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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the way teachers conceptualize reading and on whether these conceptions influence instructional practice, a study was undertaken utilizing a propositional inventory and a naturalistic field study. The propositional inventory was used in two teacher surveys: the first included 602 teachers and sought to determine their conceptions of reading; the second included 257 teachers and attempted to establish relationships between their demographic data and their reading conceptions. Three major findings resulted: teachers do think in conceptual patterns, these patterns do not match the theoretical categories discussed in the reading literature, and teacher conceptions seem to be associated most strongly with years of experience. The field study involved 33 teachers and produced the following findings: teachers have more than one conception of reading, some teachers possess more complex conceptions than others, conceptions seem to vary in stability from teacher to teacher, a teacher's reading conception may be related to the grade level taught and to the ability level of the students, and teachers do modify and change their conceptions of reading and reading instruction over time. These findings indicate that teacher conceptions of reading are reflected in instructional practices.

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TEACHER CONCEPTIONS OF READING
AND THE IMPACT ON INSTRUCTIONAL BEHAVIOR

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and
Gerald G. Duffy

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A synopsis of a Research Symposium
presented at the Annual Conference
of the International Reading
Association, Atlanta, Georgia

April 25, 1979

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This study focuses on how teachers conceptualize reading and whether these conceptions influence instructional practice. It is being conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University, an NIE funded program of research which focuses on what teachers think and how such thinking affects instructional decision-making.

The undergirding hypothesis of this paper is that effective teachers make decisions based on a theory or mental framework (a conception) which serves as a model against which the instruction is analyzed and decisions are made. In effect, the principles of the conception "push" the teacher to select a particular alternative or sequence of alternatives from the universe of possibilities; in short, the teachers analyze and the key to this analysis is a mental conception which guides and governs the pattern of decisions made. This is not unlike the phenomenon being examined by the Clinical Processes in Reading group of the IRT (1979); also, similar hypotheses are reflected in the writings of Kamil and Pearson (1979), Carroll and Chall (1975), Cunningham (1977) and Harste and Burke (1977), among others.

THE PROBLEM

Consequently, this study is attempting to determine whether teachers do have conceptions of reading, whether these conceptions are reflected in instructional practices and the degree to which a teacher's reading conception guides and governs the pattern of instructional decisions in reading. The paper discusses the methodology employed, the results of teacher surveys, the results of naturalistic classroom studies and the conclusions to date.

METHODOLOGY

Two kinds of methodology have been employed: teacher surveys using a Propositional Inventory and naturalistic field studies in twenty-three classrooms.

The Propositional Inventory was designed to serve two major purposes: to provide exploratory data regarding whether teachers think about reading in conceptual patterns and to provide a tool for selecting teachers for observational study. The categories reflected in the instrument were based on a literature search which isolated five major conceptual views of reading: linear skills, basal text, natural language, interest and integrated curriculum. For each conception, nine propositions reflecting that conception were selected and placed on a Likert scale, creating a forty-five item instrument. This instrument was then administered several times to determine the nature of teacher conceptions of reading and to study the relationship between certain demographic teaching characteristics and their conceptions of reading. Detailed information regarding the development and reliability of the Propositional Inventory is reported elsewhere (Duffy and Metheny, 1978).

The naturalistic field study has been conducted in twenty-three classrooms and includes teachers from three states who were selected by data obtained from the Propositional Inventory and by nomination. As shown in Figure 1, this aspect of the study contains two strands. The left-hand strand focuses on determining teacher conceptions, with a conception being defined as " . . . the sum of the statements the teacher offers as explanations for the decisions he/she makes about teaching (particularly in reading)." These statements are collected by "triangulating" (Denzin, 1970, 1978) three sources of data; in this case, the sources are statements collected over time from planned, formal interviews, from spontaneous interviews and from comments the teacher makes to either the pupils or the observer in the process of teaching. These statements are then categorized and, if a category contains five or more statements, it is considered to be a conception.

Figure 1 was removed due to poor reproducibility.

The right hand strand of Figure 1 focuses on the study of teacher practices. Again, three sources of data are collected: field notes of observations, transcripts of audio tapes of reading periods and analyses of pupil activities during the reading period. These practices are studied to determine the teacher's instructional patterns in the classroom.

The instructional patterns are then compared with the teacher's conceptions to determine whether the categories of statements are reflected in the teacher's instructional practices. If at least five instructional activities or patterns reflecting a particular conception are observed and/or if the time spent in reading activities reflects a conception, it is determined that the conception guides and governs the instructional practice.

RESULTS OF TEACHER SURVEYS

The Propositional Inventory has been used to survey teachers at two points in time. The first included 602 teachers in three separate administrations and focused primarily on determining the nature of conceptions. The second included 257 teachers and attempted to establish relationships between teachers' demographic data and their conceptions of reading.

Three major findings resulted from these surveys. The first is that teachers do think about reading in conceptual patterns. Statistical analysis of teacher responses indicate that they do have conceptions of reading and that the instrument itself is an efficient and reliable means for determining these patterns.

The second major finding is that, while teachers do respond in terms of conceptual patterns, these patterns do not match the theoretical categories so frequently discussed in the reading literature. Instead, teachers tend to respond in terms of the more general categories of "content-centered" and

"pupil-centered," with the former encompassing conceptions such as basal text and linear skills and the latter encompassing natural language, interest and integrated curriculum models.

Finally, a teacher's conception of reading seems to be associated most strongly with years of experience. This is reflected in the fact that the older, more experienced teachers tend to reflect the "content-centered" conceptions while the younger and less experienced teachers reflect more "pupil-centered" conceptions.

RESULTS OF NATURALISTIC FIELD STUDIES

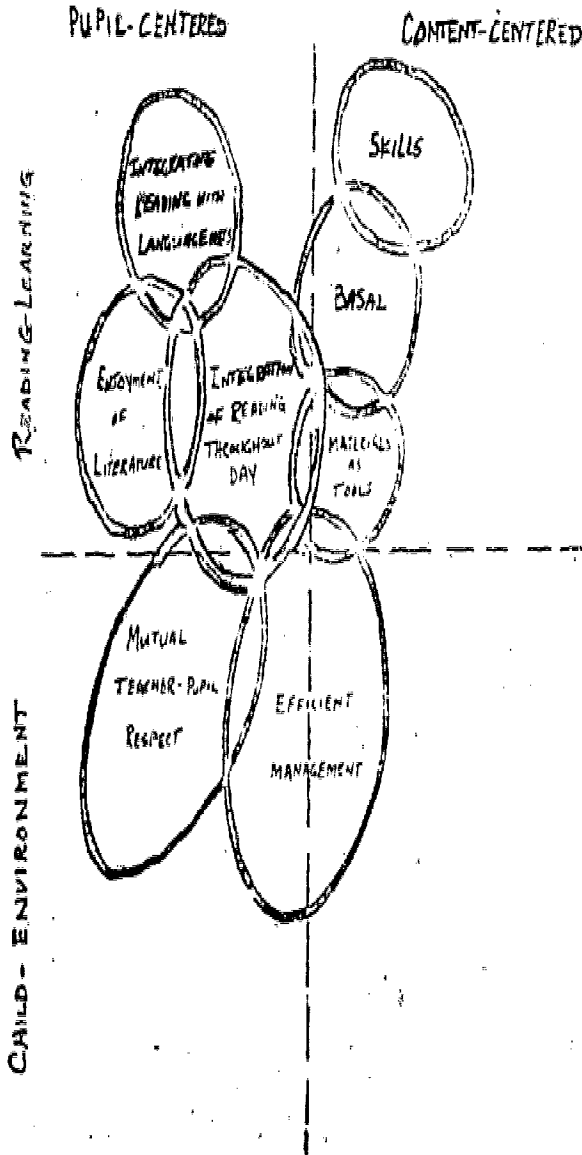
Because data from the Propositional Inventory supported the hypothesis that teachers possess conceptions of reading, classroom field studies were initiated in order to gain more insight regarding the nature of such conceptions and their interaction with instructional practice. These field studies have produced findings regarding the nature of teacher conceptions, their relationship to instructional practice and the degree to which conceptions guide and govern such practice.

The Nature of Teacher Conceptions. The results of intensive teacher interviews and observations suggest seven insights regarding teacher conceptions. First, teachers do have conceptions of reading. In fact, all twenty-three teachers observed made five or more statements about a category of reading or reading instruction, thereby meeting the criterion for having a conception of reading.

The second insight is that more teachers have more than one conception of reading. In fact, of the twenty-three teachers studied, twenty had two or more conceptions of reading. This can be seen in Figure 2, which is a graphic representation of the conceptions of two teachers. Each circle

TEACHER #3B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS



TEACHER #4B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS

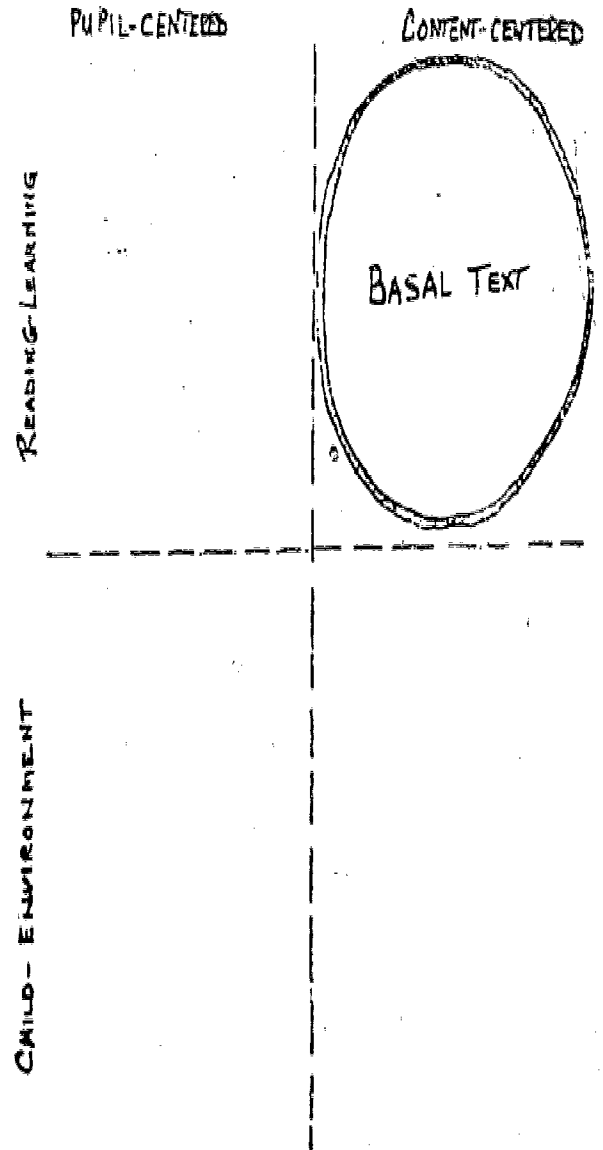


Figure 2

represents a category of statements and varies in size according to the importance the teacher assigns to them. The circles are also arranged in quadrants that represent either pupil-centered or context-centered categories as well as reading-learning based or child-environment based. In cases where teachers do have multiple conceptions of reading, the tendency is to select similar conceptions. For instance, a teacher who possesses a "basal" conception is likely to also select a "phonetic skills" or "sight words" conception and is less likely to espouse a "self-selection of trade books" or a "language experience" conception.

The third insight is that teachers not only have conceptions of reading but they also explain their instructional decisions with categorizable statements that represent "non-reading" conceptions (see Figure 2, Teacher 3B). For instance, some teachers have conceptions about mutual teacher-pupil respect, classroom management and routine, the amount of assistance needed by low or high ability pupils, the way pupils learn, social-emotional characteristics and others. Fifteen of the twenty-three teachers offered such non-reading conceptions, as well as reading conceptions, as explanations for their instructional decisions.

Fourth, it is also clear that some teachers possess more complex conceptions than others (see Figure 2). This complexity is seen both in the number of conceptions a teacher espouses and in the number of statements the teacher generates to support each conception. For instance, two of the teachers studied espouse only one conception; at the other extreme, one teacher espouses eight categories of conceptions, two others espouse six and five teachers have five categories of conceptions. Similarly, some teachers generate only the minimum of statements about an aspect of reading which

barely qualifies the category as a conception; other teachers, however, generate a dozen or more statements about a particular conception, thereby suggesting that their conception may be more complex or richer.

Fifth, teacher conceptions seem to vary in stability from teacher to teacher. For instance, some teachers maintain the same conceptions and the same practices throughout the school year but others seem to be in transition in which one conception gradually grows in importance in the teacher's mind while others conceptions diminish in importance. Figure 3 shows that the category of "developmental stages of growth" is an important factor influencing Teacher 6B's instruction. This category has grown in importance over the school year. The dotted line within the circle represents the size that category was at the beginning of the school year.

Sixth, it appears that a teacher's reading conception may be related to the grade level taught and to the ability level of the pupils. For instance, seven out of eight first grade teachers espouse "content-oriented" conceptions with the eighth taking an eclectic position. On the other hand, of the teachers who espouse the most "pupil-oriented" positions, all teach second grade or above. Similarly, teachers often seem to have a particular ability group in mind when they make statements about reading, a phenomenon evident in the fact that "pupil-oriented" teachers often clarify that their conception would change if the pupils were less able and "content-oriented" teachers say that their conception would change if their pupils were more able.

Finally, investigation of the genesis of teacher conceptions reveals that teachers do modify and change their conception of reading and reading

TEACHER #6B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS

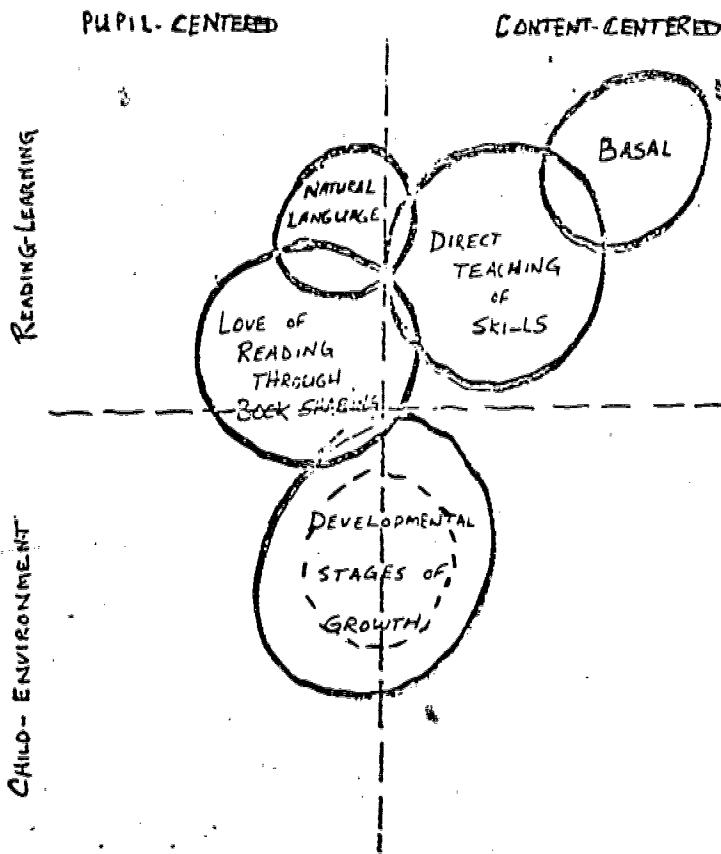


Figure 3 ||

instruction over time. However, while many sources seem to trigger such changes, teacher education classes in reading methodology appear to be one of the least influential sources.

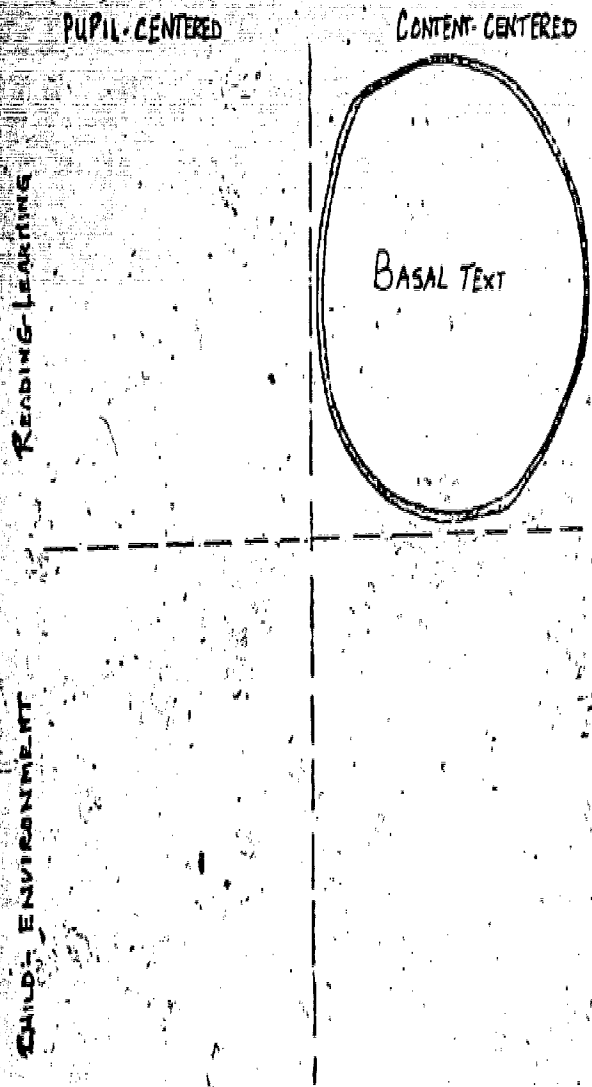
The Relationship Between Conceptions and Practice. The study of classrooms indicates that teacher conceptions of reading are reflected in instructional practices; of the twenty-three teachers studied, the instructional practices of all but four reflect their stated conceptions. For instance, a teacher espousing a basal conception was observed conducting activities typically associated with basal text instruction and analysis of her time utilization reveals that she spent 50% of her time in guided reading of basal stories and 35% of her time in related skill instruction. A teacher espousing a more "pupil-centered" conception, on the other hand, was observed conducting a variety of instructional activities and, while she devoted 55% of her time to basals and related skills, she also devoted 35% of her time to the affective and oral language dimensions of reading (see Figure 4). Generally, these consistent relationships between conception and instructional practice are evident across teachers.

Do Reading Conceptions Govern Instructional Practice? Despite the fact that the instructional practices of most teachers reflect their reading conceptions, it is not possible to state that reading conceptions are all that govern instructional decision-making in reading. Instead, it appears to be but one of several influences on the teacher's behavior; the reading conception is filtered through and modified by other influences and, when applied to classroom practice, is a unique reflection of all these influences.

Paramount among these influences is the presence of other conceptions of a non-reading nature. All but eight of the twenty-three teachers possessed

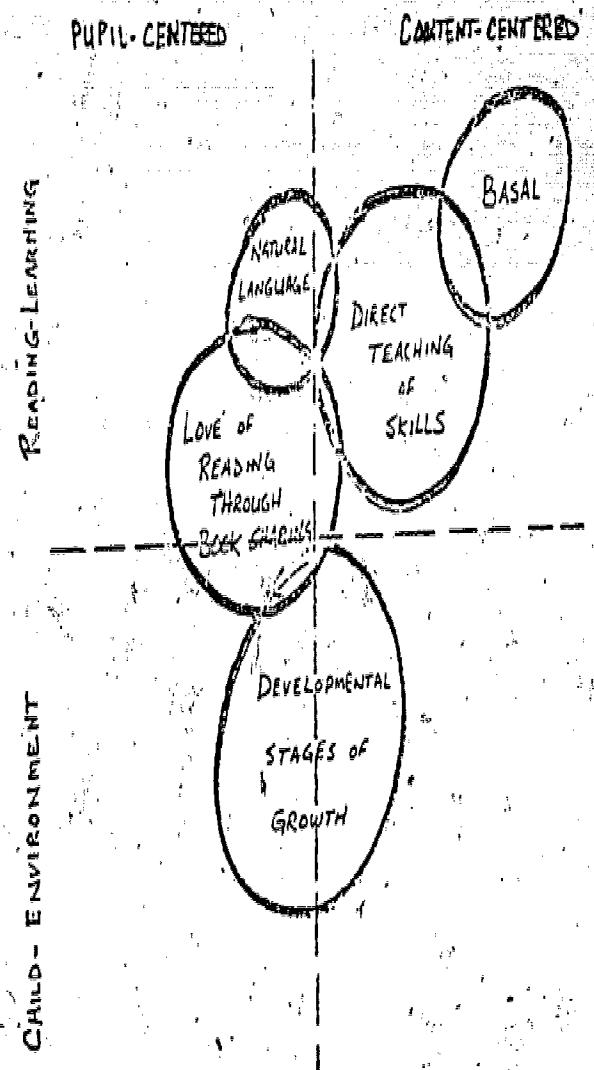
TEACHER #5B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS



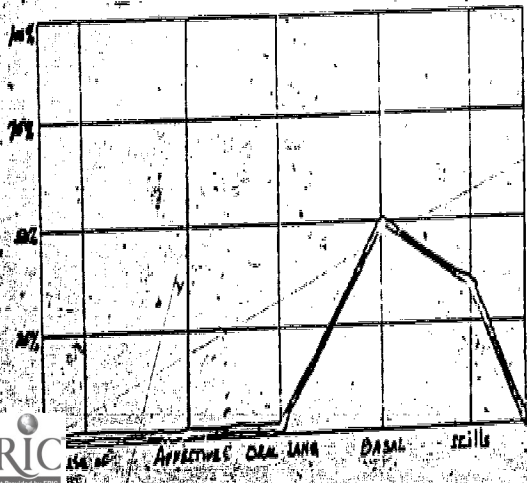
TEACHER #6B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS



TIME DEVOTED TO ACTIVITIES

TEACHER #5B



TIME DEVOTED TO ACTIVITIES

TEACHER #6B

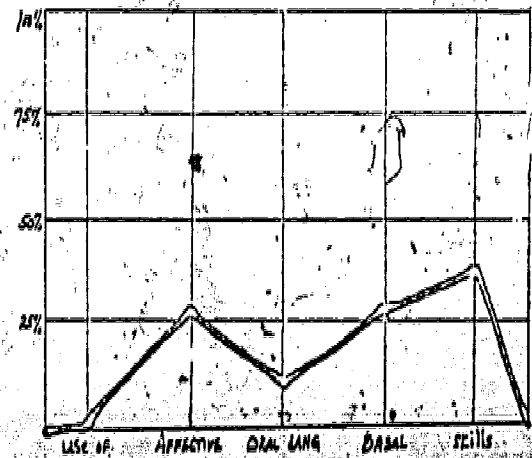


Figure 4

such "non-reading" conceptions which modify decision-making during reading. Further, for seven of the fifteen teachers having "non-reading" conceptions, such "non-reading" conceptions seem to dominate the teacher's mind and influence observed practice more than the reading conception.

Another influence is the existence of an apparently implicit belief among teachers that beginning readers (either first graders or pupils who read like first graders) must receive "content-oriented" instruction. Five of the teachers studied made this distinction clear in their statements while the observed practice of seven others indicated that they, too, were making a similar distinction. The implication seems to be that teachers possess yet another type of conception; a conception which says that children reading at a low level need more structure and content and that the "pupil-centered" concepts such as those embodied in natural language, interest and integrated curriculum activities must be saved until the pupil has the ability to read independently.

CONCLUSIONS

The ultimate goal of this research is to identify a key ingredient which distinguishes effective teachers from ineffective ones. To date, the data do not support the basic hypothesis that effective reading teachers are necessarily those who analyze the instructional situation in terms of a reading conception. Instead, the interaction between instruction in reading and reading conceptions is a complex one; while teachers do apparently have conceptions, these include many different kinds, all of which modify the teacher's instructional decision-making in subtle, but significant ways. Further, it is clear that identical conceptions can be employed in qualitatively different ways; for instance, two teachers espousing a "basal" conception can be applied in quite different ways.

The task now is to learn more about how teachers' various conceptions (including the reading ones) interact with each other and with the instructional context, how all these guide and govern the instructional decision-making process and the way in which teacher conceptions are tied to qualitative instructional practice. While teacher conceptions are clearly much more complex than simply associating one instructional decision with a matching theory of reading, there is nevertheless evidence that teachers possess conceptions which guide and govern their instruction. Our task is to discover the specifics of how these operate.

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