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Improving School Literacy Programs for At-Risk Learners Through Instructional Coordination

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It is necessary to reduce the curriculum fragmentation too commonly experienced by children who participate in instructional support programs (e.g., remedial, special, bilingual, or compensatory education classes). Curriculum fragmentation is more likely to impede than enhance literacy learning. Drawing from studies of instructional support programs, five characteristics of schools with coordinated instructional efforts are presented and discussed.

There is a common and unfortunate characteristic that is shared by most remedial and special education programs: their detachment from the regular educational effort (Allington, 1986). This separation is evident when classroom teachers and resource teachers have little knowledge of the instructional activities of the other. It is evident when the reading

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curricula in the classroom and the resource room differ radically, when the reading instruction offered by the two teachers is not mutually supportive, when disabled readers see few connections between classroom and resource room reading instruction, and when little cooperative planning and little collaboration between classroom and resource teachers occurs. Unfortunately, such detachment seems more the norm than the exception.

In this article, we argue that this situation is not only simply unfortunate, but also that the current separation of regular education from remedial and special education substantially undermines the effectiveness of our effort to alleviate reading difficulties. We begin by developing our rationale for an instructional model that requires collaboration and coordination of instruction, rather than separation and fragmentation. Then, we report on several characteristics of school districts where instructional coordination and collaboration were observed.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

Presently there is little agreement concerning precisely how to best teach reading. Different reading curricula reflect different perspectives about the nature of reading acquisition and appropriate reading instructional activities. These curricula differ on several criteria, with the most noticeable differences appearing in the beginning reading materials. For example, basal reader series differ in the number of words introduced, the number and order of decoding skills developed, the way in which decoding skills are presented, the types of vocabulary control (e.g., control by word frequency indices or grapheme–phoneme regularity), the use of illustrations, the suggested distribution of oral and silent reading activities, as well as the particular order that sets of skills are developed. Literature-based and integrated reading and writing programs differ from basal reader approaches. One common finding, in the midst of this variation, is that no reading curriculum has provided any clear and consistent evidence of superiority in producing student achievement. In short, some students commonly fail to acquire literacy on-schedule regardless of which reading curriculum is used.

Though no single reading curriculum has been proven consistently superior, the use of different curricula in instruction has been correlated with children's use of different reading strategies, especially in less successful readers (Allington, 1984). For example, code emphasis curricula appear to direct children's attention to phoneme–grapheme relations more than semantic or syntactic features of the text, thus

resulting in the production of nonwords while reading (Barr, 1975). On the other hand, the more meaning-based curricula appear to direct children's attention to semantic and syntactic considerations more than phoneme–grapheme considerations, resulting in meaningful errors that bear less resemblance to print (Calfee & Piontkowski, 1981). Error patterns reflect readers' hypotheses about reading. Thus, it appears that the instructional emphases of reading curricula subsequently affect children's hypotheses about appropriate strategies to use during reading.

Ideally, children would be taught to integrate the use of semantic, syntactic, and grapho–phonemic clues, especially the children who have experienced the most difficulty in learning to read. But, in reality, this does not occur as often as one might hope. Most often, poor readers enter a remedial or special education program where the instructional program differs substantially from that of the regular education program. In this situation, children are not learning to integrate old strategies with new ones, but rather are taught "different" strategies in the different programs. The children are often confronted with two curricula that offer inconsistent information regarding the reading activity.

Johnston, Allington, and Afflerbach (1985) argued that it seems ill-advised to create an instructional environment in which the hypotheses developed and strategies acquired in one lesson will be unsuccessful if applied in other lessons. An inconsistent instructional environment would seem to be particularly detrimental for students who have trouble learning to read.

Johnston et al. (1985) argued that placing an unsuccessful learner in curricular conflict is likely to result in "cognitive confusion" (Vernon, 1958). Cognitive confusion occurs when learners acquire partial information, misinformation, and/or conflicting information about the process of reading. In light of the poor readers' dilemma, philosophical biases aside, less-able readers need instructional activities which develop a consistent set of strategies for reading. Poor readers appear to be learners who can tolerate relatively little variation in instructional consistency and coherence.

Traditional models of instruction for less-successful learners have typically endorsed such curricula conflict. The most popular approaches in remedial and special education might be labeled "differential teaching" models. Examples of these differential teaching models are the modality preference, learning styles, and perceptual training approaches to remediation. The basic philosophy underlying differential teaching models is: "Since these students have not learned to read as well as could be expected in the regular classroom, a different kind of

reading instruction is needed" (Gilliland, 1974, p. 2). Although this hypothesis appears reasonable, when applied in a remedial or special education setting, the result is almost invariably the advancement of different curricula in the regular and remedial or special education classrooms. The use of different curricula in the two settings creates the potential for fostering cognitive confusion in the children receiving instruction in both locations.

For example, in one school district in which we observed, remedial and resource room students in Grades 1–5 received instruction in a specialized remediation program with a perceptual-decoding emphasis while simultaneously receiving instruction in a newly adopted meaning-oriented basal in their regular classroom. The remedial/resource room reading curriculum focused on learning the component parts of the reading process. Instruction consisted largely of reading words in isolation and learning word patterns (e.g., -ake, -eek, -ig, etc.). This commercial program included reading texts that presented code controlled stories (e.g., "The man had a cod. The cod got hot"). However, we saw few instances of students reading stories or books of instruction on integration of word pattern knowledge with other available sources of information, or of students receiving instruction related to comprehension of texts. The majority of time and attention was spent on letter or word-level activities.

Conversely, instruction in the regular classroom emphasized making meaning. The regular classroom utilized a meaning-emphasis basal reader series and, in general, provided the students with many opportunities to read stories and other connected text. New words were introduced in context and were encountered again later in their readers. Further, students were taught to integrate a number of different strategies in an effort to read unknown words (word pattern instruction was not emphasized). It was clear that the focus of the regular classroom instruction was on the story level, with an emphasis on comprehension.

In this case then, the remedial students were faced with mastery of two reading curricula—two curricula that represent different philosophies of reading development and, hence, emphasize different aspects of the process of learning to read and different strategies for reading. The strategies taught in the meaning-emphasis curriculum (e.g., use of contextual information to monitor word recognition) did not work well in code-emphasis texts that attempt to control difficulty by restricting range of word structures present. Likewise code-emphasis strategies (e.g., use of linear letter-sounding sequence to produce correct pronunciations) did not work well in meaning-emphasis texts where word structure controls were not present.

In addition to the fact that the differential teaching model appears to

lead to curricular conflict and potentially to cognitive confusion, the model's underlying hypothesis also appears to be founded on two particularly unwarranted assumptions. At the heart of any differential teaching model is the hypothesis that, despite sufficient instruction using a particular curricular approach, some children failed to respond to that particular teaching method. The two apparent assumptions here are that (a) instruction within the regular classroom is constant across the classroom population, and (b) the instruction received by all students has been adequate, appropriate, and timely.

Allington (1983) and Hiebert (1983) summarized evidence that instructional activities vary greatly across reader groups within a classroom. Although different groups within a given classroom received similar amounts of instruction, poorer readers have been found to have had fewer opportunities to read silently and to read in general.

Research also suggests that children's learning rates vary (Bloom, 1976; Carroll, 1963). Therefore, the amount of instruction that is adequate for one child (e.g., a good reader) is likely to be inadequate for a child who is acquiring proficiency at a different rate (e.g., a poor reader). Thus, when readers with different learning rates receive similar amounts of instruction, achievement differences appear.

Ideally, participation in remedial or special education programs should increase the quantity of instruction children receive, thereby accelerating their achievement growth. Unfortunately, recent evidence suggest that such participation is more likely to reduce the quantity of instruction remedial and special education students actually receive (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989b). In most schools then, participating in remedial and special education resource room reading instruction reduces the amount of time spent on reading instruction and increases the instructional fragmentation. One should not expect that such programs will typically accelerate reading achievement growth.

Given the difficulties inherent in the traditional differential teaching hypothesis, and given the documented inconsistency across instructional activities offered to poor readers in the classroom and remedial or special education programs, we argue for a reconsideration of plans for such instructional interventions. Rather than needing different curricula and differential teaching, we argue that some children will simply require larger amounts of higher quality reading instruction than other children. A key element in instructional quality is curriculum consistency or coherence (Allington & Johnston, 1989; Winfield, 1987). Central to achieving curriculum consistency is instructional coordination. Currently, however, most plans for remedial and special education instruction are not designed to ensure disabled readers access to larger amounts of instruction (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989a; Kimbrough

& Hill, 1981; Haynes & Jenkins, 1986; Rowan, L. Guthrie, Lee, & G. Guthrie, 1986).

ACHIEVING INSTRUCTIONAL COORDINATION

Our alternative model for enhancing the quality of reading instruction provided low-achievement children highlights instructional coordination. The central feature of this model is adherence to a consistent and coherent curricular plan—a plan that provides the less successful learner with larger amounts of instruction within a consistent curricular framework.

Central to this model of instructional coordination is collaboration between classroom and support teachers (Allington & Broikou, 1988). Classroom and support teachers not only share knowledge about the instructional environments that each creates, but also become involved in genuine collaborative planning. For example, the classroom and special education or resource room teacher jointly develop the individualized educational plan for mainstreamed special education students and meet regularly to collaboratively plan the instruction offered in both the classroom and the resource room.

Although teacher collaboration is a key feature of instructional coordination, the development of such programs involves many factors ranging from the development of a commonly accepted philosophy of literacy instruction to the organization of a long-term staff development program. In what follows, we describe key elements of school districts in which instructional coordination was observed (see Table 1). These schools were part of a sample (n = 24) of school districts studied in two federally funded projects (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989a, 1989b; Rowan & Guthrie, 1989), and two other studies (n = 17) of schools and support instruction (Johnston et al., 1985; Walmsley & Walp, 1990). Various data were collected in these several studies, but here we draw primarily from the observational and interview data collected in each. The characteristics of schools with instructional coordination were derived from our comparative analysis of these data and represent what emerged as necessary, if not sufficient, characteristics of school district organizational and instructional plan and operations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS EXHIBITING INSTRUCTIONAL COORDINATION

Common Beliefs About Literacy Learning

The cornerstone of instructional coordination is the existence of a common set of assumptions and beliefs concerning how literacy is

TABLE 1
Five Characteristics of School Districts Exhibiting Instructional Coordination

Coordination across instructional settings and experiences rarely occurs by chance. Instructional coordination occurs, invariably, as a result of a plan. There is no single organizational plan for creating coordination in instruction, but there must be a plan, the plan must be implemented, and someone has to monitor adherence to the plan. Below are listed five characteristics of school districts where coordination was observed.

1. Within the district, there existed a common set of assumptions and beliefs concerning how literacy is learned and how literacy is best developed in classrooms; teachers and administrators in the district were aware of the philosophy for literacy instruction.

2. The district had a defined literacy curriculum, broadly conceived in terms of instructional materials and activities appropriate for different developmental levels. The defined literacy curriculum was the acknowledged curriculum for all students, regardless of achievement level. A single curriculum drove all literacy intruction in all instructional programs.

3. Collaboration among instructional staff was expected; this was especially true in the case of at-risk students who saw more than one teacher. This collaboration was constant, informal, and focused on instruction.

4. There were procedures for ensuring the adequacy of the delivery of the literacy curriculum. Planned staff development, program review, classroom observation, instructional support, and curriculum development were on-going.

5. There existed substantial shared knowledge about the literacy instruction in the district. Administrators at all levels could describe the instructional activities and materials used in classrooms and special programs, and could describe how the coordination was achieved and maintained.

learned and how literacy is best developed in classrooms (Walp & Walmsley, 1989). Most importantly, this acknowledged philosophy of reading provides a common basis from which the professional staff can approach instruction. An acknowledged philosophy can direct the professional staff to an agreed-upon set of instructional strategies, and it can provide the guidelines for selecting materials and tasks to be used in both regular and support classrooms. In the few districts where instructional coordination was found, a written philosophy of reading was typically found as well. In short, a commonly held philosophy of reading can help establish instructional collaboration.

Conversely, if there is no acknowledged set of beliefs and assumptions, then it is difficult to develop a coordinated instructional plan because multiple sets of beliefs and assumptions about reading and reading acquisition exist. And, consequently, across a school district, the teachers are almost certain to offer instruction using a variety of

instructional emphases and curricula. Thus, the lack of an acknowledged philosophy is likely to greatly increase the probability of instructional fragmentation.

An acknowledged philosophy of literacy instruction has other implications. For instance, when administrators have a working knowledge of the district philosophy of reading, they can use this knowledge as a guideline for hiring new staff, thereby building an instructional staff who share a philosophy regarding the learning process. In addition, such agreement makes it more likely that psychologists and support teachers will suggest and offer literacy instruction that is consistent with that offered in classrooms.

It is also important that this philosophy be reviewed frequently in line with developments in the field of reading. If a philosophy is written "once and for all" it can quickly become outdated in the ever-changing and evolving field of reading.

One successful way to keep a philosophy of reading current is by having annual faculty meetings involving all relevant professionals, where the philosophy is reevaluated and reestablished in light of recent developments. In addition to keeping the philosophy current and enhancing awareness and ownership of the philosophy, a group meeting such as this is also important in that, through the process of committing their views to writing, the professional staff will inevitably be forced to struggle with the validity of their definition.

Defined Literacy Curriculum

The intended purpose behind the development of a defined literacy curriculum is to create a unified system of reading instruction, one that promotes instructional consistency across programs (i.e., regular and special education programs) and grade levels. A common curriculum across programs provides students the opportunity to interact with texts in a consistent manner, rather than introducing different curricular goals and different instructional emphases in the different programs. The advantage of a unified system of instruction across grade levels is that it provides students with a cohesive program from year to year.

The defined literacy curriculum is founded on the acknowledged philosophy of reading. The curriculum presents a framework for instruction that goes beyond the basal reader scope and sequence chart. It spells out how the district believes reading is best taught and accordingly provides examples of activities and materials that reflect this hypothesis.

In one particular school in which instructional coherence was observed, the school's curriculum was grounded in the notion that reading

instruction should emphasize authentic reading and writing in the development of literacy (see Gaskins, 1988, for a discussion of some factors which help make this program successful). This literacy curriculum included classroom activities such as reading trade books and writing stories that related to and extended selected topics or themes. Activities such as these were intended to involve the students in high-level cognitive processes that required the students to proceed through the processes of reading and writing. These types of activities were not typically found in the basal reader used and yet, they were expected to be implemented across the various instruction programs (e.g., Chapter I, resource room, bilingual) and at all grade levels. The defined curriculum led to cooperative efforts towards instructional coordination across programs which resulted in a coherent and effective instructional environment, particularly for the least able students.

Collaboration Among Staff

In the schools where instructional coordination was observed, there was a sense of collegiality among the professional staff. Teachers worked together to refine what they believed to be the most effective instructional program for each student, and such collaboration resulted in instruction that was consistent across programs. These professionals were receptive and reflective of their colleagues' views and suggestions about instructional plans and pedagogy, and were casual and friendly towards one another.

Meetings among teachers were frequent and ongoing. These meetings were typically not mandated by a district or school policy, rather, they evolved out of the professional concern of teachers who shared the responsibility of teaching the same at-risk children in different programs. The conferences were not necessarily held at a regular time each week. Instead, the meetings occurred when a problem issue, or "breakthrough" needed to be discussed or shared, or simply when the teachers felt the need to touch base with each other to review what was occurring in the other's classroom.

Opportunities for communication occurred in a variety of locations throughout the school and were informally planned according to the daily schedules of each teacher. For instance, information about the students' progress and particular instructional issues were sometimes discussed while passing in the hallway, when on a break, during lunch, or before the beginning of the school day. If more time was needed, then another meeting time was scheduled.

Communication is a necessary condition if coordination is to be achieved; however, the topic and focus of the meetings is of equal

importance. In order for instructional coordination to be attained, discussions must focus on ways to support and logically extend the classroom reading program, and decisions must be made concerning who is responsible for delivering certain aspects of the instruction (Rickert, Ripple, & Coleman, 1985). Thus, it seems that the first-order goal of each meeting is to focus on instructional variables and program content that will facilitate coordination among the various instructional programs. The existence of shared beliefs and a defined curriculum were essential, it seems, to effective collaboration, and ultimately, to achieving instructional coordination.

Ensured Adequacy of Instruction

Although it is important to establish a philosophy of reading and to define a literacy curriculum, these things will have little impact on instructional coordination if they are not appropriately applied across classrooms. Thus, it is important to develop procedures for ensuring the adequacy of the delivery of the literacy curriculum. One way in which this was effectively done was through an on-going staff development program.

One observed school supplies a particularly clear example of an effective staff development program. The key to the success of the staff development program appeared to be the administrators. In this school, the administrators not only were aware of the curricula found in the classrooms, but they were also the active force behind the continued growth and development of that curricula.

In another school, the administrator had relinquished control of staff development to district-wide subject area "cabinets" that were composed of classroom and specialist teachers. These cabinets were responsible for assessing staff needs and developing a long-term staff development effort to facilitate the acquisition of instructional and curricular expertise by teachers. Recommendations for short-term and long-term staff development activities were then proposed for funding from the district budget.

The effectiveness of these administrators seems to be the result of a few factors. First, these administrators were avid readers of current research in the area of reading, and thus were quite knowledgeable about effective instructional strategies. Their knowledge allowed them to discuss pertinent instructional strategies with the professional staff and direct them to other resources which they might find helpful. Second, these administrators regularly observed and participated in the instruction of children in the classroom. Observation and participation in the classrooms allowed the administrators to be familiar with the

needs of the individual students in each classroom and allowed them to know what areas of instruction might be improved. Based on the knowledge gathered through observations and participation in the classrooms, the administrators recognized areas of instruction which demanded the most attention, and therefore developed or supported staff development in the areas of need. Third, the administrators had regular meetings with members of the instructional staff and made themselves readily available to teachers for immediate needs and concerns.

The importance of knowledgeable and involved administrators cannot be overstated. Administrators can set the tone for the way teachers approach their jobs. By word and action, the administrators emphasized the development of teachers' expertise, and expressed a desire to work with teachers to make expertise a reality and to develop the best educational program possible. The teachers recognized that their input was deemed important by administrators and thus, a positive "team" relationship was developed between the teachers and administrators. In the end, the administrators' practices helped develop a prevailing positive attitude throughout the school and an attitude that instruction can always be improved.

Existence of Shared Knowledge

An underlying theme, which was particularly apparent in the previous section, is the crucial importance of instructional leadership in the successful direction of a coordinated instructional program. It has become increasingly clear that in the design of instructional programs offered to at-risk students, such leadership is a key component to program success. Now more than ever, school district and building leaders are being recognized as the central links in aligning the resources and support necessary to coordinate categorical and regular programs.

A common characteristic of programs exhibiting instructional coordination was that central office administrators were not detached from teachers and instruction, but were instead knowledgeable of instructional activities, materials, and coordination that occurred within the schools. Effective district administrators not only set effective programs in motion, but also monitored the program closely in order to keep it running smoothly. In most cases, the effectiveness of a program reflected the effectiveness of both district and building administrators. In a few cases, the building leadership was supplied by someone other than administrators. In these cases, the leadership was usually provided by a support teacher. But, before such leadership was possible, the

administrator had to "empower" the support teacher by delegating the necessary authority.

School district administrators provided the impetus for developing the plan that led to the creation of coordinated instructional programs, and they elicited the involvement of instructional staff in the development and implementation of the programs. These administrators evidenced shared knowledge of each other's efforts and programs. Curriculum directors were aware of the curriculum and instruction of special education and remedial programs. Chapter I directors were aware of key features of the reading instruction provided in special education program: Elementary supervisors knew about reading instruction in special education rooms; regular, remedial, and special education administrators were knowledgeable about the reading instruction in each other's programs. Building administrators supported the coordinated instructional plan in various ways and this full involvement was generally central to the success of any district plan.

SUMMARY

Presently, most remedial and special education programs are detached from regular instructional programs. This detachment is not surprising when one considers that the traditional model of instruction for less-successful students is based on the notion that a separate instructional program is precisely what is necessary (Johnston et al., 1985).

Research has suggested that instructional fragmentation is detrimental to less-able readers' progress (Winfield, 1987), and in light of the apparent inadequacy of the traditional model, we have suggested an alternative plan: one calling for instructional coordination across all instructional programs.

Instructional coordination occurs, invariably, as a result of a plan. Research suggests that there are several ideologies that are capable of directing the plan successfully, but one needs to be chosen (Walmsley, 1981). Once the instructional plan has been developed, the plan must be implemented and someone must monitor adherence to the plan. The result of such a plan is a consistent and cohesive program which delivers coordinated instruction to students.

When there is no such plan, it should not be surprising to find the instructional fragmentation reported in studies of remedial and special education programs (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989a; Allington, Stuetzel, Shake, & Lamarche, 1986; Kimbrough & Hill, 1981; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1990). That is, when schools have no clear plan for the delivery of literacy instruction—especially no plan for ensuring

at-risk children have access to larger amounts of consistent, coordinated instruction—then we should not be surprised that teachers do not follow the plan but, instead, create their own individual and often divergent plans. The least able learners need the most consistent and coordinated instruction, but this is unlikely to occur simply by chance.

Coordination of instruction across instructional settings (e.g., regular classroom, Chapter I, special, and bilingual education) is a key element of instructional quality, and collaboration among the professional staff is central to coordination. However, in the pursuit of such coordination, we must not create narrowly conceived instructional support programs. We end on this note because we have observed support programs that exhibited instructional coordination, yet failed to offer well-balanced high quality literacy instruction. In these programs (Allington et al., 1986; Pike, 1985), the support instruction, while coordinated with the classroom curriculum, focused primarily on low-level and isolated skill learning with few opportunities for students to engage in "real" reading or writing activities, and little emphasis on comprehension. The curricular coordination we envision involves linking instruction across settings, but instruction that involves learners in increased opportunities to actually engage in reading and writing during instructional sessions. In short, we conclude with the reminder that collaboration and instructional coordination are key elements in the design of instruction for at-risk learners, but other critical elements must not be ignored.

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