Some subjective reasons for teachers’ reliance on commercial reading materials

The results of a questionnaire indicate that a lack of communication between teachers and administrators may be the primary reason teachers rely on commercially prepared reading materials.

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Since the early 1960s, researchers have been concerned about the extent to which elementary school teachers rely on commercial materials to teach reading (Austin and Morrison, 1963; Barton and Wilder, 1964; Chall, 1967; Durkin, 1974; 1974-75; 1978-79; Goodlad, 1970; Rosecky, 1978). Most teachers appear to use basal reader and workbooks daily, and the Educational Products Information Exchange (EPICE) reported from a 1977 national survey that U.S. teachers use commercial materials for 94% of their reading instruction. Unfortunately, use of commercial materials and guidebooks does not seem to result in perfect instruction. Durkin (1974-75; 1978-79), for example, found teachers engaging in unnecessary instruction because they rigidly followed guidebook procedures or simply distributed published materials to students. Chall (1967) felt that authors recommended using their books as starting points for instruction, but that teachers used the guidebooks like scripts. Strict adherence to guidebooks sometimes precludes considering students’ individual needs and interests, according to Austin and Morrison (1963) and Goodlad (1970), and EPICE also related that teachers reused items regardless of their relevance to student needs. Teachers’ opinions on reading methodology seem to be formed strongly by the guidebooks they use (Barton and Wilder, 1964).

It has been suggested that the only way to change classroom instruction would be to alter the guidebooks (Chall, 1967; Rosecky, 1978).

Why do teachers behave in this way?
Why do teachers rely so heavily on commercial reading materials? Until recently, no rationales for this behavior have been investigated. Despite Rosenshine’s (1977) caution that teachers are often inaccurate in their accounts of their instruction, meaningful information about attitudes can be gathered by asking teachers and other school personnel why teachers rely on commercial materials. As Pearson and Kamil (1978) argue, the conscious thoughts and underlying assumptions of school personnel are important to understanding teachers’ behavior.

In the study reported here, I used a survey to gather classroom teachers’, reading teachers’, and administrators’ perceptions of the role of commercial materials in elementary-grade reading instruction. A comparison of these perceptions provided possible reasons for teachers’ reliance on commercial materials and some perspective on their opportunities for altering instruction.

Teachers may rely on published materials to teach reading for a number of reasons. Researchers have developed four hypotheses. First, some teachers may not be very deeply involved with their reading instruction and be content to use commercial materials (Durkin, 1978-79). Second, teachers may believe these materials really can teach students to read (Austin and Morrison, 1963). Third, they may believe that the procedures and components of the commercial materials are based on scientific investigations of reading instruction (Barton and Wilder, 1964). Fourth, teachers may also think their school administration requires them to use the materials (Chall, 1967).

After two pilot studies, I selected 20 forced-choice items for the final versions of the questionnaire to inquire about such beliefs. Five items probed each hypothesis. The respondents rated each statement on a five-point scale, indicating feelings ranging between strong agreement (5) and strong disagreement (1) with each statement. A response of “3” indicated moderate agreement with the hypothesis. (See questionnaire.)

Three open-ended questions asked teachers to explain “why,” “how,” and “when” they used commercial materials. This allowed respondents to elaborate on their perceptions and provide reasons for teachers’ behavior that were not included in the 20 items. Reading teachers and administrators responded to alternate forms of the questionnaire.

Interview schedules were developed to check the stability of the information gathered by questionnaire. One forced-choice item was randomly selected for each hypothesis and included in the interview schedule to meet this concern. The open-ended questions were used to relax the respondents and to probe their responses to the “why” question.

I distributed appropriate questionnaires to 539 classroom teachers, 26 reading teachers, and 26 building administrators in a large Midwestern U.S. school district. After collecting the questionnaires, I interviewed 26 teachers, 3 reading teachers, and 3 administrators (5% of each group) as a further check on the validity of the written responses.

Results of the study
Eighty-two percent of the questionnaires were completed and returned. The mean scores, ranging from 3.00 to 4.21, suggested that each group of educators agreed, at least moderately, with all of the four hypotheses about why teachers rely on commercial materials (see Table 1). Analysis of
Items from teacher's questionnaire listed by hypothesis

Teachers are not involved with their reading instruction.
1. Reading lessons are never boring for me.
2. Each day my reading lessons contain something unique.
3. Often, I wish I could cancel reading instruction for a day and pursue something more interesting.
4. When I am teaching reading, I often think of other things.
5. No one can teach reading in the same way I do.

Teachers believe commercial materials can teach reading.
1. Basal workbooks and worksheets are necessary for reading instruction.
2. I usually try different workbook materials if my students are having difficulty with a particular skill.
3. The materials that make up the basal program are the most important part of my reading instruction.
4. Materials that teach a student to read are called instructional materials.
5. When discussing reading instruction with teachers from other districts, the first question I ask is “Which basal do you use?”

Teachers believe the materials embody scientific truth.
1. The readability of stories in the basal texts is scientifically controlled.
2. Basal reading programs are scientifically tested.
3. The sequence of goals for teaching reading is scientifically valid within a basal reading series.
4. Educational publishers suggest that basal reading series are scientifically based.
5. Basal reading programs are the products of scientific investigations of the reading process.

Teachers think they are fulfilling administrators' expectations.
1. The administration outlined the immediate and long range goals for my reading instruction.
2. If I decided to teach reading without the basal workbooks and worksheets, it would be acceptable to the administration.
3. The administration selected the basal reading series that I use in my classroom.
4. I do feel pressure from the administration concerning the use of commercial materials.
5. Parents expect me to follow the basal procedures for teaching reading.

A second comparison determined if a group preferred one hypothesis to another. Classroom teachers emphasized meeting administrators' expectations (F 1, 482 = 222.16, p < .001 using the Geisser-Greenhouse Conservative F Test). Reading teachers gave equal stress to all the suggested reasons (F 1, 65 = 3.53, p > .05). Administrators accepted equally the notions that commercial materials can teach and that the materials are based on scientific investigations of the reading process (F 1, 54 = 14.28, p < .01). However, only the administrators' mean for hypothesis three was larger than their mean for hypothesis four; administrators' means for hypotheses two and four were statistically equal. The responses to forced-choice items during the interviews corroborated these trends (r = .82).

Responses to the "why" question were the only open-ended responses scored; inter scorer reliability was .94 for three scorers. (The "how" and "when" questions were included only to assure that teachers would supply rationales for their behavior and not simply tell how they use the materials.) Nearly three-quarters of the classroom teachers gave administrative expectations as their rationale (see Table 2). Reading teachers thought classroom teachers were equally likely to believe the materials could teach reading, to believe they were required to use them, or to be noninvolved in their teaching. Most administrators offered the instructional powers of the materials as the primary reason that teachers use commercial materials. The responses to the open-ended questions during the interviews were highly similar.

Discussion
Each hypothesis seems to be a partial explanation of teachers' use of commercial reading materials. However, individuals responded differently to the items and each group displayed unique patterns.

Reading teachers' responses confirmed each hypothesis equally and moderately, and their responses to the open-ended questions were also spread evenly. On average, the reading teachers had completed three more graduate level reading courses than the administrators and classroom teachers, and it was noticeable that reading teachers with more coursework were less likely to accept the scientific validity of commercial reading materials (r = .50). Classroom teachers and administrators on the
other hand, demonstrated the opposite tendency ($r = .26$ and .59, respectively). Thus, educational background does seem to explain this difference.

Classroom teachers' responses require little interpretation: In both formats of the survey, most teachers said that they use the commercial reading materials because administrators expect them to do so. The supervisors, reading teachers, and administrators did not agree. These different perspectives explain the differences on hypothesis four.

The item format seemed to affect administrators' responses. Most administrators emphasized the scientific validity of the materials on the forced-choice items, but they offered the materials' instructional powers as the primary reason teachers relied on commercial materials. Statistical analyses suggested that administrators did not see any real difference between teachers' faith in the materials and the materials' scientific basis ($r = .54$). (No other significant correlations between responses were found for any other group.) What appears to have happened during the open-ended questions is that administrators stated teachers' faith in the materials explicitly, but implied this was due to the materials' grounding in research.

Administrators' and classroom teachers' favorite hypotheses appear to complement one another. Most administrators believed that teachers use commercial materials because the materials can teach reading according to scientifically tested procedures, and classroom teachers believed that administrators expect them to use the materials.

On the surface, these opinions and consequent behaviors seem compatible, but the opinions are based on a false sense of what transpires within the reading program. Administrators saw the reading program as a democratic organization based on shared beliefs concerning commercial materials and reading instruction. Most teachers described the reading program as an autocracy with considerable limitations placed on their behavior.

Responses to two forced-choice items demonstrate the discord between the interpretations of the reading program.

Item A: If I (teacher) decided to teach reading without the basal workbooks and worksheets, it would be acceptable to the administration.

Item B: The administration selected the basal program that is used for classroom reading instruction.

While a majority of each group disagreed with Item A, 77% of the classroom teachers disagreed strongly. This response shows the intensity of classroom teachers' feelings concerning administrative expectations. When asked during the interviews to provide examples of administrative expectations, 9 of the 26 teachers interviewed and all 3 of the reading teachers interviewed related the same story: For three years, third grade teachers had complained that the vocabulary and skills of the commercial materials were too advanced for the majority of their students. The teachers requested that several objectives be deleted from the third grade curriculum. Administrators, according to these teachers, maintained that student failure was attributable to poor instruction and inappropriate use of the commercial materials. The situation was resolved when administrators appealed to the authors of the commercial materials, who immediately offered the teachers' solution of deleting several objectives.

Administrators offered a different explanation for their agreement with Item A. They suggested that all teachers must use the same materials to maintain continuity in the reading curriculum throughout the school district. In other words, controlled use of the materials is for the good of the program.

Classroom teachers and administrators disagreed directly on Item B. Seventy-seven percent of the classroom teachers reported that administrators selected the commercial materials for classroom use. Most of the teachers later interviewed also stated that administrators made all major decisions concerning textbook selection before involving other personnel. Seventy-eight percent of the administrators disagreed strongly with that interpretation, and in the interviews described a system of committees which gave any faculty member opportunity to participate in the selection. They regarded the commercial materials as the consensus choice of all district personnel.

To clarify these disagreements is not important for this study. The important point is that neither group recognized the others' position. Thus, classroom teachers felt coerced into using commercial materials, and administrators believed that all school personnel shared their convictions about the materials. The result according to both groups was a reading program based entirely on commercial reading materials. To modify this result, a desire expressed by most personnel, the respective positions must be made explicit, then discussed completely.

A series of discussions among the staff in individual schools could be the starting point for implementing change. During their discussions teachers and administrators might refine their own arguments and begin to understand each other's positions. Classroom teachers could question the assumptions held by administrators concerning the instructional powers of commercial materials, and administrators could clarify classroom teachers' misconceptions concerning administrative expectations.

After several meetings concerning reading instruction within a particular school, a representative from each building could attend a district meeting to establish common ground for a district reading program. This representative body might also serve as a standing committee charged with periodic review of programs and policies. In this manner, the district could establish a reading program based on shared assumptions and practices. The forum should demonstrate that reading programs do not transcend their participants, but that the participants are the reading programs and can change the reading programs if they choose.

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References


