

What Matters in Teaching Literacy: National Policy or Teacher Beliefs?
An Examination of Teacher Practice through the Lens of Culture in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogy in the field of literacy instruction has been greatly influenced by educational research and public policy—national, state, and/or district. However, this field has not been without its controversies with regard to the best instructional practices particularly for children considered at risk of academic failure (Chall, 1967; Chall, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). One of the most significant contributions to our understanding of reading instruction in the United States came from the federally funded “First Grade Studies” (Bond & Dykstra, 1967) when an effort to identify the best approaches to the teaching of reading was launched nationally. The major finding of these studies revealed that differences in learners were greater among classes using the same methods than they were across methods and that no one approach could be determined to be better than any other by the end of the first grade (Early, 1991). A significant by-product of the “First Grade Studies” was the redirection of instruction away from the materials being used to the teachers and their practices (Robinson, Faraone, Hittleman, & Unruh, 1990). However, according to Robinson et al. (1990), the identification of the optimal definition for teaching reading still remained elusive, writing that “under any condition, the role of the teachers seems to be a powerful ingredient” in the instructional process (p. 99).

A half a century later, we find ourselves still seeking answers to the same questions. The recent national efforts to identify key research on difficulties in learning to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and on best practices for reading instruction (National Reading Panel Report, 2001) have become part of the enduring debate on how best to teach reading and prepare teachers of reading; yet, neither really considers the teacher as the primary vehicle for instruction, but rather emphasizes a particular method or model for reading instruction. Furthermore, recent national policies in the United States have served to direct state and local agencies toward reading instruction that reflects both research documents through the “Reading Excellence Act” of the late 1990s and now the “Leave No Child Behind Act” as primary vehicles for funding to schools at risk for low academic achievement.

However, agreeing with Robinson et al. (1990) that the teacher’s role is key, I argue that critical questions still remain: Do we know what it is that teachers base their instructional strategies on? Is it always grounded in the latest theory or public policy? Is there something more that needs to be considered? This study addresses these questions through the lens of culture, arguing that we must go beyond pedagogy and public policy to include the teachers themselves and their roles in the classroom. In other words, teachers matter; culture matters. [I have relied on Geertz (1973) for the definition of culture; namely, culture is seen as the framework within which each individual perceives his/her world in ways that are influenced by patterns long established within their communities and their personal histories.]

Because teachers have been identified as key in the instructional process (Hargreaves, 1980; Robinson et al., 1990; Sutaria et al., 1989), an understanding of the

values and beliefs that undergird a teacher's practice is important. An examination of a teacher's practice, then, cannot ignore his/her culture, which provides a way of looking at instructional practice that goes beyond the narrow context of the classroom and instructional materials and/or methods. An examination of culture in action requires that teachers be considered both inside and outside their instructional roles.

Within the context of past and current research and policy in reading instruction in the United States, one would question as to why an examination of literacy instruction outside the United States would be relevant. In fact, recent renewed interest in viewing teaching from a cross-cultural perspective (Anderson-Levitt, 2002; Sutton & Levinson, 2001) within the context of policy (Sutton & Levinson, 2001) has been the stimulus for this re-examination of a study that was conducted over a decade ago in the Philippines. The original study explored the nature of language, literacy, and culture as first grade teachers carried out national educational reform policies. In an effort to get at what influences teachers in their pedagogical practices, this paper takes this previous work and explores further these questions: What does national reform look like on the ground? What do teachers know of the current research and how does it impact their practice? And, can an understanding of culture explain instructional decisions that teachers make?

Gaining an understanding of what teachers know and how they know it with regard to literacy instruction is crucial particularly in a climate where national governments, state departments of education, and local school districts demand excellence while at the same time dictating policy and practice. The fact that this study was not conducted in the United States affords the opportunity to reflect on and think

critically about our own practices and policies through the examination of another (Anderson-Levitt, 2001).

The research was carried out as an ethnography through the lens of culture (Geertz, 1973) as it was revealed through the social actions and practices of six grade one teachers in a large, rural, central, elementary school in a Cebuano-speaking region of the Philippines during the 1988-89 school year. The data represent a portion of a school ethnography that was conducted and contribute in general to the issue of public schooling in the Philippines and its effectiveness as a means to promote the government's goal of productive citizenry, literacy, and national unity.

Since its inception, the nationally controlled Philippine public school system has been perceived as a primary means through which to improve the status of the nation's poor. This is not a goal unfamiliar to other school systems around the world, nor to our own in the United States. Consider, for example, the 1997 rally cry that "all children will learn to read well and independently by the third grade" (USDOE, 1997) or the current call "to leave no child behind" (USDOE, 2001). Can national policy make a difference at the local level?

The major finding of this study revealed that language and literacy instruction within the context of national reform goals were strongly influenced by culture. The ways in which teachers implemented national reform policies and the specific meanings for grade one revealed that language and literacy, shared culture, and policy and practice were all interwoven.