



DEBORAH DUNCAN-OWENS

# Scripted Reading Programs: Fishing for Success

Principals should weigh the claims of commercial reading programs against the needs of their students and the realities of how teachers use them.

*"Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life."*

**T**his popular Chinese proverb is an apt metaphor for the dilemma faced by principals and curriculum coordinators when

deciding whether to purchase a scripted commercial reading program. Just as giving a man a fish solves the immediate problem of hunger, provid-

ing teachers with a scripted reading program may solve the immediate problems associated with new, inexperienced, or ineffective teachers. On the other hand, teaching a man to fish empowers him and acknowledges his ability to meet his own needs. Likewise, an investment in long-term professional development can train teachers to make informed decisions about how best to instruct students, which methods and materials to use, and how to know when interventions are needed for individual students.

Scripted commercial programs are not new. However, the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Reading First initiative have given commercial reading programs prominence in schools as principals look for ways to improve reading achievement through imple-





## HOT TOPIC

mentation of scientifically based reading methods. Many of the commercial reading programs are well designed and attractive and promote their ability to meet the needs of all children. But they represent a costly investment, which can complicate a purchasing decision.

While principals can cite the benefits of using scripted commercial reading programs, these programs can have a negative impact on teachers. The chart opposite lists some of the pros and cons to consider before making a decision to purchase a program.

### Do These Programs Really Work?

Questions about the effectiveness of commercial reading programs are not easily answered. While program developers often commission research evaluating their programs, these studies are viewed skeptically because they represent self-evaluations that may not be objective and have not been put through the rigors of peer evaluation. Studies that are cited to demonstrate the effectiveness of programs tend to focus on reading subskills, such as phoneme segmentation, and don't necessarily provide insight into overall literacy development. It also may not be clear that gains promised by program developers will translate into higher reading achievement later. Researchers have noted the need for qualitative studies to investigate the efficacy of commercial programs within the context of actual classrooms (Purcell-Gates, 2000; Yatvin, 2000).

### What the Research Says

Program fidelity is a cornerstone of scripted programs, and developers assert that teachers must maintain fidelity for their programs to be successful. When programs do not

The Positive and Negative Impacts of Scripted Commercial Reading Programs	
PROS	CONS
A pre-set standardized curriculum makes lessons easier for teachers to plan and supervisors to monitor.	Programs can marginalize teachers by not allowing them to make decisions about how to teach (Garan, 2004).
Programs ensure teaching consistency.	Programs can "de-skill" teachers, placing them in the role of middle managers (Coles, 2001; Rice, 2006).
Program developers can provide teacher training (Garan, 2004).	Teachers can become alienated from their reading instruction and begin treating the teaching of reading as the application of commercial materials (Shannon, 2005).
Many programs advertise their use of scientifically based reading research and alignment with Reading First guidelines (Duncan-Owens, 2007).	Teachers will continue to follow a program in spite of a lack of results because of administrative insistence.

live up to expectations, the fault is generally attributed to a lack of fidelity. However, regardless of mandates for program fidelity, and whether teachers like a particular program, research demonstrates that they tend to maintain a certain amount of autonomy in what or how they teach (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993). Interviews with demonstration classroom teachers (see sidebar on page 28) supported this finding. Eleven of the 12 teachers reported making alterations in the program in spite of the insistence of administrators and program developers for program fidelity.

While it may be argued that novice teachers would benefit from a highly structured program with a script, studies have found that it isn't just experienced teachers who veer from program mandates, but that inexperienced and ineffective teachers make changes, too (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993). However, while experienced teachers have the knowledge and background to alter the program using scientifically based reading research methods, less experienced teachers may not be as equipped to make sound decisions. Therefore, there are several

factors that principals should keep in mind when deciding whether to purchase a scripted commercial reading program:

- Researchers investigating the effectiveness of commercial reading programs have found that the critical factor in successful reading instruction is not the program, but teacher quality (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Pressley et al., 2001; Ryder, Sekulski, & Silberg, 2003).
- Programs that allow teachers to maintain some autonomy in literature selection, methods, and materials have been found to yield higher results in reading comprehension (Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 2004; Tivnan & Hemphill, 2005; Wilson, Martens, & Poonam, 2005).
- Regardless of teacher approval of a program, or administrative mandates for program fidelity, teachers will make adaptations in how they use the program (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993).
- One program cannot meet the needs of all children. Teachers need to be trained and empowered to make decisions about how best to teach their students (Garan, 2004).



## Testing a Reading Program

A recent demonstration project in Mississippi presented an opportunity to investigate how teachers view and use scripted commercial programs. In 2006, the privately funded Barksdale Reading Institute launched the project in the form of a reading reform initiative for kindergarten and first-grade students in 12 schools serving high populations of children at risk for reading failure. All of the 12 lead teachers hired to provide core reading instruction in the demonstration classrooms were knowledgeable and experienced. A scripted commercial reading program, Read Well (Sopris West, 2006) was selected to ensure consistency among the 12 different classrooms.

A series of interviews throughout the 2006-2007 school year yielded insight into the teachers' experiences using the program. At the beginning of the year, all 12 classroom teachers spoke favorably of Read Well, noting its systematic, explicit approach. As the school year progressed, they continued to speak favorably about many features of the program. However, they reported problems that emerged as they attempted to maintain fidelity to Read Well and meet the needs of their students. By midyear, it became clear that the teachers would need to supplement the program and veer from the script in order to help their students meet grade-level expectations. Among the identified problems were:

- Contractions were introduced in the earliest kindergarten and first-grade units before students had learned the words they stood for;
- Students were not permitted to move to a higher unit until all students in the group were able to pass the end-of-unit exam, with students sometimes remaining in units for weeks at a time;
- The program relied on decodable text with little or no interaction with authentic literature;
- There was an over-emphasis on subskills;
- There was not enough emphasis on text comprehension; and
- Kindergarten program features were not developmentally appropriate.

Most of the alterations the teachers made in how they used Read Well were relatively minor, such as allowing students to progress to the next unit in spite of the inability of all children in their groups to pass end-of-unit assessments. However, other alterations were more significant, such as skipping entire portions of the program. Several teachers augmented the program with other materials, trade books, and basal readers. One teacher created her own materials to use with her students. All the alterations reflected the teachers' desire to meet the needs of their students, as well as their ability to make sound decisions about how best to teach their students.

- Effective teachers are not opposed to well-designed programs, but they understand that a good program can never take the place of a highly qualified teacher—nor can it overcome the problems associated with ineffective teaching.
- Whether or not a commercial program is used, new and inexperienced teachers need mentors

to show them how to implement effective teaching strategies.

- The decision about whether to purchase or implement a program should be embedded in an understanding of the students and teachers who will use it.
- The majority of research conducted to evaluate program efficacy base conclusions on a comparison of

pretest and post-test data, assuming that teachers have followed the program with fidelity. However, evidence has demonstrated that teachers tend to abandon fidelity in favor of making adjustments in their instruction when they find it necessary in order to meet the needs of their students.

Perhaps the question isn't whether to purchase a scripted commercial program, but how to implement it and maximize the benefits associated with its use. Here are some suggestions:

- Include teachers in the decision: If they are a part of the decision, it is more likely that they will maximize the benefits of the program.
- Maintain a focus on students' needs: One program cannot meet the needs of all students and it's best to acknowledge that prior to selecting and purchasing a program.
- Consider the purchase of a program as a beginning point. Teachers still need to be provided with the information, training, materials, and opportunity to adjust their instruction in order to meet the needs of their students.
- Understand that a commercial program is not necessary in order to provide high-quality instruction using research-based reading methods aligned with Reading First mandates.
- Recognize the need to train teachers to differentiate reading instruction for diverse students. Although some programs may promote their ability to differentiate instruction, only a well-trained teacher can make the multifaceted decisions involved in developing such instruction.



## HOT TOPIC

- Encourage teachers to work together for solutions, exploring teaching methods and interventions for struggling readers.
- Consider partnering with another school, exchanging ideas, sharing successes, and tackling problems.
- Understand that there is no simple solution, no panacea, or miracle cure for reading. The range of ways to solve reading achievement challenges is as broad as the range of student profiles. □

### Deborah Duncan-Owens

is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Arkansas State University. Her e-mail address is [dowens@astate.edu](mailto:dowens@astate.edu).

### References

- Bond, G. L., & Dykstra, R. (1967). The cooperative research program on first-grade reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 2(4), 5-142.
- Coles, G. (2001). Reading taught to the tune of the scientific hickory stick. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(3), 204-212.
- Datnow, A., & Castellano, M. (2000). Teachers' responses to Success for All: How beliefs, experiences and adaptations shape implementation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37, 775-799.
- Duncan-Owens, D. (2007). *Reforming reading instruction in Mississippi through demonstration classes: Barksdale literacy teachers' first year experiences*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Mississippi State University.
- Fang, Z., Fu, D., & Lamme, L. L. (2004). From scripted instruction to teacher empowerment: Supporting literacy teachers to make pedagogical transitions. *Literacy*, 38(1), 58-64.
- Garan, E. M. (2004). *In defense of our children: When politics, profit, and education collide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Pressley, M., Wharton-McDonald, R., Allington, R., Block, C. C., Morrow, L., Tracey, D., et al. (2001). A study of effective grade-1 literacy instruction. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 5, 35-58.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (2000). The role of qualitative and ethnographic research in educational policy. *Reading Online*, 4(1). Retrieved March 12, 2006, from [www.readingonline.org/articles/purcell-gates](http://www.readingonline.org/articles/purcell-gates)
- Rice, L. J. (2006). *Countering the voices of scripted curriculum: Strategies for developing English language arts curriculum in the age of standards*. NCTE Slate, Article #115817. Retrieved December 20, 2006, from [www.ncte.org/about/issues/slate/115817.htm](http://www.ncte.org/about/issues/slate/115817.htm)
- Ryder, R. J., Sekulski, J., & Silberg, A. (2003). *Results of direct instruction reading program evaluation first through second grade, 2000-2002*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- Shannon, P. (1983). The use of commercial reading materials in American elementary schools. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19(1), 68-85.
- Sopris West (2006). *Read Well*. Frederick, CO: Sopris West Educational Services. Retrieved June 1, 2006, from [www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)
- Sosniak, L. A., & Stodolsky, S. S. (1993). Teachers and textbooks: Materials use in four fourth-grade classrooms. *The Elementary School Journal*, 93(3), 249-275.
- Tivnan, T., & Hemphill, L. (2005). Comparing four literacy models in high poverty schools: Patterns of first-grade achievement. *The Elementary School Journal*, 105, 419-441.
- Wilson, P., Martens, P., & Poonam, A. (2005). Accountability for reading and readers: What the numbers don't tell. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(7), 622-631.
- Yatvin, J. (2000). *Minority view. In Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Pub. No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy

### WEB RESOURCES

"Building a Foundation for Reading Proficiency" is a Web Exclusive article from this issue of *Principal*, which discusses how one school enhanced its literacy curriculum by introducing reading software in conjunction with the establishment of a literacy group program.  
[www.naesp.org/principal](http://www.naesp.org/principal)

The National Institutes of Health provides *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*.  
[www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/report.htm](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/report.htm)

