

What's Going On Here? A Qualitative Examination of Grouping Patterns in an Exemplary Whole Language Classroom

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Recent debate has focused on two contrasting approaches to literacy instruction, a decoding versus a meaning centered paradigm (Adams, 1990). These curricular models differ in how reading instruction is conducted, because they differ in their underlying assumptions about how learning occurs, what language is, and what constitutes the reading act itself (Shuy, 1984).

While educational research into the effects of various teaching methods is to some degree inconclusive and fragmented, a few tentative conclusions can be drawn (Pearson, 1984). First, the emphasis in instructional method is reflected in learning; i.e., children learn what they are taught. Methods that promote decoding skills tend to yield greater decoding related ability, and methods that promote comprehending tend to yield greater comprehending ability. Second, conditions other than method (e.g., teacher expectations, organizational patterns, environmental considerations) appear to have consequences for

learning. This means that context as well as content contributes to what and how children learn. Therefore, the entire instructional process, in operation, must constitute the field of study.

Rationale

Presently, researchers cannot answer the question as to which, if either, method of instruction better answers the needs of children, without first specifying more fully the distinctive features of each focus and identifying the contextual aspects of each type of instruction that significantly influences the achievement of various groups of children. A need exists for practice-to-theory research, because the use of outcomes as the only measurement appears to be inadequate (Harste, 1988).

How instruction occurs in traditional, skills-based classrooms is well known and well documented. However, the same is not true for alternative philosophies such as whole language. Therefore, we decided to examine the practices, organization, and processes that comprised literacy instruction in one classroom of at risk children led by an experienced teacher who is committed to a literature based curriculum that focuses on the comprehension and use of language.

This classroom was examined in two parts. The first part, a quantitative study, researched the product outcomes of this type of instruction and preceded the qualitative study (Stice and Bertrand, 1989). The quantitative study provided baseline data and documented the achievement of children in five pairs of first and second grade classrooms over two years. The findings from part one indicated that: 1) at risk children in the whole language classrooms scored as well as their matched counterparts in traditional classrooms on

standardized achievement test measures; 2) at risk children in the whole language classrooms appeared to learn more about reading and writing, and their literacy development appeared to be enhanced in a wider variety of ways than children from the traditional classrooms; 3) whole language appears to be a viable instructional alternative for both rural and inner-city at risk children; and 4) the efficacy of whole language may be directly proportional to the understanding of the teacher who implements it.

Methodology

Following the quantitative study, a qualitative research plan was implemented. It was designed to determine what organizational and process elements in the daily life of these two types of programs produced the differences found in the two year study. The project used direct observation with videotapes as backup. The constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was applied to all field and video transcripts. Observers were in the classroom for sixty days during the course of the school year. Data consisted not only of field notes and video tapes, but artifacts from the classroom, and interviews with both the teacher and the students.

Artifactual data in the form of samples of children's writing were collected and tagged to the corresponding event in the field notes. Both the teacher and the children were interviewed and these data summarized. Data were categorized and subsumed into larger and larger domains. Eventually, data were arranged to form models that represent the essential structures of this classroom.

Participants

This study was conducted in a classroom with 26 second grade, inner city children. Most of the children were

considered at risk for school failure. More than 80 percent qualified for the school's free lunch program, and all of them came from the same low SES community. In addition, each child on whom we focused also met at least three of the following four conditions: 1) member of a single-parent family; 2) identified by the teacher as having a variety of problems that could interfere with school success that were usually related to home environments; 3) scored below the fourth stanine on total reading on the locally administered standardized achievement test; and 4) lived in publicly subsidized project-style, multiple family housing.

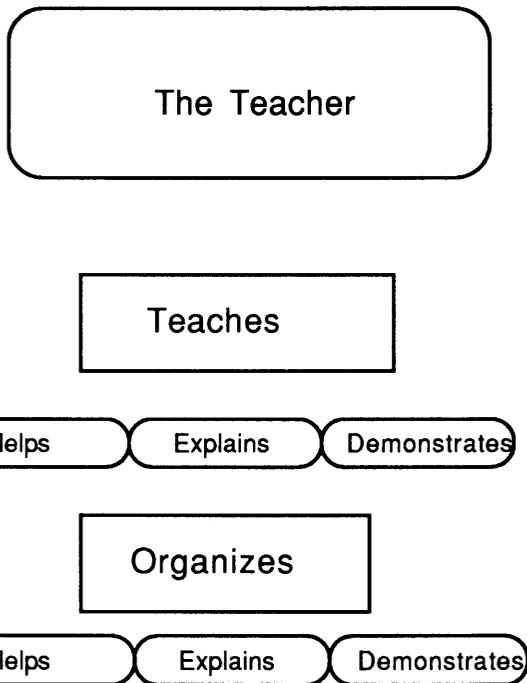
The teacher's instructional style could be characterized in the following ways: 1) identified as a whole language teacher on the DeFord (1985) Theoretical Orientation to the Reading Process (TORP); 2) engaged the children in writing every day; 3) planned instructional events and thematic units that employed children's literature and integrated the curriculum; 4) collaborated with children to develop the classroom curriculum; 5) allowed the children to read silently several times a day; 7) employed a wide variety of materials and equipment that promoted literacy learning and enriched the content of the classroom; 8) engaged in both formal and informal conferencing with the children; 9) read professional literature, and reflected on her own teaching through journal writing. She also helped found a local whole language teacher support group (Teachers Applying Whole Language, TAWL); and 10) incorporated authentic opportunities for reading, writing and thinking.

Findings

Ultimately, two models of this whole language classroom were designed, one focusing on the teacher's and the other on the children's experiences. Each model reflects the overall daily reality of this classroom.

Figure 1

Whole Language Classroom
Teacher Focus
Literacy Events



Teacher focus. First, this teacher's greatest emphasis was on activities aimed at helping children do things, sometimes as a teacher, sometimes as a co-worker and collaborator, sometimes as a resource and facilitator. She exhibited the habits and attitudes of a learner, making herself one of the most avid learners in the room, simultaneously modeling what she wanted from children. This represented her largest investment in time and effort as a

teacher. For example, she spent a great deal of time sitting on the floor with children helping them revise their written drafts. She also worked in the art and science areas, helping children design and execute projects.

This teacher's second largest emphasis was on giving children information and helping them find information for themselves. She served as a resource, and she guided children in the development of strategies for reading, writing, problem solving, and critical thinking. She helped them elaborate on the information they brought to school from their life experiences, and she helped them learn to think in strategic ways. For example, when children became involved in a unit on metamorphosis, she loaded the classroom with a wide variety of displays concerning this subject. She and the children became researchers together as they constructed a curricular unit that lasted more than three weeks and that reappeared periodically in the children's work throughout the remainder of the school year.

Finally, this teacher demonstrated difficult, new activities and then invited the children to try. Children were not penalized for imperfect attempts. Rather, they were encouraged and supported in their efforts. For example, when children wanted to write a play, she helped them order the tasks and examine how plays look and sound. Over a period of several days, the children prepared the drafts and made several collaborative attempts at the manuscript before they were satisfied. Grades were determined by cooperative evaluations with students.

In her role as teacher, she offered suggestions and questions and encouraged their projects. She modeled the reading, writing, and investigating processes, giving children the means to understand the power and usefulness of

language. For example, when a local controversy brought landfills to the attention of the children, the teacher and children collaboratively researched the subject and then built one to see where the problems were in the concept. The children brought in "materials" in the form of garbage and kept records of what was and was not biodegradable. The manifold skills involved in this project in gathering information, analyzing it, using it for a purpose, writing about it and so on are obvious. In math, the children used the amount of garbage that families generated annually to investigate ratios, averaging, fractions, and estimating in concrete ways that had meaning for the children. The vocabulary associated with ecology, solid waste management, landfills, etc., did not need to be presented on dittos and memorized. It was learned as a natural consequence of reading and talking about this issue.

Child focus. Because this classroom was a highly social and tightly integrated entity, it was complex and difficult to analyze. The children were continually engaged in some form of self-directed activity. This class did not proceed in teacher directed lessons that isolated the mechanics of language or subject areas. Thematic units allowed teacher and students to address literacy learning, mathematics, critical thinking skills, and a host of other teacher objectives through the subjects of science, social studies, and the arts. Children engaged in four organizational patterns of activities.

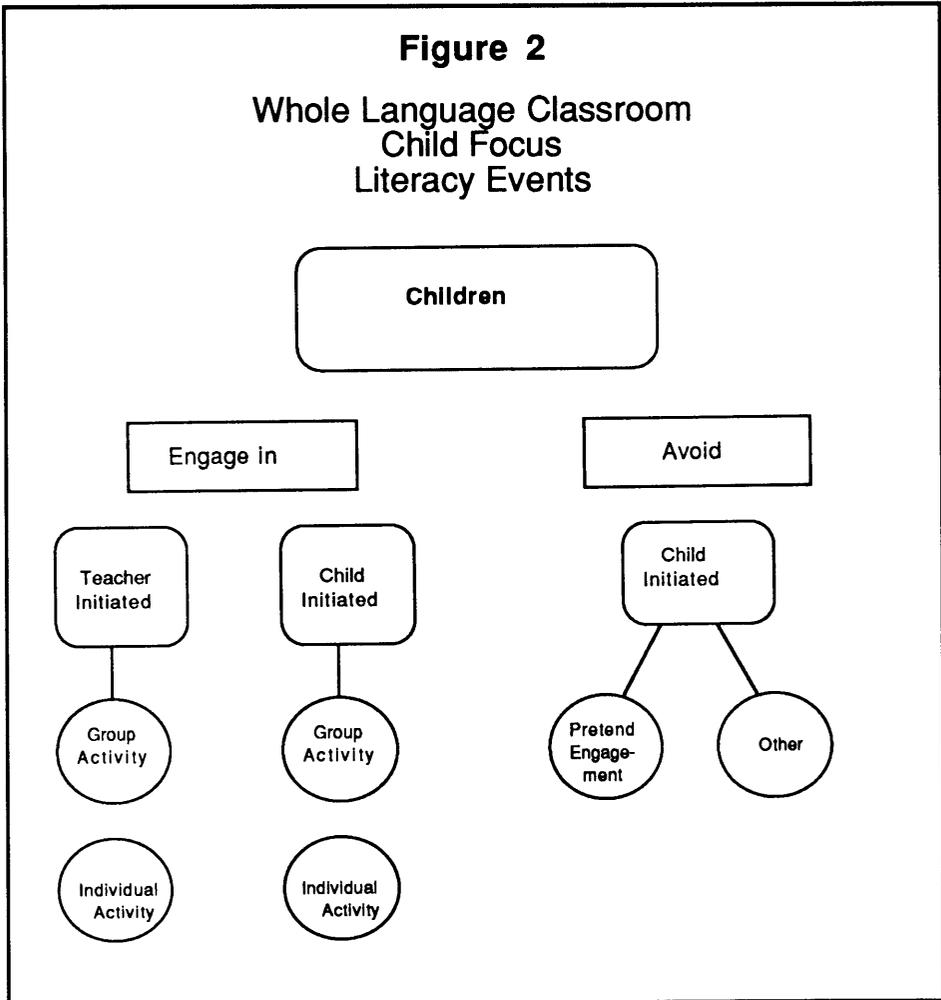
First, teacher initiated group activities represented the highest incidence of children's time. This was, however, very different from traditional teacher led group instruction. For example, one of the most pivotal points of the day was "rugtime," which usually began with classroom business (e.g., lunch money, the pledge, day's songs, calendar, etc.)

and a general discussion or debriefing in which children shared what was going on in their lives. This time was used to create a community climate, to share intimacy, and as an opportunity to teach. For example, the teacher frequently found it necessary to help children with survival or coping techniques. On several occasions, for instance, she discussed ways for children to react when they heard gunfire, or when a stranger came to the door and they were home alone.

When the business of the classroom and living had been taken care of, rugtime then focused on planning. Children and teacher collaboratively reviewed and evaluated what they had accomplished and planned what they would do that morning. Often, the teacher structured this planning by giving choices and asking children to add to the list of options. These were written down and used to guide the remainder of the morning's events. Frequently, this first "rugtime" ended with the children selecting a piece of literature to be read aloud by the teacher. Since children therefore spent the morning in activities that the teacher approved of and which interested them, the teacher was freed from direct lessons and given the opportunity to observe the children, interact with individuals, and to gather materials for upcoming activities. Both children and teacher expressed enthusiasm for and satisfaction with this arrangement when interviewed.

The second most frequently occurring time structure was teacher initiated, individual contact, usually taking the form of pupil/teacher conferences. This teacher found as many opportunities as possible to sit with a child in formal, planned conferences or in impromptu interactions. She kept careful records of these interactions as a means to

guide her both in evaluation of the student and in curriculum planning.



The third most frequently occurring activity in this class was child initiated group activity. For example, when a caterpillar died in the science area, children gathered to examine it. One child suggested that they write about their caterpillar, and several children spent portions of the next week working on a story finally entitled "The Dead (Sorry)

Caterpillar.” The children added the word “sorry” to the title so the reader would know they were sorry their caterpillar had died.

Fourth, due to the importance of children working collaboratively and learning from each other, the least frequently occurring activity consisted of children working alone. However, children could and often did work individually on a variety of tasks. In addition, each day contained time specifically devoted to individual, silent reading and writing.

Discussion

The children in this study did as well as children in traditional classrooms on standardized tests and other school system required assessments. Moreover, they scored significantly higher on measures of knowledge of the uses of literacy, ability to apply language constructively, and metacognitive analysis of what they were doing with language (Stice, Thompson and Bertrand, 1991). This is consistent with the earlier finding that meaning based classrooms tend to foster comprehension and meaningful language use.

Also consistent are the findings that organizational patterns in this classroom reflected the philosophy and general goals of whole language. These children were grouped as dictated by the task to be addressed, not for the convenience of the teacher or because a textbook or curriculum guide required it a particular way. Such groupings therefore reflected both the teacher’s and the children’s purposes and intentions.

The high level of performance of these at risk children, compared to usual expectations for them in their school, leads to the conclusion that whole language instruction is a

viable alternative instructional philosophy. It follows that these grouping patterns help operationalize whole language instruction and play an integral part in the children's successful learning.

Summary

This study attempted to construct models that subsumed a great amount of observational data. The models may be used to illuminate, explicate, and replicate the structure of an exemplary whole language classroom. Clearly, this classroom offers children opportunities to succeed in school. One can also conclude that class grouping patterns that reflect authentic learning events contributed to higher performance on the part of these children.

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