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# Curriculum Materials for Elementary Reading: Shackles and Scaffolds for Four Beginning Teachers

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## Abstract

The purpose of this longitudinal study was to learn how beginning elementary teachers understood and used curriculum materials for teaching reading, and how, in turn, these materials shaped teachers' instruction. We followed 4 teachers who worked in markedly different school situations and were provided a variety of curriculum materials, ranging from scripted reading programs to supplemental materials without teaching guides. Data were gathered through classroom observations, interviews, and curriculum artifacts over the teachers' first 3 years on the job. Our analysis suggested that curriculum materials interacted with teachers' knowledge of reading and reading instruction, and with the contexts in which they worked. As a result, curriculum materials both fostered and inhibited teachers' on-the-job learning. We found that the 2 teachers with weak knowledge or more restrictive materials and environments learned the least and were least able to adapt instruction to meet the needs of their students. The 2 teachers with stronger knowledge, access to multiple materials, and support for decision making regarding materials and instructional strategies learned the most and were most able to adapt instruction. Furthermore, early experiences with specific curriculum materials had effects 2 years later on these teachers' instructional practices. Implications for curriculum mandates, material selection, and professional development are discussed.

In the next decade, more than 2 million new teachers will be needed nationwide. Almost two-thirds of these new teachers will be young, less than 27 years old, and nearly half will have just finished college and never taught in a classroom (National Education Association, 2003). Although teaching has always been a demanding profession, the challenges awaiting these teachers will be greater than beginning

teachers have ever confronted. They will face the most diverse group of students in history, and they are likely to find themselves teaching in high-poverty, low-achieving schools. Under the No Child Left Behind legislation, thousands of these schools will be branded "in need of improvement" and subject to sanctions. As a result, beginning teachers will be under enormous pressure to improve student performance, particularly with respect to reading achievement.

In response to the dual challenge of new teachers and higher stakes, states and school districts are implementing a variety of policies aimed at improving teaching and learning. For example, many have adopted ambitious content standards and assessments, advocated alternative paths to teacher certification, and implemented new models and topics for professional development. One approach that has gained momentum and that has salience for elementary reading instruction is to focus on curriculum materials. The subject of much debate, this heightened attention to curriculum materials is fueled, in part, by several issues: increasing state and local material mandates (Allington, 2002; Goodnough, 2001, 2003; Helfand, 2002), concern about teacher preparation (Moats, 2000; Snow, 2001), the press of high-stakes accountability (Elmore, 2002; McNeil, 2000), and state guidelines for implementing Reading First, which, in many cases, restrict the money districts can spend on materials to those on an approved list.

Although some teachers are required or encouraged to use specific programs, others can choose which curriculum materials to use and how to use them. In all cases, however, curriculum materials represent an opportunity for teachers to learn and to refine their understanding of reading instruction. Little is known, however, about how beginning teachers faced with challenging classrooms deal with the variety of curriculum materials in their classrooms and the expectations for using them. How do they use materials to teach reading, and how, in turn,

do these materials shape teachers' thinking and practice? These questions were the focus of this study.

### **Curriculum Materials, Instruction, and Teacher Learning**

The study of teachers and curriculum materials is not new. Over the last several decades, studies of teachers' use of curriculum materials have revealed an uneven path of influence, and curriculum materials have repeatedly fallen in and out of favor with teacher educators, teachers, and policy makers alike. Much of the research on curriculum materials has focused on textbooks, including the prevalence of textbooks and how teachers use them, especially in the areas of mathematics and reading. Philosophical debates continue over whether textbooks constrain teachers and discourage autonomy (Apple & Junck, 1990; McNeil, 1986), support them (Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988; Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002), or provide the most effective and efficient means to deliver instruction (Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, & Tarver, 2004; Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993).

Despite these debates, evidence from several studies has suggested that teachers' beliefs and knowledge play a critical role in how these materials are used. In a study of four elementary teachers' use of textbooks across several subjects, Sosniak and Stodolsky (1993) found that teachers exerted a good deal of autonomy over how and when to use textbooks and other curriculum materials. They demonstrated, as did Spillane (1999), the differential use and influence of textbooks across subjects, even when used by the same teacher. Adding to that, Remillard (2000) found that two teachers' thinking and practices were influenced by their instructional interactions with students as well as the textbooks they used for instruction. She suggested that the materials themselves did not promote teacher learning but, rather, it was the process of adapting topics, concepts, representations, and tasks in-

cluded in these textbooks to the needs of students that promoted teacher change. Curriculum materials, therefore, serve as sites for teacher learning (Ball & Cohen, 1996).

Few studies of teachers and curriculum materials have focused on beginning teachers or distinguished new from more experienced teachers. New teachers are often consumed with issues of classroom management (Veenman, 1984), but they also need help in figuring out what and how to teach (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1990). As a result, they often look to curriculum materials to help them with instruction. Ball and Feiman-Nemser (1988) found that student teachers used textbooks even when they had negative attitudes toward them, either because the demands of teaching were so high or because they wanted to maintain the established classroom practice. Similarly, other studies have shown that new teachers want practical, subject-specific ideas they can implement immediately in their classrooms (Chubbuck, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001; Grossman & Thompson, 2004; Kauffman et al., 2002).

In reading, much of the research on the use and influence of curriculum materials has focused on basal programs or on packaged, comprehensive programs. Although one widely cited study found basal programs to be restrictive and “deskilling” (Shannon, 1987), others have found that teachers exert quite a bit of choice about how and when to use them (Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Durkin, 1984; Hoffman et al., 1998). Even studies of packaged or more scripted curriculum materials for teaching reading have suggested that teachers do not simply follow these materials, despite developers’ expectations that they closely adhere to the guidelines (Dattnow & Castellano, 2000; Eldridge, Fine, & Bryant-Shanklin, 2002). Instead, teachers respond in a variety of ways. Some comply, following the guides faithfully, whereas others accommodate, making modest changes in their teaching. Others may even

resist, inserting their own content and pedagogical perspectives (Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002). Whatever their response, teachers’ interactions with these curriculum materials influence their sense of efficacy and identity as well as their vision of instruction (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004; Smagorinsky et al., 2002; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993).

As with other subjects, the appeal and use of reading textbooks and programs have cycled over the years. With the popularity of literature-based approaches to teaching reading in the 1990s, the range of instructional reading materials in classrooms expanded substantially beyond textbooks and basal readers to include trade books, leveled readers, class sets of novels, and supplemental materials. Although basal reading textbook programs and scripted materials have recently regained a strong presence (Allington, 2002), a wide array of reading materials can be found in most classrooms today. In addition, schools also provide teachers with a range of instructional situations and supports. Some teachers have a good deal of autonomy, others work under strict mandates; some schools experience great pressure from high-stakes accountability, others feel less pressure; some schools have supportive teacher networks, others leave teachers to navigate on their own. Together, the variability in materials and contexts adds complexity to the instructional terrain, especially for new teachers.

The first years of teaching are not only challenging for teachers, they also represent a particularly important moment in educational reform: early teaching experiences lay the foundation for future success in the classroom and may well determine if new teachers leave the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2000). So it is not simply a matter of which curriculum materials teachers use, or even what beginning teachers learn from these materials, but it is also how teaching practices and teachers’ learning are shaped by interactions among the materials, teachers’ knowledge and beliefs,

and the contexts in which they work. To explore these issues we asked the following questions: How do new elementary school teachers perceive and use curriculum materials for teaching reading? What factors influence their responses? How do these materials and the contexts in which beginning teachers work shape their classroom practices and understandings? How do teachers' perceptions, understandings, and use of these curriculum materials change over time?

## Method

### Description of the Study

The data for this study were drawn from a larger, longitudinal study of beginning language arts teachers in which we followed 10 prospective teachers, five secondary and five elementary, from the last year of their graduate-level teacher education program into their first 3 years of full-time teaching (see Grossman et al., 2000). Here we focus on four elementary teachers and, specifically, on their teaching of reading during their first 3 years on the job. The fifth elementary teacher took a position some distance away and was unable to participate fully in the study.

We grounded this multicase, qualitative study in sociocultural theory, with its emphasis on the social contexts of learning (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1981). We examined how teachers developed conceptual understandings and practices for teaching reading as they engaged with a variety of curriculum tools within their schools. Consequently, our research was situated in classrooms and schools, and it was long term. As such, it provided multiple data sources for triangulation as well as prolonged engagement with participants to enhance credibility of the data and to reveal change over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, such a framework afforded us the opportunity to examine, simultaneously, myriad influences on new teachers as they appropriated aspects of the curriculum materials (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999).

Our data consisted of classroom observations during reading and writing instruction, individual and group interviews, and documents from classrooms and districts (e.g., lesson plans, workbooks, teacher-designed worksheets, district standards). Over the 4 years of the study, we observed each teacher a minimum of 17 times and interviewed each individually on at least 32 occasions. During every observation, we took extensive field notes and collected samples of curriculum materials used in the lesson. We also analyzed the curriculum materials teachers used so that we had a thorough understanding of the content, approach to reading instruction, and guidelines for implementation of each material. Every classroom observation was accompanied by a preobservation interview and a more extended postobservation discussion during which teachers described their thinking about the lessons. After each observation and associated interviews, we wrote detailed analytic memos and used those as well as the field notes and interview transcriptions during analysis.

In addition, we interviewed participants individually and in groups at the beginning and end of each year. Group interviews enabled participants to interact with colleagues from their teacher education program and to compare their experiences as beginning teachers. One group task required teachers to bring samples of curriculum materials that were most useful to them, and these served as a springboard for discussion with their peers. Another task had participants rank order the usefulness of materials they had mentioned in their interviews and discuss the materials with others.

We also interviewed school and district personnel who interacted with our participants—mentor teachers, principals, and district language arts coordinators—to better understand the contexts in which these teachers worked, including district policies regarding reading instruction, and materials. All interviews were audiotaped and

transcribed; the group interviews were also videotaped.

Data analysis was iterative. We began by reading the field notes, transcribed interviews, and analytic memos for each teacher to get an overview of each case and to develop preliminary codes as a step toward data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At least two researchers reviewed the data for each teacher, comparing and contrasting emerging categories and supporting each with multiple data points. During the first pass through the data, we focused on how teachers thought about and used curriculum materials and the factors that influenced teachers' use and thinking. In subsequent passes through the data, we analyzed how the materials fit into each teacher's enacted reading program and vision for effective reading instruction and how classroom implementation compared with the guidelines that accompanied each material. We also refined analytic codes. As a result, extensive case studies were constructed for each teacher.

The research team met regularly to discuss each case and to conduct analyses across the four cases, searching for similarities and differences and thereby developing analytic themes (Erickson, 1986; Wolcott, 1994). We searched for confirming and disconfirming evidence of the themes in both the case studies and the original data sources and adjusted the themes accordingly. Finally, we interpreted the themes in light of current curriculum policies and other related research.

### Participants and Their Reading Programs

The four elementary teachers we followed had been hired immediately after graduation and were teaching in four distinctive settings and with a wide variety of curriculum materials and supports. All were judged to be capable by their supervisors and principals. In fact, all of them had taken on leadership positions in their schools within their first 3 years of teaching.

Several had been asked to present in-service workshops on literacy for their districts, three had been mentors to student teachers, and all had been asked to lead school curriculum committees across a range of subjects.

Each teacher had access to, and used, a different assortment of curriculum materials and resources to build a reading program, and each worked in a different curriculum context. Table 1 depicts these variables. In the first row, we characterize the curriculum context at work in each school—guidelines and policies, both implicit and explicit, for how teachers were expected to make decisions about what and how to teach as well as how they were expected to use materials. Across the four sites, the curriculum context ran from a tightly structured, mandated approach regarding the reading curriculum, to a "build-your-own" program model in which teachers were free to use whatever materials they chose in whatever way they thought best. Below the curriculum context, we include information about the range of materials each teacher used, as well as demographic data for each school. As we elaborate below, some of the materials teachers used were comprehensive—they included the full range of coordinated materials teachers might need, such as student reading texts, practice materials (e.g., workbooks or worksheets), teachers' guides with detailed lesson plans, assessment materials, and the like. Other curriculum materials were less comprehensive, such as assorted workbooks and trade books that did not provide any support for teachers but could be used for instruction or student practice in a variety of ways. In addition, some curriculum materials were designed to be followed strictly, whereas others were designed to be used more flexibly. This distinction between curriculum contexts and range of materials is important, reflecting both the curriculum policy and the materials in each school. It provides a useful set of lenses for analyzing teachers' interactions with the materials,

TABLE 1. Curriculum Context, Materials, and Student Information for the Four Teachers

Variable	Stephanie	Hannah	Charles	Dorothy
Curriculum context	Mandated use of multiple structured programs, 90 minutes/day, grade 2	Mandated use of comprehensive curriculum and one trade book, other materials at teacher discretion, 30 minutes/day, grade 4	Build your own based on district curriculum framework, 60 minutes/day, grade 3	Build your own, on your own, 90 minutes/day, grade 1
Materials for reading instruction	Highly structured reading program with anthology, teacher's edition, workbook, and assessments; highly structured phonics program	Basal reader anthology with teacher's edition; class sets of two novels; small group sets of some texts; classroom library	Basal reader anthology with teacher's edition; books on tape; workbooks for phonics and comprehension practice; teacher-developed materials; classroom library	Basal reader anthology with teacher's edition; multiple bins of leveled readers; manipulatives for word work; teacher-developed materials; classroom library
Student information (%):				
Students of color	75	25	72	20
Free or reduced-price lunch	78	10	60	2
Reading at or above grade level	39	83	53	78



and their instructional practices over time. Next, we turn to a brief overview of each teacher's teaching context, which sets the backdrop for our emerging themes.

**Stephanie.** Stephanie taught second grade in an economically and ethnically diverse school in which students had consistently scored poorly on standardized reading tests. In response to this challenge, the teachers and administrators decided to adopt Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC), a comprehensive program written to accompany a basal reading program (Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish, 1987). CIRC was a precursor of the Success for All program (<http://www.successforall.net/about/history.html>) and continues to be used as a supplement to that program. The CIRC materials overlay the basal reader, providing additional materials for students, as well as detailed, specially developed instructional lesson plans, strategies, and assessments in the areas of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. Specifically, CIRC provides a series of weekly lessons developed around a reading selection in the basal reader. Students learn prespecified vocabulary drawn from the reading selection, read the selection, answer questions about it, review the content of the selection, write about it in response to a prompt, and take a test each Friday on what they have read. This routine is the same each week, and teachers follow a carefully delineated plan for each lesson. Students can work as a whole group, with partners, or individually. Suggestions are provided to the teacher for these grouping options.

Stephanie's principal made it clear that the program at Stephanie's school was "not 100% CIRC as it's written in the manuals." For example, because CIRC was originally developed for use with homogeneous ability groups of students in grades 3–6, the second-grade staff added Benchmarks (Gaskins & Downer, 1997), a highly structured word-identification program that provides teachers with sequenced weekly phonics lessons

and activities. They also altered some of the recommended CIRC activities and lessons to fit with their 90-minute block of whole-class reading instruction, the school's agreed-upon model. Because the entire school used CIRC, the collegial support for Stephanie as a beginning teacher was strong. In addition to the CIRC materials, basal reader, and Benchmarks material, Stephanie had a small classroom library of trade books that few students used.

**Hannah.** Hannah was a fourth-grade teacher at a private Christian school where she taught reading for 30 minutes each day. The school was small, with only one class at each grade level and approximately 25% students of color. Hannah enjoyed the small class size and, although she did not have a fourth-grade colleague or an officially assigned mentor, she formed a close relationship with the fifth-grade teacher next door who provided her with both materials and professional support.

Hannah relied on a limited supply of materials for reading instruction. She was required to use a recent basal reading program, although the head teacher reported that teachers had some flexibility in using it. "We don't require them [the teachers] to do every lesson in the reading text, because if they did that, they could not do the literature, and we are not at any level totally whole language or totally basal. . . . We want them to use whatever materials they think best." In addition, teachers were required to use one school-selected "classic" trade book each year, and Hannah used *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), the only book for which the school had a class set. In her first year, Hannah used her own money to purchase an additional class set of a popular trade book so her students could engage in literature-circle activities as part of her instructional program. She also had a large class library and a comfortable reading area for students to use during sustained silent reading.

Although she was not required to do so, we observed Hannah teaching each story in



the basal in the order it appeared and teaching all lessons to the entire class. Consequently, basal story instruction occupied almost all of her reading instructional time. Nevertheless, Hannah believed that, in contrast to the basal anthology, trade books were “authentic literature.” She wanted students to see reading as something more than an independent activity—as a social event where students draw from each other to construct understanding. During her first year of teaching, Hannah took time out of the basal program twice to use the two trade books. She used each with the entire class, although students met in small-group “literature circles” to discuss each chapter. These trade books did not come with teachers’ guides or other support, so Hannah had to determine, on her own, how best to use them.

*Charles.* The students at Charles’s school were similar to those at Stephanie’s in their diversity and socioeconomic standing. However, there were striking differences between the two schools in terms of resources. One of our team members described Stephanie’s room as impoverished, whereas Charles’s room was described as having abundant resources. Unlike both Stephanie and Hannah, Charles had access to a variety of materials (e.g., sets of trade books, workbooks) and was expected to draw from these for his reading instruction. According to the principal, the staff had recently worked together to implement an “eclectic approach” to reading, adding a basal program to their prior literature-based approach in order to better meet students’ needs.

Students were grouped homogeneously across classes for a 60-minute reading block. Charles taught a group of struggling third-grade readers, several of whom also received special education and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) services. He began by assessing his students’ needs, and then he experimented with a variety of materials. “[I’m] noticing their [the students’] reading, from reading with them, and I’ve done

some inventories with a few of them. . . . I’m kind of picking and choosing a lot of it, just trying to figure out what works and trying to get advice from all the other teachers of what things I can try.” From this process, Charles developed what he called his “routine,” which was a four-part reading program (i.e., reading and responding to text, comprehension and thinking skills activities, decoding and phonological awareness, and reading in self-selected books) designed for his students and based on an assortment of available materials. At the core of this program was the district-developed Language Arts Framework, distributed in a thick three-ring binder, which teachers were expected to use to guide their instruction. It provided a conceptual framework for literacy instruction, a developmental continuum, goals for reading at each grade level, and a range of instructional strategies and assessment tools.

Charles relied predominantly on individual and small group sets of trade books as well as materials designed for student practice (e.g., workbooks), none of which provided teachers with suggestions for instruction. He also had access to a basal reading program, although he used it infrequently, and when he did, he did not use the teacher’s guide. With these materials and the Language Arts Framework, Charles created his reading program.

*Dorothy.* Dorothy taught first grade in an affluent school district that she described as supportive “emotionally and also financially, with materials and stuff.” Nevertheless, she felt alone because she did not have the same philosophy or teaching style as the other first-grade teachers. This, combined with her personal sense of self-reliance (e.g., “I work best when I figure things out for myself—then I know what I’m doing, why I’m doing it”), drove Dorothy to create her own reading program.

Relying on her knowledge from teacher education and from professional books she read on her own, Dorothy used many different materials to establish a rich begin-

ning reading program: a basal reading program, hundreds of beginning reader books that she organized by reading level, sets of magnetic letters, and many teacher-constructed materials. The basal reader was just one of the curriculum materials available to Dorothy, yet it was the only one for which she had a teacher's manual. Nevertheless, she did not use the student reader often and used the teacher's manual even less frequently.

Dorothy called her approach to reading instruction a reader's workshop model. Students rotated through several activities during the 90-minute reading block, including small-group instruction with her, repeated reading for fluency, spelling practice (using word patterns tied to the decoding instruction), and independent reading and writing. While the children were working independently, Dorothy held individual conferences with three to five students each day in which she informally assessed their progress, taught mini-lessons, and talked with them about their reading and writing. Based on the results of running records, she redirected students to texts of different difficulty levels, regrouped students for instruction, and planned whole-class lessons. Throughout these activities Dorothy used a wide range of reading materials as well as instructional strategies, including teacher modeling, demonstration, and peer collaboration.

## Results and Discussion

With these dramatically different school settings, curriculum contexts, and reading curriculum materials as background, we examined how these beginning teachers thought about and used their curriculum materials and how, in turn, these materials shaped teachers' thinking and practice over time. We drew on data from interview transcriptions, classroom observation field notes, and review of curriculum materials for each teacher as well as the cross-case analyses to illuminate themes.

## Perspectives on Elementary Reading Instruction

The data revealed two interesting perspectives on teaching reading in the elementary grades that seemed to undergird teachers' thinking and use of curriculum materials. First, from our initial interview conducted during the preservice program through the entire 4 years of the study, it was clear that all four teachers believed their job was to create a reading program in their classroom. Throughout the interviews, the teachers referred to many components of a complete reading program, such as instruction in comprehension and word identification, vocabulary development, reader response to literature, process writing, and developing ownership and motivation in reading. Whereas Grossman and Thompson (2004) found that beginning language arts teachers in middle and high school were largely concerned with what to teach (e.g., which genres, topics, books, etc.) or which materials to use (e.g., curriculum materials to teach the five-paragraph essay, books to choose for American literature, etc.), these elementary teachers were more concerned with how to address all the components of a complete reading program. Regardless of whether the teachers had access to comprehensive curriculum materials (e.g., basal reading programs, structured programs) or an assortment of unrelated materials, a great number or few materials, they generally did not seem concerned with what to cover or which materials to use. Although they certainly had teaching challenges and concerns, as we describe below, they appeared to have a clear sense of what to teach in their reading programs.

A second, overarching stance of all four teachers was their concern for meeting the needs of a wide range of students. We were struck by how often they expressed concern about having appropriate material and lessons to meet individual students' needs. For example, they talked about English language learners who needed additional vocabulary development, struggling readers

who had decoding difficulties, students who were unable to discuss books, and reading material that was too easy or too difficult for some. Such concerns permeated the data at the early stages of learning to teach, and they continued over the 4 years that we followed the teachers.

Although it is difficult to determine if these two goals (i.e., creating a complete reading program and meeting the needs of a range of students) are typical of beginning elementary teachers or if they are unique to these participants, who graduated from the same teacher preparation program, they shaped how the teachers worked with and learned from curriculum materials.

#### Appeal of Mandated Curriculum Materials

Three of the four teachers were expected to use specific curriculum materials, and like the teachers Kauffman et al. (2002) studied, they welcomed them. Stephanie and Hannah used comprehensive reading programs that came with student reading texts and practice materials as well as detailed teachers' guides. These materials provided them with a sense of assurance that they were providing high-quality instruction and covering important curriculum content. Charles was also required to use a specific curriculum material—the district-developed curriculum framework—but it was markedly different in content, scope, and purpose from the materials Stephanie and Hannah were required to use.

Stephanie was socialized into a model of teaching that relied entirely on following tightly structured curriculum programs; this was how the principal and teachers thought they could be most effective. She took comfort in using "proven programs," and she believed they would help her achieve important outcomes. For example, Stephanie liked CIRC because it "nailed the Essential Learnings [state outcomes] on the head, point by point. . . . It's already so well structured for me that I don't have to concern myself too much with whether or not I'm meeting the

standards. . . . [they're] covering so many bases in a week with each story."

In addition, CIRC seemed to resonate with Stephanie's vision of a good reading program. In fact, her belief that the program "covered the bases" was so strong that, when she was asked to teach a class on CIRC to new teachers, she used this rationale to help teachers see that CIRC was simply a better way to do what they were already doing.

I would start the [adult] class by saying, you know, "What are the key elements of a good reading program. . . . Do you do independent reading in your classroom? Okay, that's a part of CIRC. You're already doing it. Do you do vocabulary development? Okay, that's a part of CIRC. You're already doing it. Do you do comprehension? That's a part of CIRC. You're already doing it. Do you do integrated writing?" And so to kind of show people that it's what they're already doing, CIRC just puts it in a logical format, but so the pieces are all there.

Hannah had a similar response to her school's mandated use of the basal reading program, though the mandate was less directive and teachers were encouraged to be selective about the lessons they taught and to use other materials. Hannah believed that if she taught the basal curriculum and stayed close to what was included in the guide, she would be covering all the student learning outcomes adopted by her school as well as many of the elements of a reading program Hannah had come to value (e.g., comprehension, writing in response to reading, etc.). The basal acted as a safety net for her, especially because she was insecure about teaching reading and seemed to have the least well-developed subject-matter knowledge of the four participants. She initially had some reservations about the basal program, feeling that it was too "preset" and that it lacked authentic literature. Nevertheless, she relied on it for most of her instruction and seemed to appreciate the support it provided.

Although Hannah and Stephanie had the same teacher education coursework as the other two participants, their student teaching experiences were different from the others and may have contributed to their appreciation of and comfort with mandated reading programs. Our observations during Year 1 revealed that both Hannah and Stephanie were placed with cooperating teachers who had structured approaches to reading instruction and required their student teachers to use the same curriculum materials and teaching strategies as they did. As a result, Hannah and Stephanie were accustomed to, and comfortable with, following predetermined instructional guidelines, which may have made them good fits for the schools where they were hired to teach. Consequently, both had limited experience with curricular and pedagogical decision making.

Charles was not directed to use curriculum materials in the same way as Stephanie or Hannah, but he was expected to use the district Language Arts Framework. Unlike the materials Hannah and Stephanie used, the framework had no lesson plans, student texts or workbooks, or guidelines for instructional pacing. Perhaps more important, the school expectation for how teachers would use the framework was more generative than prescriptive. Teachers were encouraged to refer to the framework as needed to help them plan instruction and assess students, but they were not expected to adhere closely to it. Furthermore, teachers worked collaboratively to understand and implement the ideas in the framework as they decided how best to meet their students' needs. Charles frequently referred to the framework as well as how he used it to frame conversations among his teaching teammates: "I can look through this [Language Arts Framework] with my teammates when we're planning . . . and then I can say, 'Okay . . . I'm going to make sure I teach these things.' It gives me a way to map out the year and know what skills are going to be important or to look at other

things and say . . . what I don't think is going to be really important for my third graders to be able to be successful at now or not at this point. . . . Another reason why I think this is useful for me is just having a . . . common language, that when you talk to another teacher or my teammate we can start a discussion." As we describe more fully below, the appeal of the curriculum framework for Charles was more than ensuring that he was covering important content; it also nurtured his instructional decision making and helped him create a shared vision with his colleagues.

#### Constraints of Mandated Comprehensive Curriculum Materials

Although using required materials engendered self-confidence in three of the beginning teachers and provided them with support for instruction, the mandate to use comprehensive, structured materials also created two types of problems for Stephanie and Hannah.

*Procedural orientation.* First, when teachers believed or were told that comprehensive curriculum materials would fulfill their needs or help them meet district/state expectations, they appeared to take a procedural rather than a conceptual approach to using the materials. They focused on helping students complete tasks or assignments included in the curriculum materials instead of on student learning. In some instances, such an approach may have undermined the intent of the material.

Stephanie, for example, called her implementation of the daily and weekly CIRC routine "almost a little brainless for me" and thought it would be presumptuous of her to question such a "well-researched, proven" program. She simply followed the preset lesson plans, feeling this was beneficial for many students but acknowledging that some might find it boring. As we noted, the entire school had made several changes in CIRC implementation so that CIRC could be used in heterogeneous classrooms and with whole-class instruction. Specifically, at

second grade, the school added a separate phonics program, provided tutoring for struggling students that focused on pre-reading of the CIRC story, had teachers read the basal story aloud on the first day of the week instead of asking students to read it themselves, and changed the 3-day process writing activity to a 1-day writing assignment. Stephanie implemented all of these changes, as did the other second-grade teachers.

Following the school model, all students in Stephanie's class received identical instruction and read from the same text, regardless of their reading abilities. As a result, some of the more capable students were bored, and many of the low-achieving students struggled. Classroom management problems began to surface and, in response, Stephanie made additional changes to the CIRC procedures rather than altering the program content or the recommended instructional strategies. For instance, we repeatedly observed Stephanie resorting to time limits in an effort to motivate students and keep them on track. During one lesson, all students were required to write sentences using 15 new vocabulary words that had been introduced before the reading. At 9:20 she announced: "We should be able to have our sentences done by 9:30. How many of you think we should be able to get them done before? [most of the class raises hands]. Me too. Let's give it a try. When I come by with the microphone [for students to read their sentences aloud], I need you to be ready. Let's turn it up to third-grade speed. Ready, go!"

In addition to imposing time limits, Stephanie made efforts to manage the lower-achieving students by decreasing the number of vocabulary words she covered each week instead of changing the way the words were taught and practiced or altering the reading selection and word choice. She also omitted phonics modules, depending on whether she thought they would be boring to students rather than whether students needed to learn them. As she noted,

she was able to "tweak the program without throwing [it] off." She did not question the content of instruction or the recommended instructional strategies, nor did she dare to change the structure of lessons.

Hannah made few changes to her mandated basal reading program and, like Stephanie, she also seemed to take a procedural approach to using it. Although the teacher's manual provided opportunities for teacher choice, Hannah did not take advantage of them. She closely followed the structure of the teacher's guide, doing the prereading activities, introducing vocabulary, asking questions, and assigning practice workbook pages or some culminating activity suggested in the guide. She freely admitted that she did not consult the teacher's edition before she taught a lesson. Our observations confirmed this. For example, we observed a 2-day reading lesson in which Hannah followed the teacher's manual, but she obviously had not thought much about why she was doing the activities and thus failed to create a coherent set of learning experiences for students. Our field memo documented the following:

Hannah presents a prereading semantic web on Day 1 of a lesson as a way to build background and prepare students to read the upcoming story. She tells them, "We're going to read a story about families. This is one woman's story. It is Eloise Greenfield's memories of growing up. I want to know what you guys know about families. We'll do a web thing." She asks students to contribute ideas about families which she writes on a word web on the board. After 10 minutes of class participation, the web activity ends abruptly and Hannah has students take out workbooks. For the next 20 minutes they complete and review a vocabulary page with words about families. But, on Day 2, when the students are ready to begin reading the story, Hannah doesn't reference the web or the vocabulary words from the workbook; she doesn't help students see how what they had studied on Day 1 relates to the story they are about to read. She simply tells them that they are going to read a story



aloud by Eloise Greenfield that “talks about families.”

In addition to the problem of lesson coherence, Hannah also failed to make connections for her students across larger instructional episodes because she did not realize that the stories in the anthology were thematically linked. A combination of the mandate to use the basal program; the carefully organized, detailed, comprehensive nature of the program; and Hannah’s insecurity about teaching reading seemed to work against her using the curriculum material generatively and thoughtfully. From her perspective, there was no need to think or make decisions; rather, she needed just to get through the material so she could “cover the curriculum.”

Although the school curriculum contexts and the teachers’ stances toward mandated materials seemed to encourage a routinized approach to implementation, there was also evidence that the teachers were not provided with much support for understanding the materials or learning how to use them more effectively. Stephanie was trained to use CIRC by the other second-grade teachers in the school. She told us: “The truth was, I didn’t ever really go through the [CIRC] handbook very well because I picked up teaching CIRC . . . in my first week [on the job]. They said, ‘Go in and watch the other second-grade teacher,’ and I watched her do it. She walked me through it, and that’s how I started teaching it.” Only in her second year of teaching, after Stephanie was asked to teach a CIRC class to new teachers, did she discover she was not using parts of the program as intended.

Hannah had even less preparation for using the materials. As she reflected on her in-service workshops, she said, “None of them [the workshops] have ever had anything to do with how to *use* the [basal] curriculum, ever. They’ve all been how to augment the curriculum. . . . So, I’ve just kind of guessed how to use it. But, you know, I’ve just kind of been winging it, I guess.”

Consequently, Hannah missed opportunities to learn from the materials or to use them effectively and selectively with students.

*Arrested program and pedagogical development.* A second problem that emerged from the combination of implementation requirements and comprehensive curriculum materials was a constraining effect—an arrested development of teachers’ visions of effective reading programs and a limitation of their pedagogical repertoires. Because mandated programs occupied so much instructional time (the entire 90 minutes of language arts time for Stephanie, the entire 30 minutes of Hannah’s reading instructional time), teachers were left with little time to use other materials or try other instructional strategies. In Stephanie’s mind, this meant giving up sustained silent reading, higher-level comprehension instruction, process writing, and building student ownership and motivation to read, which she embraced as part of a total reading program. The pressure was greater because she was expected to keep pace in the CIRC curriculum with the other second-grade teachers and to give the same weekly tests on the stories students read. For Hannah, the combination of only 30 minutes of reading instruction and her sense that she had to use the basal program resulted in limiting students’ reading and collaborative discussions of what Hannah considered to be “authentic literature.” Both Hannah and Stephanie were keenly aware of what they were leaving out of their reading programs and struggled with the tension this created for them.

Hannah and Stephanie did make some attempts to add to the mandated core curriculum. However, when they did, the additions appeared isolated or compartmentalized, resulting in fragmented instructional programs. Hannah, for example, conflated the basal reading program with “the reading curriculum,” viewing them as one and the same. She was pragmatic about the best way to assure that she



covered what needed to be taught: “The SLOs [student learning outcomes] . . . come straight out of the curriculum [the basal program]. So, if I do a unit [one that she developed on her own from novels], I have to make sure that I cover all the discrete elements that the textbook covers too. . . . It’s just as easy to use the book and the worksheets for that than to try to come up with your own.”

Hannah’s belief that the basal was the curriculum and that novels were “literature” mirrored the perspective of the head teacher in her school (see above). If she used the basal, then she could fit in novels so that her students could have the experience of reading and discussing full-length pieces of literature. Ironically, literature discussions were an important part of her vision of a good reading program, but they were not part of her understanding about how she might use the basal textbook with students. So, in her first year of teaching, we observed Hannah fitting two novels into her program. However, she did not tie the work with novels to the basal stories the students had been reading or to the reading skills and strategies they had been learning in the program. And, conversely, she failed to engage students in literary discussions of the stories they read in the basal. The basal curriculum and the novels were separate events in Hannah’s mind, and, as a result, the pedagogical potential was unrealized and additional opportunities for student learning and transfer were lost.

Similarly, Stephanie talked about “plugging in” the things she thought were missing from CIRC, and, in fact, this was the approach her school took toward the curriculum. In addition to adopting the Benchmarks decoding program for all second graders when teachers realized that CIRC did not have a phonics component, the school eventually added another pull-out program for struggling readers using a different packaged program designed to build decoding and fluency skills. Each of these programs was implemented separately;

there were different teachers’ manuals and student materials for each, and no effort was made to coordinate the two programs with the CIRC lessons. Although these programs were attempts to help students who were struggling with CIRC, the net effect was that the reading program was more fragmented and more difficult for Stephanie to control and likely more complicated for struggling readers.

This philosophy of “plugging in” and the disincentive to push her pedagogical thinking were also evident in Stephanie’s reflections about her own reading program. At the end of her third year of teaching, she was still trying to figure out how to implement her vision of a good reading program and the strategies she had learned in teacher education, while staying true to CIRC. She said,

What really hit me this year was . . . I went to a class on teaching low-achieving students in upper-elementary and middle school grades, and what I had forgotten—getting so heavily into CIRC, as great a program as it is—I’d forgotten that there are different ways that you can just plug things in and meet the needs of the kids in front of you. And I felt bad because she [the instructor] kept saying . . . everything we talked about in school [preservice teacher education]. And once we got out of school, I set that book aside and I got right into CIRC, and I was head first for 2 years. And all of a sudden it was like [there are] these little things that I could plug into and make the program better. And as much as I’ve been fooling around with this [CIRC], with adapting, you know, with comprehension questions . . . there’s so many other things that we can do to plug it in that don’t have to come straight out of a basal, don’t have to come straight out of CIRC, that don’t deter from that either.

The constraints associated with these teachers’ use of comprehensive, mandated curriculum materials were likely confounded by a lack of resources for reading instruction. Both Hannah and Stephanie had limited access to trade books or other reading textbooks for instruction, few sup-

plemental materials, and virtually no additional teachers' guides or supports to help them think about teaching. Further, collegial resources were minimal in Hannah's case, and Stephanie's colleagues did not offer alternative ways of thinking or additional materials because they were committed to the same program, pacing, and orientation to instruction. Mandated comprehensive programs may, by their very nature, limit the range of materials available in the classroom (they come with "everything" teachers might need), the time available for other types of instruction (they require substantial time to implement), and teachers' dispositions to use alternative approaches (they cover many of the important areas for instruction). We cannot, however, disentangle the constraining effects of the mandate from the paucity of resources, both material and human, available to these teachers.

#### Interaction of Teacher Knowledge, Context, and Materials

It would be a mistake to assume that the appeal or constraints we have described simply reside in the materials teachers were required to use. Our analysis suggests a much more complex, situated set of issues involving teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, the school context, and the materials themselves. To understand how these factors interacted, we look at how all four teachers used a similar set of materials—a basal reading program—and then we briefly describe how two of the teachers used an assortment of curriculum materials to create their reading programs.

*Comprehensive basal reading programs.* All four teachers used basal reading programs, but they used them differently. Dorothy and Charles had access to a basal reading program, including grade-level reading textbooks and the teachers' guides that came with them. Neither had access to above- and below-grade-level materials that are part of some basal programs, and neither used the program workbooks. They

were not required to use the material in any particular way, yet each relied more on the basal textbook the first year of teaching than in later years. Both teachers used the student anthologies as part of their reading programs and, at times, referred to the teacher's guide for instructional strategies. Their rationale for selective use of the basal was similar: the grade-level material did not work for the full range of students' reading levels in their classes.

Dorothy's deep understanding of beginning readers and reading texts provided the basis for her decision about using the first-grade basal. She analyzed the situation this way:

"The first three books are insanely easy because of the pattern and text and all of the picture cues. And then the last three books are insanely hard for kids who aren't there, and they're too easy for kids who are already reading confidently. So, what I do is, we do reading groups and . . . I pull from whatever [materials] I can find."

Midway through her first year, Dorothy acted on her critique and switched from heterogeneous grouping, in which all students read from the same grade-level basal text, to ability grouping, in which selected students read from the basal textbook some of the time. She used the huge assortment of leveled books in her classroom, her expertise at administering and interpreting informal reading inventories and running records, and her understanding of early reading development and instruction to modify her use of the materials and her instruction. Because Dorothy also believed that students should participate in heterogeneous reading groups, she chose several selections from the basal that she could use with the entire class. For example, on several occasions, we observed her have students read and perform a play from the basal anthology. To help the readers who struggled most succeed, she provided many opportunities for them to do repeated read-

ings and practice small parts of the play. Such scaffolding and differentiated instruction enabled her to make good use of some aspects of the basal program and to achieve her goals. Because there were no school or grade-level mandates, Dorothy was free to make these choices.

Charles took a similar approach. Early in his first year of teaching, after one of our observations, he told us how he adapted the basal because it was too difficult for many of his students: "I don't even use the teacher's manual. I mean, I had a purpose in mind, and the story was in there. [The basal] is a little bit hard for my students. I did a lot guiding the reading — I read the story to them, and they asked questions, and then they went back and did some re-reading. After I would read it out loud. There's so little [in the basal] at their independent reading level. . . . I went out and bought some [books] when I got my first paycheck."

By mid-year, Charles had accumulated alternative materials, just as Dorothy had. He searched the school for sets of easier books, bought many of his own, borrowed books from the special education teacher, and used the basal reader selectively so he could provide reading material and instruction at students' levels. Although the 14 students in Charles's reading group were already grouped homogeneously across all the third-grade classes, he divided his group into smaller ones so he could better meet their needs. Like Dorothy, Charles demonstrated a firm understanding of students' reading abilities and a capacity to adapt and assemble multiple reading materials.

Dorothy's and Charles's use of the basal reading program is a stark contrast to the routinized approach of both Hannah and Stephanie. It is tempting to assume that such flexible use of material might have worked for Hannah, had she tried it, or for Stephanie, had she had the option of adapting CIRC. However, our observations and interviews suggest that might not be the case. Both Hannah and Stephanie seemed to

benefit substantially from the structure and guidance provided by the reading programs they used and struggled when that support was not available. For example, Hannah's initial attempts at implementing literature circles were chaotic. Students read the books independently, one chapter at a time, completed a "bookmark" worksheet Hannah had been encouraged to use during student teaching, and then met in groups, reporting their answers to the bookmark questions in a round-robin fashion. Much of the time, the group was off task and the conversations were superficial. Hannah's later attempts, after revising the worksheets to make them more directed and using a wider range of books to match students' reading levels, were even worse. Her approach to literature circles was procedural rather than instructional; she believed that if she gave students better directions and participant role sheets for their small-group discussions, they would be more successful. Furthermore, her goal was simply to have students work on their own, reading from "authentic" literature rather than to help them learn strategies for comprehending or evaluating text. On the one hand, using trade books gave Hannah ultimate instructional flexibility, but, on the other hand, there was no support to help her use the materials well. Without support from either colleagues or teaching guides for the materials, Hannah and her students floundered.

Similarly, Stephanie's few attempts to move away from her school's many mandated reading programs were not satisfying to her. She liked the structure of CIRC, feeling that her students needed it. When she tried implementing other instructional activities on her own, she worried that her instruction was not as structured as CIRC and that she was not as planful as she should be. She said: "Unfortunately, it's [her own instructional effort] not . . . as structured as CIRC is. I'm not very structured, so it's kind of, 'Ask me on Tuesday what's going to happen on Tuesday in my classroom.'"

For both Hannah and Stephanie, the structure and comprehensiveness of their curriculum materials provided useful scaffolds for determining what and how to teach, especially because both teachers lacked support in other areas. Stephanie was challenged by the large number of struggling readers in her class, limited access to curriculum and student material, and her inexperience and reluctance to move away from the school-wide, highly directed programs. She acknowledged that reading professional books on her own was a “stretch” for her. Similarly, Hannah lacked substantial mentoring, familiarity with the program, ample materials, and pedagogical content knowledge. Although the programs these teachers used and the mandates about how to use them led to some problems, it seems doubtful that without them Stephanie or Hannah could have created her own effective reading program during these first years of teaching.

*Teacher-constructed reading programs.* Charles and Dorothy were master constructors of their own reading programs. Each was able to draw on a variety of resources to create a cohesive reading program that met the needs of a wide range of students. Although they worked in dramatically different settings, both seemed to have ample materials (provided by the school as well as purchased with their own money), the support to exert professional prerogative, and the knowledge to create their programs. The way these supports came together, however, was different for each of them.

Charles had a variety of materials (e.g., trade books, leveled readers, workbooks, practice materials) as well as a firm understanding of reading processes and reading instruction. In fact, he was one of the strongest students in the teacher education program, graduating with deep conceptual knowledge and a wide repertoire of practical tools for teaching reading and writing. He had student taught in the same school in which he was hired, where he learned to use an assortment of materials under the

guidance of a strong and supportive cooperating teacher who encouraged Charles to try out ideas he had learned in teacher education. With the assortment of materials in his own classroom, Charles used many instructional strategies, including oral and silent reading, repeated reading, modeling of skills and strategies, explicit explanation, response journals, group discussions, and whole-class, small-group, and individualized instruction to promote student learning. This combination of curriculum materials, expertise, and decision-making power allowed Charles to apply his knowledge in using materials that generally did not include lesson plans or guides.

Charles’s success was very much influenced by the school district Language Arts Framework and the supportive professional context in which he worked. The framework was influential in Charles’s curriculum decisions. Although it provided an excellent conceptual base as well as instructional strategies and classroom-based assessment tools, it did not specify what to do day-to-day, nor did it detail how to use a variety of materials effectively. Nevertheless, this framework was a good fit for Charles and for the teachers in his school who relied on a wide range of curriculum materials. The philosophy, instructional ideas, and assessment strategies in the framework were not new to Charles—they fit with understandings he had developed during teacher education—so he did not need to be convinced of their importance or to learn about them. He embraced the framework and talked about how he was trying to “internalize” it. He even had student-made posters of the grade-level standards from the framework hanging in his room. Essentially, the framework provided him with both the “big picture” and enough detail that he could apply it to his program and make good use of the available curriculum materials.

Equally important, if not more so, was that the teachers in Charles’s school talked about instruction and assessment. In fact, Charles was convinced that the curriculum

framework was so useful to him because he and his colleagues were continually working through it together. Every Friday morning all the teachers who taught third-grade reading (the classroom teachers and specialists who helped out) met to discuss instruction and assessment. This group was one venue where Charles was nurtured to develop his knowledge, curriculum, and decision making. He said: "[We meet] every week, every Friday morning. It's wonderful, it's unbelievable! We get so much out of it. This week we talked about how we're going to do our assessment at the end of this quarter and tools we're going to use. And it's just to get ideas. And we talked about different [reading] skills we want to target or that we are targeting and how we're doing that."

Another venue in which Charles developed his knowledge and decision-making capacity was with his principal. Charles welcomed the substantive feedback he received from the principal and worked diligently to enact the ideas they discussed. He seemed to enjoy a collegial, inquiry-oriented relationship with her.

I had a post meeting with my principal about the lesson she observed on Tuesday, and we were talking about rethinking the format of my routine. And mainly we were talking about the time I spend actually instructing, the time they [students] spend actually reading. . . . What she said really made a lot of sense. . . . Before, I spent too much time on vocabulary, and there were some other skills. I had so many ideas of things that were relevant, but I tried to do too much at once. And that's something I've been struggling with, and talking to her helped me refocus—I need to really think about one or two things I really want to focus on and stick to those.

In contrast to Charles, Dorothy worked in a professional vacuum. For the first 2 years, she had no colleagues who shared her vision or approach to teaching. Dorothy objected to how the other first-grade teachers relied on whole-class reading in-

struction and how closely they followed the basal reader teacher's manual because she believed it was not meeting the needs of students with a range of abilities. She said:

There's not really any other first-grade teacher that I would go to and ask, "How do you do your language arts?" Partly because they're . . . very worried about doing the right thing; [they are] following exactly what the teacher's manual says all the way through. But there's nothing behind that saying, "Okay, this is what I want my kids to learn so I'm making this decision to use the story in this way." [They're] afraid to make decisions on their own. . . . So it's been a frustration because I've been doing so much thinking about how to make things work and what my kids need and what they don't need, but there isn't anybody I really trust to go to here to talk about it. So I've really kind of felt like I've been left on my own to hammer it out. I work best when I figure things out for myself. I make them make sense for me, and then I know what I'm doing, why I'm doing it. But it would have been nice to have somebody to go to and say, "Hey, what do you recommend?" But in order to do that it'd have to be somebody I trust—whose teaching I trust, I think that they're making good decisions, that kind of thing. There's nobody here.

Yet, because Dorothy always saw herself as an independent learner, was knowledgeable, and felt empowered to make instructional decisions, the lack of collegial support did not deter her efforts to create her own vision and to build an effective reading program. Her student teaching had actually prepared her for these responsibilities because her cooperating teacher allowed her to design and implement reading instruction for her fourth-grade students. According to Dorothy, her cooperating teacher did not teach reading at all—she just assigned students to read. So, by default, Dorothy had to design the reading curriculum and develop instructional strategies. Unlike Charles, Dorothy did not have a student



teaching experience or colleagues that provided substantive support, but, like Charles, she was given opportunities to develop her own teaching repertoire, and she was up to the task.

Armed with a strong foundational knowledge of early reading and a disposition for decision making, Dorothy bolstered her knowledge with intensive reading and studying every summer. She returned each fall with new ideas and the support of her principal to “do her own thing” because it was working. Dorothy’s classroom supply of books was extensive, and her willingness to create materials to match her instruction was extraordinary. For example, each week she found and introduced a poem of the week that served as the basis for decoding lessons. Then she created word sorts, games, and writing activities that provided practice of the targeted decoding skill.

Charles and Dorothy thrived in settings that encouraged them to use a variety of curriculum materials. Unlike Stephanie and Hannah, who seemed to need the support provided by more comprehensive materials, such tightly prescribed use of materials may have shackled Dorothy and Charles to a more restrictive and less effective approach to reading instruction. Further, we cannot help but wonder if Charles or Dorothy would have been drawn to teaching positions in schools such as those in which Stephanie and Hannah were hired. Charles told us: “Hopefully, you’ve got a school where people are able to make decisions about what good instruction is. That’s the kind of place where I want to be. . . . As a professional, I think I can make some decisions about what I know are going to be important skills for my students to learn.”

#### Little Change over Time

Over the first 3 years of full-time teaching, there was relatively little change in the curriculum materials these beginning teachers used or how they used them. We would characterize the changes as shifts in degree rather than in kind. The teachers seemed to

have learned their respective systems well and had generally chosen to stay the course that was charted during their first year of teaching. In Year 3, Stephanie was still using CIRC and Benchmark, Hannah was still using the basal and supplementing it with a few novels, Charles continued to rely on the district framework and multiple materials to structure the four components of his reading program, and Dorothy was still using her readers’ workshop model and a variety of reading materials.

All four teachers began to see some of the limitations of the curriculum materials they used as well as their own approaches to instruction. In general, these insights reflected teachers’ continuing commitments to meeting individual student needs and to developing a complete reading program. The way the insights were manifested, however, was influenced by the unique set of curriculum materials each teacher used and the context in which each worked. As a result, we found different patterns of change across the four participants. At one end of the continuum, Dorothy and Charles, the teachers with the most curricular choice, well-developed understandings of reading and reading instruction, and support to make instructional decisions, developed somewhat deeper, more elaborated understandings of reading instruction, and their programs became more sophisticated. At the other end of the continuum, Stephanie, with the most prescriptive materials and curricula expectations and the fewest decision-making opportunities, changed in ways that were more superficial and procedural. In the middle was Hannah, with her limited resources and comprehensive materials; she made some small changes but also seemed to pick up on important conceptual and practical tools to guide her instruction. We elaborate below.

In their third year of teaching, Charles and Dorothy continued working within their teacher-constructed reading programs to provide better instruction for all their students. Charles, for example, worried about



not having enough structure in the decoding portion of his program and hoped that there might be a program “out there” that could give him this structure. He searched for some options but ultimately decided that his own program was best: “I’ve looked at a lot of stuff, but a lot of it’s kind of hokey—making little dolls. It didn’t really have much to do with the reading. I mean, I know what the objectives are . . . I know what the skills are that are important for the kids to learn, and I know what they’ll be assessed on, so I’m just trying to focus on those things.”

Although Charles wanted something more systematic to guide his curricular decisions, he had developed a critical eye toward materials and was not willing to make the curriculum less purposeful for his students in order to obtain guidance. Instead, he worked with the district framework and his colleagues and used district professional development opportunities to add structure to his phonics program. He also reported preparing more lessons than in the past because he could more quickly determine students’ strengths and weaknesses and had a better understanding of expectations for third graders. This quest to improve instruction continued to be supported by the weekly Friday meetings with his teammates. After 3 years, Charles found the meetings as helpful and stimulating as before.

Dorothy continued to refine her reading program as well. In her third year, she gained a colleague with whom she could talk about some aspects of her teaching. She valued the relationship, but she continued to work primarily on her own to find better ways to meet students’ needs. Dorothy became more confident and comfortable with both the day-to-day aspects of teaching and with teaching reading, and this allowed her to be more reflective and to critique her own practice: “I’m starting to notice a lot more glitches in my teaching, or just quirks about how I teach, that I didn’t notice at all last year . . . just becoming a lot more critical of

what I do. I’m a lot more confident now—sometimes too confident. Like, oh yeah, it worked well first year, second year. I could just do it without thinking about it. But that isn’t the case, I’m finding. . . . I think for me the biggest worry I have is that when we do small-group reading lessons I don’t feel like I’m doing a thorough enough job of making sure those are valuable times.” Dorothy acted on her concerns. She moved students in and out of heterogeneous and homogeneous groups more frequently because she had become more adept at assessing students using running records and classroom observations, and she added more structure to her decoding instruction. She also now relied on a booklet distributed by the state that identified important learning outcomes for first-grade students, as a way to monitor her curriculum coverage. Although not as detailed as the curriculum guide Charles used, this framework helped Dorothy clarify the expectations for students at her grade level; she was able to use it to guide her choices rather than to dictate them. As she said, “I’m able to spend more time refining things as opposed to creating them.”

Although Hannah did not have the same encouragement to thoughtfully adapt the curriculum, ready access to materials, or understanding of reading instruction that could nurture her professional growth, her experience with the basal reading program appeared to provide a scaffold for her to develop a better understanding of both materials and instructional strategies. Perhaps because she was familiar with the material or had more confidence, Hannah made more choices about what to teach from the program. And, as she became more focused on teaching specific strategies and skills, she decided that using basal stories, which were shorter than novels, made it easier for her to teach some of her target outcomes. There was even some evidence that Hannah had internalized the lesson framework modeled in the basal (framed around a directed reading activity) and used it when she planned

and taught other lessons involving reading, such as Bible lessons.

Ironically, in her third year of teaching, Hannah noted that she thought the basal had “gotten better,” but, in truth, she was using the same basal program as in previous years. The basal had not changed, but now she was better able to understand and use it to her advantage. She continued, however, to use the basal lessons with the entire class, although she administered informal reading inventories to all her students and found that they had a range of reading levels. She addressed the issue by adding several more novels at different reading levels for her literature discussion groups, a move consistent with her principal’s encouragement to go beyond the basal textbook. However, without the same sort of support provided by the basal guide, Hannah was still unable to implement effective literature circles. She continued to have difficulty focusing instruction and managing students’ engagement.

As might be expected, Stephanie exhibited the least change. Although she felt she had made CIRC her own and found ways to support struggling students, her focus was still on helping students complete tasks that were generally too difficult for them—a focus that mirrored several district decisions. For instance, the school district paid Stephanie to develop adaptations for CIRC activities that all the second-grade teachers in the district could use with their low-achieving students. Similarly, her school bought another packaged decoding/fluency program for first grade so that the students might succeed in CIRC when they entered second grade. These types of decisions only reinforced the expectation that Stephanie and her students would work within the bounds of the CIRC program. At the end of her third year of teaching, Stephanie’s thinking reflected the importance of keeping with the program: “One thing that’s really improved for me, though, is pacing. Just having an awareness of how long I have to do a certain unit,

or how early I have to start prepping for standardized testing. . . . But this year, it feels I have a much better sense of what speed I should be working at.” Because she was compelled to follow this program closely, keep pace with her teammates, and test students on the material each week, she had little inclination to reexamine what and how she taught—getting through it was the priority.

Even with this strong push to stay in step with CIRC, Stephanie had a lingering concern that she might not be doing a good job teaching reading. She felt rewarded by the district and school when she was asked to take on more leadership for CIRC implementation; however, by the third year she felt that the program had become so familiar to her that she began to question her effectiveness: “And, it’s funny. Like reading has been the one thing that’s gone pretty well from the start. But this year, it’s feeling funny. And I think part of it is that maybe it’s because I’ve got the hang of it. Now in my third year, I feel like I’m not doing as good of a job with it. Like I’m almost getting too casual because I’ve gotten used to that part of it. And maybe not. Maybe it’s just becoming more subconscious for me. But just in the last couple of weeks it’s kind of been feeling like, ‘Oooh, am I really doing the best job that I can?’” Concerns such as these were also echoed by Charles and Dorothy in their third year. Yet both of them felt empowered and able to address their needs. In contrast, Stephanie lacked the tools, knowledge, support, or latitude to move off her curricular course or to act on her concerns; she had become shackled to a narrow way of thinking and teaching.

## Discussion and Implications

As new teachers launch their careers, they confront the issues faced by all beginning teachers—classroom management, developing a teacher identity, learning the school culture, understanding students, building a repertoire of instructional strategies, and the like. But in today’s environment, new

teachers face the added pressure of high-stakes accountability and of policies, both explicit and implicit, aimed at improving their teaching and their students' learning. In reading, many of these state and local policies have targeted curriculum materials, narrowing the curricular and pedagogical choices for teachers. Such an approach has implications not only for student learning but for teacher learning as well.

The beginning teachers in this study were deeply influenced by the curriculum materials provided to them and the curriculum contexts in which they worked. But they were influenced as well by their own knowledge and dispositions about reading instruction and by the school cultures in which they worked. Together, these shaped what teachers learned from the materials, how they used them, and ultimately how effectively they met the needs of the readers in their classrooms. In general, the two teachers with more restrictive materials and teaching contexts or less well-developed knowledge learned the least and were least able to adapt their instruction. Teachers who had stronger content knowledge, access to multiple materials, and support for curricular decision making learned the most and were most able to adapt instruction. Furthermore, early experiences with curriculum materials had lasting effects on these teachers. Consequently, explicit and implicit policies that target curriculum mandates, materials, and professional development can be powerful influences on the professional growth of beginning teachers. We turn now to these.

#### Curriculum Mandates

The push for mandated reading curricula has escalated. Some even argue that it is most essential for beginning teachers (Goodnough, 2001; Moats, 2000). But our data suggest that such mandates do not necessarily result in substantive teacher learning, thoughtful instruction, or best classroom practices. The situation is complex, however. It is not simply a matter of the

presence or absence of mandates. It appears that when the curriculum material is comprehensive (covering a large portion of the curriculum and including most of the materials teachers need), when instruction is more or less prescribed, and when school expectations for fidelity are high, there is little need for teachers to think through their practice and limited flexibility for them to meet the varied needs of their students. This combination of factors seems to direct teachers toward materials and particular teaching strategies rather than toward their students and the effects of their teaching. But teacher learning requires a focus on both teaching and student learning and, in particular, on the interaction between the two (Barr, 2001; Cohen & Ball, 1999). This seems to be where many curriculum mandates fall short.

Curriculum mandates may be particularly problematic for beginning teachers, who are eager to succeed and reluctant to question the "experts" or to exert professional prerogative. In this study, Stephanie and Hannah were reluctant to question the curriculum materials they were expected to use, most likely because of a combination of the materials, the curriculum contexts of their schools, and their earlier student teacher experiences of deferring to material. Although Stephanie was expected to follow the school reading program closely, Hannah's tight adherence to the curriculum materials during her first year was somewhat self-imposed. Although all four teachers in this study began their teaching careers with a vision of meeting the needs of individual students and of implementing a complete reading program, Stephanie and Hannah had the most difficulty realizing that vision. Beginning teachers may be most susceptible to the limiting effects of tightly regulated curriculum and curricular decision making and most likely to carry those effects into their later years of teaching. Teachers will not improve their practice if they are absolved of thinking about the what, why, and how of their instruction and its effects on

student learning. Furthermore, implementing a set of tightly controlled practices often leaves teachers with little time or motivation to do anything else.

It is difficult to imagine curriculum mandates that could capture the flexible, responsive instruction some researchers have found in successful classrooms (Allington & Johnston, 2001; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001)—how teachers “craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child they work with” (Snow, 1998) and use a variety of materials (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). In fact, the two teachers in this study who were most able to adapt instruction were those least tied to specific curriculum materials. They were free to match students with texts at appropriate levels, provide explicit instruction where needed, rely on a variety of grouping patterns for instruction, and use materials thoughtfully. It is equally difficult to imagine curriculum mandates that could accommodate the varied abilities of new teachers and the situations in which they find themselves. When mandates do not allow teachers to reflect on teaching and act on their insights, or when they direct teachers away from the “messiness” of teaching and the continual change of students, classrooms, and teachers themselves, the mandates may inhibit teacher learning (Duffy, 2004).

Although some educators believe that all curriculum mandates are problematic and that they disempower teachers, others suggest that what is mandated or the degree of specification can affect how a mandate is perceived and how it influences practice. They argue that curriculum needs to provide teachers with a focus that is specific but not rigid (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988). For example, requiring teachers to use curriculum guides to plan instruction is quite different from requiring all teachers to follow the same textbook and give the same tests on the same days. Similarly, specifying that teachers use a set of materials but

encouraging them to use the materials selectively and to supplement with other resources is likely to affect teachers differently than providing them with a single textbook and few supplemental materials. Our analysis suggests that three of the four teachers in this study appreciated and benefited from the materials they were required to use. For example, Hannah eventually understood the materials she was expected to use and took more control over how she used them. Similarly, Charles was supported in his teaching by the district curriculum framework and referred to it often as he planned his reading program. Even Stephanie, who was the most limited by the materials and her teaching context, appreciated the support the required curriculum provided her and floundered when she moved away from it. So, the alternative to mandated curriculum is not to withhold curriculum materials or guides from teachers; the evidence here and elsewhere is clear that teachers want and need materials (Grossman & Thompson, 2004; Kauffman et al., 2002). Instead, the objective is to support and promote thoughtful use of materials by engaging teachers in curricular decision making in light of student learning.

Although our findings raise concerns about curriculum mandates for beginning teachers, it is unlikely that mandates will disappear from the current policy environment. Our findings suggest two possible ways to reframe mandates. The first is to reconceptualize the notion of “fidelity” to a mandate. Rather than monitoring implementation by compliance with program procedures and materials, we suggest continuous examination of the quality of instruction offered to children of various abilities and the learning that results. This requires teachers and administrators to focus on student learning and engagement in light of program requirements, examining the effectiveness of ongoing instruction rather than simply relying on end-of-year test results. The second way to reframe

mandates is to rethink what is mandated. Here we are reminded of the origin of standards-based reform and a focus on the ends or outcomes, giving school districts and schools flexibility on the means (National Research Council, 1999). We can imagine a return to common curriculum frameworks or content standards that are at a moderate level of specificity (Dutro & Valencia, 2004). These could guide, rather than prescribe, instruction and could encourage multiple instructional strategies and programs.

### Materials

Regardless of whether curriculum materials are mandated, our evidence suggests that they influence teacher learning and practice. With a strong commitment to meeting individual student needs and a wide range of reading abilities in their classes, the teachers in this study needed access to materials of various types and difficulty levels. But there were dramatic differences in the quantity and type of material available across the schools. The teachers who were expected to use specific curriculum materials (Stephanie and Hannah) had few materials, whereas teachers who were encouraged to construct their own programs (Dorothy and Charles) had many. This was not simply a matter of affluence; it was a matter of priority. Dorothy's school had rich resources, and her classroom was filled with leveled books and supplemental reading material. In contrast, Charles worked in a high-poverty school, but the teachers shared resources across classrooms so they could provide students with materials at appropriate levels. Although both Hannah and Stephanie recognized the need for additional reading material, they simply had limited access. Clearly, issues of teacher learning and practice go far beyond the availability of materials. However, without an assortment of materials, teachers are denied the opportunity to explore alternative approaches to instruction or to see how their students learn with different types and levels of texts. This is critical when teachers

are learning to adjust instruction to individual student needs.

Beyond quantity and variety of materials, however, is the question of how well curriculum materials help teachers learn — how educative they are, how transparent in their rationales, how well they scaffold teacher learning. Above, we explored the effects of tightly controlled curriculum. But even these materials were difficult for our new teachers to understand and implement, as evidenced by Hannah's misconceptions about the basal and Stephanie's realization that she and her school were not using CIRC as designed. Others, too, have found that teachers' guides often fail to help teachers understand the rationale for teaching suggestions or how to examine student work and student thinking (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Grossman & Thompson, 2004; Remillard, 2000; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993). To be truly educative, teachers' guides should support teacher thinking about content, instruction, and student learning, not simply provide directions for implementation.

Many materials, however, do not even provide teaching suggestions. Other than the CIRC manual and the teachers' manuals that accompanied basal reading programs, most materials in teachers' classrooms (e.g., novels, leveled readers, workbooks, supplemental texts) did not provide much support or scaffolding for teachers. Lesson plans or ideas for instruction rarely accompanied these materials, leaving teachers on their own to design lessons or to figure out how the material could best be used. Our observations and interviews confirmed that teachers would have appreciated instructional suggestions for using these materials. They wanted the benefit of the scaffolding that teaching suggestions would provide as long as they could have the option of what they called "jumping off" when they were ready.

### Professional Development

We were surprised by the teachers' lack of preparation for using many of the mate-



rials in their classrooms. Most striking was that, when materials were mandated, there was little on-site support to help these new teachers understand the conceptual underpinnings of the materials and to learn to use them well. As a result, there was much misunderstanding and, likely, wasted instructional time. This job of professional development around curriculum materials belongs to both preservice education and to early career mentoring. At the preservice stage, prospective teachers need to become familiar with and develop a critical eye toward curriculum materials. This should include both careful study of the materials as well as observing implementation. In our experience, this is rarely a priority in teacher education programs—there are time limitations, philosophical dilemmas, and concerns about preparing teachers for a variety of field placements. However, when preservice education programs ignore curriculum materials or present only those materials or approaches “in favor,” they leave new teachers ill-prepared for the realities of today’s classrooms. Armed with knowledge and insights about materials, beginning teachers may feel more capable and empowered to deal with the range of mandates and materials in schools. And, at the induction stage, teachers need support for learning about and from materials as well. Many new teachers do not have the time, confidence, or expertise to be able to sort through complex, comprehensive programs or to use supplemental materials effectively. Mentoring programs and new-teacher orientations need to include attention to curriculum materials so that both teachers and students are successful (Borko, Davinroy, Bliem, & Cumbo, 2000; Hoffman et al., 1998).

Such attention to curriculum materials does not imply that new teachers should learn to use a single curriculum or approach; most elementary teachers find themselves with an assortment of reading materials in their classrooms and must solve problems associated with programs or

approaches as they implement them, even if they are using packaged programs. Teachers need to be prepared to understand the strengths and limitations, both conceptually and practically, of curriculum materials and to make good instructional decisions about them. Further, given elementary teachers’ focus on individual student learning, we believe that it is essential to tie professional development to student work and assessment. The point is not simply to implement curriculum materials according to guidelines or to use supplemental materials in a particular way but to consider the effects of specific materials and particular instructional strategies on student learning and then adjust instruction accordingly. Such an approach to professional development moves away from a model of training teachers to implement routines and procedures, toward a model of helping teachers learn to deal with the complexities and contradictions of teaching (Duffy, 2004; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000).

Our findings also suggest that one type of professional development, like one type of curriculum, cannot meet the needs of all beginning teachers. As the teachers in this study clearly demonstrate, beginning teachers are not a monolithic group. What some teachers find helpful, others are bound to find limiting; what some find vague and ill-structured, others will find supportive. Effective professional development is best found at the school level where teachers have formal and informal opportunities to interact with peers and where coaches and mentors can tailor support to individual teachers working with particular students on specific subject matter (Chubbuck et al., 2001; Grossman, Thompson, & Valencia, 2002; Stein & D’Amico, 2002). In fact, when we asked our participants what they would purchase if they had an unlimited budget, they unanimously responded, “someone on-site to help.” In a bold step, these novice teachers wanted to open their classrooms to expert teachers who would watch them teach, provide feedback, and model lessons.



Professional development must also help beginning elementary teachers work through their two major dilemmas: creating effective, cohesive reading programs and meeting the needs of individual students. Faced with an array of materials and high-stakes accountability, it is a challenge for new teachers to figure out how the pieces fit together and how to ensure student success. Without a blueprint, the materials and instruction will be fragmented and frustrating for both teachers and students. Similarly, faced with students who are reading at different levels, teachers need support in assessing students' needs, identifying appropriate material, and then planning for and managing small groups of learners. These are issues for all teachers, whether they use mandated programs, supplemental materials, or comprehensive programs. If professional development is focused too narrowly on one material or a single instructional approach, teachers may lose sight of the bigger, programmatic questions. What is needed is professional development that focuses on how to plan and implement a complete reading program not simply on the various pieces of a program.

Many think that curriculum materials can solve the challenges of teaching and learning. Our data suggest the solution is not that simple. New teachers clearly need the support of good curriculum materials, but they also need the knowledge, resources, and support to use the materials thoughtfully and effectively.

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