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One first grade teacher's experience with a literature-based reading series: A look at her first year

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine a first-grade, rural school teacher's use of a newly adopted literature-based reading series. The goal was not only to see how she used the materials but to also examine any struggles she experienced during her first year with a literature-based series. The participant/observer spent one day a week for an entire school year observing the teacher's reading class and interviewing the teacher at regular intervals. It was apparent in the interviews that this teacher had a positive attitude toward many aspects of the new series and believed that she had changed her methods and beliefs of teaching reading. However, classroom observations revealed that in fact she modified the materials to meet her epistemology. Although prior studies support that the literature-based basals are significantly different from previous editions, a change in reading instruction will only occur with greater teacher guidance.

A LOOK AT HER FIRST YEAR

This study examines one first grade teacher's use of a newly adopted literature-based reading series. The teacher taught in a small, rural town in the Mid-South. The researcher served as a participant/observer and visited the classroom throughout the school year in order to observe the teacher's lessons with the newly adopted series and to interview the teacher and others involved in the educational context on a regular basis. The purpose of this study is to look at one teacher's implementation of a newly adopted basal reading series in light of her theoretical beliefs and pedagogical practices. The researcher also sought to examine any difficulties encountered by this teacher. This article will begin with a brief review of the research surrounding basal readers followed by a discussion of

the research methodology. The article ends with conclusions and implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the popularization of basals in the 1840s (Smith, 1965), they have often been a source of criticism because of the quality of literature (Strickland, 1964), the controlled vocabulary (Chall, 1983) and the explicit instructions (Woodward, 1986). Reading researchers and educators have argued that the control of teaching reading lies with the basal publishers instead of with the teachers (Shannon, 1989) and that even pacing in the lessons is managed by administrators and not the classroom teachers (Shannon, 1990). Still many schools have relied on the basals during the last 40 years (Paris, Wixon, and Palincsar, 1986; Venezky, 1987).

As basals continues to be an important part of many classrooms, it is interesting that newer literature-based editions of basals use published literature, less controlled vocabulary and a slightly more suggestive tone in the teacher directions (Hoffman et al., 1994) than previous editions. The newer basal readers also recommend flexible small group reading, provide fewer questions, and contain very little pacing information for teachers (Hoffman et al., 1994). However, it is evident that the debate surrounding basals will continue even with the development of these newer editions (e.g., Goodman, Maras, and Birdseye, 1994). The question now is how will teachers implement a literature-based series with which they are unfamiliar.

Research shows that in contrast to urban and suburban teachers, teachers in rural areas are less confident about teaching with literature (Lehman, Allen and Freeman, 1990). If literature is used, the teachers feel more secure teaching from a published reading program, exploring literature with a structured sequential curriculum, and having grade level lists of books available for use. Since the literature-based basals contain literature, provide some structure, and contain lists of trade books which might be used with the basal stories, rural teachers might find them very appealing.

Most educational research takes place in suburban and urban areas, yet nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 public school districts in the United States are in rural areas (Trusock, 1994). Rural residents make up 42% of the functionally illiterate (Bailey, Daisey, Maes, and Spears, 1992). Since illiteracy is a prevalent problem in these areas, more research needs to be conducted in rural communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to take a closer look at one rural classroom in order to determine the complexities surrounding the implementation of a new literature-based reading series.

METHOD

Context

The context of this study is a school located in a small, rural community in the Mid-South with 181 students. It is the only elementary school in a town of 711. Approximately half of the parents are involved in agriculture (soybean, rice, cotton) while the other half work at factories in a nearby town. The socio-economic makeup of the school is lower-middle class. Approximately 50% of the students are White and 50% African-American.

Key Informant and Her Classroom

The key informant for this study was a first-grade teacher, Mrs. Glasier, who was one of two first-grade teachers at the school. Mrs. Glasier had an undergraduate degree in education, had taught elementary school for 16 years, and was a lifetime resident of the community. In a previous study (Altieri, 1996), which analyzed the use of literature in the school, it was evident that the basal played an important role in this teacher's classroom. Mrs. Glasier expressed interest in the new basal series adopted by the school and suggested that the researcher spend the year in her classroom to see how she dealt with the new series.

Mrs. Glasier's class of 18 students had equal numbers of males and females. Approximately 50% of her students were African-Americans and 50% White. Six of her children received Chapter 1 services from special education. A typical day in this classroom began with reading and language arts and daily basal use. The rest of the day was broken up into other segmented periods of time for math, science/social studies, and spelling. A small number of trade books were kept in the back of the classroom, many of which were provided with the new reading series. The teacher had selected the texts from a list provided by the publishers. As a school-wide decision, all teachers used the same word list for vocabulary and spelling. Thus, the words suggested in the basal were the spelling words with no additional spelling book use.

Materials

The teachers selected the 1993 literature-based basal series by Silver Burdette and Ginn. It was standard practice for the school to use a series for approximately eight years before adopting a new series. Previously the school had used the 1986 Houghton Mifflin Reading Series.

The teachers examined a variety of basal series during the basal selection process and voted on the one which they preferred. The 1993 Silver Burdette and Ginn was the series that the teachers chose. It was evident from interviewing numerous educators in the building

that the series was selected because it was a step towards “whole language” in their eyes. It appeared that the use of literature in the basals lead the teachers to feel that the texts were “whole language,” and they believed this selection would make them current in the delivery of reading instruction.

Prior to beginning the school year, the publishers provided a workshop in order to familiarize teachers with the materials. That was the only support provided by the publishers of the selected new series.

Design and Procedure

This year long, qualitative study employed a naturalistic inquiry methodology (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Primary data sources were field notes and interviews. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1988) with the key informant at five different points in time. She was interviewed prior to the school year when the new series was originally selected. Then she was interviewed at four evenly spaced times throughout her first year of implementing the new series. The researcher also interviewed the children in the classroom and other people involved in the educational context. Notes were taken during the interviews by the researcher and later transcribed.

Field notes were gathered on a weekly basis by the researcher who served as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980) in the classroom for approximately three hours during the established reading time on a weekly basis. These visits began in August and lasted through May so that the entire year with the basal could be examined. Secondary data sources included artifacts and a field work journal (Spradley, 1979). Artifacts included copies of handouts, journal pages, and standardized test results.

During data analysis, the researcher looked for patterns through analysis of the primary data sources and then triangulated the findings whenever possible by examining across both primary and secondary sources of data. A constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of fieldnotes and interviews was employed to determine underlying themes existing in the data. These themes enabled the researcher to develop and test hypotheses. This process focused data collection on subsequent visits. Member checks were used to verify or disconfirm information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Finally, peer debriefing occurred on a regular basis throughout the study with a colleague experienced in literacy education and naturalistic research design. This allowed the researcher to discuss emerging hypotheses and to receive continuous feedback about the findings.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Interviews with the teacher indicated she firmly believed that her philosophy of reading had changed during the course of the year. Initially, the teacher used the word "traditionalist" to refer to her views. She felt that because she "was a traditionalist," the new basal series might be difficult for her to use with the children. However, as the year progressed, it became evident through further discussions that she felt her teaching of reading was changing. By the end of the year Mrs. Glasier stated that she "should have done this stuff years ago." She felt she had been in a "rut," but now her teaching had changed a great deal. It was obvious from talking to her that she was comfortable with the materials at the end of the year, and that she felt she was current in her reading beliefs.

However, observations, and interviews revealed that her theoretical view of reading was not altered when she encountered new information which contradicted her way of viewing literacy development and literacy teaching early in the year. Instead, she assimilated the new information by changing the information to fit her epistemology of how reading should be done. Flexible grouping, text-based spelling words, student notebooks, and publisher provided trade books were all uncertainties confronting this teacher in the new basal series.

Flexible Grouping

One suggestion in the text that caused concern for Mrs. Glasier was the flexible grouping suggested in the teacher's manual. She had used whole class reading instruction for several years, yet the new series often recommended using flexible small groups or partners for reading. In the fall, she tried flexible groups and appeared to not understand the philosophy behind this approach. She repeatedly expressed a dislike for small group or partner reading because she wanted to know what every student was doing during reading. Occasionally, at the end of the year she grouped students but usually only during free time. When groups were used during the preestablished reading time, she would still go around the room and individually make each child read the passage to her while groups were reading.

Readers Writers Notebook

Similar patterns were evident when she made use of the student notebook. This is a consumable book that is similar to publisher supplied workbooks that often accompanied prior series. However, the notebooks differed from workbooks because the notebooks required a great deal more writing and often encouraged student drawing. Although researchers support allowing young children to

integrate drawing and writing (Altieri, 1995; Olson, 1992), it was evident that this teacher did not feel the drawing was necessary.

Initially, this teacher saw the notebooks as “a waste of money” and nothing but “blank pages,” and she missed the workbooks provided with the previous series. She had difficulty seeing value in a book with an entire page allowed for one question. Although the publishers appeared to be encouraging the reader to write and draw in response to the question, Mrs. Glasier felt that the pages often covered questions that could be done in a “10 minute oral activity.”

Mrs. Glasier did state that if the publishers said to do something, it was done. She believed they were the experts. The students proceeded to complete each of the pages in the order they occurred in the notebook. The publisher-provided notebooks appeared to focus less on isolated skills than workbooks. Instead, they involved drawing and writing. Although every page in the notebook was sequentially completed, when directions required students to draw and write a story, this teacher would often have students only complete the writing part before moving on to the next page. Briefly into the year, she began giving the children sentence starters for their stories on the blank pages. As time progressed, she even referred to the notebook as a workbook during class.

Spelling Words

The new series also recommended using words from the stories, selected by the publisher, for spelling words. Even though these words appear to be more difficult than the traditional isolated word list provided in spelling workbooks, basal authors assume that students will find them easier to learn because the words are seen in a meaningful context on repeated occasions.

Prior to this school year, the teachers used a separate spelling book which contained word lists. Often lists such as these contain phonemically similar words. Once again, the teacher attempted to follow the suggestions provided with the new basals based on a school-wide mandate that this policy be followed. Shortly after the year began, she, like many other teachers at the school, encountered difficulties because parents were concerned that the words were too difficult and students seemed to have trouble spelling the words, which were less phonetically regular than past traditional spelling lists.

A few months later, she decided to make her own spelling lists from words in the stories. The chosen words tended to be phonetically regular and very similar to each other. She also chose some of the smaller words in the story. Evidently, she felt that she could now satisfy many of the stakeholders and still follow the publisher’s idea that the words should come from the story.

Children's Literature

Although the basal publishers allowed the teacher to select a number of trade books with this series, it was evident in Mrs. Glasier's classroom that this did not necessarily ensure the infusion of more children's literature into the curriculum. A previous study regarding this teacher's use of literature revealed that Mrs. Glasier used children's books to read aloud to the class. However the use of multiethnic literature was almost nonexistent. In fact, during the prior school year, she could not name any stories portraying people of diverse cultures that were read to her children or used in the classroom (Altieri, 1994). Since this occurred in a number of interviews held with teachers at the school, it appeared to be linked to the isolated nature of the area and the fact that they were unaware of current children's literature.

Initially, with the newly adopted basal series, the teacher continued to read aloud to the children as time allowed. Usually the books shared were ones provided by the basal publisher. During this time, it was evident that the publisher-provided books were more current than those the teacher previously used and represented more and diverse ethnic groups. However, as the school year progressed the teacher no longer read to the children during story time. It appeared to the researcher to be due in part to the number of options included in the teacher's manual. The teacher often stated she was "unsure which suggestions to use in the book." Thus, she appeared to try to use so many suggestions in the teacher's manual that very little time was left to actually read aloud to the class.

During an interview, Mrs. Glasier, acknowledged that she did use fewer trade books with the students in her class this year. She stated that she felt the literature provided in the basals was so good that she no longer felt the need to read other books to them.

The stories in basals do represent a variety of cultures and have been shown to be more engaging (McCarthy, et al., 1994). Thus for some teachers, especially those in isolated areas, the texts may provide opportunities for children to be exposed to more quality literature. This literature represents a variety of genres as well as a variety of cultures. However, it is also evident that some teachers may feel the basal stories are a replacement for trade books in the classroom.

Research supports the importance of using literature with children (Huck & Hepler, 1996; Manley, 1988; Norton, 1995; Smith and Bowers, 1989). By doing so, teachers have an opportunity to exemplify excellent reading, show their own love of books, and allow children personal choice in the selection of books read. Also, the publishers are encouraging the use of trade books by supplying them with the series. However, it appears that these books may not be used in the classroom as the publishers anticipated.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Although the literature-based basals are significantly different from previously published reading series, researchers question what changes in pedagogical practices take place in classrooms which adopt them (Hoffman, et al., 1994). Basal readers play a key role in many classrooms today, so it is important to look at how the greatest gains can be achieved with these series. The literature-based basals make many good suggestions (e.g., integrated spelling and vocabulary, small group reading, and encouragement of writing and drawing), yet to merely present teachers with new materials is rarely enough to change a teacher's theoretical views or pedagogical practices (Hoffman, et al., 1994).

Some of the literature-based basal series provide quality multicultural trade books for the teachers and students in the classroom. This is extremely important as prior studies have shown that a lack of knowledge about (Thompson and Meeks, 1990) and difficulty in obtaining multicultural literature (Reimer, 1992) may influence the extent to which multicultural literature is used in the classroom. The importance of using such texts with children has been well documented (Altieri, 1996; Bishop, 1991; Harris, 1993). Since rural schools are often isolated, these publisher-provided trade books can assure that teachers have access to quality multicultural stories to share with children. However, some teachers may not realize the value of such texts and thus still may not use them in the best possible manner.

Results of this study suggest that important constraints influenced the degree of change that took place. Most notable constraints included the teacher's philosophy, and the limited amount of support provided by the basal publishers. Although Mrs. Glasier followed the teacher edition closely, she did not appear to substantially change her pedagogical practices. She was initially enthusiastic about the new series, but she quickly encountered difficulties with it.

Research indicates that teachers need to know how to employ new methods in their classroom (Guskey, 1989). More important, teachers also need to understand the philosophy behind the practices. While Guskey's research suggests that lack of knowledge is a major obstacle in change, this experienced teacher knew how to use small groups, assign spelling words, and complete notebook pages. Rather, the problem appeared to be her theoretical beliefs of reading instruction. She did not understand the philosophy behind the methods suggested in the literature-based basals and the value of these practices. Preservice and inservice education should address these areas.

While research shows that support systems are an essential part of any program under change (Scharer, 1992), rural teachers often

are professionally isolated (Erickson, 1995). These teachers may not have convenient access to a university or workshops necessary to keep them up to date. Not only must teachers be aware of new strategies, but teachers must also understand the philosophy behind these methods.

It is difficult to develop this knowledge when teachers are provided with new materials but very little information on the background of the materials. This teacher only received assistance from the literature-based basal publishers at a meeting after the adoption of the basal series, even though most questions and concerns occur after implementation of new materials. Other research has also shown that, in general, the literature-based basal publishers are providing minimal support with the new materials (Hoffman, et al., 1998). This problem seems to be compounded when one thinks of isolated rural areas, where teachers may not have access to a great deal of other support.

While rural teachers are often left to themselves to find a solution to their problems (Killian and Byrd, 1988), research shows that teachers learn a great deal from each other (Altieri, 1994; Roberts, 1982). Allowing teachers to work in teams might be beneficial. Taking the time to help teachers grasp the theory behind any new reading series is essential, and small discussion groups facilitated by literary experts might help. Distance learning technology may also help teachers work through new materials. With one-third of our teachers teaching in rural schools today (Erickson, 1995), it is essential that efforts be made to meet their needs. Beliefs of individual teachers must be addressed to make lasting instructional changes (Pajares, 1992).

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