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The Role of Children's Literature in One Rural Town's Elementary School: A Case Study

Jennifer L. Altieri

Although researchers and theorists have shown the value of using literature in the curriculum (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman, 1987; Norton, 1993), studies show that the use of children's literature in the classroom is not as common as one might think (Blass and Jurenka, 1989-1990; Morrow, 1982). One study suggests that teacher location may be related to the use of literature-based instruction (Lehman, Allen, and Freeman 1990). This study found that teachers in rural areas were less confident about teaching with literature without the benefit of a published reading program than urban and suburban teachers. Rural teachers were also much more likely to feel that lists of recommended children's books for each grade level were important.

Although nearly 2/3 of the 15,600 public school districts in the United States are in areas designated rural (Trusock, 1994), most research focuses on urban or suburban areas. With one-third of our teachers in teaching in rural schools today (Erickson, 1995), literacy issues in rural areas cannot continue to be ignored. After conducting a review of rural research, DeYoung (1987) believes that research focused on rural

schools is rarely at the same level of sophistication as research published in mainstream educational journals.

While the condition of America's rural communities is assumed by many to be idyllic, the situation is far worse than generally recognized (Davidson, 1990). According to the 1980 census, rural residents comprise only 28% of the U.S. population, yet they make up 42% of the functionally illiterate (Bailey, Daisey, Maes, & Spears, 1992). Often lower test scores and an increased failure rate are evident (Schoppmeyer, 1986). Since illiteracy is such a prevalent problem, more research needs to be conducted in rural areas.

The present study takes a closer look at one rural setting in order to determine the complexities surrounding the use of literature in that school. The following questions guide the study: (1) What is the extent to which teachers in one rural elementary school use literature in their classrooms? (2) How do the teachers perceive the role of literature in their classrooms? (3) What influences their decision on whether or not to use literature in the curriculum?

Method

Participants. The context of this study was a school located in a small, rural community in the Mid-South. The school contained kindergarten through fourth grade classes. There were 181 students at the school, and it was the only elementary school in a town of 711. Approximately half of the parents were involved in agriculture (soybean, rice, cotton) while the other half worked at nearby factories.

The socio-economic make up of the school was lower-middle class. Approximately 50% of the students were White and 50% African-American. There were only two children that possessed a different ethnic background. Half of the

students were served free lunch, and breakfast was also provided at the school.

All teachers at the school (N-11) agreed to participate including the Chapter I teacher. Their years of teaching experience ranged from three years to twenty-eight years. Although three of the teachers occasionally took college courses, none of the teachers had attained an advanced degree. Most of the teachers were originally from the area, and many of them were related to each other.

Data Source. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1988) with each teacher at the school. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. All notes were taken during the interviews by the researcher and later transcribed. Member checks were held with many of the respondents in order to clarify any questions that the researcher had pertaining to responses (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Questions during the semi-structured interview began with a grand tour question (Spradley, 1979) and then focused on each teacher's use of literature in the classroom. This included looking at the extent to which trade books were used by the teacher, criteria for materials selection, and constraints felt by the teacher on the use of literature.

All data were broken down into individual thought units on index cards. The cards were sorted multiple times and put into data-driven categories utilizing the constant comparative method.

Results and discussion

It became readily apparent during the interviews that the basal played a predominant role in many classrooms. Only one teacher, the Chapter I teacher, used literature during

reading. The teachers in this study were well aware of their lack of knowledge about how to integrate literature into the curriculum. Many teachers referred to themselves as a "skills teacher" and a "traditionalist." They remembered learning how to teach with the basal when they were in college and continued to do so in that manner, placing a heavy emphasis on skills. Those who used the published reading series stated that they followed the teacher's manual explicitly. Two of the teachers even stated that they would not want to teach reading with literature because "reading is skills." These teachers were uncomfortable with the idea that reading could be taught without the basal because they were concerned that they would miss skills they perceived as necessary in order to learn to read.

When the teachers were asked if they used trade books during any other part of the day, the answer was much the same. Although two teachers did state that they might use trade books in other content areas, they also said that the trade books were used with the text and not as a replacement. Clearly textbooks in general were important to the teachers. It was only during story time that many teachers used literature. Even then some were quick to clarify that it was ONLY used during story time because they were "traditionalists," teaching classes in a historically traditional manner which relies heavily on textbooks, worksheets, and standardized tests. For the most part trade books were seen as an "extra" in classes and thus were reserved for use when "extra" time was available.

The most common ways to obtain trade books were student book clubs and trade books which were left in their classroom by previous teachers. One teacher admitted that the books which she used she had had for twenty years. This is not surprising in that the nearest bookstore is in a large city located about 1-1/2 hours away. One teacher even stated that

she illegally Xeroxed books and another one said she checked books out of the school library and just never returned them.

Libraries were rarely mentioned as a source of support for teachers but that could be due to several factors. The school library, which is rather small, is only staffed part time by a retired librarian. The closest public library is in a nearby city and charges people outside the city limits a \$25 fee to use their facilities. This was mentioned often in interviews. Many teachers stated that they, their students, and their students' parents had used the library before the fee was imposed, and now residents of the small town could not afford to use the library. A kindergarten teacher also mentioned that the library had a yearly sale where books could be bought by the inch. Now she could no longer buy those books because she does not live within the city limits or pay a fee.

Recommendations

While teachers in suburban areas have reported a limited knowledge about literature (Scharer, 1992), it is obvious that teachers in a rural school may face even more obstacles in developing relevant knowledge. Rural areas often have more limited resources. The town may not have a local university where a course can be taken or even access to trade books through a library or bookstore.

Taking into consideration the needs of rural areas, "on site" workshops may be part of the answer. It was evident in the interviews that workshops were a powerful source of gaining new knowledge. One kindergarten teacher said her students like to predict with trade books. She added, "It was a strategy I learned during a workshop." A first-grade teacher, Gloria, mentioned that she became aware of the whole language trend three years ago when she attended a workshop. She also began her own class library after attending a

workshop four years ago. Carol, a second grade teacher, attended a summer workshop the previous year and learned for the first time that some teachers did not use basals. Statements such as these help to illustrate the isolation of some teachers, and the importance of workshops in keeping rural teachers current on literacy issues. When one considers the isolation of some small, rural towns, it is easy to see why teachers often experience difficulty with commuting to a university on a regular basis to take classes. Yet workshops, when properly planned, can meet the specific needs of the teachers involved.

Distance education may also provide opportunities for such areas which might otherwise find a great deal of resources inaccessible. Often people in the area can be used to serve as site coordinators and university courses can be offered. Not only would this benefit the university, by allowing professors to keep in touch with the needs of teachers in rural areas but more teachers might be encouraged to take courses and perhaps pursue advanced degrees.

One teacher felt that the literature class she took in college taught about books but not how to use them. However she remembered learning how to use the basal. Thus she taught using the basal reader. The one teacher who used literature in her reading classroom attributed it to her college experience. She felt that the university she attended taught the students not only how to use the literature but gave students ample opportunity to practice using it in schools. In her eyes this experience in the schools was invaluable. According to her, "Nobody was ever afraid to make mistakes because you were given plenty of support." Unfortunately only one teacher had an experience like this to report. Most of the teachers stated that they didn't know how to use literature and had never been taught how to do so.

Teachers who have not recently graduated from a teacher education program may not know how to use literature in their classrooms. While inservice education may be used with teachers to provide a support system for implementing literature-based instruction in the classroom, it is difficult when the teachers are living in isolated areas. Although research has shown that support systems are an essential part of changes in programs (Scharer, 1992), rural teachers often are professionally isolated (Erickson, 1995) and left to themselves to find a solution to their problems (Killian and Byrd, 1988). However, research has shown that teachers learn a great deal from each other (Altieri, 1994; Roberts, 1982). Small discussion groups facilitated by literacy experts "on site" might help these teachers to realize that by working collaboratively they can realize the full potential of their knowledge.

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