Unraveling the Role of Curriculum in Teacher Decision-Making

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Abstract

Teachers make copious decisions each day, yet processes undergirding these decisions are elusive and have not been the subject of many in-depth investigations within special education. The purpose of this qualitative investigation, therefore, was to complete a micro-level analysis of the influence of curriculum on 11 secondary teachers’ decisions regarding reading instruction for adolescent struggling readers. Using the theoretical framework of teachers’ literacy-related decision-making proposed by Ruppar, Dymond, and Gaffney (2015), we conducted interviews and observations during one school year to examine how teachers make curricular decisions based on their access to a prescribed, research-based reading intervention curriculum. Findings indicate the availability of such a curriculum facilitated teachers’ decision-making around individualizing instruction and increased their self-efficacy, leading to the conclusion that a bi-directional relationship exists between curriculum and (a) beliefs, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) individualization. Implications for future research and practice in secondary teacher preparation are discussed.

*Keywords: decision-making, curriculum, teacher education, secondary education, reading intervention*

Unraveling the Role of Curriculum in Teacher Decision-Making

 Teachers are professionals who make multiple decisions within the context of their classroom and school community on a daily basis that profoundly impact the students they serve (McMillan, 2003; Stern & Shavelson, 1983). In reviewing the general education teacher education literature on teacher decision-making, Borko and Shavelson (1990) proposed a two-part model in which teachers’ decisions occurred during planning and when interacting with students (i.e., interactive decision-making). At both of these time points a series of factors influence teacher decision-making including: (a) information about students, (b) nature of instructional tasks, (c) context of instruction, and (d) teacher characteristics. More specifically, when making decisions teachers consider student motivation, interest, and ability, as well as the complexity of subject matter, time allotted to instruction, and policies around promotion and retention (Borko & Shavelson, 1990). Thus, teacher decision-making is a multi-faceted construct influenced by a host of contextual factors.

 More recent research within special education supports and extends the model proposed by Borko and Shavelson (1990). Ruppar, Dymond, and Gaffney (2015) conducted a grounded theory study of four secondary teachers’ decisions regarding literacy instruction for students with severe disabilities. The authors found special educators’ literacy decisions were impacted by four core concepts: (a) contexts; (b) beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; (c) self-efficacy; and (d) expectations. Specifically, “relationships among teachers’ beliefs and contexts were dynamic, and teachers’ self-efficacy provided a key link between beliefs and contexts in influencing literacy decisions” (Ruppar et al., 2015, p. 221). The present study foregrounded the role of context in secondary teacher decision-making. Specifically, we investigated the decision-making processes through which teachers engaged with a prescribed literacy curriculum to provide differentiated and targeted literacy instruction.

**Context and Teacher Decision-making**

 Classroom contexts are complex and multidimensional (Fang, 1996). Context in the study conducted by Ruppar et al. (2015) includes six subcomponents: staff and materials, colleagues, administrators and policies, collective curricular philosophies, personal and professional experiences, and professional development. Positive or negatives interactions among these subcomponents can result in context either enhancing or limiting teachers’ decision-making (Borko & Shavelson, 1990). Frequently, teachers’ decision-making must occur at the nexus of a series of practical realities such as behavior management, administrative mandates, scheduling, student ability, socio-cultural make up of the classroom, and available resources. In balancing the complexity of context, teachers undertake decision-making processes without explicit attention to the factors that influence their decisions and resulting outcomes (Fang, 1996). This does not mean teachers make decisions unsystematically; rather, the process happens tacitly without deep reflection (Rich & Hannafin, 2008). For this reason, experts have called for empirical research that can make implicit decision-making processes more explicit (Zeichner, 2005).

 Curriculum, and the degree to which it is available and mandated, represents an important component of context that deserves further attention (Bishop, Brownell, Klingner, Leko, & Galman, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015). Curriculum can be defined as “a particular way of ordering content and purposes for teaching and learning in schools” (Walker, 2002, p. 5). A wide array of materials fall under the definition of curriculum including a list of courses, a scope and sequence chart, a list of topics, textbooks, and teachers’ guides (Walker, 2002). Experts assert commercially published curricular materials “dominate teaching practice in the United States” (Ball & Cohen, 1996, p. 6); however, within and across local education agencies (LEAs) there is variation in the degree to which curriculum is available and mandated. At one extreme, teachers must implement a mandated curriculum, thereby eliminating the need or option to make decisions about curriculum selection. At the other extreme, teachers are given free reign in their curricular decisions. Studies of these two types of scenarios date back to the 1980s and collectively reveal uneven trends regarding the influence of curriculum on teacher decision-making and practice.

 The use of a prescribed curriculum results in mixed impacts on beginning general education teachers (Borko, Lalik, Livingston, Pecic, & Perry, 1986; Grossman et al., 2000; Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002). Some studies have shown beginning teachers benefit from a well-developed curriculum because it can promote greater conceptual understandings of subject matter (Grossman et al., 2000); for others, curriculum increases instructional quality (Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006). In fact, evidence suggests beginning teachers who are not bound by curriculum mandates still decide to implement highly structured curricula, because such curricula reduce the time needed for instructional planning and preparation (Borko et al., 1986). Moreover, curriculum plays a critical role in special education teacher practice in reading, particularly given the frequency with which some teachers enter the classroom through alternative pathways. Kamman (2009) used a grounded theory approach to study the influence of curriculum on three beginning special education middle school teachers who entered the classroom through a test-only alternative pathway. Access to curricular supports, which included a mandated prescribed curriculum, mentoring around the curriculum, and modeling of the curriculum, emerged as the core component in the study. Kamman’s (2009) findings indicated these curricular supports facilitated the three beginning teachers’ implementation of intensive, targeted, high quality reading instruction despite their incoming lack of knowledge about special education reading instruction. These findings suggest that inexperienced teachers benefit from prescribed curriculum materials that assist and support decision-making and practice.

The results from Kamman’s (2009) study are reinforced by Bishop et al. (2010) who investigated influences on 25 beginning special educators’ reading practices. The teachers entered the classroom via traditional and alternative routes, and were grouped according to their performance on the Reading Instruction in Special Education (RISE) classroom observation instrument (Brownell et al., 2009). Teachers’ RISE scores placed them in one of three groups: most accomplished, moderately accomplished, or least accomplished. The use of a prescribed curriculum that capitalized on principles of direct instruction was a positive influence on all the teachers. The most accomplished teachers talked about how the curriculum was a key component of their instruction and guided their decision-making. Teachers who did not have a prescribed curriculum were more likely to score in the least accomplished group, and their instruction was seen as haphazard, less intense, and often stymied due to heightened behavior management issues. The prescribed curriculum was one of a series of critical factors that supported teachers’ decision-making, behavior management, and self-efficacy resulting in higher scores on the observation instrument.

 Alternatively, some researchers found the mandated use of a prescribed curriculum resulted in dissonance for beginning teachers (Smagorinsky et al., 2002). In one instance, a beginning teacher entered the classroom with a high degree of expertise, but the curriculum she was expected to implement did not align with her well-defined beliefs (Smagorinsky et al., 2002). In another instance, teachers reported the school-wide adoption of the prescribed reading curriculum *Success For All* constrained their autonomy, decision-making, and creativity (Datnow & Castellano, 2000). In a third analysis, the adherence to a prescribed curriculum caused dissonance but for different reasons. Dingle, Brownell, Leko, Boardman, and Haager (2011) examined the influence of professional development, context, and individual qualities on elementary special educators’ instructional practices in reading. The research team conducted case studies of three special educators, one of whom entered the classroom via an alternative route. The three teachers participated in a year-long reading professional development (PD) initiative focused on word study and fluency. Among the key findings was the degree to which teachers profited from the PD was dependent on how willing they were to modify or enhance the curricula they used. Teachers who implemented a prescribed direct instruction curriculum demonstrated reluctance to veer from the curriculum even when student performance data indicated the curriculum was not completely addressing students’ instructional needs.

Collectively, there is a lack of consensus in the research on prescribed curriculum and the degree to which it facilitates or constrains teacher decision-making and practice. This signals a more complex and understudied phenomenon may be in operation. The present study is a direct response to the need for more research in this area.

**Situating the Study in Reading Instruction for Secondary Students**

 Ideally the need to make decisions around reading instruction would be limited to elementary teachers, because reading instruction is thought to begin and end before students advance to middle and high school (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). Unfortunately, this is not the current reality. Approximately 71% of English Language Learners (ELLs), 42% of Black students, and 34% of Hispanic students read below basic level in eighth grade according to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Statistics on the reading achievement of students with disabilities are similarly disconcerting. Approximately 63% of eighth and twelfth grade students with disabilities read below basic level (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The result is that basic reading instruction is becoming a necessity in secondary schools. This, in turn, means secondary teachers must make decisions about curriculum and best practices in reading instruction. Unlike their elementary counterparts, however, secondary teachers who are responsible for providing basic reading instruction face two substantial challenges: (a) they receive little to no preparation in basic reading instruction (Hall, 2005) and (b) they must overcome adolescents’ reluctance to engage in reading instruction— reluctance that stems from years of negative literacy experiences in academic settings (Alvermann, 2001; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Reeves, 2004). For these reasons, the research base underlying elementary teachers’ literacy decision-making process is not completely generalizable to the secondary context.

 We argue there is an urgent need for research situated at the secondary level that can inform future research, practice, and teacher education around reading instruction for older struggling readers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to uncover and explain the relationships between curriculum and decision-making for secondary teachers who teach reading to students with disabilities and struggling readers. By exploring these relationships we can make recommendations to local education agencies (LEAs) around curriculum adoption, as well as better understand how to provide more effective teacher preparation at the preservice and inservice level around the selection and use of various curricula. We also engaged in this research as a way to build the empirical base of studies on teacher cognition in relation to secondary students with disabilities and struggling readers.

**Conceptual Framework**

 Our intent was to take a micro-level view of context by focusing on curriculum and its role on teacher decision-making. In doing so, we built upon the conceptual framework for special education teachers’ literacy decisions proposed by Ruppar et al. (2015). This framework describes and explains the interactions of contextual components with (a) beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; (b) expectations, and (c) self-efficacy. Using this framework, Ruppar and colleagues describe how teachers’ approaches to individualization illuminated their beliefs around the purpose of instructional decision-making. In this instance, individualization is defined as the level of attention to the individual needs and/or interests of students in their material selection. While some teachers emphasized individual needs in their decision-making processes, others sought curricula that could meet a large number of students simultaneously. Expectations, defined as teachers’ varied beliefs around the abilities of their students to master literacy skills, played the most significant role in the decisions they made around literacy instruction. Teachers who viewed their students as capable of learning literacy skills demonstrated increased self-efficacy, which in turn resulted in increased individualized instruction. Ruppar and colleagues used Guskey and Passaro’s (1994) definition of self-efficacy as “teachers’ belief or conviction that they can influence how well students learn” (p. 628, as cited in Ruppar et al., 2015). On the other hand, teachers who viewed students as less capable proved less efficacious and addressed literacy only in a minimal capacity. As a result of the uneven levels of teacher efficacy, the authors conclude that self-efficacy is the primary mediating factor between context and teacher decision-making.

 Using the framework established by Ruppar et al. (2015) we investigated two research questions related to the contextual factor *staff and materials* defined as “the availability of assistance and literacy materials” (p. 216).

1. What is the interplay among curriculum, beliefs, and decision-making for teachers who implement a research-based secondary reading curriculum and those who do not?
2. What is the interplay among curricular decision-making, self-efficacy, and individualization for teachers who implement a research-based secondary reading curriculum and those who do not?

**Methods**

 We employed qualitative methods to conduct an in-depth examination of teachers’ decision-making processes. Qualitative methods are useful when attempting to describe and explain phenomena, particularly as they occur in lived experiences (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative methods promote researchers’ constructions of comprehensive, detailed, and holistic accounts of that which is being questioned (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methods were particularly appropriate for this study as we sought to explore the processes through which teachers made decisions based on the characteristics of their specific context. Moreover, qualitative research methods enabled us to make these decision-making processes explicit to researchers and teacher educators, as well as the participants themselves.

**Positionality**

When using qualitative methods it is important researchers situate themselves within the context of the research study (Patton, 2002). Describing one’s positionality is instrumental in bringing forth potential biases and hidden assumptions, thereby promoting credibility and trustworthiness (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Patton, 2002; Trainor & Graue, 2014).

We approached this study from a situated cognition theoretical perspective (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Situated cognition acknowledges the important role one’s environment plays in cognitive processes like learning and decision-making. Cognition cannot be separated from activity; instead, cognition is situated in activity and mediated by individual perceptions and experiences accumulated over a lifetime (Brown et al., 1989). Additionally, cognitive processes like decision-making are influenced by the contexts in which teachers work. As discussed previously contextual features include, but are not limited to, student characteristics, curricular resources, administrative mandates, scheduling, and professional development.

In terms of literacy instruction for secondary struggling readers and students with disabilities, we believe adolescence is not too late to intervene. Interventions should be age appropriate, research-based, and aligned with guidelines from the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) and the *Reading Next Report* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Such recommendations include: (a) explicit and systematic instruction in word study, fluency, and comprehension; (b) collaborative learning opportunities; (c) the incorporation of technology; (d) high quality professional development for teachers; (e) intensive, individualized interventions; and (f) the use of diverse texts.

**Setting**

This study took place in a large mid-Western school district and was part of a larger study (Leko et al., 2014; 2015) that resulted from a collaborative endeavor between the research team and school district leaders. Within the district of over 25,000 students in grades PK-12, approximately 55% of students come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, 14% are identified with a disability, and 50% come from families who are economically disadvantaged (WINSS, 2013). District leaders sought our help as external evaluators in charge of collecting and analyzing data on teachers’ implementation of the research-based reading intervention program *System 44*. District administrators selected six middle schools with similar student populations and contexts to participate in the research study. Four schools were assigned the *System 44* reading intervention program, and two schools were assigned as business-as-usual comparison sites.

**Participants**

Eleven teachers participated in the study. Five teachers (identified with the pseudonyms Ben, Jill, Monica, Pam, and Stacy) implemented *System 44*. Hereafter we refer to these teachers as *implementers*. These teachers were committed to improving the reading achievement of middle school struggling readers and students with disabilities and were experienced working with such students in their roles as Language Arts (L.A.) teachers, reading intervention teachers, or special educators. With the exception of Ben who participated in a brief pilot of *System 44* the previous spring, the teachers were new program implementers.

All students at the four schools assigned to *System 44* (n = 1,743) took the Scholastic Phonics Inventory (SPI), which is a screening assessment that is part of the *System 44* program. Students who earned an SPI fluency score below 22 (out of 60 possible) were identified as needing basic reading instruction and attended a 50-min *System 44* resource class each day that was separate from their general education English/L.A. class. With the exception of Jill who only taught students with significant cognitive disabilities, the teachers implemented *System 44* with heterogeneous student populations that included students with low- and high-incidence disabilities, English Language Learners (ELLs), and struggling readers.

Six teachers (identified with the pseudonyms Abby, Kelly, May, Anne, Meg, and Sandy) taught reading intervention classes at the comparison school sites. We refer to these teachers as *comparison teachers*. At these school sites, students whose state assessment and Lexile scores were below the cut off score for entry into *Read 180* were enrolled in a 55-min reading intervention class as part of their daily schedule. The teachers who provided instruction in these classes had instructional freedom when providing reading intervention, meaning they held responsibility for selecting curricula to teach and specific reading skills to target. Table 1 provides more information on the study participants, their schools, and classroom contexts.

***System 44* Intervention**

*System 44* is a reading intervention program designed to remediate older students’ decoding and fluency deficits. The program is produced by Scholastic and designed to be the precursor to the comprehension intervention program *Read 180*. *System 44* incorporates several research-based reading intervention practices including intense, individualized interventions focused at the word and text level carried out in small groups of two to four students for a minimum of 50 min per day (Scammacca et al., 2007; Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2012).

**Content and structure.***System 44* uses principles of direct instruction to teach students the 44 phonemes present in the English language. Reading fluency using high interest controlled readability texts is the second major component of the program. Daily instruction includes four elements: initial whole group warm-up, individualized computer-based instruction, small group teacher-led instruction, and independent reading. A daily lesson begins with the teacher delivering 5-10 min of whole group instruction followed by students rotating among computer, small group, and independent reading stations. The program is designed for a 90-min or 60-min instructional block. The computer-based instruction uses adaptive technology, which adjusts instruction based on individual students’ progress. Program workbooks used during small group instruction include the *Decodable Digest—*decoding skill-based reading passages*—* and the *44 book,* which is a consumable that provides additional decoding and spelling practice.

Table 1

*Teacher, School, and Classroom Characteristics*

| Teacher Characteristics | School Characteristics | Classroom Characteristics |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Teacher | Years Exp./Ethnicity | Teaching Assignment  | Total Students | % FRL | % Minority | % SWD | Class size(s)  | Student Characteristics |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | SR | ELL | SWD |
| System 44 Teachers |
| Ben | 25/White | Gen. ed reading \*  | 381 | 71 | 66 | 19 | 6-11 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Jill | 10/White | Special education  | 379 | 62 | 63 | 17 | 6 |  |  | ✓ |
| Monica | 15/White | Gen. ed L.A.\*  | 560 | 37 | 52 | 20 | 10-12 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Pam | 36/White | Special education  | 379 | 62 | 63 | 17 | 3-7 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Stacy | 19/White | Gen. ed L.A. | 423 | 47 | 43 | 18 | 7-15 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Comparison Teachers |
| Abby | 12/White | Special education | 631 | 65 | 61 | 21 |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Kelly | 24/White | Special education | 631 | 65 | 61 | 21 |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| May | 12/White | Gen. ed reading & Special education | 631 | 65 | 61 | 21 |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Anne | 20/White | Gen. ed reading & math | 631 | 65 | 61 | 21 |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Meg | 4/White | Gen. ed reading\* | 731 | 21 | 38 | 9 |  |  | ✓ |  |
| Sandy | 7/White | Gen. ed reading\* | 731 | 21 | 38 | 9 |  | ✓ |  | ✓ |

*Note.* Years Exp.= years of teaching experience; Cert.= certification; SR= struggling reader; ELL= English language learner; SWD= students with disabilities; L.A.= Language Arts; FRL= free/reduced lunch rate; SWD= students with disabilities; \*= Masters degree in Reading; Gen. ed=General education

*System 44* is managed using the Scholastic Achievement Manager (SAM) computer-based assessment and data monitoring system, which provides teachers with series of reports to help them group students for differentiated small group instruction. The goal of *System 44* is for students to successfully complete all of their assigned decoding skills on the computer and the graduate to *Read 180*. *System 44* is best considered a prescribed curriculum, providing teachers with all materials, assessments, lessons plans, and grouping recommendations.

**Teacher training and evaluation*.*** The teachers implementing *System 44* attended an upfront 2-day summer training delivered by Scholastic representatives. During these trainings teachers learned about the overall purpose and structure of the program, how to implement it, and how to use the SAM system. Follow up coaching consisted of monthly observations and debriefs with the district administrator who coordinated the *Read 180* and *System 44* programs. Teachers could also call or email this district administrator anytime with questions. Twice during the school year a Scholastic representative observed teachers’ instruction and provided feedback.

**Data Sources**

**Interviews.** The research team conducted three semi-structured interviews with each implementer in October, February, and April or May, and two interviews with the comparison teachers in October and May. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 80 min, were audio recorded, and then transcribed verbatim, resulting in 180 single-spaced pages of transcripts. Implementers were asked about their perceptions of the program, how they were using it, and decisions around implementing and adapting it and why. Comparison teachers were asked about their beliefs on reading instruction, how they taught reading, and why they made particular decisions around reading instruction. Interviews and observations occurred one after another so teachers could answer questions based on observation data.

**Observation field notes.** We observed each implementer three times during the study in October, February, and May. Comparison teachers were observed twice— once in October and once in May. In total, the research team observed 33 hours and 57 minutes of classroom instruction. For all observations, two research team members took detailed field notes on a laptop computer. At the end of each observation the two team members debriefed and compared field notes to verify each other’s interpretations and come to consensus on what was observed and how to label it. Observation field notes were used primarily as a secondary data source to contextualize and triangulate teachers’ interview statements.

**Implementation fidelity ratings.** Following each observation, the two team members debriefed and came to consensus in rating teachers using the *In-Classroom Observation and Action Plan* tool that comes with the *System 44* program. This 20-item tool assessed teachers’ fidelity of implementation on classroom setup and management, instructional support, and data interpretation using a 1-4 Likert scale with 1 indicating *novice*, 2 *apprentice*, 3 *practitioner* and 4 *expert*. Raters sum the individual item scores to calculate overall instructional proficiency. The maximum possible score is 80. An overall score of 71 or higher indicates expert; a score of 51-70 is apprentice; 31-50 is practitioner, and below 30 is novice. Findings explaining differences in teachers’ fidelity of implementation are reported elsewhere (Leko, Roberts, & Pek, 2015); thus, for the purposes of this paper we simply report teachers’ overall ratings as a way to contextualize teachers’ instruction and the degree to which they implemented the curriculum as intended. Ben and Monica scored at the expert level across all observations. Jill and Stacy scored at the apprentice level on the first observation, then increased to the practitioner level for the second and third observations. Pam scored at the apprentice level across all observations.

**Artifacts.** In several instances teachers shared classroom artifacts like lesson plans, worksheets, assessment reports, and student work samples with members of the research team. We used these artifacts as secondary data sources for triangulation and discussion pieces during interviews.

**Analysis**

To facilitate our analyses we stored and manipulated the data using the qualitative software program NVivo. NVivo was useful given our large data set and need for comparative analyses between the two groups of teachers. We used two levels of qualitative analysis to illuminate teachers’ decision-making processes. In the first level of analysis, we used a deductive approach. We created a list of a priori codes based on the four core concepts found in the Ruppar et al. (2015) framework of teacher decision-making. We then applied these codes to our data to determine conceptual consistencies or overlaps. In completing this step we reviewed and coded teachers’ data individually and then collapsed the data within teacher groups (i.e., implementers vs. comparison teachers). We then completed a second level of inductive analysis using the three-stage coding process (i.e., open, axial, and selective) associated with grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We reanalyzed the data and identified new codes that emerged specific to our data. As part of this second level of analysis, we identified open and axial codes and grouped them under broader selective codes or themes that were distinct from the Ruppar et al. (2015) framework. Like in the deductive stage of data analysis we first coded individual teachers and then combined them according to their group.

The final stage of data analysis was the cross-group comparison. We created case nodes in NVivo for implementers and comparison teachers to compare the two groups. Using a case matrix, we conducted a comparative analysis of the two groups based on the themes from the Ruppar et al. (2015) framework and the themes that emerged from the indicative second round of coding.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

We employed a series of procedures to promote trustworthiness and credibility including the use of multiple data sources that allowed for triangulation (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Data collection based on multiple data sources within and across 11 participants resulted in a large breadth and depth of evidence. We also engaged in investigator triangulation by peer debriefing throughout the entire study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). During interviews we employed member checking to verify information and interpretations. Finally, the use of NVivo, which can export data files and corresponding codes, provided an audit trail for data analyses.

**Findings**

**Interplay between Curriculum, Beliefs, and Decision-making**

 We explored the interplay among context, beliefs, and decision-making for *System 44* implementers and comparison teachers. Context in our study focused on curricular influences in accordance with whether teachers were expected to implement *System 44* or a curriculum of their choosing.

 **Comparison teachers.** In the absence of a specific reading intervention curriculum, comparison teachers selected curricular materials based on what they believed were important and universal literacy skills.Across comparison teachers we observed a vast array of skills and activities being taught including vocabulary, fluency, read alouds, figurative language, idiomatic phrases, and sustained silent reading, among others. Four comparison teachers (Abby, Meg, Anne, and Sandy) amassed or created their own materials that would address a multitude of reading skills. When asked about her instruction, Anne stated, “There is no cohesive curriculum. I feel mine at least is not really well mashed together. It’s kind of disjointed.” Abby described her approach by stating

 Words Their Way I use a little bit, I mostly am creating stuff on my own. I mean I’m not using any sort of package program, a lot of times I’ll start with a novel. So I kind of pick something that I think is at an appropriate level for them and something that is going to be at high interest.

Observation data corroborate Abby’s eclectic approach. During the first observation, she had students read a poem aloud and then brainstorm rhyming words. Next she guided students through completing a vocabulary four-square map for the word “headache.” Similarly, Sandy described deciding on what to teach based on what she believed students needed stating

 I observe my students not only in the reading classes but also in other environments so there are times when I decide to do something, I might have to change it possibly due to need for example, learning how to read expository text, if they’re reading something in science, I might be delivering mini lessons on how to attack a science article.

 Two teachers—Kelly and May— had access to commercial curricula. Kelly decided to implement a reading intervention program she had used in a prior teaching position. The program was designed for students with hearing impairments, and Kelly reported adapting it for her hearing-abled students. She decided to use the program because it was familiar, available, and addressed multiple skills as she described, “spelling, it has comprehension, it works on words and phrases and sentence writing. It has very simple stories, each story is built on the next…. The stories also, when you start with the beginning stories, they’re very visual.”

During Kelly’s two observations, we observed students rotating through a set of centers based on the curriculum Kelly implemented. Across the two observations the center work included brainstorming the multiple meanings of the word “wave”, writing sentences with targeted vocabulary words, reading curriculum-based stories, completing a spelling test with the teacher, writing stories about a rabbit, completing phonics worksheets, and practicing spelling words.

Interestingly, May began the school year without a prescribed curriculum and then gained access to a direct instruction reading program. She decided to supplement her instruction by including writing instruction explaining,

 We were told that we would be using *SRA's Direct Instruction* program and *Words Their Way* as a kind of like our core…. We didn’t have those materials when the school started, and so the beginning of the year was mixed of stuff and me just kind of getting the feel of what the students did know and didn't know. When the materials arrived I started doing both *Words Their Way* and the direct instruction SRA program with them, and I also have tried to mix in some writing because I feel like that's really important and they are not getting writing instruction any where else.

All of the comparison teachers also reported making curricular decisions they believed would advance student interest and engagement. As alluded to earlier, Abby described her selection process by stating, “… so I kind of pick something that I think is at an appropriate level for them and something that is going to be at high interest.” Similarly, May’s focus on student interest is evident when she stated, “I think high quality reading instruction needs to be really engaging towards the students in order for them to be motivated to read.” Technology played an important role in student engagement for some comparison teachers. Kelly incorporated technology because her students “feel more comfortable when they have that technology in their hand and I think that’s part of what makes a good reading program.” Additionally, to increase student engagement, the comparison teachers at the same school decided to mix groups across classes for one unit so students would have an opportunity to build community and collaborate with new people.

 Finally, comparison teachers’ curricular decision-making was also influenced by their beliefs about particular disability labels and resulting student need. Without mandated curricular materials, comparison teachers selected intervention materials they believed were appropriate based on an individual student’s disability category. In one example Kelly stated she had to “ask questions differently” for a student who is “hearing impaired and autistic.” In another example, Anne recounted how she provided a student who is visually impaired and uses a wheel chair with books at a lower reading level and opportunities to work on letter sounds. She also explained that the student uses “switches that allow her to listen to certain things” even though Anne admitted not fully understanding the assistive technology device as she is “not the girl’s case manager.” For another student who uses a wheelchair, Meg established a classroom community of support. Meg described how she developed “a strong community so that they can use their classmates as resources. I know Soo Won [student who uses a wheelchair] is very comfortable asking her classmates that are right next to her for help.” Although well-intentioned, comparison teachers relied on their generic beliefs or understandings about students’ disabilities without drawing on data regarding students’ present levels of performance. With the exception of Abby who noted students took the Flynt-Cooter comprehensive reading inventory, there were no interview or observation data to indicate comparison teachers based their curriculum decisions on diagnostic or progress monitoring data. The result was instruction that lacked a clear scope, sequence, and purpose and did not resemble targeted and intensive intervention in basic reading skills. Without collecting or analyzing student data, comparison teachers’ beliefs were never challenged. They had no reason to think their instruction was not meeting the needs of their secondary students with intense reading intervention needs. In this way, the lack of a mandated or prescribed curriculum resulted in comparison teachers’ beliefs having a unidirectional influence on their curricular decision-making.

 **Implementers.** For implementers the mandated use of *System 44* removed the need to make decisions about what to teach. Their decisions, therefore, centered on how best to implement the program and who should access it. In terms of beliefs, unlike the comparison teachers whose beliefs largely went unchecked due to the instructional freedom of their context, the use of *System 44* challenged the implementers’ pre-existing beliefs. Specifically, all implementers were surprised to realize their middle school students still struggled with basic phonics skills. Ben described this revelation as an “eye opening experience.” Stacy described her surprise by recounting an experience with a particular student

 And I was shocked to discover how low some of them are. I have some 6th graders, one in particular didn’t have the alphabet memorized by sight…and he made it all the way to sixth grade with that lack of skill.

 In addition to challenging teachers’ beliefs about students’ needs, *System 44* also provided the materials that teachers needed to facilitate appropriate reading instruction, thereby eliminating the need for implementers to hunt for materials they believed would be appropriate for their students— a finding that starkly contrasts the reality of the comparison teachers. Stacy said the program really helped her “get back” the basics of reading after teaching middle school for so long. Monica found the program useful “especially for old dogs like me who um, learn new tricks right along with the kids.” Jess felt that she could not have been able to address phonics effectively without the *System 44* materials, “I think it’s definitely helped, I think it’s hard in middle school to work on phonics but I think that’s what these kids need and I can say that I wouldn’t have been able to provide that without the program.” Ben relished the opportunity to work with students who struggle with phonics because “we didn’t have that [*System 44*] before.”

 Although the use of *System 44* challenged implementers’ existing beliefs about secondary students’ reading needs, the program did little to challenge teachers’ beliefs around student behavior. In fact, the structure of the program and teachers’ desire to implement the program with a high degree of fidelity actually fostered implementers’ beliefs that students who posed behavioral challenges should be excluded from *System 44* classrooms. Being part of the *System 44* classroom was often touted as an exclusive honor by implementers. For instance Monica described the program to her students as, “an expensive program and that we chose you [the students] to be in this program and that we have high hopes so it’s a real honor to be chosen for this program.” Although implementers, such as Monica, Stacy and Pam, deliberately used this type of language with intent to minimize the stigma of a remedial reading class, the notion of “being chosen” had negative connotations for students who were excluded from the program due to behavioral issues. Stacy advocated for a *System 44* “enrollment checklist” that included both academic and behavior skills. This proposed checklist would include behavioral competencies such as “ability to stay focused for 20 minutes at a time, ability to transition to a new activity and remain focused, and motivated to learn.” She believed that students who qualified academically but not behaviorally should not be allowed to participate in the *System 44* program because she believed that “they will not be successful in the design of a program.” Thus, the perception of the program being an honor for which students must be “chosen,” allowed implementers to restrict initial access.

 In addition to initial entrance into the program, students deemed as behavioral issues were sometimes removed from the program mid-stream. *System 44* requires that students work independently on a computer while the instructor works with small groups of students on targeted skills. This focus on independent learning proved challenging for students with behavior issues and teachers often lamented the fact that these students distracted other students from learning. For instance, Ben described

 There’s a couple really challenging kids who either have Tourette’s or CD [cognitive disability] or are very loud and it’s just remarkable how the focus of these children are when this boy with Tourette’s Syndrome, is just making a lot of sounds and they’re right there.

 At one school site, students who were distractors risked being kicked out of the program all together. Monica described her approach as

 I don’t usually kick too many kids out but yes, it is, I’m very much supported if a kid is not able to work independently or gets into other people’s faces or I can trust on the computer. They are gone.

 As opposed to the comparison teachers, the use of the *System 44* materials as a contextual variable facilitated a bi-directional relationship between context and beliefs. The materials challenged implementers’ existing beliefs around middle school students and basic reading instruction. In return, the teachers were then able to implement *System 44* materials that could address the specific phonics needs of their students. However, beliefs about students’ behavior went unchecked and resulted in the exclusion of students who could have benefited from the intensive reading instruction.

**Interplay among Curriculum, Self-Efficacy, Individualization, and Decision-making**

Our second research question examined how differences in curricular access for implementers and comparison teachers constrain or enhance teacher self-efficacy and individualization of instruction for students with disabilities and struggling readers.

**Comparison teachers.** Comparison teachers, in general, reported low levels of self-efficacy regarding their reading instruction. Without guiding materials, they struggled to identify appropriate instructional outcomes and materials. May expressed her exasperation when she said

 I am really trying to figure out through this year what constitutes high quality reading instruction for students who have been struggling for years and years…and I am not really sure at this point what’s high quality reading instruction for them.

Sandy also lacked confidence but for a different reason. Sandy could not determine how to structure her instruction to meet the needs of all students in her class recounting, “But I feel like I wasn’t addressing the needs of particularly the pre-K readers. And kind of like, teaching to the middle, so to speak, and you don’t get either end.” Comparison teachers blamed the district for providing minimal resources to address secondary students’ reading needs. Anne stated, “I just don’t feel like we always have the material that would be right.” Sandy reiterated Anne’s concern when she said, “And you know I’m not confident that what I’m providing for the kids is the best level instruction without books that they can read.” Sandy went on to say

 There are little to no available materials that I’ve asked for that no one seems to have any idea of what to come up with beyond a resources book such as *Words Their Way* and to have that directed to me. But that’s not a curriculum and that’s not students’ books to read, that’s just a book for teachers to use.

In the absence of appropriate materials, comparison teachers lacked confidence that they could adequately meet the needs of their struggling readers.

 In addition to low self-efficacy, comparison teachers also struggled with individualization. In particular, they cited the wide range of skill levels in their classrooms as limiting their ability to effectively individualize instruction. Kelly stated the most challenging part of providing reading instruction

 is trying to manage the variety of levels that these students are on…So it’s just trying to come up with a variety of materials that reach all the students that I have to teach in the same class period at the same time.

 Like Kelly, Anne faced difficultly trying to individualize, but she cited finding the “extra time” needed to modify her instruction as the primary culprit. May tried to do a variety of activities in order to meet students “where they are at” but found it “challenging to do so because they are at various levels.” Overall, the lack of curricular materials for teaching literacy limited comparison teachers’ self-efficacy and also their ability to individualize instruction. Moreover, the relationship between self-efficacy and individualization had a reciprocal effect. Comparison teachers’ inability to individualize without appropriate curricular materials lowered their self-efficacy. The comparison teachers understood their students had individualized needs, however they were at a loss when it came to making decisions about how to appropriately individualize instruction in classrooms with students of such widely varying needs. Quite often, we observed comparison teachers teaching the same lesson or skill to all students in their class, even though they acknowledged having a wide range of abilities to address. For example, during Anne’s first observation, all of the students sat in rows and brainstormed a list of adjectives to describe a kiwi that she displayed at the front of the room. Then all of the students wrote two or three sentences about kiwis.

**Implementers.** In contrast to comparison teachers, implementers reported high levels of self-efficacy regarding their reading instruction. This heightened self-efficacy proved novel to Jess who described previous teaching experiences as “pulling my hair out before trying to come up with activities that were appropriate and useful and helpful to students.” The regular progress-monitoring element of *System 44* helped implementers feel confident in their instruction. Jess, Monica, and Sandy described significant improvements in students’ reading scores as exhilarating and encouraging. Ben described the joy he felt when a student who had struggled for a long time “can now show what he knows, his grandparents who are taking care of him can see that change and that confidence in reading.” Implementers appreciated the structure of the program and its ability to inform instruction. Monica, for instance, liked she got “to know what their [students’] goals are” and Ben liked that the computer “tells him what to teach” based on students’ daily performance. For Ben, the direction the computer provided did not result in a feeling of lost autonomy. Instead, Ben capitalized on the computer as a way to build his own expertise and provide what he considered to be more comprehensive reading instruction stating

Kids who are struggling at this level, just don’t know the phonics kind of piece to it, it [computer] helps engage them in that phonics piece. Then I can take those students and work with them in a more holistic way, you know small group reading and reading workshop and I can use my other techniques that I have at their text level.

 Similarly, other teachers reported making decisions that would better facilitate the program in their individual classrooms. Jess who taught students with significant disabilities decided to expand to meet her students’ social needs stating, “and I started doing hidden curriculum to work on some social skills with them in the program too.” Pam mentioned how she made decisions to foster even greater student engagement stating

 I, maybe not so much adapted but supplemented. I make like Bingo games and word games. I made up a lot of games that use the vocabulary, the sounds and the concepts of *System 44* to kind of keep it more [laughs], you know, to keep the information in front of kids, and make it fun.

 Implementers also cited an increased ability to individualize instruction. Implementers lauded *System 44*’s individualized approach as extremely helpful in meeting students’ particular needs. Ben explained, “Every person is different. And what’s powerful about *System 44* is that it targets those differences. It’s not like everyone is on the same lesson, everybody is going on their individual strengths.” Observation data triangulates Ben’s comments. Across all three of Ben’s observations, we saw him use *System 44* data printouts to group students according to their specific skill needs. He also used the printouts to conference individually with students about their progress and achievement. Similarly, Pam noted the program meets the student where they are with instruction that is appropriate for a wide range of reading abilities, including secondary non-readers. For Ben, the computer-based progress monitoring helped him to create individual goals based on students’ needs. In addition, when students worked independently on the computer program, he was able to work with individually with students. Jess said she loved the “direct instruction approach at each student’s individual needs. Without having to go through each student.”

**Discussion**

This study’s findings illuminate the complex role curriculum plays in teacher decision-making in the area of secondary reading. Teachers who were expected to use a prescribed, research-based reading intervention curriculum spent less time deciding what to teach or where to access engaging, age-appropriate materials. Instead, their decisions centered on how to make the curriculum work best in their contexts and how to leverage it to promote individualized instruction. To make *System 44* work well in their contexts, teachers also made decisions about how to implement and adapt the program. In trying to implement the program with a high degree of fidelity, *System 44* teachers made decisions about curriculum access in relation to student behavior that sometimes resulted in students with challenging behaviors being excluded from the program. We posit this is an example of teachers making decisions that tip the implementation fidelity/adaptation scale (Leko, 2015) in the wrong direction.

Comparison teachers’ decisions centered on what aspects of reading to teach and what types of materials students would find engaging. Their decision-making process was based largely on their beliefs, assumptions, and prior experiences as opposed to being grounded in data on students’ needs. Their decisions were also influenced by what was readily available within their contexts—findings that closely mirror extant research indicating curricular decisions are made at the intersection of teachers’ particular contexts and personal beliefs (Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1992).

 Interestingly, both groups of teachers recognized the diverse range of needs in their classrooms and the need to individualize. However, the *System 44* program made individualization a feasible and achievable outcome for the implementers. While it has been argued that prescribed, scripted curricula are too rigid (Datnow & Castellano, 2000) and “de-skill” the professional work of teachers (Apple, 1990), none of the implementers noted the use of *System 44* limited their creativity or autonomy. In fact, evidence from this study suggests *System 44* increased teacher self-efficacy and individualization by providing explicit structures for progress monitoring, goal setting, and differentiated instructional activities. In turn, implementers’ ability to meet students’ needs effectively promoted their self-efficacy. This corroborates findings from the teacher education literature that curriculum can improve teachers’ reading instructional practices (Bishop et al., 2010; Kamman, 2009) and increase their confidence in their instructional decisions (Kauffman et al., 2002).

In relating our findings to the Ruppar et al. (2015) framework, we propose the existence of specific curricula, like *System 44*, as having a bi-directional relationship with all three areas: beliefs, self-efficacy, and individualization (see Figure 1). In our study, the use of *System 44* actually disrupted teacher’s beliefs about causes of student learning, as well as student outcomes and capacities for learning. Specifically, *System 44* illuminated the fact that middle school students can and do struggle with basic decoding. This disruption then had a ripple effect on teacher beliefs and self-efficacy. As teachers’ beliefs were disrupted and recalibrated, they were then able to individualize based on student needs rather than preexisting assumptions. The ability to individualize facilitated increased self-efficacy because teachers saw that they were addressing a wide range of diverse needs. We indicate this ripple effect by drawing arrows between expectations, beliefs, and self-efficacy.



*Figure 1*. Revised framework for teacher decision-making. Adapted from Ruppar, Gaffney, and Dymond (2015).

At the same time, the use of the *System 44* materials provided the resources with which teachers could individualize with increased ease. Moreover, the program’s progress monitoring systems helped teachers witness improved student outcomes, which also increased self-efficacy. For this reason, we have incorporated a bi-directional relationship between staff and materials and teacher expectations, beliefs, and self-efficacy. The significance of *System 44* for implementers was not only the disruption of their beliefs, but also its ability to support individualization and self-efficacy through differentiated materials and regular progress monitoring. Thus, the unique qualities of *System 44* facilitated positive interactions in ways that other programs may not.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. Although members of the research team conducted member checks with the participating teachers based on their interview and observation data, the team was unable to solicit teachers’ feedback on the overall findings. Themes pertinent to the comparison teachers are based on only two interviews and observations per participant. Additional comparison teacher interview and observation data might have surfaced negative evidence or led to richer case descriptions. With the exception of Ben, all of the implementers were in their first year using *System 44*. Findings could look different if we were studying the decision-making processes of teachers who were implementing a more familiar curriculum.

**Implications for Research**

Perhaps the most compelling direction for future research is the interplay between curricular materials, teacher decision-making, teacher efficacy, and student outcomes. Results of this study cannot provide a commentary on whether, or to what degree, teachers’ decision-making with respect to curriculum affects student outcomes. Our findings, however, indicate future research in this area should not theorize the connection between these components in a linear fashion. Rather, such studies should be conceptualized to account for the complex and interconnected relationships among teacher decision-making, curriculum, and student outcomes (Fang, 1996).

Future research should also investigate the similarities and differences between elementary and secondary teachers’ reading-related decisions. As basic reading instruction is a predominant focus at the elementary level, and therefore given more emphasis in elementary teacher preparation, we wonder whether the mandated use of a prescribed reading curriculum would lead to the same outcomes in terms of elementary teachers’ decision-making.

**Implications for Practice**

The implementation of a prescribed reading intervention curriculum was helpful in promoting secondary teachers’ self-efficacy and ability to individualize instruction. An implication from this finding is that administrators at the district and school level should think carefully about providing secondary teachers with supportive curricula that free them from the need to make decisions about basic instructional materials and mechanics to more purposeful, “higher-level” decisions about individual students’ needs. We argue, however, that in trying to implement such curricula with a high degree of fidelity, teachers should be cautious that their decisions do not exclude or marginalize students who are in need of reading intervention. In this way it seems critical teacher educators support teachers as they engage with curricular materials and reflect on the impact curricular materials play in their decision-making.

 Furthermore, our data demonstrated that secondary teachers in both groups held the assumption that secondary students did not require fundamental reading skills. However, this assumption was challenged in the implementer group, as they realized many students benefited from basic reading instruction. Pre-service and in-service teachers need training to guard against this assumption as well as the knowledge and tools necessary to provide learning opportunities in fundamental reading skills at the secondary level. However, our study also demonstrated the importance of having age-appropriate materials that honored secondary students’ interests. Thus, elementary reading programs should not be transported to the secondary level without thoughtful adjustments in content.

 The comparison teachers faced an uphill battle in trying to respond to the needs of their students without a supportive curriculum and sufficient preparation in basic reading instruction. We applaud their efforts. We urge special education teacher preparation programs to devote more time and energy to preparing secondary teachers in the area of reading instruction and related intensive interventions. In doing so, secondary teachers will be able to approach basic reading instruction with more confidence, maximize the potential of prescribed curricula, and ultimately make decisions that will more effectively meet students’ individual needs.

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