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GETTING STARTED IN THE FALL: ORGANIZING READING INSTRUCTION

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A Scenario

Time: First day of back-to-school inservice

Place: Sunnyview Elementary School

Person: Ms. Janice Wilson, a third-grade teacher of five years

Situation: Ms. Wilson, returning from summer vacation, goes about the usual process of organizing her reading program for the new school year. Since teachers in her district are expected to use the adopted basal reader, Ms. Wilson's task involves grouping her 28 third graders for reading instruction. She inspects the cumulative folders, noting for each student the basal reader s/he completed at the end of the second grade. She also confers with the second grade teachers in order to obtain additional information about the reading ability of each of her students. Based upon these data, she forms reading groups, and on the second day of school, hands out the appropriate textbooks and commences formalized reading instruction. As always, she vows to conduct individual Informal Reading Inventories for the purpose of evaluating her students, but she never quite finds time to do them.

The Problem

Does this sound familiar? Such a scenario is not atypical of the process countless elementary teachers undergo at the beginning of school each fall. Based upon data from the preceding year, the teachers form reading groups, hand out the basals, and jump right into reading instruction. There are several disadvantages, however, in initiating a reading program in this manner. First, records indicating prior placements may not be accurate predictors of current placements: past reading group assignments themselves may have been inaccurate, and/or children may have regressed (or possibly progressed) in reading ability over the summer. Second, teachers need time to get to know each individual child and his/her reading strengths and weaknesses before determining an instructional level and assigning him/her to a reading group. And third, students need time to readjust to school and "warm up" their reading skills before they can be expected to perform effectively in a rigorous, developmental reading program.

A Suggestion

It is the purpose of this article to describe an alternate approach for initiating a reading program at the beginning of the school year. Rather than rushing into groupings and formalized reading instruction, we urge teachers to take two or three weeks during which: (a) the students can exercise their probably dormant

reading skills and engage in activities designed to promote positive attitudes toward reading; (b)informal, diagnostic information is obtained for each student; and (c)flexible, informal reading groups are formed with the purpose of "trying out" students in a reading group situation. After this period, the teacher will be better prepared to form developmental reading groups, and the students will be ready to engage in the hard work of developing and expanding their reading skills.

Reading "Warm-Up" Period

Since many children will have read very little over the summer, time to rejuvenate reading and language art skills is appropriate at the beginning of the school year. Students can be taken to the school library and allowed to self-select books of interest to them. Sustained, silent reading periods should follow these visits and become a part of the weekly schedule. This will help students develop the habit of always having a book they are reading for enjoyment.

Teachers should read to their class daily and continue this throughout the school year. Informal "book reports" can occur in which students share favorite or exciting parts of books they have read. Involving students in art activities such as constructing mobiles or dioramas or illustrating books will promote children's literature, and at the same time, decorate the classroom. Children can become literary critics and orally review books they have read, perhaps using a "Critics' Corner" in the classroom. Merely asking the class "Has anyone read a good book lately?" will result in a lively discussion of popular children's books and will enhance interest in independent reading.

The class can begin viewing one of the many fine children's literature programs on educational television during this period. A classroom reading laboratory or kit can be introduced to the class. A student-produced class newspaper or literary magazine may be initiated. Creative writing periods, dramatizations of books or plays, choral readings, and the like can become a part of the language-rich environment in which reading and other communication skills are valued and regularly practiced.

Informal Assessment of Reading Ability

During this two or three week period, a teacher can informally evaluate the students' reading and language arts abilities. This can be accomplished by observing the children engage in all the reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities previously described. Based upon these observations, judgments about strengths and weaknesses in these areas can be made.

Additionally, some form of specific informal reading assessment should be conducted. If the basal program to be used possesses placement tests, these can be administered to all students. If these are not available, an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) can be constructed and administered. Ideally, this involves individually assessing all students' word recognition and comprehension skills using an instrument constructed from the basal readers. Administering and scoring 25 to 30 IRIs, however, is very time-consuming and may not be feasible, especially for a teacher who does not have access

to a teacher aide or other helper.

An alternative is to administer a modified IRI that does not take so much of a teacher's class time. This can be accomplished by having the students individually read and tape record the oral reading sections of the IRI. The comprehension assessment is obtained by having groups of students silently read other graded passages from the basals and then respond in writing to comprehension questions. The teacher can then score and analyze the oral reading and the comprehension questions later after class. Although this process is surely not as accurate as individually-conducted IRIs in finding students' instructional reading levels, it does supply a teacher with one additional bit of information that can be used in assigning students to reading groups.

Tentative Reading Groups

Based upon the information gained from the modified IRIs, observations of students in warm-up activities, and the students' prior placement and performance in reading groups, a teacher could go ahead and group children for reading instruction. But regardless of the care taken in assigning students to groups, one never knows how well a child will perform until s/he has had some time to work in that group.

In order to give students such a trial opportunity, tentative reading groups can be formed. Rather than using the basal readers that will be ultimately used for instruction, however, other material should be used for this trial period. Many school districts have multiple copies of children's trade books in paperback. By selecting interesting books at the appropriate instructional levels (a readability formula can be used to estimate the difficulty of the trade books), one can conduct basal-like groupings that involve directed readings and skill instruction. The advantages in employing this procedure include: the children enjoy it since they have a chance to read a quality children's book; it gives the teacher one more opportunity to assess instructional reading levels and observe how students perform in a reading group situation; and, since the basal readers were not yet used, changes in these tentative groups can be made without the trauma associated with a later move to another reading group—especially if it involves a move "down" to less difficult materials. If multiple copies of children's books are not available, older basal readers would be suitable—though less desirable—alternatives for use in these tentative groups.

Conclusions

In summary, the advantages of deferring formalized reading instruction for two or three weeks in the fall and substituting some of the less rigorous activities described above are twofold in nature. First, the teacher will know her/his students' reading abilities much better and will subsequently make more accurate placements in reading groups; hence, individualizing instruction within these groups will also be facilitated. And second, the students will have an opportunity to revitalize their reading skills and possibly strengthen or develop positive attitudes toward reading.

It should be noted that although this procedure was described

with the assumption that basal readers and reading and reading groups were to be the resultant organization (since it is the most common), many of the suggestions would apply to other reading programs as well. For example, if a teacher planned to initiate a highly individualized reading program involving student self-selection of trade books, or if a teacher planned to implement a language experience program, many of the warm-up and informal assessment activities would still be helpful, for the advantages in waiting to initiate a formal reading program apply, whatever the specific organization.

Both students and teachers need time in the fall to prepare themselves for the tasks of learning and teaching. Providing for this time within the reading program will help both students and teachers be more effective in their respective roles.