom to integrate curriculum, the teacher observations that focused on building teacher capacity, and teacher collaboration all had an influence in shaping my literacy teaching.

The experiences before and after the second era were powerful in shaping my beliefs about reading instruction. My experience in the first era helped me to appreciate the teacher development provided in the second era. The change in the mandated reading program in the third era contrasted strongly with my experience in the second era, which solidified my personal philosophy of reading instruction. As I reflected on these three eras of experience I realized that all three eras have been influential in my understandings about reading instruction.

The first part of the title to my study is “Navigating the changing face of beginning reading instruction.” Judging from past experience, my district will continually strive to improve beginning reading instruction, so I will continue to encounter changes in instructional approaches. So far every approach to beginning reading instruction has had both positive and negative aspects. My ability to capitalize on the strengths and supplement the weak areas will hopefully make a difference to my students’ achievement. My experience and expertise in beginning reading instruction will help me recognize the pearls and prepare me to supplement weaker areas. I worry about the teachers who do not have this kind of experience on which to draw. I think my best preparation for future change is to continue to be a student of beginning reading instruction.

The second part of the title to my study asks, “Am I right back where I started?” This question is what came to my mind as I embarked on the third era with a commercial reading program. I have found through my study that although I have returned to using a commercial reading program to direct my beginning reading instruction, I am not right back where I started. I now have experience and expertise that I bring to the table. I have knowledge of the elements of

balanced literacy and how to implement them. I have practical application in using diagnostic assessments to guide my beginning readers. I have a professional learning community to support my efforts to meet student needs. I have many professional development options available to me. I have learned critical thinking in regards to what drives my instruction and the embedded beliefs in a reading program. I have built awareness of my own practice and belief system and the contradictions within them. Armed with these tools I can better navigate the changing face of beginning reading instruction.

### **Future Research**

Through the use of self-study of practice, I have come to understand my own literacy practices. The systematic, analytic reflection on my experience helped to surface the contradictions between my beliefs and my practice. This experience has made me aware of areas where I can grow and develop as an educator. Another benefit is that I have increased my ability to communicate my learning. Hopefully, the study of my experience will resonate with other teachers who find themselves in similar circumstances.

Developing an understanding of the authority of experience in teaching is an area that can benefit the field of beginning reading instruction specifically and the field of education in general. It would be insightful for educational researchers and policy makers if more teacher voices shared their experience concerning themes in this study or those that have been influential in their practice.

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## Appendix A: Framework-for-Analysis of personal practice and research

I used the Framework-for-Analysis for personal practice and research introduced in Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009).

<b>Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What is the purpose that you identify for your study?</li> </ul>	<p>What can I learn from studying my practice as an elementary literacy educator to help me navigate future changes in the educational environment? How can I prepare to contribute to the field of education in general and the study of literacy instruction in particular as an elementary teacher? When is my knowledge and experience “enough” to have a voice? I want to identify the influences that shaped my practice and beliefs, recognize how I responded to changes in literacy approaches, and come up with questions that could guide my practice as change continues to be the norm. How can I be ready to navigate future trends in literacy education in a way that does not conflict with my educational philosophy? What is my philosophy towards literacy instruction? What contributed to the development of my philosophy? How has the educational environment changed to challenge my philosophy?</p>
<b>Definition of self study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What definition of self-study do you use in the work you undertake?</li> <li>•Where is the self situated in this study?</li> </ul>	<p>I will be using the definition of self-study as put forth by Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009. The self in this study would be situated in my past experience as a literacy educator laid against the backdrop of the literacy field in general in order to surface influences brought to weight in developing and conflicting with my philosophy of literacy education.</p>
<b>Definition of self study methodology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•When describing your methodology, how is it apparent that you are engaged in self-study?</li> <li>•How do you describe your methodology?</li> </ul>	<p>The questions that I raise in the study make it apparent that I will need to include a form of self-study as a method of study. The need to learn from my past experience requires the study of self.</p> <p>My methodology will be a combination of self-study and life history methods. The life history aspect will lay the background of the education field in general, while the self-study will make transparent my experience within the educational field.</p>
<b>Rigorous research practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What data collection and data analysis tools do you use?</li> <li>•How are the aspects of your methodology described?</li> <li>•How do you make apparent your thoughtful research practice?</li> <li>•As part of making a study rigorous comes in the context you select to study, in what way or ways does the context support the rigor of the study?</li> </ul>	<p>Data Collection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recollections: written reflections</li> <li>• responses to specific questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What was my practice in each era?</li> <li>What changes did I observe?</li> <li>What contradictions did I feel between my practice and my beliefs?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• forms for reporting student progress</li> <li>• listing of in-services and courses attended</li> <li>• journal entries</li> </ul> <p>Data Analysis: I will identify themes in my data and look for changes over time.</p> <p>The context of my lived experience during multiple shifts in literacy instruction will add rigor to the study.</p>
<b>Explicit evidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•In what ways do you connect</li> </ul>	<p>I anticipate that my data will lead to claims that will add</p>

	<p>the data collected with the assertions made in your study?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•For example, if you said that you interviewed people, how do you display the data collected?</li> <li>•Will the evidence you collect allow for the insights you claim?</li> </ul>	insight to the understanding of a practitioner within an educational environment.
<b>Authority of experience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•How do you situate the authority of your own experience in the study?</li> <li>•How do you situate yourself in the study so that the readers (when you are ready to present your work) will accept your work as trustworthy?</li> </ul>	The authority of my experience will be the authentic expression of the processes employed to improve teaching in various educational climates. The authority will be augmented by artifacts that add to the overall context. Ultimately, the decision to deem the work trustworthy will lie with the reader.
<b>Story of self</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•In what ways is the self portrayed in the study?</li> <li>•Where is the self in relation to others?</li> <li>•How is the self evident?</li> </ul>	The story of self is evident in the reflection on my practice and philosophy and the contradictions found within them. The story of self in relation to others will be evident in comparison to the field in general.
<b>Situate in larger literature</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Within what research literature do you situate your work?</li> <li>•How do you bring depth to your understandings of your field of focus?</li> </ul>	I would ground this study in the research on balanced literacy with a comparison/contrast to scientifically-based research on explicit and systematic assessment-driven instruction. I would also need to discuss the political influences that support the various instructional approaches.
<b>Questions raised in/by study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•In this category you ask yourself questions that arise as you review your own work and/or engage in your study.</li> </ul>	

Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research: Theory, methodology, and practice* (p. 42). London: Springer.

## Appendix B: Framework-for-Inquiry planner

I used the Framework-for-Inquiry planner introduced in Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009).

<p><b>What am I interested in exploring?</b> What do I identify as problems in my practice, where my actions do not seem to match my values (living contradictions)? What issues do I want to further understand? What do I want to learn about these interests, issues, and concerns?</p> <p><i>The reason that I embarked on this study is to gain understanding of why, after intense training and education, I was being asked to plan my literacy curriculum in a way that I had done several decades ago. It made me wonder if all the effort that I have been putting out to improve my teaching has been a waste, or, if I had persisted in planning in the same fashion as I originally done in the 1970s would I have been saved a lot of bother. Do my students benefit from my attempts to improve my teaching and planning? How do I, as a teacher, follow the mandate of the school district and still stay true to my conception of what is best for children?</i></p>
<p><b>How could I explore these concerns and issues?</b> What contexts might be most fitting? Who are the most appropriate participants – me? My students?</p> <p><i>I work in an elementary school, K-6, where I teach first grade. Since I am working in the school district where this change in direction has taken place, it is a good place to continue my study. The key participant will be me. I need to examine not only how I came to this place, but also my underlying belief about how a person should respond in a contradiction. To compare and contrast my experience against the experience of others, I will need to interview teachers and literacy coordinators from past years, and, review the literature in the field. I'm not sure if interviewing former students would be helpful.</i></p>
<p><b>What methods might I use?</b> What could count as evidence?</p> <p><i>I will need to document my recollections of many past experiences. I have various forms for reporting student progress from my classes for the second and third eras. These reflect what was important enough to track and report.</i></p> <p><i>I also have a list of trainings that I attended from the second era. The third era could be reconstructed to the best of my ability.</i></p> <p><i>I can document the reading programs used in my district. I have been unable to document the program I used in the first era. I contacted the principal but she didn't know.</i></p> <p><i>I can interview the former literacy coordinators and teacher specialists in our district. (The district officially did away with literacy coordinators.)</i></p> <p><i>I can interview former teachers in my school district.</i></p> <p><i>I have limited journal entries.</i></p> <p><i>This will be a self-study with possibly narrative history influence.</i></p>
<p><b>What work in teacher education research (or other research fields) will guide my inquiry?</b> What beliefs are embedded in my questions? What values do I embody in my practice and research? How will I hold myself accountable? What do I expect to contribute to the knowledge base?</p> <p><i>I would primarily draw on the work of balanced literacy with CELL/ExLL. This is the training that I received almost immediately upon returning to teaching. I will also draw on the literature and my experience related to the NRP report 2000 and NCLB.</i></p> <p><i>This study will contribute to my understanding of how I established what I value in teaching and what I see as healthy practices in teaching and what I can contribute that will help children excel academically and socially. I hope other teachers will find this study helpful in their pursuit of understanding of teaching.</i></p>

Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research: Theory, methodology, and practice* (p. 39). London: Dordrecht.

## Appendix C: Secondary Data Sources

Table C1: *Secondary Data Sources – Individual reporting forms*

Grade Level	Quantity	Description	School Year	Developed by
First, second, third, sixth	6	Progress Report form	1997–2009	Grade level team or teacher
Second	1	Receptive/Productive Assessment form	2000	Unknown
Kindergarten, third	2	Standards Report form	2004, 2010	District
Kindergarten, third	3	Elementary Standards Report form	2009–2011	District

Table C2: *Secondary Data Sources – Class reporting forms*

Grade Level	Quantity	Description	School Year
First–second	2	Listings of Reading Skills	1997–2001
Sixth	1	Pre- and Post-Test Reading Composite form	2002–2003
Second	1	DRA Reporting Form (fall, winter, spring)	2003–2004
Second	1	Literacy Transition form	2003–2004

## Appendix D: Table of Eras and Themes

This is a copy of a chart that I used to organize my thoughts on the various eras.

	1978	1997	2009
<i>Curriculum Development Teacher's role</i>	all provided - Outline		11-2-2009
<i>Reading Program</i>	Basal reading program	Transitioning from basal reading program to CELL/XLL while adopting a reading program (Harcourt Brace Signatures)	Implementation of the new reading program adoption as district control is increased.
<i>Driving Instruction</i>	Teacher used basal to drive instruction. State core was not a topic of discussion	State core was becoming more prominent in educational discussions	State CORE and the reading program drive instruction
<i>Assessment</i>	State CORE test was administered but only worried about when it was administered.	State CORE test was administered but results were not a huge concern. My principal would say, "I know that you as teachers know what is best for children. You know better than the test what they need." Scores were more of a concern, but not driving instruction.	State CORE tests are a regular part of teacher discussion throughout the year. Scores are part of "high stakes testing." Scores are used to identify students and/or groups who need additional support. The federal government has requirements for "low-performing" schools. <i>How is this one?</i>
<i>Materials</i>	Teaching materials were provided and organized within the basal and teachers' manual. I knew I needed more but didn't know how to build a system to meet the needs of students who were not as successful in class. The approach was that there was something wrong with the child - send him/her to special ed.	Teaching techniques were emphasized but teachers and schools were responsible to come up with the materials. The methods were highly reliant on teacher knowledge and ingenuity to create a program. Had to give up "dinosaur" units. Teachers formed reading groups to teach to the students' level.	Teacher techniques are written into curriculum. The mandated reading program is systematic and spiraling. Materials are provided on three levels - approaching, on level, and beyond level. Materials are helpful but still need more specific intervention materials.
<i>Collaboration</i>	Teachers are highly isolated. I remember thinking that I shouldn't use another teacher's ideas because that would be "stealing" their ideas. We never had a joint class activity. We never had grade level meetings of any kind.	As I returned to the field of teaching, I was fortunate to have a couple teachers who really helped me through my first year. One was a veteran teacher who had taught the grade level for many years. The other was a new graduate and fresh into teaching. We really helped each other out. Our grade level met once a week for grade level planning.	When I returned to the classroom this time, teachers were encouraged and expected to work together. We have a weekly team planning meeting and a weekly PLC meeting. At the PLC meeting, teachers are expected to go over student data and plan together how to meet the needs of their students as a group.
<i>Professional Development</i>	In-house professional development - none in two years. I took 1 class locally.	In-house professional development was continuous (built into school calendar) and included many teaching methods. Literacy coaches and peer coaching were gaining prominence.	In-house professional development is continuous (built into school calendar). Literacy inservices are primarily how to use the reading program and how to use the assessments.
<i>Student</i>	blame child or deficit in child		



# Appendix E: Conference Poster



**Am I right back where I started?**  
 My experience as a literacy educator in enacting and enforcing a policy shift that deskills teachers  
 DeAnna Perry • Masters of Arts Candidate • Department of Teacher Education • Brigham Young University  
 Mentored by Stefinee Pinegar



Themes of Analysis		1978	1997	2009	
<p><b>My Question:</b> What do I learn about the impact of policy shifts on my role as a school-based literacy educator when my school district adopts a basal reading program and dismantles a literacy program that privileged teacher knowledge and expertise?</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b> This study will bring to light the impact that literacy reform has had on classroom instruction and mentoring practices through the lens of a practicing teacher. This understanding will inform my practice in the future as reform continues to be the norm.</p> <p><b>Method:</b> This study is being conducted using a life history approach. This involves gathering information through guided conversations, exploring the context, collecting artifacts from life, and having ongoing reflexivity and responsiveness.</p>	<p><b>What does the reading program look like?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basal reading program</li> <li>• Students grouped into three groups by reading ability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition from a basal reading program to CELL/ELL approach</li> <li>• Students grouped by ability usually in more than three groups depending on needs of students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New reading program adoption with increased district control</li> <li>• Reading program provides materials for students on three levels</li> </ul>	<p>The projected completion date for this study is August 2010. The study offers readers an understanding of literacy reform from the perspective of a classroom practitioner, with the intent that classroom teachers will be more aware of the potential impact of policy on instructional practice.</p> <p align="center"><b>Observations</b></p> <p>At this point in the study there are many categories of literacy instruction that are noticeably changed over time, such as what drives instruction, the impact of State CORE testing, instructional approaches, amount of collaboration, the prevalence of in-house professional development, and beliefs about student achievement.</p> <p>A portion of literacy instruction is noticeably similar over time, such as the program provided. In 1978, I welcomed a basal reading program and didn't question its authority to drive instruction. I currently use a commercial reading program, which I am instructed to use with fidelity. How I consistently question the program's authority to drive instruction.</p>	
	<p><b>What drives instruction?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basal reading program used to drive instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on educating teachers on instructional strategies</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State CORE curriculum and the reading program drive instruction</li> </ul>
	<p><b>What is the impact of State CORE testing?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State CORE curriculum not a discussion among teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State CORE curriculum more prominent in discussion among teachers and administrators</li> <li>• State CORE test results not a high concern, didn't drive instruction</li> <li>• Instructional methods emphasized</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State CORE tests a common part of teacher discussion</li> <li>• Scores used to identify students and/or groups in need of additional support</li> <li>• Federal involvement</li> </ul>
	<p><b>What type of instructional approach?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching materials provided with basal reading program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers and schools provided and organized materials</li> <li>• Instructional methods highly reliant on teacher knowledge</li> <li>• New and veteran teachers share ideas</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional techniques are written into the reading program</li> <li>• Reading program is systematic and explicit</li> </ul>
	<p><b>What is the Role of Collaboration?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are highly isolated</li> <li>• Limited sharing of ideas</li> <li>• No joint class activities</li> <li>• No grade level meetings</li> <li>• Monthly faculty meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly grade level meetings</li> <li>• Monthly faculty inservice meetings</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration is expected</li> <li>• Weekly grade level PLC meetings focused on student data</li> <li>• Weekly grade level planning meetings</li> <li>• Monthly faculty meetings</li> <li>• Bimonthly faculty inservice meetings</li> </ul>
	<p><b>What guides Professional Development?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No in-house professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous in-house and district professional development</li> <li>• Focus on teacher methods</li> <li>• Literacy coaching and peer coaching methods employed</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-house and district professional development is reduced</li> <li>• Literacy inservices focus on use of the commercial reading program and testing preparation</li> <li>• Literacy coaching is reduced</li> </ul>
<p><b>What are my beliefs regarding student achievement?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very little in-class intervention</li> <li>• Student failure attributed as a deficit on the part of the child or environment</li> <li>• Struggling students sent to special ed. for reading instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grouping and attention to learning modalities seen as key to student success</li> <li>• Every child can learn, but may excel in an area other than academics</li> <li>• Struggling student sent to special ed. for reading instruction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All students can and must become literate</li> <li>• Classroom teacher directs a variety of resources to support struggling readers</li> <li>• Struggling students are often served in the classroom</li> <li>• A few students will be served by special ed. outside the classroom environment</li> </ul>		