PARTNER READING: A CONSTRUCTIVIST BASED APPROACH TO

DEVELOPING READING SKILLS IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether partner reading can elicit a high level of comprehension of text while utilizing a style of learning that is natural for young children. A comparison between the partner reading technique and the traditional basal reading method on student comprehension was studied. Twenty-three second grade students from two classrooms were tested on two story selections. A counterbalance design was applied so that each story was presented in both the traditional teacher centered basal method and the partner reading technique. The questions which followed tested literal, interpretive, critical, and creative thinking. The partner reading approach accessed constuctivist methods of teaching in which the students interacted with each other, building and creating ideas on the selection independent of teacher intervention. The basal method placed a heavy emphasis on phonics skills, scope and sequence, and presentation of material in a teacher centered manner.

A dependent t test used to analyze the scores indicated that there was no significant difference between the two reading approaches. These results suggest that educators may confidently apply the more natural and motivating method of partner reading to their lessons with no negative impact on student comprehension scores.

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CHAPTER 1

Statement of the Problem

Overview

What can we do to make every child in the United States a reader? Researchers in the area of education have studied this question for decades, and yet the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that, "each school year, (students) become more and more turned off to reading" (Carbo, 1996, p. 64). The NAEP goes on to state that library use, reading motivation, and comprehension have all steadily declined over the last ten years (Carbo, 1996).

Educators are continually attempting to spark the interest and motivation of students in the area of reading, however techniques to enhance reading skills seem to rapidly go in and out of fashion. Reading reform recommendations have suggested immersing children in literature, exposing them to more print, focusing on thematic units, targeting spelling, phonics, and punctuation, and building portfolios (Cantrell, 1998/1999). These methods, although not without merit, have not had a dramatic effect on student motivation and performance.

To find out why reading skills have declined in the last few years, and more importantly, to plan how to turn young readers' perceptions around, educators should be made aware of which components of a reading program are successful and which factors constitute a need for change. According to Almasi and McKeown (1996), readers are more likely to be engaged cognitively when the task is interesting, important, and has intrinsic value to them. Finding and implementing these types of tasks may help students "turn on" to reading.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether partner reading can elicit as high a level of comprehension as basal reading while utilizing a style of learning that is natural for young children.

Research Question

Is there a statistically significant difference between traditional teacher centered basal reading and partner reading on student comprehension of the text?

Need for the Study

Researchers have found that constructive-based learning methods tap into a young child's natural learning style, however there is a perception in many communities across our nation that educators should endorse skills-based techniques to teach reading. A federal request to the Center for the Study of Reading on how to teach children reading skills resulted in the center making a case "for systematically teaching young children about phonemic awareness and decoding" (Teale, 1995, p. 121). To complicate matters, parents and lawmakers have recently pushed to pass "pro-phonics" legislation in 15 states (Levine, 1996). Although parents and legislators may not be the most qualified persons to make these decisions, these campaigns may understandably create conflict for teachers who must decide which method would be best suited for their classroom.

Partner reading subscribes to the constructivist principle which states that children naturally build and enhance schema by being actively involved with the environment. It has been successfully applied by many

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effective teachers (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999) and can be adapted to both whole language or skills-based programs. Partner reading allows students to become actively involved in the reading process on a personal level which may make learning more salient and enjoyable, however before including it in their lessons educators need to determine whether partner reading can elicit good reading skills from students as well as or better than traditional skills-based methods. If partner reading is proven to be an effective method of instruction teachers should be encouraged to include it in their reading program as a way to enhance interest, motivation, and achievement in the reading process. Reading may then become a more intrinsically enjoyable activity for students.

Definition of Terms

Constructivist Learning Theory - Constructivist theory proposes that students must be actively engaged in a lesson in order to learn. As students interact with their environment, the new information builds and enhances schemes already in place.

Basal Reading Approach - The basal method incorporates teacher directed lessons in which students are encouraged to practice skills, check for accuracy, and review ideas in a preselected series of stories. Step by step teachers' manuals and skills workbooks are included in the program. The basal series constitute the "most widely used materials for teaching reading in the elementary schools in America" (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1988, p.280).

Partner Reading - A constuctivist reading technique in which students read with a partner. This method encourages students to interact with each other and the reading material, building and creating original ideas about the selection.

Summary

Constructivist based learning approaches promote an intuitive or natural way of learning that encourages children to actively and knowledgeably respond to print. Constructivist methods foster responsible and independent learners and would seem like an obvious choice for the classroom, however many proponents of skills based programs disagree. They advocate that phonics and reading skills be taught in a teacher directed and sequential manner. In an effort to help educators decide which method is right for their classroom, this research examined how each approach influences student comprehension.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Overview

There are primarily two programs teachers currently use for reading
instruction: the whole language approach and the skills-based approach
(Cantrell, 1998/1999; Flippo, 1998; Freppon & McIntyre, 1999;
Wharton-McDonald, Rankin, Mistretta & Ettenburger 1997). Teachers
also may use an interactive or integrated approach which utilizes parts of
both methods (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999).

As would be expected, in a skills-based classroom students spend
large portions of the day "engaged in systematic skills instruction"
(Cantrell, 1998/1999, p. 370). Teacher-centered phonics, spelling, and
guided reading lessons are predominant. Although some direct skills
instruction is necessary, classrooms that focus only on basal texts and
commercial programs are likely to have "Skills frequently taught
separately (and an) emphasis on low-level skills" (Cantrell, 1998/1999, p.
371). This often leaves few opportunities for interaction between
classmates or creative thinking. Flippo (1998) claimed that using
workbooks for every lesson, following the basal reading program's
procedures without modification, and emphasizing phonics and various
reading drills rather than interpretation are a few of the practices that
make learning to read difficult. Freppon and McIntyre (1999) conclude,
"skills-based classroom cultures (demonstrate) the expectation that
children (are) to receive the predetermined scope and sequence of
instruction and transfer it directly into their own reading behaviors" (p.
208).

In contrast, whole language proposes that "children need self-selected, meaningful, collaborative, and varied experiences to help them to read" (Freppon et al., 1999, p. 209) including learning from classmates as well as individually or from an adult instructor. Student engagement and active participation in the lessons are seen as imperative to learning.

Whole language education is viewed as constructivist. Constructivist theory suggests that new ideas and experiences build and enhance concepts that the child has already learned. This process occurs as a child actively engages with the environment. Freppon (1999) states that when studying how children learn, researchers have concluded that students actively construct ideas based on schemes already in place, and that "learning occurs through interaction with the environment and with others" (p. 206). Furthermore, "constructivist-based, whole language classrooms (reflect) the idea that children learn literacy skills and other important concepts and responses through their own engagement in reading, writing, and talking" (Freppon & McIntyre, 1999, p.209). The whole language or constructivist-based perspective suggests that learning is not a passive activity in which a student has only to sit by and absorb the verbal information transmitted by an instructor, but rather an active and engaging event in which the student is responsible for creating and sharing original thoughts and ideas.

One activity for which students are naturally motivated and that successfully applies constructivist practices is partner reading. Partner reading is much like cooperative group work in that students "assist one another in applying ...reading strategies to facilitate their comprehension of a content area" (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999, p. 739). Sometimes teachers may choose to assign partners and other times they may allow

students to select partners themselves (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999). The partners then take turns reading orally from the selected material, and help each other when needed (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; Morrow et al., 1999). To insure good management, a list of explicit guidelines should be presented and teachers should expect "high levels of achievement and appropriate classroom behavior from all students" (Wharton-McDonald, Rankin, Mistretta, & Ettenberger, 1997, p.520). Because no special materials or specific teacher training is needed, partner reading could be comfortably and readily initiated in most classrooms. Furthermore, implementing a natural reading style may foster motivation and achievement.

Children working together on their own in this way create a motivation to interact and to learn from the printed material since they are actively involved in the learning process in a natural and social way. Goldberg (1992/1993) states that partner reading engages students in instructional conversations which are a "particular kind of lesson geared toward creating richly textured opportunities for students' conceptual and linguistic development," and which promote learning through "spontaneous and natural conversations" (p. 317-319). The catalyst for socializing becomes the reading material being shared by the students, and each sees him or herself as being responsible for interpreting and bringing forth ideas about the selection. Comprehension of the text occurs as an enjoyable and natural outcome of these conversations.

During partner reading, students are enticed to practice and to relearn strategies for the *process* of reading as well as the content. The process of reading addresses the construction, function, and use of language as an organizational tool for interpreting the message on the

page (Barrentine, 1996). As each partner demonstrates how a story is read, understanding of the process of reading becomes clearer. Page turning, inflection, pronunciation, expression, and interpretation of the text are monitored and practiced by the students. The partners are able to take what they have already learned about how to read and actively apply it to a meaningful situation.

In discussing interactive read-alouds, in which the teacher reads and students are encouraged to share their thoughts on the selection, Barrentine (1996) states that,

> Interactions about process are elicited along with aesthetic, personal responses to text.
> Unlike relevant content, process and strategy information is rarely acquired in a single encounter. With repeated engagement in demonstrations children internalize the ability to use process and strategy information (p. 37-38).

Similarly, partner reading can be an informal and enjoyable way for students to demonstrate and to practice their mastery of the process of reading as well as being a vehicle for analyzing the message of the text. Discussion among peers increases involvement and interest and so helps create more connections to the selection. Furthermore, the individual experiences each child brings to the group help to enlighten and widen the perspective of the others involved.

Which classrooms should be encouraged to attempt partner reading? All age groups could benefit, however young children in particular are naturally active in their learning style. Carbo (1996) noted that children do not become strong visual learners until after third grade, nor do they become strong auditory learners until after fifth grade. Therefore, early elementary students should be exposed to many active

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learning experiences since it most naturally fits their style of learning. Unfortunately, elementary classrooms tend to rely heavily on teacher centered instruction and practice worksheets. "The reading styles of both young children and underachievers show... that activity-based experiences are imperative- but American students still do about 1,000 worksheets each school year" (Carbo, 1996, p.64). According to John Goodlad's study of students and teachers in the United States, "the predominant instructional style is frontal teaching: in most classrooms the teacher is active and the students are passive" (Carbo, 1996, p.64-65). For example, in a skills based classroom an observer might see "children working at their desks to complete routine assignments...minor and irregular use of children's literature...(and) whole class and small group basal reading instruction" (Freppon & McIntyre, 1999, p. 209). This type of instruction is sometimes fruitful, however, it clearly does not access a young child's natural learning style.

Whole language classrooms often utilize a teacher centered approach as well, but many of these classrooms try to elicit active or constructive-based learning principles through "children working together and independently on self-selected activities and teacher assignments" (Freppon et al., 1999, p.209). The whole language philosophy acknowledges that simply exposing a child to literature and thematic units may not be enough to create better readers. Active engagement in reading needs to be a component of the lesson. Students reading together orally, if not already a part of the teacher's plans, might be a productive addition to these classrooms.

Morrow, Tracey, Woo, and Pressley (1999) observed that exemplary first grade teachers, who used whole language principles along with other

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reading methods, employed partner reading as one of their frequent reading exercises. These teachers found that active learning exercises such as partner reading improved literacy growth, and "from the first day of school the teachers worked on helping the children become self-directed learners who could think for themselves" (Morrow et al., 1999, p.469-470). Furthermore, Wharton-McDonald, Rankin, Mistretta, and Ettenburger (1997) noted that highly effective teachers consistently used a combination of "authentic reading and writing activities" which included various types of reading such as shared reading and "students reading aloud with others" (p.519-520). The researchers also found that classrooms that were less effective utilized fewer reading methods, spent less overall time on reading, and spent "a great deal (of time) copying from the board and from teacher-made worksheets- something almost never observed in the classrooms of the most effective teachers" (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997, p. 520).

There is little question that phonics work is a necessary part of learning to read (Au & Carroll, 1997), however classroom lessons should also make an effort to reflect how we read in situations that are not contrived and which manifest real reading. Reading techniques that reflect real situations can help relieve the tedium of phonics exercises and rote memorization drills. Strategies that access students' natural learning style should be utilized so that children do not have to struggle unnecessarily when learning how to read.

Summary

Research indicates that young children learn best when they are actively engaged in their lessons, however the majority of classrooms in the United States expect students to passively absorb a preconceived, teacher dictated, scope and sequence of information. To optimize student involvement in reading educators may want to try partner reading. Partner reading would be a beneficial addition to the teacher centered focus of American classrooms because it would allow students to utilize a more natural and challenging learning strategy which may help spark their interest and motivation. This procedure could be an easily initiated adaptation to the classroom that would be particularly appropriate in the lower grade levels of elementary school.

CHAPTER III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether partner reading can elicit as high a level of comprehension as basal reading while utilizing a style of learning that is natural for young children.

Research Question

Is there a statistically significant difference between traditional teacher centered basal reading and partner reading on student comprehension of the text?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects involved in this study consist of 25 second grade students from an urban parochial school in upstate New York. The average and above average reading groups took part in the research. Unfortunately, children in the below average reading group could not be included due to scheduling difficulties. The students taking part in the investigation had been previously exposed to both the reading methods applied in the study, although the basal technique was used much more frequently in their classrooms.

Materials

The students read two stories from their basal reading series which had a similar theme. One selection was fiction and one was nonfiction. There were four comprehension questions to answer at the end of each

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story. The comprehension questions were taken from the basal readers, and tested for various levels of understanding.

Procedure

The two second grade classrooms that participated conducted reading sessions which grouped together the average and the above average students. The students' regular classroom teachers presented the basal and the partner reading techniques. A counterbalance design was employed in which both groups had the opportunity to read both stories, with each class reading a certain story selection using a different reading method. For example, if Group A read the first story using the basal approach, Group B would use the partner reading method for that story. As the research was conducted, the children read the stories for the first time.

The basal approach taught specific vocabulary and phonics skills before, during, and after the selection was read. The skills were taught either through workbooks or by adult instruction. The teacher also asked a series of comprehension questions as students read the story orally. These guided reading questions were included in the teacher's manual, and were presented about every two pages of the story. After finishing the selection students wrote out the answers to four questions found at the end of the story. These questions tested literal, interpretive, critical, and creative thinking. Each question was worth four points. Students were graded on grammar and sentence structure as well as comprehension.

Partner reading focused primarily on actual reading and child centered discussion of text. The instructor first outlined the expectations involved. Guidelines included: read anywhere in the room; share the reading with your partner; read quietly; when you finish the story write

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about what you have read. For comparison purposes, the writing exercise in this endeavor was to answer the four comprehension questions found in the basal reader, however, many other writing activities could be used with this method. Students answered the questions independently in order to get an accurate measure of how much each child had learned, and again, each answer was worth four points. Other than observing if students were focusing on the selection, there were very few interruptions by the teacher. Students could stop to help each other or discuss the story when they so chose to. The stated consequence for not following the directions above was to work without a partner at a desk, something no child in the study had to do.

The students' writing efforts for both methods were graded and assessed for comprehension, grammar, and sentence structure. A perfect score was 16. The following evaluations include comparisons of the reading methods used on student comprehension.

Limitations of the Study

There were some noticeable limitations to the research. The most critical restriction was that children in the lower reading groups could not take part in the study. Another difficulty was that one of the classroom teachers who had agreed to administer the research went on long term medical leave, and the person who took her place did not have teaching credentials.

Analysis of Data

A dependent t-test was used to determine if any statistically significant differences occur in comprehension when applying the basal or the partner reading method of teaching.

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CHAPTER IV

Statistical Analysis

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether partner reading can elicit as high a level of comprehension as basal reading while utilizing a style of learning that is natural for young children.

Null Hypothesis

There will be no significant difference between the posttest mean comprehension scores of the teacher centered basal reading approach and the partner reading approach.

Analysis of Data

Due to the fact that two scores were evaluated for the same individuals, the data collected from the students was analyzed using a t test for related measures. The following pages examine t test results, mean, median, standard deviation, and other data related to the investigation.

The data indicate that there was no statistically significant difference between the basal technique and the partner reading technique on students' comprehension scores. The t value was not significant at the .05 level, therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This reveals that the students were able to comprehend the text well when utilizing a form of learning that is interesting, natural, and motivating for them. Continuous teacher intervention, found in the guided reading technique, is not necessary for students to have a good understanding of the story.

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The analysis found that three of the tests had means that fell in very close range of each other; the scores for the teacher centered method were 13.2 and 13.8. and the mean score for the partner reading technique for Class 2A was 13.5. For Class 2A the mean score for the partner reading technique was slightly higher than the mean score for the teacher centered basal method. The research found a much greater difference between the mean scores of the two approaches in Class 2B, with the partner reading method only achieving 10.9 in comparison to the basal method's 13.8. When the t score is calculated for Class 2B alone, a statistically significant difference of less than .01 is found. It should be noted that for Class 2B the teacher centered reading lessons were more productive, possibly because of the long term substitute teacher and climate of the classroom.

Table 1 – Student Scores/2A

Class 2A	Teacher Centered	Partner Reading
S1	15	15
S2	12	15
S3	12	15
S4	12	13
S5	12	14
S6	12	14
S7	16	16
S8	16	16
S9	12	15
S10	12	8
S11	16	15
S12	10	10
S13	15	10

Mean	13.20	13.50
Std Dev	1.96	2.47
Median	12.00	15.00

Table 2 – Student Scores/2B

Class 2B	Teacher Centered	Partner Reading
S14	15	11
S15	16	11
S16	8	11
S17	12	8
S18	14	9
S19	12	12
S20	14	11
S21	15	8
S22	14	12
S23	16	10
S24	14	12
S25	16	16

Mean	13.80	10.90
Std Dev	2.19	2.06
Median	14.00	11.00

The dependent t test required a critical t value of 2.064 at the .05 level. The calculated t value for both classrooms together was 1.96, considerably less than what was needed to reject the null hypothesis. However, the calculated t value for Class 2B alone was 3.49, significantly greater than the .01 t value of 3.106. The null hypothesis must be rejected when independently analyzing this classroom.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether partner reading can elicit as high a level of comprehension as basal reading while utilizing a style of learning that is natural for young children.

Conclusions

This investigation of the effects of two reading methods on student comprehension found no statistically significant difference between the two approaches. By accepting the null hypothesis, this research proposes that educators should not feel compelled to utilize only teacher centered methods for their reading classes. Tapping into the naturally active learning style children possess can do much to inspire and motivate young readers, and as the above research has demonstrated, it does not have to compromise achievement.

The lower reading groups in the two classrooms were not able to take part in the study due to scheduling problems. This was unfortunate because past classroom observations have led this researcher to believe that children who struggle with reading greatly benefit from a partner reading experience. Students who are unfocused, distracted, and frustrated in guided reading sessions seem to rise to the occasion when reading with a friend. This is a topic for further investigation.

There were some conflicting results in the study. The research showed the students' comprehension scores in Class 2A to be virtually the same, with the partner reading technique scoring slightly higher but not

significantly so. Class 2B, however, revealed a significant discrepancy between the two methods. In this classroom the teacher centered reading lessons proved to be more successful, which illustrates some important points.

Class 2B, when assessed independently, had a t value that was found to be significant at the .01 level. Reasons for this may include the fact that the class had a long term substitute teacher who did not have formal training in education, the previous learning experiences of the students had been almost exclusively teacher centered, and although the guidelines were explained, the substitute teacher may not have had a clear idea of what was required from the partner reading exercise. For partner reading or other independent learning experiences to be successful specific guidelines of what is expected from students must be clearly expressed, students' behavior must be strictly monitored, and the students must be continually observed to make sure they are on task.

Implications for the Classroom

This research suggests that the partner reading method may be employed in the classroom with results in comprehension scores that are equivalent to the teacher centered approach. Partner reading is a social, personally meaningful, and interactive approach which accesses children's natural learning style. Educators should be encouraged to apply this highly motivating technique to inspire young readers.

Presently, as much as 42% of fourth graders are not reading at grade level (Carbo, 1997). The often rigid and skills oriented structure of many classrooms does not leave much room for natural or real reading experiences. To reach many students reading must be presented as more

than just a skill. Students should be able to practice reading in a way that is intrinsically valuable and interesting.

Partner reading underscores the most recent definition of reading which promotes constructivist principles. The "new definition...describes the process of reading as an interactive one, in which readers interact with the text as their prior experience is activated" (Carter, 1997, p. 65). The more dynamic and personal the experience is, the better a student will learn. Partner reading could be accessed by educators as one of a variety of methods that enhance reading skills through constructivist means.

Implications for Further Research

There are many related areas of interest that could be investigated in the future. This study reveals that partner reading is a competent method for teaching reading to average and above average students, yet how effective is this approach for poor readers? Is it a valid approach for children in special education?

The sample size of the research was small. Would the results be the same when tested on a larger group of students? How do higher grade levels respond to partner reading?

How truly motivating is a constructivist approach such as partner reading? Are students more eager to learn and more focused on the task during a partner reading experience or during a teacher centered lesson?

How do students in a classroom that is taught primarily by a teacher centered method respond to more independent learning experiences such as partner reading? What is their initial achievement

and what is their achievement after the method has been practiced over a period of time?

A long term investigation may want to determine if students who have been given some autonomy and responsibility for their performance in the classroom turn out to be more capable citizens in our society.

Research into these questions, and many others related to constructivist principles, may have an effect on how students are taught in the future.

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