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THE EFFECT OF A MINI-CONFERENCE ON TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT THE READING PROCESS

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Five decades ago, William S. Gray asserted that "Sound reading instruction and the development of reading programs presuppose a clear understanding of the nature of reading and the fundamental processes involved" (Gray, 1937, p.25). More recently, Harste and Burke (1977) demonstrated that teachers' philosophy of reading manifested itself in their instructional procedures and the quality of students' oral reading miscues. For example, teachers professing a psycholinguistic, language-based orientation to reading instruction tended to engage their students in holistic language activities such as the language experience approach. Conversely, teachers subscribing to a skills mastery approach relied more heavily on pre-packaged diagnostic and prescriptive materials. If teachers' understanding of the reading process is crucial to their ability to make informed decisions, what means exist to advance their knowledge of the reading process?

There is evidence to suggest that teachers are reluctant to read professional journals (Cogan and Anderson, 1977; and Mour, 1977) perhaps because of time constraints, and even more hesitant to embrace classroom implications from research (Clifford, 1973; Pearson, 1978). Since the very people who are in the best position to field-test new theories and related strategies are not eager to read about them, alternate means should be made available to keep teachers abreast of their chosen field.

The present study was undertaken to appraise the degree to which teacher beliefs about the reading process might be updated through attendance at a weekend mini-conference. The mini-conference focused on classroom application of findings from contemporary psycholinguistic research.

Methods

Subjects

The subjects were 88 male and female teachers who voluntarily spent a weekend attending a mini-conference entitled "Reading and the Linguistically Different Learner." sponsored by the Reading Department, California State University at Fullerton. Their years of experience as teachers ranged from one to 29 years with an average of 9.2 years for the total population. The number of graduate semester units in reading among them varied from none (15 subjects) to 39 (one subject), averaging

13.5 semester units.

Teachers were recruited for the conference by means of newspaper articles, posters on college bulletin boards, brochures and word of mouth. The fact that the major speaker was Dr. Yetta Goodman, a widely known proponent of language based instruction, was well publicized. The conference was held on a Friday evening from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and on Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Instrument

In order to evaluate any changes in teacher beliefs over the duration of the conference, the Bishop adaptation of DeFord's (1978) Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) was administered in a pretest/posttest format. The original TORP is a 28 item survey that was constructed to reflect beliefs and practices outlined in a variety of beginning reading programs representing three theoretical orientations to reading. The TORP includes 10 statements representing a phonics orientation, eight representing a linguistic or whole language orientation, and 10 that reflect a skills hierarchy perspective.

The TORP has been shown to consistently differentiate teachers according to their individual theoretical orientation to the reading process (DeFord, 1978). The TORP has demonstrated good validity and high reliability (Cronbach Alpha = .98) and the Bishop adaptation preserves these features.

The Bishop adaptation of the TORP was used in this study for two reasons. First, it contains 23 items that maintain the characteristics of the original TORP but make it less time consuming for administration to conference participants. Second, it supplied detailed information about the teaching experience and graduate reading course work of conference participants.

<div align="center">

Bishop Adaptation of
THEORETICAL ORIENTATION TO READING PROFILE (TORP)

(With Dr. Yetta Goodman's Responses to the Instrument)

</div>

Name_____   Date_____

Professional Role_____   Years in role_____

Years teaching_____   Number of graduate units in reading_____

Number of undergraduate units in reading _____

Directions: Read the following statements and circle one of the responses that will indicate the relationship of the statement to your feelings about reading and reading instruction.

SA–Strongly Agree   A–Agree   U–Undecided or Sometimes

D–Disagree   SD–Strongly Disagree

1. When a reader doesn't know a word, the   SA   A   U   D   SD
   correct response should be given.

2. A child needs to be able to verbalize the rules of phonics in order to process new words.   SA   A   U   D   SD

3. If every word is accurately reproduced, the story should be completely understood.   SA   A   U   D   SD

4. A child cannot read before he has had formal reading instruction.   SA   A   U   D   SD

5. Reversals are a significant problem in the teaching of reading.   SA   A   U   D   SD

6. Fluency and expression are necessary components that make a good reader.   SA   A   U   D   SD

7. It is a good practice to correct a child as soon as a mistake is made while reading orally.   SA   A   U   D   SD

8. Context should be a major focus in reading instruction.   SA   A   U   D   SD

9. The more errors a child makes, the poorer is his reading ability.   SA   A   U   D   SD

10. When a child does not know a word, he/she should be instructed to sound out its parts.   SA   A   U   D   SD

11. It is a good practice to allow a child to edit what is written into his own dialect when reading orally.   SA   A   U   D   SD

12. It is a good idea to introduce new words before they are encountered in reading.   SA   A   U   D   SD

13. Mispronouncing a word is a strong indication that the child does not know its meaning.   SA   A   U   D   SD

14. Phonics is a most efficient way to teach reading.   SA   A   U   D   SD

15. It is a sign of an inefficient reader when words, lines, or phrases are repeated.   SA   A   U   D   SD

16. Some problems in reading are caused by readers dropping the endings from words. (Oral?*)   SA   A   U   D   SD

17. Language background affects the way a child should be expected to read. (Orally? Single reading process.*)   SA   A   U   D   SD

18. Drill with sight words is a good form of practice in reading instruction.   SA   A   U   D   SD

19. A child should be encouraged to guess when attending to unfamiliar words.   SA   A   U   D   SD

20. The way to improve reading is to improve word attack skills.   SA   A   U   D   SD

21. Language experience is an effective means to facilitate reading instruction.   SA   A   U   D   SD

22. If a child says "house" for the written word "home" he should be corrected.   SA   A   U   D   SD

23. The ability to read a word list is indicative of proficiency in reading.   SA   A   U   D   SD

(Dr. Y. Goodman's responses indicated by arrows.)

A Likert scale ranging from one to five degrees measuring strong agreement to strong disagreement was applied to each statement response. Thus, possible total scores ranged from a low of 23, implying little faith in a psycholinguistic view of reading, to a high of 115, indicating a strong alliance with a psycholinguistic perspective. For example, items one and eight illustrate the desired direction of response representing such a psycholinguistic orientation to the reading process. Strong disagreement on item one acknowledges the importance of informed guessing on the part of the reader. Similarly, item eight emphasizes the dominant role of context in gaining meaning from print. The arrows depict the direction conference sponsors and the keynote speaker hoped the participants would move as a result of their attendance.

Procedures

On the first evening of the conference, the Bishop adaptation of the TORP was administered to the 88 subjects as pretest. The teachers were instructed to write their names on the survey. At the same time, Dr. Yetta Goodman, the keynote speaker representing a psycholinguistic orientation to the reading process, completed a copy of the instrument. Rather than selecting numbers to represent her responses, Dr. Goodman used arrows to indicate the direction in which she hoped conference participants would move. These target directions coincided with the conference objectives. After the participants had completed the TORP, Dr. Goodman presented her keynote address on "Reading and the Linguistically Different Learner."

On Saturday morning, Dr. Goodman met with small groups of participants who had registered for half-hour time segments to discuss reading related questions. At the same time, another speaker presented a program on "Reading and the Ethnically Different Learner." This was followed by one hour small group presentations clustered about the conference theme.

Prior to the conclusion of the conference, teachers met in small groups that were matched according to grade or areas of interest. They discussed major conference ideas and implementation procedures. At the conclusion of the conference on Saturday evening, the same Bishop adaptation of the TORP was administered to the participants as a posttest.

Results

All 23 statement responses were added together yielding a total score for each of the 88 participants on the pre and posttest administrations of the TORP. A two-tailed t-test comparing pre and posttest means on the TORP revealed a significant difference in excess of p .01 for the total instrument. The pre and posttest means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1 below:

Pre and Posttest Means and Standard Deviations

Group (n=88)	Standard Deviation	Mean
Pretest	8.44	76
Posttest	7.97	86

The responses on the posttest administration of the TORP indicated that participants altered their pretest beliefs about the reading process. Moreover, they displayed an informed acceptance of the psycholinguistic view of the reading process promoted throughout the conference sessions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not experienced teachers would alter their beliefs about the reading process when exposed to a mini-conference format focusing on psycholinguistic concepts. Previous research (e.g., Harste and Burke, 1977) established that a teacher's theoretical view of the reading process strongly influenced instructional practices and childrens' developing perceptaions about reading.

How do teachers come to accept a particular theory of reading? Clifford (1973) maintained that teachers adopt a belief system largely through the slow process of cultural diffusion. That is, through social encounters with colleagues and credible professionals, change may occur, albeit slowly. The mini-conference format appraised in this study provided opportunities for small group interaction with a highly credible keynote speaker and authority in reading. Moreover, small group speaker sessions supported and reinforced a psycholinguisitic view of the reading process.

Based on the results of this study, teachers demonstrated a willingness to modify their beliefs about the reading process when alternate views were presented in the dynamic, concise, and practical format of a weekend mini-conference.

A logical extension of this study would involve a pre and post-conference ethnographic study of randomly selected participants in the naturalistic setting of the classroom. Such an approach would provide a fairly reliable indication of whether or not classroom decisions are altered by a relatively brief

exposure to psycholinguistic theory. For example, approaches to classroom, socio-psycholinguistic research methodology outlined by Harste and Burke (1978) and more recently by Mosenthal and Na (1980) suggest some possible directions for future investigations.

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