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Three Reasons *Caveat Praeceptor* Must Guide the Selection of any Reading Intervention

School leaders are often tasked with finding intervention programs which must balance meeting federal guidelines with being effective for their districts' students. In the past, publishers have tacitly used the truism *caveat emptor*, or let the buyer beware, which means that a buyer must be aware of--and is legally responsible for--the inherent or possible flaws of an item that the buyer is considering. Now, administrators must employ *Caveat praeceptor*. Praeceptor, from the Latin verb praecipio, has multiple applicable meanings: to anticipate, to command, and to teach (Latin Dictionary, 2015). *Caveat praeceptor* is the author's construct which conveys the idea that educational leaders must be aware of--and responsible for--the qualities of their districts' intervention choices.

The need for *caveat praeceptor* is demonstrated by the following case study. A Rocky Mountain school district was faced with the possibility of losing federal funding if it did not as part of a district wide improvement plan adopt a scientifically based (The National Institute for Literacy, 2006) reading intervention in its Title 1 schools. The district serves 7,622 K-6 students in 27 elementary schools. The total district population is 13,435 students, a population which could be described as a homogenous group consisting of a majority of white or Caucasian students. Twenty percent of the total population self-identified as being of Hispanic origin or race. Forty-two percent of the total population received free or reduced- priced lunches. Twenty-five of the twenty-seven elementary schools have been designated as Title I Schools by the federal government (District, 2015). In the fall semester of 2013, 6 of these Title I schools

participated in a district sponsored pilot study of *Journeys Common Core 2012*, a reading program published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Moore, 2014).

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt presented its reading program, *Journeys Common Core 2012*, with an extensive list of over 350 references, (129 of which pre- date *No Child Left Behind*), (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014) to the district as a panacea for district reading score improvement that would also meet the federal definition of being scientifically based, a mandate for district spending of federal dollars. The district's senior leadership decided to pilot the *Journeys* program, collect data, and compare the publisher's claims to what was found in its own study (Author, 2015; Moore, 2014). This district's pilot study of *Journeys* led the author to three understandings which have been characterized here as caveats, or things of which to beware, which hopefully can help leaders and administrators navigate the waters of corporate publishing houses and their promoted interventions. The first caveat when considering an intervention is the understanding that the concept commonly known as scientifically based may be more of a marketing concept rather than science. Many researchers have linked the scientific requirements of NCLB to the bottom line of corporate publishers (Garan, 2005; Rush & Scherff, 2012; Spencer, 2014). Writing six years after NCLB was ratified; Patrick Shannon (2007) commented that "Commercial publishers have experts to represent their programs in order to increase their market share" (p.456). (The second caveat is to understand that marginalized populations may not benefit from programs recommended by this potentially flawed science. Allen (2006) asserted: "The enforcers of NCLB policy are not finding new answers to how to teach poor (historically marginalized) children because they are not looking for them" (p. 42). The third caveat is to be aware of interventions which have a weak claim of being scientifically based.

Manzo (2006) wrote about RF recommended programs which have a potential for weakness due to the nature of the program selection process: “Federal employees and their representatives had directed or even pressured states to choose specific assessments, consultants, and certain kinds of texts as conditions for getting funding under Reading First” (2006, p. 24).

Caveat #1: Marketing versus Science

The first caveat is the understanding that the concept now known as scientifically based intervention may in reality be more of a marketing tool rather than science. The mix of marketing and science began with the *No Child Left Behind Act*, a set of federal laws and regulations which “dramatically expanded federal influence” (Dee & Jacob, 2011, p. 418) on education in the United States. NCLB called for a previously unknown level of federal involvement in education, which was historically a matter in the purview of individual states. “NCLB has institutionalized a broad and pervasive Federal role in K-12 education and introduced new mandates for schools receiving Title I monies, and carried broad curriculum implications for all K-12 schools” (Groen, 2012, p. 10; see also Barbash, 2008; Dee & Jacob, 2011).

Reading First [RF] (NCLB, 2002) is a statutory component of NCLB. The National Reading Panel’s [NRP]2000 Report, which was the basis for NCLB/RF, may have been influenced by publishers to exclude relevant research (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Garan, 2005). The NRP excluded qualitative and correlational research altogether, and set parameters which left many studies out of the final report’s recommendations (Pressby & Allington, 2015). These original omissions in the NRP’s 2000 Report have had major consequences for the teaching of

reading in the United States, as they promulgated into law the so called five pillars of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies. (Shepard, 2008). Several experts have questioned the NRP's method of determining these pillars as either profit driven (Shannon, 2007) or non-inclusive in nature (Spencer, 2014). Though Shanahan supported the NRP Report, having been the committee chairman, and argued against the counter assertions of others, including Elaine Garan, (Garan, 2005; Shanahan, 2005) these five pillars were not just controversially and questionably derived, as Garan wrote (2005), they were made the law of the land (Edelsky, 2007; Groen, 2012; & Meyer, 2013).

As a result of this arguably flawed research, reading teachers across the nation have been compelled to use commercial core and supplemental reading programs containing these five elements even though “researchers have uncovered a number a concerns about the effectiveness of specific elements of some core reading programs” (Mahiri and Maniates, 2011, p. 10). One of the conclusions of the Reading First Final Report was that “Reading First did not produce a statistically significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores in grades one, two or three” (USDOE, 2008, p. xv). The results of the Rocky Mountain school district's study reflected a similar reality. Though the district's results included marginal gains in a post test in first grade, the effect size of the gains was exceedingly small, with a partial eta-squared of 0.005 (Moore, 2014, p. 6).

District leaders made the decision to discontinue *Journeys* based upon their analysis of the pilot program's data and comparison of the value received with relative student gains. The pilot study was initially expensive to the district, with implementation costs estimated to be

about \$400,000 (Brandt, 2015, personal interview). However, the district was in a favorable position; it was able, with the data from its own study and cost analysis, to determine that for its purposes, the publisher's marketing had been stronger than the strength of the science upon which intervention was based.

Caveat #2: Consider the Needs of Marginalized Populations

The second caveat for leaders as they select interventions is understanding that marginalized populations may suffer under NCLB/RF recommended programs. English Language Learners, African-American, urban, and recent immigrants may not in fact benefit from programs deemed scientifically based by NCLB/RF (Loveless, 2007; Mahiri & Maniates, 2011). For example, African -American students receive, according to a United States Government Accounting Office Report, less instructional time in subjects other than math and language arts. Such instruction has decreased significantly in all districts as underperforming schools focused on tested subjects. "Schools with higher percentages of low income or minority students reported significantly larger average decreases in time spent on arts education as compared with teaching at (non-minority) schools" (USGAO, 2009, p. 14). This increase in instruction time in math and language arts is commonly due to school leaders implementing NCLB/RF programs such as scripted reading programs, which have been criticized in the relevant literature (Mahiri & Maniates, 2011; Manzo, 2006; & Meyer, 2013).

One effect of NCLB/RF is that schools failing to meet their goals, defined by NCLB as twice failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals in any sub group (Edelsky, 2006),

repeatedly are to be closed, leaving one author to lament that “Public schools are being closed, most of them in communities of color that are economically poor. (Minority) children will suffer needless long commutes, sometimes through dangerous neighborhoods, to get to schools in which curriculum continues to be prescribed and is often culturally and linguistically insensitive” (Meyer, 2013, p. 6). The prescribed curriculum to which Meyer referred can be described as scripted curricula sold by publishing companies which make promises of standardized test score improvement to desperate districts (Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Meyer, 2013).

The regulations of NCLB/RF have been understood to require commercially available scripted curricula. Mahiri and Maniates (2011) wrote that “California, like some other states, required the use of prescriptive, highly specified core reading curricula...as an antidote to demographic disparities in reading proficiency” (2011, p. 10). The demographic disparities referred to are the increasing numbers of recent immigrants and other ELL students to California and other states, for whom NCLB/RF’s policies and practices replace teachers’ professional judgments: “Both new and highly experienced teachers of reading were required to maintain fidelity to the prescribed program rather than invoke their contextualized pedagogical content knowledge that (is) a hallmark of quality teaching” (Mahiri & Maniates, 2011, p.10).

The Rocky Mountain school district’s leaders made a decision to exclude potential participants who had been identified as gifted, and those who received supplemental reading instruction (e.g. Leveled Literacy Intervention (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014). These students were excluded for two reasons. The first reason for the exclusion of certain students lay in the fact that the reading program, *Journeys*, did not offer products for many student groups

within its core program. The publisher offered an English Language Learners component at additional cost (Brandt, personal interview; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

The second reason for student exclusion lay in the study's design, which was to study the effects of the core program alone, and to control for extraneous variables. Teachers in the three pilot schools reported that the core program was weak in the areas of ELL instruction and differentiated instruction. Several teachers interviewed during the district's pilot program also reported difficulties associated with what they described as *Journeys'* rigid and scripted structure (Moore, 2014). One surveyed teacher reported that "Because it (*Journeys*) was so complex... I had to take home the book every night (to learn) the exact script" (Moore, 2014, p.68). Another teacher reported "I don't feel that I have any freedom" (Moore, 2014, p. 71). Such structured programs have been criticized in the literature as failing to meet the needs of historically marginalized populations (Meyer, 2013). Information of this nature would not have been available to the district had the district relied upon the one, publisher sponsored, extant research study.

Caveat #3: Define Scientifically Based

The third caveat leaders must consider is that though publishing houses claim that their interventions are scientifically based, the evidence is cited consists of sponsored research.. When researching a potential program. Leaders may find in the literature only one study, which may or may not be empirically designed, but will almost certainly be sponsored by the publisher of that reading program. According to Manzo (2006), a publisher's own sponsored research is not enough for any leader to accept a claim of its program being scientifically valuable. Edelsky

(2006) voiced frustration with federal regulations (Which) narrow the curriculum with programs that require all kids- no matter their different needs- to be on the same page on the same day...” (p. 461). Recently, leaders have been reminded that the scientific method, such as peer review of efficacy and replication studies should be used to evaluate publishers’ self-made and supported claims (Rush & Scherff, 2012).

The Rocky Mountain district’s pilot study of *Journeys* allowed the district leadership to disregard the marketing efforts of a publisher and make an informed selection decision. Unfortunately, many districts are not in a similar position, as Wren (2003) noted when NCLB first became law: “For now, the vendors are trying to use poorly designed studies to support the effectiveness of their programs, and for now, consumers (school districts) are still buying it” (p. 1). As explained by the National Literacy Panel, “Peer review provides a baseline of quality control because it exposes ideas and experimentation to examination and criticism by other researchers. Its absence should raise doubt about the quality of the research” (2006, p.4). Unfortunately, some leaders may not be able to conduct their own research on reading programs, a fact not lost on publishing companies. However, regardless of whether a district can afford to conduct a full in-house study of the efficacy of such reading programs, there are steps district administrators can—and should—take before adopting a program. .

Curriculum Adoption Action Plan

There are three steps that any leader can immediately take to ensure the selection of quality interventions. When considering any intervention, leaders must accept a responsibility to determine whether the science upon which the intervention is based is sound, whether the

program will help improve the reading abilities of marginalized groups, and consider whether marketing or science supports the intervention.

First, district leaders should advise and empower their textbook or intervention adoption committees to investigate publishing houses' claims that interventions are scientifically based or proven. Publishers' statements do not have to be taken at face value. Ideally, interventions will have had multiple independent reviews and supporting empirical or qualitative research, which is available to leaders in the literature. In the *Journeys* case study, there was only one study found in a key word search of the literature, and that one study had been sponsored by the publisher. In the current case study, senior district leaders gave mid-level leaders the latitude to study the publisher's claims in light of the district's unique situation.

Second, district leaders should initiate and support in-house research on potential intervention programs. Pilot programs offer opportunities for real world application and evaluation of publishers' claims under each district's unique conditions. In fact, leaders may come to value their own research over publishers' marketing. The Rocky Mountain school district's stakeholders were the ultimate winners in the case study. District support for in-house research led to both financial savings for taxpayers and a more informed reading program selection for students (Author, 2015). When a pilot study cannot be done, the district still has an obligation to be attentive to overall data and determine the effectiveness of the program with their students.

Third, leaders must encourage the discontinuation of programs which, though perhaps favored by stakeholders, are in fact ineffective. Such programs should be replaced, and

instruction models which are improving outcomes for marginalized populations should be continued. In the case study, the district's research indicated that the control group model of reading instruction was as successful as the experimental model, *Journeys*, was less expensive, and was more responsive to the needs of ELL and other marginalized groups. Recognizing the financial distress some districts are under, the author recommends several low cost alternatives to the more expensive pilot study evaluation method:

- Webinars on reading and literacy topics,
- Regional university libraries,
- Local, state, regional, and national conferences which personnel were already attending,
- Local, state, regional, and national administrator associations and websites,
- Utilizing local, state, regional, and national teachers' association and websites.

In summary, just as consumers must beware and be responsible for products purchased, district administrators must accept responsibility for the efficacy of reading programs and interventions selected. District administrators can help to ensure positive outcomes for historically marginalized populations by empowering their adoption committees with the ability to question publishers' claims of efficacy and recognizing pilot studies as cost effective measures of efficacy. Finally, leaders must ensure the discontinuation of ineffective programs. Leaders who take these simple but important steps demonstrate *caveat praeceptor* and exemplify effective leadership.

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