Instructional Decision Making in Reading in the Content Areas

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Abstract

This study investigated instructional decisions of content area teachers in the intermediate level as reflected in their written lesson plans and actual classroom practice. It probed the teaching strategies used and the reasons teachers ascribed to strategy use. Belief themes were generated from teachers' responses obtained from two sets of contextualized interviews using written lesson plans and video vignettes of content area classes as contexts for interview discussions. Findings revealed that content area teachers' instructional decisions in lesson planning are influenced by certain beliefs, namely, belief in matching instruction with students' needs and experiences, belief in guiding students to master content, belief in building and sustaining interest, and belief in paving the way for self-expression. Additionally, two other beliefs influenced content area teachers' instructional decisions in the classroom, namely, a belief in guiding students to learn and a belief in promoting self-expression. The study noted that content area teachers prioritize student motivation and mastery of content in their teaching over the more important concerns of scaffolding students' comprehension.

Keywords: content area reading, teacher's beliefs, instructional decision making

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The need to provide elementary school children instruction in reading to learn has long been recognized. Along with this idea comes the strategic role teachers play in carrying out the task of merging reading instruction with content teaching. However, despite the amount of research documenting the benefits of content area reading, not all teachers welcome the idea of merging content reading with various subject matters.

Why do teachers teach the way they do? A great deal of research has been dedicated to answering this question. Findings point to various factors influencing teaching practices: social and cultural contexts, classroom realities, curriculum goals, nature of the discipline, preservice experiences, and personal biography (Bean, 1997; Bean & Zulich, 1992; Moje, 1993; Muth, 1993; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1993). These factors have been shown to mediate teachers' instructional decisions.

Furthermore, the construct of beliefs has been the topic of many studies that attempted to explain the nature of teachers' decision making and practices. Studies have accorded teacher beliefs as powerful factors that determine how new knowledge is constructed (Archer, 2000); how classroom decisions are made (Fickel, 1999), and how behavior is defined (Pajares, 1992).

Instructional decisions are reflected in lesson plans and in classroom practices. To understand these instructional decisions entails an understanding of the teacher's choices, and the rationales behind those choices — for they represent the beliefs the teacher holds.

Current literature reveals that knowledge of comprehension instruction done in the context of content teaching supports students' learning with texts (RAND Reading Study Group, 2000). Scaffolding instruction by means of instructing students on the strategies to use while learning with content area texts facilitates text comprehension (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). However, teacher beliefs and contextual factors mediate teachers' adoption and implementation of comprehension instruction in content classrooms.

In the Philippines, content area reading is not a new concept. Teachers in the Philippines know what reading in the content areas is. However, the benefits of content area reading are not fully realized in our educational system. Merging reading and writing with content learning still remains an idea, not a reality in our classrooms.

Hence, an inquiry into the whys of teachers' instructional decisions can clarify rationales for adopting certain teaching strategies. These rationales can reveal what they know and what they need to know about comprehension instruction, which is the core of content area reading.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored instructional decision making of content area teachers based on their choice of strategies and reasons they ascribed to strategy use. It determined how content area teachers make instructional decisions concerning what strategies to use, why, and how in the teaching of content. In the process, their beliefs were uncovered and analyzed in connection with practices eminent in their lesson plans and content area classrooms. Moreover, the study endeavored to ascertain what beliefs are truly reflected in the teachers' decision making in terms of lesson planning and classroom practice. And more importantly, the study investigated how teachers' overall beliefs influence their decisions to implement content area reading instruction.

Two questions were posed to examine teachers' instructional decision making in relation to how they view teaching and learning in the content areas:

1) How do teacher beliefs influence content area teachers' instructional decisions in lesson planning? 2) How do teacher beliefs influence content area teachers' instructional decisions in the classroom?

Methods

The major feature of the study is that of inquiry, which is characteristic of a qualitative study and can allow for a grounded theory approach in theory generation.

Sample

The study used a purposive sample that consisted of ten in-service intermediate level content area teachers who are considered exemplary teachers in their school based on prior teacher evaluation done by school administrators and recommendation by the same. Two teachers represented each subject area, and all ten teachers taught in Grades 5, 6, and 7. The intermediate grades were specifically chosen for this study because these are the grades where students are immersed in content study and are required to read academic texts in the various subject areas. Furthermore, a purposeful sample provided a group composed of

teachers teaching the different subject areas: science, social studies, mathematics, Christian living education and (reading) literature where engagement with texts is present. In addition, the nature of the data (instructional choices, justifications, predispositions, practices) requires that informants to be knowledgeable people whose in-depth knowledge can guarantee the provision of pertinent data.

Another type of sampling used in the study is with-in case sampling. The qualitative researcher has many with-in case decisions: Which activities, processes, and events will be sampled? – that is, whom to look at, talk with, where, when, about what, and why – all these place limits on the conclusion that can be drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In this study of content area teachers' instructional decisions manifested in choice of strategies and justifications, lesson plans that showed the use of content area reading strategies grouped as Prior Knowledge/Interest Building, Vocabulary/Concept Development, Study Strategies (Vacca & Vacca, 1999) were sampled and likewise selected as context for interview discussions. Using the same criterion, excerpts from videotaped classes were selected to provide additional meaningful context for the interview discussions.

Instruments

The research instruments used in the study are described below.

<u>Lesson Plans</u>. These were written by the subjects during the school year 2006 to 2007 and selected to provide meaningful context for the interview discussions. These were lesson plans in science, social studies, mathematics, reading (literature), and Christian living education.

<u>Video Clips of Classes</u>. Classes in the five subject areas were videotaped. After a class was videotaped, the researcher viewed the videotape and selected excerpts for discussion with the teacher. The selection of excerpts was determined by the occurrence of content area reading practices, and the teacher's and the students' interaction with text. Video data were used as the context for the video clip interview.

<u>Interview Guide</u>. The interview guide was developed prior to the interviews. It served mainly as an outline that directed the flow of questions so that the main issues that needed to be addressed are not lost during the course of the interview. Questions covered two general constructs: content area reading

and teacher beliefs. The questions about content area reading were particularly concerned with strategies such as prior knowledge/interest building, vocabulary/concept development, and study strategies. An important aspect of the interviews was the question that asked about "reasons for choosing/using a strategy", which revealed much about the teachers' underlying beliefs, motives, and predispositions.

<u>Interview</u>. There were two kinds: interview based on the lesson plans and interview based on the video clips. Both followed the same interview schedule. Contextualizing interviews using lesson plans and video vignettes of classes allowed for the gaining of information beyond what is possible in traditional, decontextualized interviews or in a combination of interviews and observations (Speer, 2005).

Interview Based on Lesson Plans. Here, a teacher was interviewed using his/her lesson plans (previously selected by the researcher) as context for discussion. The choice of questions generated from the interview guide was determined by the specific context reflected in a lesson plan, which could be any of the previously enumerated strategies in content area reading. Generally speaking, the teacher was asked what he/she intended to accomplish through particular examples in his/her lesson plans, and why. Follow-up questions served to elicit the teacher's beliefs and thinking that were tied to specific decisions that were exemplified in the lesson plans accompanying the interview.

Interview Based on Video Clips. The teacher was interviewed (with excerpts previously selected by the researcher or video clips of classes as context) focusing on his/her use of content area reading strategies eminent in the video clips. After a video clip was played, the teacher was given the opportunity to narrate what happened during the entire clip. This narrative provided the data on what happened in the episode from the teacher's perspective to ensure that analysis was not based only on the assumption that the researcher saw the same things as the teacher. What the teacher was trying to do and why was probed and clarified. Teachers were asked to describe particular decisions and the reasons for doing so. This approach led to belief-based decisions to be closely tied to specific instructional decisions as captured on the videotape (Speer, 2005).

<u>Teacher's Data Sheet</u>. This served to gather personal information regarding primary to secondary schooling, degree route, teacher preparation experience, and professional teaching experience of the subjects in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data gathering for this study consisted of six parts:

1. Sampling for Lesson Plans

Lesson plans that were used during the interviews were selected from the lesson plans written by the subjects during the school year 2006 to 2007. Selection was based on the inclusion of activities that supported content area reading strategies in the lesson plan. Lesson plans that did not involve any student/teacher interaction with text were discarded.

2. Interview

Ten individual interviews were conducted. During each interview, lesson plans selected for the teacher served as the context for the interview discussions. Questions that probed into the teacher's description of particular activities and the reasons for including them in the lesson plans were asked. Follow-up questions served to elicit teacher beliefs and thinking that were tied to specific examples of text-related activities included in the lesson plans that accompanied the interview.

3. Videotaping of Classes

Five of the ten teachers were selected for the videotaping of classes. These five teachers came from each of the five subject areas: science, social studies, mathematics, Christian living, and reading (literature). Classes in the subject areas that were videotaped involved engagement with text.

4. Sampling of Videotaped Classes

After the five classes were videotaped, excerpts to be used for interview discussions with the teachers were selected. The selection of excerpts was based on whether or not the practice featured related to content area reading. Video data that did not resemble content area reading practices were not selected for the interview.

5 Interview

Five individual interviews of teachers who were videotaped in their actual teaching sessions were held. During each interview, selected video clips

provided concrete examples that were referenced during the discussion with the teacher. Questions were asked to probe and clarify what the teacher intended to do on particular video clips and why. Reasons and explanations were probed further to elicit teacher beliefs that were tied to specific examples as seen on the video clips.

6. Teacher's Data Sheet

The subjects completed a personal data sheet, which served to provide information about their primary to secondary schooling, degree route, teacher preparation experience, and professional teaching experience.

Data Analyses

Transcriptions of interviews based on lesson plans involving ten content area teachers and the interviews based on the video clips involving five of the ten content area teachers were analyzed and reviewed through the following steps:

For Research Question 1: How do teacher beliefs influence elementary content area teachers' instructional decisions in lesson planning?

Instructional Strategies Used/ Not Used and Reasons

Each of the ten content area teacher's teaching strategies as specified in the lesson plans and verified during the interviews were classified according to instructional strategies in content area reading namely: Prior Knowledge/Interest Building, Vocabulary/Concept Development, and Study Strategies (Vacca & Vacca, 1999).

The teachers' articulated reasons, rationales, and explanations for their choice of strategies formed another classification.

Strategies that were deemed effective by the content area teachers but were not used in the lesson plans were also grouped according to instructional strategies in content area reading. An additional group labeled Other Strategies was used for strategies not falling under any of the aforementioned content area reading strategies. The teachers' articulated reasons were also cited.

Teachers' Belief Statements

The ten content area teachers' articulated beliefs or statements of belief culled from their explanations of the reasons and rationales they attached to strategy use formed another classification.

Belief Themes

Emerging similarities were noted from the teachers' belief statements, thereby building belief themes. In this study, three or more (out of ten) teachers articulating the same or related beliefs were clustered to form a belief theme. The procedure applied in generating the belief themes is as follows:

- 1. First, the table of teachers' belief statements was analyzed by comparing and contrasting teachers' statements of beliefs while noting prominent similarities or congruence between or among them.
- 2. Once three or more similar statements of beliefs are identified, each belief statement is matched with articulated reasons and choice of strategies (from the table of strategies used and reasons). Each belief statement must be consistent with or be supported by the reasons articulated and the strategies chosen by the teachers. Otherwise, there is no theme generated.
- 3. If the identified similar belief statements are supported by the articulated reasons and strategies used, then a belief theme is deemed valid.
- 4. A belief theme is defined based on the idea espoused in the three or more similar belief statements.

For Research Question 2: *How do teacher beliefs influence elementary content area teachers' instructional decisions in the classroom?*

The same steps were followed, only this time using data obtained from the second set of interviews (interviews based on video clips) involving five of the ten content area teachers – each of the five representing each of these subject areas: science, social studies, mathematics, Christian living education, and reading (literature).

Results

Question 1: How do teacher beliefs influence content area teachers' instructional decisions in lesson planning?

Practices revealed in the teachers' lesson plans and their corresponding justifications did support their beliefs. However, they did not exactly align with content literacy goals. Daily plans were not designed to meet the comprehension demands of learning with text. Hall et al. (2005) argued that teachers' lack of familiarity with instruction using expository texts could be responsible for failure to implement comprehension instruction in content area classes. Reasons that supported the teachers' choice of strategies lend support to this argument.

Be that as it may, it is clear in this study that teacher beliefs did influence the teachers' instructional decisions on lesson planning. The four belief themes generated from the data: *Matching instruction with students' needs and experiences, Guiding students to master content, Building and sustaining interest,* and *Paving the way for self-expression in the classroom* all reflect previously generated themes from other studies (See Archer, 2000; Hammerness, 1999; Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995).

According to Errington (2004), a teacher's belief system encompasses held beliefs about: what teachers should be teaching, what learners should be learning, and the respective roles of teachers and learners in pursuing both. The belief themes that were generated in this study: *Matching instruction with students' needs and experiences, Guiding students to master content, Building and sustaining interest,* and *Paving the way for self-expression in the classroom* all point towards a belief system as conceptualized by Errington (2004), which essentially covers views about learners and learning.

These themes generated in the study support previous research findings that reflect teacher beliefs on the pedagogical and epistemological levels (Archer 2000) impacting teaching practices. These belief themes also lend support to Anderson and Holt-Reynolds' (1995) practical theories on teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching whereby student motivation and interest are valued and therefore impact on the design of activities.

But the more important facet of this study is the meanings that the teachers attach to these held beliefs. This brings to light more crucial discoveries, which impact teaching and learning. The questions of how teachers

plan to act on their beliefs and how these beliefs influence their decisions to use content area reading strategies are noteworthy.

According to Errington (2004), the primacy effect of teacher beliefs will be likely to induce teachers to put beliefs into practice. Hence, teachers will express what constitutes worthwhile teaching and learning for them, whether they act in an informed manner or in an implicit way. It can be concluded based on the teachers' reasons that supported their beliefs, that they need a more informed notion of the rationales and processes involved in teaching with texts, which can enable them to make more informed decisions when they design activities in their content areas

The teachers in the study are knowledgeable with strategies that are effective in teaching content. They have very good instructional choices (strategies) spread throughout their lesson plans. However, although their rationales for using the strategies were not wrong at all, the need to merge reading and writing with content learning to reap the many benefits from such practice paled in importance compared to that which they put to motivating students and helping them master content.

A study of content area teaching showed that teachers reject or accept literacy strategies because of cultural and institutional constraints (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1997). Teachers in this study did express related constraints especially with regard to the strategies they reject. But the literacy strategies they used in their lesson plans were fairly varied. Hence, as far as lesson planning is concerned, the teachers' beliefs on the value of student motivation, and mastery of content were clearly reflected in their practices, as evidenced by the activities they included in their lesson plans and the explanations they have articulated. However, as far as instructional decisions that support content area reading instruction are concerned, they may be reflected in their choices of strategies but not when their rationales for using the strategies are considered. According to Anderson and Holt-Reynolds (1995), different rationales lead to different ways of using strategies and different results to student learning.

Research Question 2: How do teacher beliefs influence content area teachers' instructional decisions in the classroom?

In this study, the teachers' rationales for using strategies clarified their beliefs about their instructional roles and the kinds of activities that can help their students learn. Although the strategies they used were inherently effective in pursuing content literacy goals, they were unable to scaffold instruction to attain such goals. According to Pajares (1992), decisions are a reflection of what the teacher believes to be important or plausible. The teachers in the study prioritized the learning of mathematics skills, attainment of science objectives, retention of bits and pieces of information, accomplishing workbook exercises that check mastery of lessons, infusion of values, and monitoring student response through recitation of desired answers. Hence, their beliefs in "guiding students to learn", and "promoting self-expression in the classroom" were manifested in the activities they carried out in the classroom, however, not necessarily geared towards fostering learning with content area texts. Unlike the teachers in Archer's study (2000), literacy did not pervade the curriculum.

Having said that, the two belief themes generated from the data: *Guiding students to learn*, and *Promoting self-expression* reflect belief themes generated from previous research (See Archer, 2000; Hammerness, 1999; Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995). These findings do support previous research into the links between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices (Errington, 2004).

In this study, teacher beliefs appeared to have influenced the content of the teachers' instructional plans and their decision making in the classroom. The themes that were generated revealed much about how the teachers planned and chose what to do and what to avoid in the classroom. According to Bandura (1986), "beliefs are the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives." The belief themes generated in this study reflect categories of beliefs from extant literature, which teachers reference when they make decisions about teaching and learning.

On the other hand, the teachers' practices were not fully geared towards teaching students to use the strategies in learning content. This brings the analysis back to the question of rationale (why use the strategy). This question is a crucial consideration in this study because instructional decision making is viewed under the lens of content area reading. While it is true that opportunities for self-expression can generate a lot of ideas from students that contribute to learning in the classroom, most of these attempts were geared not towards the application of literacy skills in learning content, but as a means of navigating the class through the usual sequence of motivation-presentation-discussion-application in teaching subject matter.

While it is true that building and sustaining interest are crucial to student learning, most of the practices observed in the classroom were more for the purpose of building rapport and making schoolwork interesting, but less of scaffolding instruction to help students learn with text.

According to Gunning (2002) the framework for teaching content area reading includes "establishing key ideas, preparation for reading, guided reading, rereading, extension, and application." Although the strategies the teachers used in their lesson plans indeed paved the way for self-expression, and gave the students opportunities to generate ideas which they would express through speaking and writing activities, those strategies were not selected for the purpose of preparing and engaging students in reading and learning from their content area texts. As evidenced by classroom observations, their beliefs did not translate in ways that could help readers predict, question and later resolve conceptual conflicts, clarify and organize information, and put new information in use in other ways – as they approach and engage in the reading of content area texts. While the teachers valued self-expression, they were not able to capitalize on discussion to encourage students to talk, listen, read, and write as they respond to texts and construct meaning.

Knowing what beliefs teachers hold and how these beliefs shape instructional decisions is crucial in determining which beliefs matter and which beliefs should be altered. By knowing the beliefs that teachers value and those that are proven to be linked to practices in the classroom, teacher education and training can be more purposeful, goal-oriented, and effective.

Conclusions

This study was able to prove that content area teachers in the study are familiar with effective strategies in content area reading. However, their understandings of the underlying rationales that guide the use of the strategies and the processes involved in merging reading with content teaching were inadequate. Hence, strategies were implemented in ways that did not fully support students' engagement with texts and construction of meaning.

This study was able to verify the predominance of the transmission model, or the telling pedagogy in teaching in content area classrooms. It was found that the teachers' prevalent belief in helping students to master content was realized in the classrooms mostly through traditional methods (e.g. lectures, the chalk-and-talk approach, and workbook drills). Hence, content area reading instruction was rarely manifested in a majority of the classrooms.

The study found out the importance teachers place on student motivation over the more decisive instructional moves that can scaffold students' comprehension. The "interestingness of presentation" is valued, i.e. what students find interesting is worth presenting or teaching.

This study was able to determine the teachers' grasp of content area reading instruction, which hardly supported literacy across the curriculum. The beliefs teachers hold did not shape decisions to use content area reading strategies in their respective content areas. Teachers' unfamiliarity with the rationales and processes involved in using reading and writing to teach content was responsible for the ineffectual implementation of content area reading instruction

Finally, this study asserts that teachers must be well trained in the implementation of comprehension instruction. All teachers should approach content teaching with the goal of developing content literate students who are equipped with literacy learning tools that will last a lifetime.

Teachers' instructional decision making determines what happens in the classrooms. Sound decision making can empower teachers to be content literacy experts in their own classrooms. Uncovering and reframing particular beliefs that hinder the efficacy of content area reading instruction can help strengthen teachers' decision making – that is to make purposeful, principled decisions about what students should learn and how the learning should be planned out.

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