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What Was Learned: From the Oakland County Primary Reading Study Project

by Philip G. Hilaire

From September 1964 to June 1967, Oakland Schools, together with Oakland University, was involved in a comprehensive reading study project in the primary grades. The three approaches under investigation were the Language Experience, Basal Reader and i.t.a. medium. Twelve first grade classes using each approach from twelve of the constituent school districts of Oakland County volunteered. The study was continued in grades two and three in eleven of the twelve districts for an additional period of two years. Dr. Harry T. Hahn, formerly Director of Instruction of Oakland Schools, now Professor of Education at Oakland University, was director of this comprehensive study sponsored by the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare under two separate but integrated studies (3, 4).

Educators in Oakland County have frequently asked, "What has been the outcome of this project?" I should like to share some of the significant findings of this study with educators in our area:

1. There are numerous effective ways of teaching reading in our schools. Teachers using all three approaches obtained "better-than-average" results as measured by standardized reading tests. The mere act of being involved in an educational experiment does improve instruction.

2. With a quality in-service education program, on released time, teachers can and will change their point of view and practices in teaching reading.
3. Greater interest and use of the Language Experience approach in primary grades has been much in evidence in our schools regardless of the orthography used. The Language Experience approach provides unique opportunities for personalized discovery and reflective thought, capitalizing on the experiences of each child. Each pupil uses his own words to express his ideas. As R. V. Allen has stated so well:

What a child can think about, he can talk about.

What a child talks about can be written by the teacher, or by himself.

A child's ideas that are written can be read by him.

A child having learned to read and write, and having experienced authorship many times, now can read and appreciate the works of other authors (2).

In the schools of this county there is much evidence of children experiencing authorship as vast quantities of books have been composed and made by students. This book-making vehicle has been an excellent catalyst for recognizing, respecting, and cultivating individuality and for developing

pride in authorship. This has proved to be a stimulating and ego-building activity.

4. In both standardized and informal testing situations, the Language Experience and i.t.a. groups did significantly better than the Basal Reader groups in the areas of spelling, word study, arithmetic computation and concepts. It was also found that these two groups read many more books, did more writing, and showed a wider use of vocabulary in written communication.
5. In the area of reading comprehension in both word meaning and paragraph reading the Language Experience and i.t.a. classes scored significantly higher than the Basal Group.
6. Comparing the outcome of the Language Experience and i.t.a. classes in the areas described in statements four and five, it was found that there were no significant differences between these two groups. Perhaps, as Russell Stauffer has stated, "Differences, if any, between these two groups could be measured if better standardized reading tests could be designed to measure outcomes of creative and critical reading, which, at present, are not measurable (6)." It is my opinion also that standardized tests are critically needed to replace the superficial fact recognition tests that are still in vogue and were designed in the 20's.
7. In first grade it was found that the knowledge of letter names, and/or sounds, was very significant. Children who knew many letters and/or sounds had a higher degree of success in mastering the fundamentals of

beginning reading instruction. Through their discovery of the association of symbol-sound relationships through writing, children did become conscious of letter names and sounds.

There is a closer relationship between phonics and writing than between phonics and

reading. Increased understanding of the phonetic elements of our language is best developed through written activities which deal with the language letter-by-letter, syllable-by-syllable, and word-by-word. This suggests a planned program of writing and spelling to accompany reading from the beginning stages and continuing through the grades. Phonics instruction which is not reinforced with writing experiences is wasteful and inefficient (1).

Word attack skills need to be taught as a "first aid" to meaning. The use of the Language Experience approach in both orthographies developed a keen awareness to this symbol-sound relationship. R. V. Allen stated.

8. In the area of spelling instruction, there was greater use of the **learner** approach rather than the standardized workbook **list** approach in the Language Experience and the i.t.a. classes—functional spelling representing the skill needed to spell any personal words when involved in writing a letter, a report, or a book, etc. This approach resulted in a higher degree of spelling competency. A list of words used frequently in

writing by children was compiled. This booklet, **Words I Use (5)**, is being used experimentally in many districts. It is not used as a list for drill purposes. When children are involved in writing activities they can check the spelling of words that are frequently used by all authors.

9. How a child sees himself as a reader—his attitude toward reading,—“I can read and write”—is a much greater factor in reading achievement than the use of any specific method of instruction. Therefore, greater use of the Language Experience approach, which seeks to involve the learner in a personalized and meaningful way, results in satisfactory achievement for the largest number of children. This finding implies that teachers should seek to employ approaches which promote the highest level of teacher-pupil interaction.
10. Within a school district, or even within a school building, there should be a plan through inservice education to acquaint teachers with various approaches to primary reading instruction. The teachers should be given an opportunity to select one or a combination of several which are best suited to her teaching personality, the background and interests of the children, and the availability of materials.
11. Many of the schools in the study have found it beneficial for both pupils and teachers to continue in a two-year cycle. The use of the non-graded primary in this manner has

been successful and increasingly popular. Both teacher and pupils are more aware of individual differences. Districts have been encouraging teachers to consider this type of structure. In situations where teachers did continue with their groups for another year the children scored higher in both reading and writing skills.

12. The wider use of more interesting literary type basal readers, containing poems, plays, essays, choral reading selections, works of our great children's authors is much in evidence in classrooms. These materials have more interest appeal to both teachers and pupils. Many publishers are now producing books of this nature. Extensive materials in this area are now available to schools.
13. Finally, it has appeared that studies of reading instruction, to be really significant, should be conducted on a cooperative basis if they are to make an impact on practice in our school area. No district involved in the Oakland County Reading Study Project has, by itself, the personnel and other resources to undertake such a comprehensive study.

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THE CRICKET

The robin calls loudly
As I follow the sound of
A cricket dying.

FUN

I like to play in the woods
With the rabbits and the bees —
But rabbits run away.

DAYBREAK

As the sun rises
All the people in the world
Open their eyes.

TIGER

The woods are quiet;
Out leaps a tiger
Jumping on its prey.

(Mrs. Russell is a sixth grade teacher at Salinas School in Dearborn.)

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