

7-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Jacobson, J. M. (1990). Reading: The Conferences. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 30 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol30/iss4/9

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READING: THE CONFERENCES

Jeanne M. Jacobson

Improving Reading Programs and Strategies for At-Risk Readers

*American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting, Boston, April 16-20, 1990*

The importance of addressing the needs of at-risk readers in demonstrably sound ways was the theme of a number of presentations at AERA's annual meeting. In one session, Rita M. Bean, of the University of Pittsburgh, presented the report of a study in which she and her colleagues investigated in-class and pullout settings for remedial instruction.

An impetus for the research was the current interest in returning remedial instruction to a classroom setting, rather than using pullout programs. The purposes of the study were to compare the kinds and amount of reading instruction which those students identified as in need of remedial help receive when the remedial program is conducted in a regular classroom, with the instruction given in programs which move students to a specially designated remedial reading classroom; and to observe how teacher and student time is spent during reading sessions in both settings.

Subjects for the study were 119 fourth and fifth grade students from 12 schools participating in Chapter I reading programs. Structured observations of teachers and students

occurred over a four month period. Data were analyzed to determine the average weekly time students experienced different teacher behaviors (e.g., giving information, giving instructions, questioning and answering); the average weekly time students spent on different aspects of lessons (e.g., before, during and after reading activities; skill-related activities; independent work); the percent of weekly time students spent with different types of materials (e.g., basals, tradebooks, content texts, writing, workbooks and worksheets); and the percent of weekly time students spent attending to different levels of text (e.g., word level, sentence and paragraph level, selection level).

A discouraging finding was that the category of teaching behavior designated by the researchers as "noninstructional" — time the students spent in transition from one activity to another, or in situations where there was no student-teacher interaction — was the most frequently observed in both settings, although this category was observed significantly more often in in-class settings than in pullout settings.

In both settings, the focus of lessons was predominantly skill-based, and materials used were heavily oriented toward basal readers, workbooks and skillsheets. In both settings, the use of tradebooks and content texts, combined, accounted for approximately five percent of the time; and less than five percent of the time, in either setting, was spent by students in writing. In both settings, approximately one-third of reading instruction was focused on the selection level, between one-fifth and one-fourth at the word level, and slightly less at the sentence and paragraph level.

In summarizing the research findings, Bean noted, "Results indicated that these low achieving students, regardless

of setting, were not receiving much opportunity in their reading program to participate in actual reading or writing activities."

"We need continuing efforts to plan good instruction for low-achieving students. We need an innovative model for such instruction, not simply changes in structure and form."

Rita M. Bean, AERA annual meeting, 1990

Instructional strategies used to assist struggling readers include efforts to help them engage in the kinds of strategic reading used by skillful readers. A paper presented by Gloria E. Miller, of the University of South Carolina, reported on her research investigating a strategy which incorporates cognitive, metacognitive and affective components.

Self-instruction, or SI, is a method in which students monitor their own understanding of text during the reading process. In SI, students are taught to set a reading purpose prior to reading ("I have to see if this makes sense.") to self-question during reading ("Does this make sense?"), to evaluate their own progress ("How am I doing so far?") to reinforce the strategy ("I'm doing a good job of asking myself if this makes sense; it seems to be helping me; I'll keep on asking my question as I finish reading.") and evaluating the passage and their understanding of it on completion ("What was this about? Did it make sense to me, or was there something that did not make sense?").

In the research study reported by Miller, 44 fourth and fifth graders classified as reading disabled were taught a form of the self-instruction strategy. For half the children, the self-instruction method was altered to a didactic approach, in which the children were not taught to question themselves or

evaluate their own progress; rather the questions were posed and the task set by the teacher ("I want you to find out if this story makes sense to you by asking if this story makes sense as you read." "OK, what was the story about? Did you find any problems? Did the story make sense to you?") Subjects were divided into those taught to use the self-instruction and given didactic instruction in small groups, and those who were taught SI and received the didactic teaching individually.

After four teaching sessions, all given within a one-week period, students' reading comprehension was individually tested. Each student read a series of short expository passages, some of which contained conflicting information; answered literal questions about the passages; and responded to questions designed to indicate awareness of anomalies. A similar assessment was done a month later.

The results of the study indicated that when students were taught to use the self-instruction strategy individually, their reading comprehension surpassed that of students who were given didactic instruction, or who were taught the SI strategy in a group. The same results were manifested in the delayed testing session, suggesting that the beneficial effects of individual SI training persist over time.

The next annual conference of the American Educational Research Association will be held April 3-7, 1991, in Chicago. For information, write AERA, 1230 Seventeenth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-3078.

Correction: The spring column, "Reading: The Conferences" contained two errors which have been called to our attention by Dr. Violet J. Harris, whose NCTE presentation was described: *The Brownies Book* was published for two years, 1920-21; Emma Akin, incorrectly identified in the column as black, was a white educator and author.
