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Literature-based reading instruction: Problems, possibilities & polemics in the struggle to change

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ABSTRACT

Concerns are being raised in both professional literature as well as in the popular press regarding certain aspects of the literature-based movement. A longitudinal study investigated a group of first-grade teachers who have been attempting (with varying degrees of success) to introduce literature-based teaching strategies into their classrooms. The experiences of these teachers were inspected in relation to four areas of concern that have been raised regarding literature-based teaching: (1) skills instruction; (2) guided reading strategies; (3) literature selection; and (4) thematic teaching (or curriculum integration). Results indicated that the teachers varied considerably in their instruction as they wrestled with the issue of how best to guide students toward appropriate practice and success with texts that were uncontrolled in terms of vocabulary. Findings provide support for both sides of an increasingly polarized and strident debate over the merits of literature-based teaching. Contains 29 references. (Author/RS)

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NRRC
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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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Abstract. *Concerns are being raised in both professional literature as well as in the popular press regarding certain aspects of the literature-based movement. Here we report on findings from a longitudinal study of a group of first-grade teachers who have been attempting (with varying degrees of success) to introduce literature-based teaching strategies into their classrooms. We inspect the experiences of these teachers in relation to four areas of concern that have been raised regarding literature-based teaching: 1. skills instruction; 2. guided reading strategies; 3. literature selection; and 4. thematic teaching (or curriculum integration). We describe classroom practices and the problems and possibilities associated with teacher change in each of the four areas.*

> . . . those who are looking ahead to a new movement in education, adapted to the existing need for a new social order, should think in terms of Education itself rather than in terms of some 'ism about education, even such an 'ism as in "progressivism." For in spite of itself any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an 'ism becomes so involved in reaction against other 'isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it then forms its principles by reaction against them instead

> of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems, and possibilities.
>
> —John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938, p. 6)

The literature-based movement in reading education is barely 15 years old (Cullinan, 1987), and already the enthusiasm that accompanied its birth has given way to caution among many and outright skepticism among some. Nowhere has this story been so clearly and poignantly played out than in the state of California. Just a decade ago, the literature-based movement received an enormous boost when the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bill Honig, announced the California Reading Initiative. Coming from this Initiative, the English–Language Arts Framework called for a literature-based program that: exposes all students to significant works and encourages reading rather than a skills-based program; attends to values through literature reflecting the dilemmas met by all human beings; teaches phonics in meaningful contexts, keeps simple rather than intensive phonics programs; and guides students through a range of thinking processes as they study content and focus on aesthetic, ethical, and cultural issues rather than the narrow discipline focus found in the traditional curriculum (Alexander, 1987). The Initiative had an almost immediate effect on the teaching of reading in California schools. Publishers of educational materials, for example, responded with programs designed to reflect the framework and the philosophy (Wepner & Feeley, 1993).

Today, the scene is much different. Concerns over low test scores have fueled an enormous backlash against the literature-based movement. According to the "nation's report card" comparing achievement data from thirty-nine states, California tied for last place with Louisiana on average reading proficiency. Honig (1996) himself writes: "While [the English–Language Arts Framework] does state that phonics and skills are important, it is neither specific nor clear enough about the essential beginning-to-read strategies for preschool, kindergarten, and early primary grades" (p. 8). The reactionary movement, focused on the same kinds of concerns as in California, is being acted out on a smaller scale, but with no less intensity across the country (see Berger, 1993; Levine, 1994).

Debates over the merits of literature-based and holistic teaching abound in the popular media (e.g., Willis, 1995) and in professional journals (e.g., Edelsky, 1990; McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990; McKenna, Stahl & Reinking, 1994). While the media has targeted reading achievement and test scores as the key issue in the debate, there are several areas of specific concern (indeed the same areas that were highlighted in the California framework) that have received repeated criticism. These criticisms of literature-based teaching include concerns about skills instruction, guided practice, selection of literature themes and topics, and integrated curriculum.

Study Context

For the past 3 years, we have regularly observed and interviewed 14 teachers as they deal with the introduction of a "literature-based" basal reading series in their classrooms

(Hoffman, et al., 1993; Hoffman et al., 1995). These 14 first-grade teachers participating in our study were drawn from eight different schools and four districts representing a diversity of teaching contexts (e.g., rural, urban, suburban). During Year 1 (the year before the introduction of the "new" basals) and Year 2 (the first year of the adoption), the teachers were interviewed and observed a minimum of three times annually. We documented enormous diversity in instructional practice and philosophy within this group of teachers at the start of the project and traced changes in teaching associated with the adoption process. During the baseline year (Year 1), we discovered that the majority of the teachers were using the "old" basals in varying degrees, although one teacher relied solely on tradebooks for reading instruction.

During Year 2 of the study, we observed that teachers' levels of implementation of the new program and instructional strategies varied. Many teachers echoed in varying degrees the critiques and the advantages of literature-based reading raised in the national dialogue. Teachers also wrestled with issues of change and implementation under a variety of conditions—conditions which affected implementation of reading instruction in many ways.

During Year 3 of the study, all the teachers were interviewed and observed at least one more time. Interview transcripts were combined with field notes from the observations and analyzed for recurring patterns and themes in instructional practice. The interview data were also reviewed for patterns of teacher thinking focused on specific aspects of literature-based instruction, as well as teacher perceptions of student responses to specific features of literaturebased teaching. Through inductive analysis of these data (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we identified certain teachers whose struggles continually centered on one or more of the concerns about literature-based instruction voiced in the literature. We also identified teachers who experienced success in applying literature-based teaching strategies in their classrooms. These teachers became the focus for the particular analysis in this report. Each teacher in this subset was observed and interviewed at least three more times during Year 3 of the study.

Our goal in this report is to present key similarities and differences in the way selected teachers identified and dealt with their concerns about: (1) skills instruction; (2) guided practice; (3) literature selection; and (4) integrated curriculum in their instructional contexts. We will begin the discussion of each area of concern with a short summary of the "debate" (traditional vs. literature-based instruction). We will then focus our report on two teachers within each concern area—one whose teaching and reflections on student learning reflect the problems expressed in the national criticism of literature-based reading instruction, and another whose experiences suggest positive experiences with literature-based teaching practices. To help place the two highlighted teachers within the broader sample of teachers from our study, we will discuss the range of responses within a particular area of concern.

Before presenting our findings, we wish to note that the descriptions of participating teachers are not intended to document success

stories and disaster details—or even effective versus ineffective teachers. While we believe that literature-based reading instruction has many strong points, we do not mean to suggest that such instruction is the only ideal for teachers to embrace. All of the teachers we have studied, and we emphasize *all*, have worked very hard to lead their students to success in literacy. To do so, teachers followed a number of different paths. We present the findings of this study to offer insights about how other teachers in similar settings may experience implementation of literature-based reading instruction.

Results

Skills Instruction

The Polemics

A focus on skills instruction within reading programs continues to dominate many conversations among educators, and is also reflected in much of the published research on beginning reading instruction. Proponents of literature-based instruction argue that skills can be taught effectively within the context of a story, poem, or message. They criticize the reliance on traditional scope and sequences as limiting the breadth of experiences that children bring to a particular passage, and report that adherence to a strict focus on code in isolation allows young readers only one strategy when faced with unfamiliar words. Giving children lots of opportunities to focus on text and make connections with their growing awareness of written words as a meaning-making experience improves their overall attitude toward reading instruction (Edelsky, 1992; Goodman, 1993).

Critics of literature-based programs cite lower test scores, poor word-attack skills, and dismal spelling performances in their indictment of skills instruction in programs without a specific, identifiable scope and sequence (Adams, 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkerson, 1985). Critics also claim that texts without controlled vocabulary prove too frustrating to young readers not yet able to decode (Guszak, 1992). Comparison studies are often used to bolster the claim that those students receiving direct instruction on skills read and comprehend better than other students (Stahl & Miller, 1989).

Findings

Within our study, reading skills instruction varied tremendously. At one end of the continuum, we had teachers who attempted to implement suggestions in the literature-based basal to make changes in their approach to skills in reading instruction, but without much success. Other teachers appeared to successfully make literature the cornerstone of skills instruction.

Problems with skills instruction in the context of literature. In many ways, Sarah is typical of teachers who were uncomfortable with the implementation of literature-based reading instruction. Sarah has taught first grade for more than 20 years in a large suburban school district with a predominantly Mexican-American population. As a master's-level student in the 1980s, she was introduced to and became comfortable with a traditional scope and sequence approach to reading instruction. Her perception of her students as increasingly

successful readers as the result of structured basal instruction cements her belief in this approach. Sarah made an attempt to implement the new literature-based series, but was clearly uncomfortable from the beginning:

> . . . it's just [that] this series does not adapt itself to slower kids . . . their readiness book is not really a readiness book . . . you know, yes, it teaches them to hold the book . . . and how to turn the pages . . . it's not really a readiness series so my bottom kids, I have taken out of this series and put back in the old series.

Sarah echoes the concerns of critics regarding the inattention to code instruction. She deplores the lack of an explicit scope and sequence, and feels the need to heavily supplement the skills instruction alluded to by the series adopted by her district.

Although she admits the children use more decoding strategies when confronted by stories with little controlled vocabulary, Sarah's practice has been to force the literature-based series into her previous approach to reading instruction. She devotes a large part of her instructional time to drilling children on sight words from the basal stories. She accomplishes this by creating small, controlled vocabulary booklets that are read, reread, and then sent home to be read again. In addition to the books, words go home in worksheet form to be practiced with a family member. This forced practice has not been rewarding:

> ... it's not fun ... you have to struggle too hard with them ... give me *Tip and Mitten* ... loved *Tip and Mitten*.

When asked what skills are important in beginning reading, Sarah focuses on code, especially at the beginning of the year. She approaches code instruction independently from what children may be reading in small-group instruction. This takes the form of a short introduction with a worksheet. These worksheets present a letter (sound) in isolation, along with a word that contains the letter usually followed by several pictures, some of which contain the beginning, ending, or vowel sound being discussed. Rarely are any other words containing the letter located on the page. Beginning sounds are introduced first and followed by ending sounds and then blends. Vowel sounds are taught throughout the year enabling the students to practice those sounds longer. Because Sarah believes that "sounding out words" is the most important reading strategy children in first grade acquire, other skills like comprehension skills, "what the sentence is telling them, action words, naming words, those kind of things," are done after code instruction has been completed, though not necessarily mastered.

Possibilities with skills instruction in the context of literature. While participating in this project, Pam has taught in two different schools within the same large urban school district. The first school population was of lower socioeconomic status and mixed ethnicity—Mexican American, European American, and African American. Now Pam teaches at a school with primarily European-American children of middle- to upper-socioeconomic standing. While her methods have continued to develop and change, her philosophy about how children learn has not changed.

Early in her teaching career Pam used a reading basal, but switched to a literature-

based approach a few years before the new literature-based basals were adopted. She found controlled vocabulary basals lacking in originality, creativity, and rich language that children use when communicating. Pam began to search for a way of connecting children's literature with students in a meaningful way. Through a series of conversations, workshops, lectures, and readings, she implemented a literature-based program which successfully addresses the national reactions and concerns about skills instruction. Over the years, she has developed an instructional approach that introduces children to strategies they need to be successful readers and writers. When questioned about skills, Pam responded that the word "skills" conveyed to her something taught in isolation and devoid of context.

> What does skills mean to me in reading? It means a specific way to get at a specific answer that might not necessarily be in context. Just a skill that you use as opposed to a strategy to find something out . . . I think skills are important, but they need to be done in context. And so I do my skills instruction in context. And so it's not isolated.

Pam teaches skills within the context of a shared or guided reading lesson. She also does much of her code instruction through writing. She focuses students' attention on word form, sound, and use as she models writing for them. She helps them to sound out words as they write for pleasure, projects, or in journals. She does not restrict code instruction to beginning, ending, vowel sounds, or blends. The children guide much of the instruction by the focus they place on print. This is not to imply that Pam has no control over the lesson, or that she lacks knowledge about what children need to know to continue to be successful. While she does not subscribe to a particular scope and sequence for skills instruction, she is very aware of the skills children need to be successful, and when necessary, makes these skills specific through direct instruction. She knows the essential elements deemed important by the state of Texas and views basals and other textbooks as "vehicles to teach the EEs" [*E*ssential *E*lements (EEs) are reading skills listed in the Texas State Curriculum Guide]. As long as Pam is teaching the EEs, she feels that "the vehicle" is up to her, "not the basal."

As a means to help students focus constantly on print, Pam continually reminds children of strategies that good readers use when confronted by words they do not know, punctuation that is puzzling, or content they find confusing. She models her own thought processes as a reader, and invites the children to do the same. Through warm-up activities, Pam invites the students to read again a piece of poetry introduced the day before and to comment on what they notice about the print. It is not unusual for the discussion of one piece of text to focus on the use of the word "I"; the sounds of "ow" (complete with a band-aid to remind the children that /ow/ sometimes sounds like you are hurt); the purpose of commas; and recognition of repetitive or rhyming words. Pam's focus on print continues throughout the day, regardless of subject matter, as she continually reminds children about strategies and letter/sound relationships.

Pam is constantly aware, as a watcher of children, which skills need further review by a

particular student, and she uses individual reading and journal time to help that child focus on that skill. This may mean simply clarifying for a student that the sound heard at the beginning of "thank you" is a /th/ ("Look where my tongue is. Put your tongue against your teeth and say /th/"), not an /f/. Watching children also allows Pam to provide *scaffolding* for those children ready to make more complex observations. She attributes her success to knowledge of children as learners and her commitment to the idea that children will be readers if they are invited.

Along the continuum. In our study, teachers varied in their responses to skills instruction within a literature-based program without the benefit of a traditional scope and sequence. Many of the teachers made attempts to implement literature-based strategies; but, like Sarah, they have struggled with the skills component. Some have returned to their "old" basals to support code instruction with controlled vocabulary texts and use the new basals for "fun" reading. Others supplemented their instruction with outside resources (i.e., phonics programs, packets, and worksheets). Still others tried to adapt traditional strategies (i.e., creating flashcards for new words) to the new basal stories. Our sense is that, unlike Pam who has developed her literature-based reading program over several years, many of the teachers new to literature-based teaching are struggling to do something they have never seen, and they are struggling to do so without much guidance or support. In the face of limited district and school level inservice, we expect that teachers like Sarah will continue to grapple with code instruction in a variety of ways.

Guided Practice With Uncontrolled Text

The Polemics

For many years, proponents of using authentic literature in classroom reading have asserted that teachers must find rich and varied materials of interest to each individual, ensuring that every student is both helped to read and protected from boredom, anxiety, and failure. The texts in traditional basal readers, particularly the early levels of the programs, are either specially written or adapted versions of children's literature with severe vocabulary and sentence length controls (Wepner & Feeley, 1993). Proponents of literature-based instruction argue that children learn language most easily when it is meaningful and functional (Routman, 1991). Thus, literature-based instruction involves the use of texts that are not vocabulary controlled—although other forms of predictability occur (e.g., repetition of key phrases, logical sequencing, etc.). Because of careful vocabulary control, traditional forms of guided practice facilitate the *teaching of new vocabulary* before reading a new story (where the new words are practiced in context). Acknowledging the value of practice in developing reading fluency, teachers with a literature-based philosophy also seek to provide students with opportunities to practice reading. One approach that is often adopted is that of shared reading, because it:

> offers a nonthreatening approach to reading that strengthens skills and enjoyment. . . . Poems that are reread for pleasure provide a way for students to build reading fluency and confidence as well as

develop an appreciation of poetry (Routman, 1991, p. 33).

Critics of the *shared reading* model suggest that this strategy is shortsighted and leads to little more than the memorization of text. They hold that students do experience success with the text that is in front of them, but there is little in this shared reading experience that is educative for students as independent readers. The kind of pretend reading associated with emergent reading may reflect developing concepts of what reading is about at early stages of literacy acquisition, but at some point attention needs to focus on the words in the text. If teachers make the act of reading too easy through highly predictable text that encourages guessing or through instruction that offers the support of memory, then students will fail to attend to that part of learning to read which is most important—decoding words (Gough, 1996). Critics maintain that the shared reading model is seductive because it makes everyone look like a reader, even if they are not.

Findings

We found our sample teachers varied considerably in their instruction as they wrestled with the issue of how best to guide students toward appropriate practice and success with texts that were uncontrolled in terms of vocabulary. Some teachers used the shared reading model as a foundation for introducing literature, while others questioned its usefulness.

Problems with guided practice in uncontrolled text. Typical of the teachers who struggled with the shared reading format is Marilyn, who has a master's degree in special education and has taught for over 20 years. Marilyn uses the new basal series occasionally. When she does use it, she introduces a new story by reading it aloud to the children. There is no particular focus or follow-up to this first reading. On the next occasion, Marilyn and her students read the story "together," with the children joining in when they can. Following this second shared reading the students read the story on their own in pairs. Once these three readings have been accomplished, the story is not revisited. Marilyn wishes there were other ways to get children "to read with you." She voices her fears that students are relying on memorization rather than decoding techniques to sound like real readers: "You know, you read it together, and I'd read it to them, and so it's a lot of this memory business. Are the students really acquiring the ability to read well, or are they merely memorizing stories because of repetition and predictability and choral reading?" Marilyn believes the latter to be the case. Although she notes that the students look like they are reading and they are enjoying the experience, she doubts they are developing as independent readers, in spite of their positive performance on several reading measures (i.e., anecdotal records, checklists, etc.). Marilyn's distrust of the new basal is grounded in her concern for the lack of both vocabulary control and word repetition. She believes that a child who has been through the old basal and seems to "read" is a reader. However, one who has been through the new basal and seems to read might have just memo-

rized the text from all the choral reading and teacher modeling.

Possibilities with guided practice in uncontrolled text. Pam, the same first-grade teacher described in the skills instruction section of this report, uses shared reading as the daily mainstay of her reading program. It is a time when she and the children share the responsibility of working together through the text. This text is not necessarily a book; it may be a poem, enlarged on chart paper. Pam's shared reading time is a nonthreatening event where the students are encouraged to chime in when they feel comfortable as the teacher's voice offers support.

For Pam, shared reading has three components: the warm-up, an old favorite, and the new story. First is the warm-up, consisting of one to three poems or songs. And "it's fun," claims Pam, "you can clap, and you can move. It's not that you have to be just sitting there. It can be real interactive." Often Pam will compose the warm-up following a basic tune or pattern; the children will create a warm-up too, or do innovations on one, "A lot of times, on their own, during library-choice time, they'll go up there with a vis-a-vis [pen] and cross out the words and put their own words in there."

The old favorite is next; this is a rereading of a story the teacher has previously read with the children. Pam explains that this rereading is valuable because "you've got that scaffolding in place where the kids . . . [have] heard the story before, they're familiar with the text somewhat, so that next reading of that story you have a lot more participation because they've got that groundwork, that familiarity with it." For use early in the year, Pam chooses materials that have a definite rhyme or pattern. Over time, the shared books "become less repetitive, or you know, less obvious in that area." The new story is usually chosen because of its suitability to the current theme. If it does not have an obvious rhyme or other predictable component, then the children will listen, and although they will join in, they participate more the next day when this story becomes an old favorite.

To provide additional reading practice (and thus address the concern raised by Marilyn and other critics of literature-based reading instruction), Pam makes familiar books available to her students:

> Once a book becomes an old favorite, it might be read again during that week or the next. Then it is always set out on the chalk ledge right there for 3 of 4 weeks before it's put in the basket. The books are always accessible to the children, and I notice that during Readers Workshop time the kids, a lot of my low children just on grade level, go back to the stories that they are familiar with. And then they read those independently. Once they get that scaffolding—they've had me as a support and shared it. Then it's up there for them to choose. And very often they go back to those stories that I've read to them, shared with them.

After Shared Reading, Pam's students go to literacy choices; they go to the center they want and respond to their reading as they choose. To address concerns about children reading only from memory, Pam keeps her low children in a guided reading group, where they work on strategies with her until she feels they

can handle the workshop. She carefully chooses reading material for these students, selecting texts with which they can be successful and will be of interest them. Pam guides students' selection with 30 books from which they make choices; she wants them to be stretched a little, but to continue to experience success.

Along the continuum. For teachers working with text that is virtually uncontrolled with respect to vocabulary introduction and repetition, traditional forms of guided practice do not appear to work. The teachers in our larger sample are struggling to incorporate strategies that will develop fluent and independent readers. Some teachers continue to rely on traditional practice such as teaching vocabulary in isolation before the story—even though this may involve teaching as many as 50 new words before a single story. Those who are experimenting with a shared reading model seem to fall along the continuum between Marilyn and Pam. The major differences occur in terms of: the number of contacts with a story, the variety of contexts in which these stories are encountered, and the degree to which the teacher focuses the students' attention on the print (e.g., with a pocket chart) after the story is memorized.

Literature Selection

The Polemics

Proponents of literature-based instruction advocate using multiethnic literature because students feel pride in their own identity and culture when they read literature that highlights the experiences of their own cultural group. Other advantages of including literature that focuses on people of diverse backgrounds are that: (a) all students can develop tolerance and appreciation for other cultural groups; (b) all students can gain a balanced view of historical forces that shaped American society; and (c) all students can explore issues of social justice (Au, 1993). Reacting to the lack of representation of people of color (Sims, 1982) and to the sterile topics contained in traditional basals (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988), proponents of multiethnic literature hold that, while these new texts inevitably contain values, they do, as The California Framework suggests, reflect "honest dilemmas met by all human beings . . . rather than condescending to superficial values reflected in 'safe' sterile texts" (Alexander, 1987, p. 152).

Critics of literature-based instruction have denounced much literature as being inappropriate for students or as teaching the "wrong" values. They criticize particular books (e.g., *Witches* by Roald Dahl, *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Patterson, *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting, or *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman) because of references to the supernatural, death, homelessness, and nontraditional family structures (Hydrick, 1994). In spite of such criticisms, diverse literature is making its way into classrooms through trade books, the new literature-based basals, or through combinations of trade books and basals (Hoffman et al., 1993).

Findings

The inclusion of diverse settings, characters, and themes in the new basals has been

met with a range of responses from our sample group of teachers. Some teachers responded positively to the multicultural nature of the texts as reflections of current American society; others were critical of the controversial themes; and still others seemed to ignore altogether the content of the literature.

Problems with literature selection. June, a teacher from an upper-middle-class background, has taught in a middle-class, suburban school with a predominantly European-American population for many years. The school demographics have changed in the last few years to include more White, working-class students and some Hispanic students. June uses the basal sparingly, and for years has relied instead on children's literature as in Language to Literacy units (Roser, Hoffman, & Farest, 1990), the Great Books Program, and other trade books. Students have many opportunities to engage in reading and writing activities throughout the day, and for this reason, June regards herself as an innovative teacher with an integrated approach to language arts instruction.

In spite of her love of literature, June's responses to the multicultural literature provided in the new basals echo the concerns of the critics. She believes that her White, middle-class students do not relate to the literature that reflects diverse characters and themes, "Some of these stories in that reader, they can't relate." June reverses the argument that gave rise to multicultural literature, namely that African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American students had difficulty relating to the White, middle-class student depicted in Dick and Jane readers. She reacted negatively, for example, to school projects related to what she called "social issues" such as homelessness and women's shelters. She said:

> And I don't think first-graders need to know all of that. . . . They are in a safe cocoon here and I said, 'whoa, whoa, I grew up in a safe cocoon and it didn't warp me.' I feel compassionate toward the poor . . . but I grew up very sheltered. . . . I don't think it hurt me to be sheltered. Just like today, why should these children have to face the burden of homelessness or the battered women? I don't think they need to know about everything bad. You know, I was sitting here holding my breath today waiting for someone to say about that bomb that went off in Oklahoma City. And nobody mentioned it, so I didn't talk about it because I feel like sometimes they don't need to know everything.

While June, within the context of her own middle-class background and suburban teaching experience, manifests the views of the critics of multicultural and "value-laden" texts, Penny embraced multicultural literature.

Possibilities with literature selection. Penny, an African-American woman, teaches in an inner-city school with a predominantly African-American population. She supplements the basal with additional skills worksheets and literature that she reads aloud to students. Her instruction is quite traditional in many ways: she has three ability groups that participate in round robin or choral reading; she requires students to answer comprehension questions and fill out worksheets; and she offers whole-group instruction focused on practicing skills.

However, Penny appreciates multicultural texts that relate to her African-American students' experiences and values the new basals and the teachers' editions for this reason:

> I like the multicultural perspective that comes along in the TE. I like that because it shows how people are alike and yet they are different also, which is what the children need. . . . The old series didn't touch on it at all. That is one thing I have pulled from it because they have Whitney Houston and kids just love it. . . .They have done a lot of good things to bring in the multicultural perspective.

During reading instruction, Penny explicitly refers to students' ethnic backgrounds and family structures. For example, while asking students why a character in the story looked down, she explained that usually when people are shy "they won't look you in the face" and suggested that was a characteristic of Black families:

> Children are reared not to look at adults and they always looked down. That came from slavery, but now we teach our children to look up in the eyeball when they are talking to you.

Reading this same story, she asked the students to speculate on where the other members of the family not mentioned in the story might be. When students gave responses such as "at the store," "at work," and "separated," Penny said:

> Remember how we talked about how family structures are different for each family. Some of you live with mom and dad, some with just mom, some with just dad, some with grandmother, some of you live with aunts. And you live with people for different reasons.

Through this reminder about differing family structures, Penny communicated to students not only that she knew about their backgrounds, but that she valued their differences. In both examples, she seemed to reaffirm their identities as African-American children, while instructing them about ways to behave in the dominant White culture (e.g., ". . . look at people when they are speaking to you."). Rather than shying away from cultural identity, diverse family structures, or values, Penny seizes the opportunities to discuss these with students as they relate to the texts they read. Additionally, she appreciates the multicultural nature of the texts selected for the new basal readers.

Along the continuum. In one sense, June and Penny both argue for texts which value the lifestyles and cultures of their students. However, while June sees little need for her White, middle-class students to relate to diverse characters, settings, and themes portrayed in the literature, Penny emphasizes the need for multiethnic literature to include the working-class, African-American students she teaches. In her status quo view, June echoes the critics' concerns about the inclusion of "social issues" as inappropriate for young children. Penny, by contrast, views cultural identity, diverse family structures, and values as very relevant to young children—a view supported by proponents of multicultural literature.

While it may not be unusual to find two teachers (such as June and Penny) on opposite ends of a continuum in terms of their emphasis on diversity, we did find the *lack* of discussion

of diversity among most of our sample teachers surprising. Most of the teachers seemed not to have noticed the inclusion of diverse characters, settings, and themes in the new basals; they continued to treat each selection in assembly-line fashion—"just another story to get through."

Integrated Curriculum

The Polemics

Advocates of literature-based instruction decry the traditional division of the school curriculum into separate subjects or disciplines (Kellough, 1996; Routman, 1991). They claim that learning content as a list of diverse facts robs students of the logical connections and the joy of inquiry that can occur when such study is integrated across disciplines. According to these educators, integrating curriculum study through use of nonfiction texts allows students to gain insight into their world while learning how to approach the reading of informational text. Citing the limited use of nonfiction texts in traditional elementary curricula, advocates of integrated curriculum hold that all content teachers can and should be "reading" teachers—sharing with students strategies and approaches for constructing meaning from a variety of texts for a number of purposes. They argue that traditional reading instruction is ineffective because most instruction does not occur in the context of "real reading." They hold that students have difficulty remembering isolated bits of skill information and knowing when to apply these bits. However, when skill instruction accompanies actual text reading, students see how skills apply *and* use these skills immediately. Advocates of a literature-based teaching philosophy also argue for the importance of instruction that extends students' responses to literature through a full range of response options that include not only reading and writing but also such forms of creative expression as found in the performing and visual arts.

Opponents of literature-based instruction methods (e.g., Engelmann, Becker, Carnine, & Gersten, 1988) criticize such instruction as a vague, feel-good approach which fails to help children learn the specific skills necessary for successful reading. Claiming that competence enhances self-esteem and not vice versa, they call for a return to the basics of reading instruction—including a daily time where teachers focus on helping students master specific, sequenced reading skills. They are particularly adamant about the benefits of such instruction for at-risk learners.

Like the critics of literature-based *reading* instruction, opponents of *broader* curriculum integration hold that when teachers integrate reading instruction with curriculum study, reading instruction is often lost; attention to specific reading skills is either decreased or overlooked as students engage in projects rather than skill mastery. Such critics also maintain that many integration efforts result in little more than "cute" extensions or amalgamations of weakly connected texts teachers describe as units—which offer little in the way of actual content instruction. Critics charge that since such units decrease the amount of time students could spend in useful skill instruction and in reading their textbooks for important

facts, their use is, in fact, detrimental to the curriculum.

Findings

Within our study, approaches to integrated curriculum varied widely. At one end of the continuum, we had teachers who kept their reading instruction quite separate from other curricular areas. They tended to work straight through the new basal texts having students treat expository texts in the same ways as narrative texts. On the other end of the continuum, we had teachers who tied reading to all subject areas and approached curriculum from a thematic, inquiry perspective. Other teachers attempted to integrate reading into other curricular areas through occasional mini-units around a topic.

Problems with an integrated curriculum. As in other areas, the teachers in our study addressed the inclusion of more literature in their reading programs in a number of ways. At one end of the continuum, teachers like Danielle simply worked their way straight through the new series, approaching each story in the same manner, and failing to address strategies for reading informational text. Attempts to link reading in other subject areas with basal selections were not observed. Others, like Marilyn, saw the new basal selections as a fun addition to their skills programs. In these classrooms, it was not uncommon to see students engaged in shared or partner reading with new basals in the morning and meeting for skill instruction from the old basals in the afternoon. Rather than being lost in the new literature movement, reading instruction in these classes seemed to occur all day long! Marilyn aptly expressed this view in a conversation about the new basals in her classroom:

> I think all children need all venues presented to learn to read. I don't like the idea of just context reading or just sight reading, or just phonics, linguistic reading. . . . Or this predictable repetitive—I feel like you need to do ALL of them at this age 'cause you don't know for sure what is best for each child. And maybe several things are best. . . . And so give 'em everything. . . . Shoot the whole cannon. . . . It's a shotgun approach, yeah.

However, like the straight-through-the-series teachers, add-on teachers like Marilyn were not observed sharing specific reading strategies for approaching nonfiction text within the new series. In other words, new basals seemed to be used for fun reading, old basals for skill and drill. In this way, add-on teachers hoped to gain the advantage of sharing good literature with students without sacrificing skills instruction.

While add-on teachers maintained much of their previous skills approach to reading instruction, some did experiment with various forms of curriculum integration. The simplest of these occurred when teachers had students read a particular basal story out of order—to support a unit of study in another part of the curriculum.

On a larger scale of integration, we observed several teachers who used what they called a *literature* or *thematic* unit in addition to the new basal series. These units ranged from published guides to original creations.

Marilyn described her evolution from using only a traditional basal to her use of such units:

> A long time ago, I used to do something called a Fun Friday which was a little compacted literature unit. I didn't know it. But, you know, I did a unit on popcorn one Friday, and I did a unit on giants one Friday, and I did a unit on apples. Well, now, I do a frog unit. But it's a 2- or 3-week unit. I do a giants unit. You know, and I've learned more about using literature with first graders as a vehicle to teach them to read and write—give them excuses for things to read and write.

In contrast to the occasional matching of a basal story to other curriculum study, many teachers using literature units or other trade-book reading seemed also to reflect an add-on mentality, as we observed very little matching of basal stories to these units. Indeed, throughout the study, Marilyn made no attempt to match her longer literature units to the sequence of the new basal stories:

> I didn't try to make MY literature units fit the basal. . . . So, I do a basal story every week and try not to worry about whether it matches what I'm doing. If I have a 3-week pig unit, I'm not trying to worry about whether the basal has a story with a pig in it.

When asked if her longer units were designed to support an integrated curriculum approach and teach science and social studies in addition to reading skills, the conversation suggested that Marilyn's major focus in using the units (like that of several other teachers) was still predominantly fiction-based, focused more on reading enjoyment. While Marilyn emphasized the purpose of her literature units as supporting reading and writing development, we did not see her teaching one of these units during any of our visits, nor did we observe her sharing reading strategies when asking students to read informational texts (as in the frog unit). For add-on teachers, early steps in the transition to nonfiction reading and integrated curriculum centered on some mix-and-match efforts (e.g., coordinating basal stories with other study) and some extension work (introducing students to a number of theme-related, mostly fictional texts without providing specific instruction regarding inquiry or content-reading strategies).

Possibilities with an integrated curriculum. In contrast to the add-on teachers, Pam successfully adapted her reading instruction to reflect the advantages of integrated curriculum inquiry. One of the ways in which Pam has altered her approach to literature-based instruction is to expand the use of genre. Moving from a focus on narrative text, Pam has incorporated informational and nonfiction text throughout the day. Pam's emphasis is upon inquiry into topics of interest to her and her students (e.g., space, China, Brazil). Choice is a central feature of the inquiry units. For example, when studying a space unit, students had to decide on which area such as flight, the solar system, or Jupiter they would explore in more depth. Although the unit began as part of the science period, students incorporated their interest in space into language arts, library, and stations. Pam described the integration of subjects in this way:

> [Students] might take a book on *The Magic School Bus Visits the Solar System* and

> use it during writing time to write their own version of a book that follows that format. . . . And quite often during library time, a choice time, they will pick up books from the content area to read. . . . The math books on fractions aren't just out during math time—they are out all day . . . children can use them any way they see fit.

Pam encourages students to make connections across subject areas by introducing students to particular themes or topics which are studied in depth. When children are not as familiar with the topics, China for example, she spends a significant amount of time building their background knowledge by introducing books and talking about it. Then, students choose a topic to study in depth. For example, during the investigation of China, two students chose to research the Chinese New Year; several others investigated Chinese food and made fortune cookies complete with fortunes written by the children. Another group of students who were interested in Chinese literature read Chinese fairy tales and rhymes, then wrote their own play using puppets which they presented at the Chinese Fair.

Throughout the inquiry units, students are involved in consulting different resources to answer the questions they have selected as research topics. For example, students called an expert, a veterinarian, when a question arose from reading the book *Itchy Itchy Chicken Pox* about whether dogs could get chicken pox. To contact the veterinarian, students had to learn the important reading strategy of using a telephone book. Pam further supplements inquiry by helping students focus on information-gathering strategies. Within the context of the inquiry units students learn to read for a purpose, learn how to skim for necessary information, and learn how to consult different kinds of resources (e.g., experts, telephone books, encyclopedias or "Eye Witness" books). Pam frequently reminds students, especially her emergent readers, to view pictures as important sources of information and include visual discoveries in their notes. Using a variety of genres within the context of inquiry allows students to find out information, be involved in research, and to employ a number of sophisticated reading strategies. Reading does not just occur within a prescribed period of time each day, but rather occurs throughout the day. Pam suggests that this form of integration and purposeful reading will affect even the most reluctant reader. For example, a student who was completely uninterested in reading became enthralled with medieval times when Pam read *The Cat in the Attic*. She explained his increased motivation in this way:

> That was the thing for him—castles, medieval knights, armor, fighting, all that stuff. That's what clicked for him; so once we started all that castle work during social studies time that's when he started understanding the power of reading, the importance of reading, and how reading can give you gratification. He had all these questions about castles and knights. We were able to use this energy, focus it through reading books.

Along the continuum. As we observed teachers struggling with the challenge of curriculum integration and focused reading instruction, we saw perhaps a wider spectrum of

solutions to this problem than those in other challenge areas. At one end of the continuum were teachers who seemed quite unaware of different genres in the new basal series and who failed to address informational reading strategies. We expect that, in the not-too-distant future, such teachers will become increasingly aware of genre differences and hopefully, begin to address various strategies young readers may profitably employ in reading various texts. Somewhere in the middle of the continuum, we saw teachers such as Marilyn, secure in believing that their collections of fiction and nonfiction materials are providing students with greater reading experience and diversity in the curriculum. While such teachers are clearly attempting to enrich their curricula, they are failing, at least currently, to help young readers employ specific reading strategies and engage in actual inquiry with informational texts. Just as the process of implementing units of instruction has evolved over time for these teachers, we expect that learning to address specific reading instruction within unit study will also take time.

Finally, at the other end of the continuum, we saw teachers like Pam, who not only understand the value of using literature across the curriculum, but engage students in motivating inquiry with various texts, building both reading skill and world knowledge in their students. As we discovered with Pam, adapting one's practice to address multiple texts in multiple settings is a complex endeavor. Thus, even though we saw teachers dealing with curriculum integration and focused reading instruction in numerous ways, for us, Pam's journey suggests two hopeful issues. First, literature-based reading instruction across the curriculum can indeed successfully address students' focused reading instruction needs while supporting a motivating inquiry process across disciplines. And second, a teacher's implementation of such instruction is a process—refined and improved over time.

Conclusion: Of "-isms" and Change—What Should be Balanced in Reading Instruction?

We see in these data support for both sides of an increasingly polarized and strident debate over the merits of literature-based teaching. While some teachers experienced success in implementing literature-based instruction, others encountered real and serious problems in implementing something they had never seen nor experienced. Although such problems appear to support criticisms about literature-based reading instruction, we cannot help but wonder if these problems are more indicative of lack of teacher support and inservice training than of weaknesses inherent in a literature-based approach. While the teachers in our study who were successful in teaching from a literature-based philosophy are special in many ways (e.g., Pam's several years' experimentation with literature-based instruction), we saw nothing in their instructional practices beyond the reach of all teachers. Based on our observations, we believe that the more appropriate focus for concern within current reading education is on a general failure to support teachers toward change. Out of the four districts we studied, two offered no staff development at all on literature-based teaching strategies. One

district offered a half-day of training to one teacher from each grade level, with the charge that participants return to train the other teachers on their campuses. The remaining district offered a voluntary one-day inservice—during the summer. Yet all four districts adopted new literature-based basal reading programs with the obvious intent that teachers use them.

There are those who argue today for a *balanced* approach to reading instruction (Honig, 1996) as if we have gone too far in our emphasis on literature and a developmental perspective on literacy acquisition—establishing, in Dewey's (1938) terms, a sort of "literature-based instruction-ism." According to those who would defeat this "-ism," we must take away from literature and give back to skills in order to balance our efforts. Such arguments function as if instruction is a "zero sum game"—you cannot do more of something (e.g., skills) without doing less of something else (e.g., literature). We do not find any support for this perspective in our data. Indeed, it is difficult for us to see how a balance metaphor applies at all to the teachers whom we have documented as successful in implementing literature-based reading instruction. What would "balance" advocates suggest that these teachers do less or more of? How would they help struggling teachers to balance their efforts? Perhaps the metaphor of balance is more useful if applied to the issue of teacher support and experience: We believe that those who would require teacher change must *balance* those expectations with appropriate teacher support. Such support, we believe, enables teachers to experiment and grow—ultimately developing through their experience the kind of satisfaction expressed by teachers like Pam. As John Dewey (1938) writes, the road to any educational change is not an easy one—thus, we can and must expect that teachers will need support in dealing with new instructional ideas:

> There is no discipline in the world so severe as the discipline of experience subjected to the tests of intelligent development and direction. Hence the only ground I can see for even a temporary reaction against the standards, aims, and methods of the newer education is the failure of educators who professedly adopt them to be faithful to them in practice. As I have emphasized more than once, the road to new education is not an easier one to follow than the old road but a more strenuous and difficult one. It will remain so until it has attained its majority and that attainment will require many years of serious co-operative work on the part of its adherents. The greatest danger that attends its future is, I believe, the idea that it is an easy way to follow. (p. 90)

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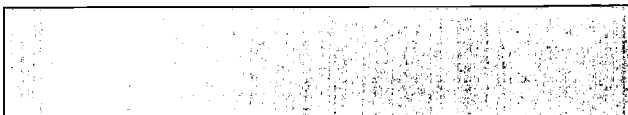

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