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IS THE INFLUENCE OF PSYCHOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH EVIDENT IN PRESERVICE TEACHERS' VIEWS OF THE READING PROCESS?

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Psycholinguistic research which has been conducted for about twenty years has been persuasive enough to challenge some of the traditional beliefs teachers held about reading instruction. Holdaway (1979) tells us:

Essentially, the psycholinguists insist that reading is not a matter of perceiving or recognizing words first and then getting to meaning but rather that meaning guides and facilitates perception. The influence of meaning in reducing uncertainty greatly limits the amount of visual detail which must be processed and in so doing makes perception more rapid and efficient, while at the same time allowing the greater part of attention to be directed toward comprehending. (p.87)

Goodman (1974), Smith (1975), Clark (1976), Artley (1975) and a number of other investigators have provided sufficient evidence to cause educators to question some traditional methods used in the teaching of reading.

The overall aim of this investigation was to attempt to determine whether the psycholinguistic view of the reading process was being reflected in the views of preservice teachers.

Subject Selection and Procedure

The subjects consisted of two groups of preservice teachers who were preparing to teach elementary school children in regular classrooms or in special education programs, specifically those children with behavior disorders. The students were enrolled in an urban university during the spring semester of the 1981-82 academic year. Their beliefs about reading were checked by asking them to respond to a self-rating scale which was developed by R. D. Robinson, E. J. Goodacre, and M. C. McKenna for their study entitled "Psycholinguistic Beliefs and a Cross-Cultural Study of Teacher Practice." (1978) The scale was based on a verbatim list of statements introduced by F. Smith (1973). T. Bean (1980)

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also used this scale for his study entitled, "Can We Update Experienced Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Reading?"

Table 1
Robinson et al. Rating Scale (1978)

	No Emphasis	Slight Emphasis	Uncertain	Moderate Emphasis	Heavy Emphasis
1. Aim for early mastery of rules of reading.					
2. Ensure that phonic skills are learned and used.					
3. Teach letters or words one at a time, making sure each new letter or word is learned before moving on.					
4. Make word-perfect reading the prime objective.					
5. Discourage guessing; be sure children read carefully.					
6. Encourage the avoidance of errors.					
7. Provide immediate feedback.					
8. Detect and correct inappropriate eye movements.					
9. Identify and give special attention to problem readers as soon as possible.					
10. Make sure children understand the importance of reading and the seriousness of falling behind.					
11. Take opportunity during reading instruction to improve spelling and written expression and also insist on the best possible spoken English.					
12. If the method you are using is unsatisfactory, try another. Always be alert for new materials and techniques.					

A teacher holding a psycholinguistic view of the reading process would be expected to respond negatively to the twelve items on the scale. It was hypothesized that the newly prepared teachers would not hold beliefs which show the influence of the psycholinguistic view. It was also hypothesized that there would be no difference in the responses of the elementary teachers and those of the special education teachers.

For the first hypothesis, the categories were arranged in two segments as follows: The No Emphasis/Slight Emphasis was one segment, and the Moderate Emphasis/Heavy Emphasis was the other. The uncertain responses were not included. The criterion for evidencing the influence of psycholinguistic research was a mean score of 49% or less Moderate Emphasis/Heavy Emphasis on the scale.

For the second hypothesis a t-test was run to statistically compare the ratings in each of the twelve categories of those preparing to be elementary teachers with those preparing to be special education teachers.

Results

The rating scale was sent to eighty-eight elementary education majors and to forty-nine special education majors. Thirty-seven or 42% of the elementary education majors returned the scale, and twenty-three or 47% of the special education majors returned theirs.

Hypothesis 1: Newly prepared teachers will not hold beliefs about reading which show the influence of recent psycholinguistic research.

As stated previously, the criterion for evidencing the influence of this research was a mean score of 49% or less Moderate Emphasis/Heavy Emphasis on the rating scale. The score for the preservice group as a whole was 70% Moderate Emphasis/Heavy Emphasis thus leading to an acceptance of the hypothesis. This indicates that these students were strongly influenced by traditional views of the reading process.

Hypothesis 2: There will be no difference in the response of the preservice elementary education students and those of the preservice special education students.

There were only three categories in which there was a difference which was significant in the ratings of the elementary education students and those of the special education students.

The first of these was the first category on the scale:

"Aim for the early mastery of the rules of reading."

Although both groups of preservice students placed considerable emphasis on this as being important, the mean rating of the elementary students was Heavy Emphasis, while the mean rating of the special education students was Moderate Emphasis. Both of these would be in contradiction with the psycholinguistic principles of reading instruction. The difference was significant at the .01 level.

Table II
 "Aim for early mastery of the rules of reading."

Group	No. of Cases	S. D.	Mean	t
Special Education	23	1.043	4.2174	-2.61*
Elementary Education	37	0.397	4.8108	

*Significant at the 0.015 level

The second category on the rating scale was also one in which the difference was significant at the .01 level.

"Ensure that phonic skills are learned and used."

Table III

Group	No. of Cases	S. D.	Mean	t
Special Education	23	1.014	3.8696	-2.76*
Elementary Education	37	0.607	4.5135	

*Significant at the 0.010 level

Once again the elementary rating was Heavy Emphasis while the special education rating was Moderate Emphasis. This, too, was in contradiction with psycholinguistic principles.

The third category in which the ratings were different was Number 4 on the scale - "Make word-perfect reading the prime objective."

Table IV
 "Make word-perfect reading the prime objective."

Group	No. of Cases	S. D.	Mean	t
Special Education	23	1.096	2.2609	-2.76*
Elementary Education	37	1.242	3.1081	

*Significant at the 0.008 level

The special education rating was Slight Emphasis on this with the elementary rating slightly higher, but below Moderate Emphasis. The difference was significant at the .008 level. Those favoring psycholinguistic principles of reading would place no emphasis on this.

The three categories in which the combined group of preservice

teachers showed greatest agreement with psycholinguistic principles were Numbers 4, 5, and 6 on the scale. They are:

"Make word-perfect reading the prime objective."

"Discourage guessing; be sure children read carefully."

"Encourage the avoidance of errors."

Discussion

It was surprising to note that the teachers still in preparation were the ones who appeared to cling very closely to traditional beliefs about the teaching of reading. This was unexpected since their preparation should reflect the influence of recent psycholinguistic research. Several assumptions might be made as to why this occurred.

1. Preservice students' beliefs are heavily influenced by supervising teachers who may hold to the more traditional beliefs about reading.
2. These preservice students may not have been introduced to psycholinguistic principles in their undergraduate preparation.
3. The preservice students may have leaned heavily on the remembrance of their own reading instruction in the elementary school which was likely traditional in nature.

Number 1 above would not be unusual as it has been pointed out by Austin and Morrison (1963) that the person most heavily influencing preservice teachers is the supervising teacher during the student teaching period.

Number 2 seems highly unlikely since university faculty generally are informed on current research and help their students to become familiar with this research. Certainly reading teachers should know about the psycholinguistic research which has been conducted. Even if university faculty did not familiarize their students with this, there would be few texts for reading methods courses which would not include the psycholinguistic research and the application to reading instruction.

For Number 3, Lortie (1966) has indicated that teaching is the only profession in which an entering individual has had experience observing what it is that members of that profession do. This is true since each individual experiences the influence of teachers for each year that s/he attends school. No one has to imagine what it is that teachers do, all students receive direct exposure to what it is they do. It may or may not be what should be done, but without a doubt, that exposure has an influence on the beliefs and practices of any beginning teacher.

Limitations of Study

Since this study was conducted in one setting, the findings cannot be generalized beyond that setting or beyond the group of individuals responding. It is possible, if a wider sample of students from several universities were asked to complete the survey, that the results would be quite different. It would be well to include a larger sample drawn from more than one teacher

preparation program in future research.

Summary

While it is true that the influence of psycholinguistics is only one influence that has been dominant in recent years, it is a most important one which future teachers should be aware of. Clearly this should be felt in teacher preparation programs. The fact that even this small group of students tended to hold more closely to traditional views of reading should encourage teacher educators to re-examine their preparation programs. Without this background, there is less likelihood of any modifications being made in the instructional programs in reading in our elementary schools. Without a clear view of what the reading process requires at varying levels, modifications cannot be made to meet the needs of children who are learning to read. While every teacher cannot be expected to view reading from the psycholinguistic point of view, every teacher should be aware of and informed about this way of perceiving the act of reading.

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