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PROVIDING FOR CAPABLE READERS: BEYOND THE BASAL MANUAL

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Introduction

For many years, reading methods textbooks have suggested the use of flexible grouping to meet the needs of students' abilities and interests in reading (Smith, 1963; Spache and Spache, 1977; Durkin, 1983). However, the authors' observations of intern and experienced teachers indicate that such practices are not often utilized. Within grouping patterns observed, special allowances were often made to meet the needs of students who read below grade level but rarely for capable students who read above grade level.

If classroom teachers do not use the suggestions of the reading methods textbooks from their college instruction, then one might ask how teachers make instructional decisions about reading, especially those decisions affecting capable readers. According to the results of a survey conducted by Barton and Wilder (1964), teachers responded that they depended on the basal reading manual to guide their instructional practices. In a more recent survey, Shannon (1987) found that little change had been made since the sixties. Teachers assume that basal manuals are founded on current research; therefore, they do not feel the need to stay abreast of what research suggests about reading instruction. Teachers continue to see the basal manual as the only source of direction for teaching reading.

This study was an attempt to better understand teacher practices for placement in basal reading series, particularly placement of capable readers. The following questions were addressed:

1. On what do teachers base their placement decisions?
2. What do teachers believe will happen to the skill development of capable students who skip basal reading levels?
3. In actual practice would a teacher allow a capable reader to skip levels in a basal reading series?

Method

A survey was developed and piloted by the authors, then mailed to a sample of elementary teachers. Respondents were asked to describe placement practices they used and the reasons underlying such decisions. Then, as a means of comparison, several descriptions of children achieving at various reading levels were presented. The respondents were asked to make a placement decision and include the factors underlying each decision.

The survey was sent to 324 entry year teachers and their supervising teachers on file with Oklahoma State University. The 112 (35%) respondents comprised the sample for this study. Experience for the supervising teachers ranged from 3 to 45 years (Table 1). The respondents represented urban, suburban, and rural communities. Twenty-five teachers were randomly selected to participate in a follow-up telephone interview in which their beliefs about placement and basal reader hierarchies would be further explored.

The survey instrument included questions dealing with number of reading groups and their levels, influences on the placement of students for reading, the effect of placement on skill development, and beliefs about the placement of students either above or below grade level. Demographic information was also requested, as well as the teacher's educational background and years of experience.

Results

When questioned about the number and levels of reading groups in their classrooms, 73% of the respon-

Table 1--Respondents' Years of Experience

Years Exper.	No. of Tchrs.	Years Exper.	No. Tchrs
1	13	15	5
2	16	16	4
3	7	17	1
4	3	18	3
5	3	19	4
6	5	20	3
7	5	22	2
8	2	24	1
9	4	25	1
10	6	26	3
11	2	27	1
12	4	28	1
13	4	45	1
14	7		

dents indicated that they had three or more reading groups. Forty-two percent had at least one reading group above grade placement.

The teachers were asked to rank 10 possible influences on reading placement (informal assessment, school board policy, school principal, other teachers, personal beliefs, basal placement materials, basal manual, achievement tests, reading specialist, and other). Of these ten, teachers reported being most influenced by informal assessment (40%) (Figure 1). The next highest rating was basal placement materials. These were followed by achievement test scores, reading specialist recommendations, and other teachers. Only five percent of the respondents indicated that their personal beliefs about reading instruction influenced their decisions about placement.

Figure 1. Influences on Placement Decisions

Q: What influences your decisions about placement of students in a basal series? Please rank order your choices with 1 having the most influence. (informal assessment, school board policy, principal, other teachers, personal beliefs about reading, basal placement materials, recommendations of the basal manual, achievement test scores, recommendations of reading specialists, other).

Figure 1. Influences on Placement Decisions

40%	informal assessment
13%	basal placement materials
9%	achievement test scores
9%	reading specialist
6%	other teachers
5%	personal beliefs

Capable Readers

Teachers were questioned about what they believed would happen to the skill development of a capable reader who skipped levels in the basal reader (Fig. 2). Seventy-one percent of the respondents believed that capable readers would miss skills which would make it difficult to progress, and two percent felt that capable readers could not progress because of the missed skills.

Figure 2. Effect on Skill Development of Skipping Basal Reading Levels.

Q: What do you believe would happen to the skill development of a capable reader who skipped one or more levels within a basal reading system?

71%	would miss essential skills but would be able to compensate
19%	would miss skills which would make it difficult to progress
8%	would not miss any skills
2%	could not progress because of missed skills

The teachers were asked to respond to the following scenario: "At the highest grade level you teach, Student A scored 1½ years above grade level on a standardized achievement test at the end of last year and completed all books in the basal series for that level. Where in the basal series would you place this child?"

Approximately 50% of the teachers said they would

place the student in grade level material but would move him through at a faster pace. One-third of the respondents stated that they would move the student to a higher level basal in the same series. Twenty-three percent of the teachers suggested the use of supplementary materials with the capable student.

Teachers were asked to explain on what information they had based their decisions in the previous scenario. One-third of the respondents did not give reasons for making their decisions. Twenty percent stated they would give the student an informal assessment rather than accept the score of the achievement test. Eighteen percent said that placement would be contingent upon completion of previous basal reading materials, and sixteen percent of the teachers would base their decisions on professional judgment and personal beliefs.

In the telephone interviews teachers were asked to discuss the skill hierarchy in the basal reading series that they were using and placement of students above grade level. Of the 23 teachers we were able to contact, 26% stated that they had not noticed a specific skill hierarchy in their basal reader. Basals cited were Open Court, Houghton Mifflin, Economy, Macmillan, Scott Foresman, and Ginn. The remaining 74% stated that there was a specific skill hierarchy in their basal reader. Of the 17 teachers who noticed a specific skill hierarchy, only five could expand on what that hierarchy was. The remaining 12, although aware that there was a specific scope and sequence, were unable to state what that scope and sequence was. The same basal reading series were cited as having specific skill hierarchies as were cited for not having specific skill hierarchies.

When asked under what circumstances they would place a student above grade level in the basal reading series, two specifically said that they would not place a student above grade level. Eleven respondents would place a student above grade level only if it were determined the student had mastered all of the skills in the grade reader. The remaining teachers said they would advance a student if he were gifted, or if he tested above grade level.

Discussion

This study was designed to determine teachers' beliefs about the placement of capable readers for reading instruction and their actual placement practices. The questions were structured in such a way that inconsistencies between beliefs and practices became evident. The respondents stated that allowing capable readers to skip levels of the basal reader would result in the reader missing essential skills. However, when questions about their placement practices, 42% stated that they had some students in their classrooms placed above grade level.

When the teachers were asked what influenced their placement decisions, 40% stated that they primarily used informal assessment, but when asked where they based their placement decision for the student in the scenario, only 20% indicated that they would administer some type of informal assessment. Whereas only 5% initially stated that their personal beliefs influenced their placement practices, 16% indicated that in a given situation their placement decision was determined by personal belief and judgment.

The participants in the telephone interviews were generally consistent with their mailed survey responses. However, 26% were not consistent when questioned about where they would place capable students.

Implications

This study indicated that there are basic inconsistencies between teachers' stated beliefs about capable readers and stated placement practices. These inconsistencies appear to be partly the result of the fear of skipping essential skills as outlined in the basals.

Unfortunately, this study cannot state with certainty how teachers react to capable readers within their own classrooms. A follow-up of classroom observations should be conducted to determine what these teachers do in actual practice. Only then could a definitive estimation of how often teachers act in accordance with their state beliefs be made.

Classroom teachers must become knowledgeable deci-

sion-makers. In light of recent research (Russell, 1986; Combs, Siera & Douglas, 1987) which question the validity of skill hierarchies, teachers must study and evaluate the scope and sequence in their adopted basal reading series. In addition, the use of the basal as the only source of instruction needs to be questioned, and a more eclectic approach to reading instruction needs to be adopted.

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