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# Novice Teachers: Do They Use What We Teach Them?

**Karen S. Daves  
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Teacher educators frequently engage in some rather agonizing soul searching regarding their effectiveness in preparing preservice teachers. Students pass through their classes, go on to other classes, and eventually they are in the real world of the classroom. Teacher educators seldom get direct feedback from students as to the relevance or the value of the instruction they received. Lacking this feedback, teacher educators who teach from a whole language perspective frequently question whether students actually use the instructional strategies they were taught in their reading courses, or whether they choose the more traditional basal reader approach. To answer this question, the researchers designed a survey to gain insight into the relationship between what novice teachers were taught and how they are actually teaching.

## **Background**

For many years the basal reader was firmly entrenched in our schools as the only reading program, and most teachers accepted this without question. In 1982, Shannon reported that 77% of the teachers surveyed perceived that basal readers and worksheets were mandated by their schools. This perception should have changed as the whole language philosophy became widely accepted. Yet Woodward (1986)

reported that observations in both elementary and junior high school reading classes revealed strict adherence to the script in the teacher's manual to the point of no spontaneity whatsoever. Based on more recent observations in classrooms, several researchers report that such activity does indeed exist. Duffy, Roehler and Putnam (1987) reported that many teachers were expected to follow the directions and procedures outlined in the teachers' guides rigidly. Apparently some administrators are fearful that if teachers do not adhere to the guides, the children will not learn.

This strict reliance on teacher's guides and basal readers is inconsistent with the teacher training programs many new teachers have been through. These programs emphasize the importance of structuring effective reading instruction utilizing alternative teaching methods. Duffy, Roehler and Putnam (1987) suggest that these teachers may be faced with a conflict between the way they were taught and what their administrators expect.

How do new teachers who have just completed their teacher education programs teach reading? Do they employ the "whole language" instructional practices advocated by their reading methods instructors? If not, why not? What are the influencing factors? A survey of new teachers was designed to answer these questions.

## **Method**

The research instrument was a survey form using a sentence completion format. Respondents were asked to rank order applicable choices of ten variables in response to sentence stems. The sentence stems were designed to elicit answers to the following questions: Which instructional practices were cultivated by their teacher education programs?

Which instructional practices were encouraged by co-teachers, administrators and/or parents? Which instructional practices did new teachers select to emphasize in their classrooms? Which, if any, of these selected instructional practices they would like to change? And finally, from whom would support be needed to facilitate any desired changes? (See Appendix I.)

Surveys were sent to 110 new teachers graduated and certified during the 1986-87 academic year from three universities in Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. The survey was conducted during the spring of the sample's first year (1987-88) of teaching. Fifty-two surveys were returned of which forty-five were complete and submitted for analysis.

## **Results**

As perceived by this sample of novice teachers, the five top-ranked instructional practices cultivated in undergraduate reading courses at the three universities were in ranked order: 1) language experience, 2) writing activities, 3) children's literature, used instructionally, 4) learning centers, and 5) free, silent reading. (See Table 1.) In contrast, the majority of the respondents indicated that much of their reading instructional time was spent using basal readers and workbooks/skillsbooks. (See Table 2.)

Respondents indicated a concern that they were relying too much on basal readers and workbooks/skillbooks, while not spending enough time on language experience and learning centers. (See Table 2.) The respondents indicated they would place more emphasis on language experience, writing activities and children's literature, used instructionally, to improve their teaching methods. (See Table 3.)

**Table 1: Instructional Strategies Encouraged**

Instructional Practice	<u>Cumulative Percentages of Rankings 1-3</u>			
	Undergrad. Courses	Admini-strators	Co-Teachers	Parents
Basal Readers	33.5	77.8	72.7	70.4
Language Exp.	88.8	26.7	27.3	20.4
CAI	4.4	15.6	6.8	9.0
Round Robin Rdng	4.4	8.8	22.7	18.2
Free, Silent Rdng	33.4	13.2	11.3	6.8
Workbks/Skillbks	8.8	62.2	66.0	59.1
Writing Act.	66.6	44.5	45.5	31.8
Learning Centers	35.6	8.8	20.5	4.5
Children's Lit.-T	31.1	19.9	15.9	6.9
Children's Lit.-I	37.8	24.4	20.5	20.4

As reflected in Table 1, the five top-ranked instructional practices encouraged by school administrators were in ranked order: 1) basal readers, 2) workbooks and skillbooks, 3) writing activities, 4) language experience, and 5) children's literature, used instructionally. The encouragement given by co-workers and parents was very similar to that of school administrators.

**Table 2: Time Spent on Instructional Practices**

Instructional Practice	<u>Number of Respondents Ranking Practice 1 or 2</u>		
	Much Time Spent	Too Much Time	Too Little Time
Basal Readers	39	30	2
Language Experience	11	2	24
Computer Assisted Instr'ct'n	3	1	6
Round Robin Reading	4	6	1
Free, Silent Reading	5	2	8
Workbooks/Skillbooks	23	30	1
Writing Activities	9	2	12
Learning Centers	4	0	17
Children's Lit.-Teacher Read	3	0	4
Children's Lit.-Instructional	9	1	11

**Table 3: Desired Changes in Instructional Practices**

Instructional Practice	Number of Respondents Ranking Practice:			
	First	Second	First & Second	Not Selected
Basal Readers	0	0	0	35
Language Exp.	25	6	31	8
CAI	2	2	4	30
Round Robin Rdng	0	0	0	39
Free, Silent Rdng	3	6	9	19
Workbks/Skillbks	2	3	5	36
Writing Act.	7	15	22	10
Learning Centers	4	4	8	20
Children's Lit.-T	4	5	9	21
Children's Lit.-I	9	4	13	21

When asked to rank order those from whom they would need support in making any desired adjustments in instructional reading practices in their classrooms, the respondents indicated the need for support from the following in order of greatest need to least need: 1) principals, 2) fellow teachers, 3) resources for ideas, 4) parents and additional materials, 5) curriculum director, 6) reading consultant, 7) additional services and schoolboard, 8) graduate courses in reading, and 9) librarians. (See Table 4.)

Based on this survey, it appears there is a low correlation between the instructional practices cultivated in the undergraduate reading courses and the instructional practices actually employed by novice teachers in their classrooms. The instructional practices novice teachers do choose to employ seem to be those perceived to be promoted by administrators, fellow teachers, and parents. Additional training through graduate courses in reading and support from librarians were ranked as the least needed in order to improve instructional practices.

Furthermore, the data indicate that these novice teachers are cognizant of the discrepancy between what they were taught and what is being promoted within their particular educational setting. The need to align daily instructional practices with the instructional practices cultivated in undergraduate reading courses seems apparent. While these new teachers expressed a desire to make adjustments in their reading instructional practices, they seemed hesitant to do so without the support of their principals and fellow teachers or without additional materials and resources for new ideas. One of the lowest ranked resources to which they would turn for support in order confidently to make an adjustment in the way they teach reading was a graduate course in reading.

**Table 4: Structures of Support Needed for Change**

Source of Support	Number of Respondents Ranking Practice:				
	First	Second	Third	1-3 Cum.	Not Selected
Principal	17	6	6	29	7
Curriculum Director	5	6	3	14	25
Reading Consultant	4	5	4	13	16
Fellow Teachers	6	8	6	20	12
School Board	3	5	3	11	24
Librarian	0	3	1	4	22
Parents	4	3	8	15	15
Additional Inservice	2	5	4	11	15
Graduate Course in Reading	1	1	3	5	17
Resource for New Ideas	3	10	4	17	9
Additional Materials	5	7	3	15	7

### Conclusions

This study was designed to gain insight into the practices of new teachers. Novice teachers are not employing the reading instructional practices which are being cultivated in undergraduate reading courses. Such practices are not congruent with the instructional practices they perceive to be

expected of them by the administrators, teachers and parents in to their educational setting.

Additional questions must now be considered. Are the perceptions of the novice teachers accurate? Even though the respondents perceive the basal reader and workbooks/skill-books to be encouraged and preferred by administrators, co-teachers and parents, are they *required* to use them or is there simply an absence of encouragement to change? Are educational institutions providing the novice teacher with the knowledge base and the confidence to pursue aggressively a change in the status quo? Have novice teachers been prepared to be educational decision-makers?

If the perceptions of the respondents are correct, why is there such a discrepancy between the instructional practices being cultivated in the teacher education institutions and those being actively promoted in the schools? There appears to be an obvious need for communication and collaboration among administrators, practicing teachers, parents, university faculty, and novice teachers.

University faculty *must* continue to seek to increase visibility outside the university classroom in promoting current reading research outlining the most effective ways to teach reading. Administrators, practicing teachers and parents *must* seek actively to become more knowledgeable about the current developments in reading instruction. Teacher education institutions *must* work more closely with administrators and teachers in order to recognize and overcome the difficulties of translating research into practice, and they *must* nurture professional educational decision-makers, while school administrators *must* actively encourage teachers to use their knowledge base to make instructional decisions. If



there is to be a positive impact on reading achievement in the schools, all participants must demand a solid knowledge base and engage in professional collaboration.

### References

- Duffy, G. G., Roehler, L. R., & Putnam, J. (1987). Putting the teacher in control: Basal reading textbooks and instructional decision making. *Elementary School Journal, 87*, 357-366.
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## Appendix I

### SURVEY OF NEW TEACHERS

Please answer questions one through nine by **rank ordering only** those variables which affect you. For example, do not rank all the variables for each question, rank only those which apply to your situation. Use the rank of 1 for your most important teaching variable, and mark all teaching variables that are not applicable with an N/A.

#### Example: When I was in first grade, my teachers used

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

#### 1. To teach children to read, my undergraduate reading courses strongly encouraged me to use

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

#### 2. Administrators encourage me to use

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

#### 3. The majority of my fellow teachers think it is best to use

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

**4. The parents of my students seem to think it is best to use**

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

**5. I find that I spend much of my reading instructional time using**

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

**6. I am concerned that I may be spending too much time using**

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

**7. I am concerned that I may not be spending enough time using**

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

**8. If I could improve the way I teach reading, I would place more emphasis on**

- |  |   |                                |
|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> basal readers                 | <input type="checkbox"/> workbooks, skillbooks          | <input type="checkbox"/> other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> language experience           | <input type="checkbox"/> writing activities             | (list)                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer assisted instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> learning centers               |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> round robin reading           | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-read by teacher |                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> free, silent reading          | <input type="checkbox"/> children's lit-instructional   |                                |

**9. In order to confidently make an adjustment in the way I teach reading, I would need the support of (don't forget to rank responses)**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> my principal           | <input type="checkbox"/> parents                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> my curriculum director | <input type="checkbox"/> additional inservice         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a reading consultant   | <input type="checkbox"/> a graduate course in reading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fellow teachers        | <input type="checkbox"/> a resource for new ideas     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> school board           | <input type="checkbox"/> additional materials         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> librarian              | <input type="checkbox"/> other (list)                 |

On the back, please list additional insights and comments you have about the way you teach students reading. For those teachers who see the need to make changes in your classrooms but who hesitate to do so, please explain your situations.

Did you remember to rank order all your responses? Thank you.

The grade I teach is \_\_\_\_\_

The state in which I teach is \_\_\_\_\_

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## .... Expanding Horizons....

### "From Trash to Written Treasure"

*This teaching idea is shared by Jo VanderLaan,  
a student in the College of Education at Western Michigan University*

An intriguing writing center, "From trash to written treasure," can be based on the poem "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out," from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, by Shel Silverstein. Prepare for the center by collecting varied, clean items which might be found in the trash — empty boxes, discarded envelopes, and so forth. Read the poem to the class, and brainstorm a list of items that might be found in the trash. Ask the students what they might discover about people from their trash. Then set up the writing center by putting out the trash collection in a plastic bag, where students will have room to sort through the items, and to write.

Here are sample writing starts for the writing center. Put each on a separate card. Choose an imaginary street address and substitute it for (street # and name) on the cards. Each \* indicates the beginning of a new card.

- \* How many people do you think live at (street # and name)? Who are they?
- \* What do you think the people who live at (street # and name) like to do? Why do you think so?
- \* What does this family like to eat? Prepare a menu they'll enjoy.
- \* What do you think this family does for fun?
- \* Are all of the people who live at (street # and name) healthy? Why do you think they are or are not?
- \* Write a story about one of the people who lives at (street # and name).
- \* What can you find out about this family's friends from their trash?
- \* Choose one piece of trash. Tell six ways it could be used.
- \* Write a careful description of one piece of trash, but do not mention its name. See if someone else can tell which piece of trash it is.
- \* Choose one piece of trash. Describe its size, shape, smell, feel, color and use.
- \* What trash from this trash bag would you like to keep? Why?
- \* Which piece of trash is worth the most? Write ten reasons why it is the most valuable.

