WHY AM I TEACHING THIS? INVESTIGATING THE TENSION BETWEEN MANDATED CURRICULUM AND TEACHER AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT
This article shares the experience of a teacher investigating the tension between a mandated literacy program and his desire to teach in response to his perceptions of students’ needs. Qualitative teacher research methodology is used to study the impact of mandated literacy practices on teaching and learning; and to answer the question: how is my teaching situated within the literacy program? Data, collected through a research journal, were analyzed using a Foucauldian lens of discourse, and reading theory. This study unveils the mechanisms supporting mandates, and conflicts between theoretical and practical applications of mandated practices and the teacher’s instructional beliefs.

More and more resources were delivered to my classroom and becoming part of my teaching because of an increased emphasis on student reading in the elementary grades. In-services were offered on these new methods of reading instruction, and teachers were being told by school administration these methods were best practice. With this implementation mandated by my school and school board, I decided to question the impact these resources had on my reading instruction. This led me to the question: how was my teaching situated within my school’s literacy program?

BACKGROUND
It was my sixth year teaching in an elementary school (which I will refer to as Mainstream Elementary), and I found myself teaching a combined grade one/two classroom. This was a first for the school, and as such came with significant pressure to succeed from both
administration and parents. Not only was I trying to deliver multiple grade curricula through differentiated instruction but the focus on reading instruction was becoming increasingly intense. As a means of increasing student reading, various initiatives were being implemented that resulted in my teaching being more connected to materials and resources and less connected to my students. My instructional decisions became dependent on people outside of my classroom—editors, publishers and administrators—instead of on the needs of my students. As a result of this, I was feeling a lack of confidence and frustration (Patterson, 1990).

Not only was I experiencing concerns about the origin of my teaching decisions but the mandated initiatives seemed to be inhibiting my teaching. These initiatives took the form of board-wide expectations regarding materials, assessments, classroom practices, and measurable outcomes. A goal of these initiatives was consistency—all teachers would use similar instructional practices.

I have always had numerous questions regarding reading instruction throughout my teaching. I have ridden the proverbial pendulum from Direct Instruction to Whole Language and back again. As I swung from philosophy to philosophy, I became confused, disoriented, and discouraged. With each swing of the pendulum came “new and improved” knowledge and evidence supporting one theory over the other. The pendulum was now on an upswing toward measurable outcomes.

School measurable outcomes had begun with running records, leveled books, and guided reading, with an increased emphasis on recording and reporting the data from each. I had no issue with being held accountable; my issue rested with the impact this accountability had on my teaching and subsequently on student learning. I was concerned the focus had shifted from student based to score based, with less attention to student needs and learning experiences. This posed a moral dilemma for me as I wanted to ensure that I was maintaining a focus on teaching and learning in my classroom, while at the same time being mindful of the accountability expectations.

I started to question what was happening in my classroom and the role I was playing. I realized that I needed to take a step back and observe what was happening in my classroom from an outside perspective. I needed to understand how my teaching practices had become so disconnected from my teaching philosophy. Although I did not realize it at the time, this was my first step in the teacher research process: identifying an issue I wanted to explore further.

**Teacher Research**

As Manning and Harste (1994) stated, “there are two kinds of educational research, that which is done to teachers and kids and the other that is done by teachers and kids” (p. 2). I wanted a methodology that would allow me to delve into issues that were pertinent to my classroom; issues that were becoming more of a factor in shaping my teaching practices and student learning. Teacher research provided a process for examining my reading
Instruction and, more specifically, to understand how the actual events in my classroom corresponded to my beliefs about teaching and learning.

Teacher research enabled me to answer my own questions in a systematic and intentional inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990), and allowed me to recognize the rationale of my teaching decisions and to identify the theories on which I based these decisions. By undertaking this process, I was able to examine my classroom without compromising my teaching or student learning.

In teacher research, I would have a dual role. First, as the teacher, I would be a significant member of the classroom being scrutinized. My actions, motivations, philosophies, and beliefs would be under the metaphoric microscope. Second, I would be analyzing the classroom for an enhanced understanding. In this way I am not only under the microscope, but also the person looking through it and manipulating the lens.

To effectively conduct teacher research, I had to understand this dual role when making decisions both as a teacher and as a researcher. I had to recognize and appreciate the biases involved in such a dual role. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) acknowledged that these biases—the values, assumptions, beliefs and knowledge held by the researcher—directly inform the data collected and how this data is interpreted and reported.

**Data Collection**

Once I understood the research process as well as my role in that process, I then needed to decide on the methods that I would employ. I selected qualitative inquiry because of its contextual approach to research. Taking the data from my daily experiences allowed me to study my classroom and my teaching practices in a real-life setting; recording and examining why things were happening, as things were happening. With careful observation, I could develop new ways of understanding my teaching and classroom (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2008). Qualitative research enabled me to look extensively at, and listen intently to, what was happening around me.

Actual classroom events would be the focus of study. I was examining the teaching and learning, the rationale for decisions, and the dialogue that occurred. This was the information I needed to examine my teaching in relation to Mainstream Elementary’s literacy program. My classroom provided me with a multitude of research opportunities ranging from lesson plans, to classroom interactions, to dialogue amongst teachers, students and parents. With such an abundance of data, I had to select data collection methods that best corresponded to my research question.

As a way of recording my data – the events, thoughts and questions that arose during the course of this research study – I kept a teacher research journal. The journal was a working document that provided me the opportunity to reflect on my data; record thoughts, questions and connections; and engage in self-dialogue – questioning and answering my own reflections.
I identified and recorded classroom events and occurrences that were relevant to my research question – the events and occurrences that brought me back to my initial unease; to the feeling that I was doing an injustice to my students. I recorded lessons and activities that left my students disinterested and disengaged. I recorded student reactions to lessons and activities and my own reflections and insights as well. I recorded incidents and dialogue where students questioned classroom practices, voiced displeasure about events and/or activities, and expressed opinions about their learning opportunities. I recorded conversations with parents and staff surrounding classroom practices and activities, program resources and initiatives in my classroom, and in the school as a whole.

My journal became my sounding board; a place for me to consider issues and questions that were presented in my classroom, a place to deliberate the pros and cons of my choices, and a place to explore the rationale behind my decisions. Content became conversation and margins became areas of insight and inquiry. My journal became my silent partner; always challenging me to look deeper, to reach further and to consider myself in my practice.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The next step in the research process involved organizing and analyzing my data. Data analysis is a crucial component of teacher research. It is during this stage that analysis and interpretations are made based upon the data collected. However, data analysis does not necessarily occur at the conclusion of data collection. Data analysis and interpretation can be woven throughout the entire research study (Merritt & Labbo, 2004); so that the data being collected can influence the research decisions of the teacher.

Data analysis reveals what the data means in relation to the research question. It is with this in mind that researchers must “see what is there—not what we expect to be there” (Merritt & Labbo, 2004, p. 408). What this meant is that I could not have preconceived notions of what I would find. I had to be responsive and open to the data being examined.

I began organizing my data to identify patterns in my journal entries. “Finding the patterns within data, viewing each bit of information as a part of a larger puzzle which you must unscramble” (Power & Hubbard, 1999, p. 35). Three topics that were the cornerstone of the literacy program mentioned frequently in my journal were reading levels, running records, and guided reading. After these topics were identified, I looked through the resources delivered to my classroom and realized that all were connected. These topics are the cornerstone of a balanced reading program, which was what my school selected as the basis of its literacy instruction.

I considered how and why these instructional practices emerged as themes in my writing, which reflected issues in reconciling my practice with the balanced literacy initiative. I also considered the impact of the themes on my teaching and my contribution to these themes as significant classroom experiences. The themes, as well as my reflection and interpretation of the themes, were then considered in relation to my research question. As a way of relating the data to my research question, I used two analytic lenses: a Foucauldian lens of discourse, and reading theory. Using a Foucauldian lens of discourse
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enabled me to analyze the mechanisms in place that supported Mainstream Elementary’s literacy program. I was able to analyze the impact of these mechanisms on my teaching practices.

Foucault examined the structures that are established in any given system. Such structures include the ideas, concepts, and ways of thinking and behaving that are created within a particular context (Mills, 1997). In this way, Foucault’s work on discourse studied the elements and variables at play within a given context, examining not only their contextual role but their role in developing and maintaining the context in which they operate.

A reading theory lens allowed me to view my data through a theoretical framework so that I could situate my instructional practices against a Direct Instruction or Whole Language philosophy. Direct Instruction focuses on the accumulation of individual skills taught in isolation. Whole Language focuses on a student centered approach to reading instruction whereby instructional activities are based upon meaning making.

**Reading Levels**

Reading level, as defined by Mainstream Elementary, refers to the level of difficulty at which a student is able to decode text independently. This level was often represented by a letter or a numerical value. The letter value was based on the leveling system of Fountas and Pinnell (1996). The numerical value was based on PM Benchmark and Reading Recovery systems.¹ The primary grades at Mainstream Elementary had a PM Benchmark collection of books used specifically for determining the reading level of students. Books from Reading Recovery were also used to determine reading levels.

I often questioned the use of reading levels but used them nonetheless. One journal entry that emerged during analysis reflects this questioning:

Why am I limiting access to reading materials!?

I wrote similar questions numerous times within my research journal, yet I continued with this instructional practice. Using a Foucauldian lens of discourse illustrated the role of surveillance (Foucault, 1995) in that I was operating under the premise that my practices were being watched by my school administration. I was not employing the use of reading levels simply because of their advantages to student learning but out of fear that my teaching would be questioned.

The following entry, underlined several times in my journal, was a message that I heard countless time at reading instruction in-services:

¹ PM is a collection of levelled books used in the primary grades at my school. PM Benchmarks are kits that enable the teacher to assess and evaluate student reading levels through the use of levelled books and running records. Reading Recovery is a program developed by Marie Clay to understand and enhance student reading through a process of miscue analysis. This program is a short-term, one-to-one intervention for students identified as having reading difficulties.
Levels match students with independent reading level.

Analysing this entry through a reading theory lens enabled me to relate reading levels to Direct Instruction. Within this philosophical framework, students progress through a series of skills that are then combined for the purpose of reading (Meyer & Manning, 2007). Reading levels enabled me to provide texts for students that were neither easy nor hard. The belief was that reading practice would be optimized when students used texts that required them to use reading strategies but would not frustrate. This made sense to me. I did not want my students reading books that frustrated them. However, I still felt that reading levels were restrictive to students by taking away their role in book selection.

**RUNNING RECORDS**

The running record is a miscue analysis reading assessment that is used to determine the oral reading level of students. This reading assessment analyzes miscues as: meaning (semantic), syntactic, and visual. This approach to analysis was based on the work of Marie Clay (2006). Reading errors which maintain the meaning of the text (such as car for vehicle) are coded as meaning (semantic) errors. Reading errors which are structurally correct up to the error (such as the man walked vs. the man was) are coded as syntactic errors. Reading errors based on visual information from the print (such as horse for house) are coded as visual errors. Errors and self-corrections are then calculated to determine the easy (independent), instructional, and hard reading levels of students (Clay, 2006).

I analyzed the following journal entry using both a Foucauldian lens for discourse analysis and reading theory:

> I am feeling the pressure to conduct running records and use them as the sole measure of student reading.

From a Foucauldian perspective, running records were considered official knowledge and numerous mechanisms were put in place that supported this belief (Foucault, 1995). Teachers were in-serviced on conducting running records, resources were delivered to schools to facilitate the use of running records, and board mandates were implemented to report the scores of running records. I was unconvinced that one method would be used as the single method of reading assessment. These mechanisms situated running records as being what “good” teachers use for reading assessment.

An understanding of reading theory enabled me to see the benefits of facilitating running records. I was able to analyze the cueing systems of students as they read and to identify the miscues they had. It provided me an opportunity to examine their thinking as they read. I was able to study the students’ use of the cueing systems and coordinate my teaching decisions based on these findings.

Although the practice of assessing reading using running records developed from a Whole Language perspective (teachers tailoring their instruction to the needs of students), Mainstream Elementary utilized running records as a Direct Instruction perspective in that
teachers determined student reading levels based on scores and developed a linear style program of reading achievement.

**GUIDED READING**
Guided reading is the teaching of reading strategies to a small group of students based on reading levels. Journal entries pertaining to this recurring journal theme could be summed up by the following phrase:

Best practice.

I was told by literacy coaches, school administration, curriculum consultants and other teachers that guided reading was best practice. When I had questions about using this practice in my classroom, I was told that guided reading significantly increased student reading levels. Any objection to guided reading was seen as being flawed, and was thus rejected. These incidents reflected what Foucault termed as regime of truth by Foucault (Mills, 1997). There were mechanisms in place—literacy committees, board documents, professional development—that maintained the position of guided reading as best practice.

From a reading theory perspective, guided reading consisted of teachers instructing students on specific strategies necessary to comprehend a text. This view resembled comprehension-as-procedure (Aukerman, 2008) as “a good reader is seen as one who accesses a fixed set of strategies to arrive successfully at the outcome” (p. 52) that the teacher determined. Within this view of comprehension, the text has one meaning and students need to possess and utilize specific strategies to arrive at this particular meaning. This view of comprehension resembles Direct Instruction.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**
The vast majority of the resources that were delivered to my classroom related to the themes that emerged through the analysis of my research journal: reading levels, running records and guided reading. Using both a Foucauldian lens of discourse and reading theory as analytical lenses enabled me to examine my data in relation to my school literacy program as well as the theoretical foundation of my teaching practices.

At first, I was hesitant in using reading levels as part of my instructional practices. Restricting the books that students read could have a negative impact on their reading interest and experience. It was only through this study that I realized I could focus on the most beneficial aspects of reading levels and incorporate these aspects into my classroom routine. For me, one positive of reading levels was students reading books that were neither too easy nor too difficult. I decided to incorporate choice by having students selecting homework and silent reading books that appealed to them from the books within their level. This made a huge difference. Students were pleased that they had input in book selection, and they were selecting books that they wanted to read. This addressed one of my major concerns with reading levels: lack of student input.
The more I used running records as a reading assessment tool, the more I believed they had a place in my instruction. However, I still struggled with using running records as the sole means to assess student reading. I decided to expand my running records to include comprehension assessment. After each running record, I would ask students comprehension questions that related to the text they read. I would use these questions as an informal way to measure student understanding. Also, the student and I would discuss the running record and analyze their reading miscues together. This conversation provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their reading and to provide a context for their choices.

I also incorporated student choice into guided reading. As part of my daily reading instruction, I discussed and modeled reading strategies. Students would have an opportunity to ask questions about these strategies and use them in a variety of settings. I decided to give students input in the strategies taught during guided reading. I would meet with each group on Monday and have an informal conference about the reading strategies they felt they needed more practice with. During this conversation, I would ask them to model certain strategies and see if we agreed with the strategy that should be focused on during guided reading. Students enjoyed this aspect as they were able to communicate their needs to me. I enjoyed this as we were able to have a meaningful conversation where students could voice their learning and explain what they needed to continue their reading progress.

I came into this research thinking that my reading instruction was based on decisions made by people outside of my classroom and that my students’ needs were not being considered. I was neglecting the idea that I was the classroom teacher and that I made countless instructional decisions each day. I could use the initiatives set forth by Mainstream Elementary’s literacy program while at the same time meeting the needs of my individual students with complementary strategies for instruction and assessment. It was up to me to use my knowledge of my students and teaching practices to assist students in their reading development.

Through this process, I rediscovered my agency and discretion as a classroom teacher – my ability to act in a critical and informed way and to integrate mandated instructional strategies in a personally meaningful way. I continued on, with a spirit of curiosity, to understand and maximize the intended benefits of the prescribed practice. I incorporated these benefits as part of my teaching practices to maximize teaching and learning.

I still firmly believe that there is no “one right way” to teach reading. I have to be eclectic and take the beneficial aspects of each recommended practice to add to my growing repertoire of instructional practices. I cannot judge a resource or program to be all bad or good; there are strengths and weaknesses in everything. It was important for me to understand my pedagogical beliefs in order to construct meaning of new initiatives. Teacher research allowed me to give fair consideration to new practices and initiatives instead of merely resisting, ignoring, or accepting them.
REFERENCES


Biographical note:

David Costello is the Numeracy Consultant for the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island. He recently graduated from a Master's degree in Literacy Education with a focus on literacy instruction and student learning. David is enrolled in a PhD (Education) program where he plans to continue his research in literacy.