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A Study of Undergraduate Preparation in the Teaching of Reading Skills

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Abstract

In any teaching-learning situation it is advisable to carry on the process of continuous evaluation to identify strengths and overcome weaknesses. All too frequently such evaluations are seldom undertaken in higher education. As a result, instructors have little or no evidence available to judge the impact of their courses and are unable to discover the values and limitations of their offerings. The present study 1 was an initial effort carried out to mitigate this situation in the undergraduate reading methods course for elementary teachers at Western Michigan University.

A STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE PREPARATION IN THE TEACHING OF READING SKILLS

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The study was supported by a grant from the College of Education.

Summary. The major purposes of the present study were two-fold:

1. to evaluate the impact or value of the undergraduate reading course as perceived by first-year teachers who had taken it.
2. to elicit information which would provide the base for subsequent course-program improvement.

To this end, a special questionnaire was constructed and the findings of the study were obtained from that instrument.

In the initial formulation of the questionnaire, all instructors who taught sections of the reading course were asked to participate. The faculty teaching the basic reading course was of the opinion that data should be collected to determine:

1. first-year teachers' perceptions of their education in the field of reading.
2. concepts introduced in the basic reading course.
3. teaching techniques used by instructors.
4. experiences provided to students.
5. first-year teachers' ratings of these experiences.
6. first-year teachers' evaluation of various proposals which could effect change in the present methods of teaching reading skills at the university.

¹ The full text of this study is available at a cost of \$1.50. Send your request to the Resources Center at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001.

The concepts listed above served as the basis for the construction of the questionnaire used in the present study. The instrument in its final form, consisted of sixty-four items divided into five sections. Each section served the purpose of eliciting the types of data needed to determine the value-impact of the basic reading course.

The five sections of the final revised instrument were structured as follows:

1. Section One consisted of the novice teachers' rating of their introductions to the teaching of reading skills.
2. Section Two attempted to determine the content of the basic reading course.
3. Section Three identified learning experiences respondents may or may not have had and their ratings of those experiences.
4. Section Four asked teachers to rate various proposals for change in the basic reading course.
5. Section Five elicited background data and responses to three open-ended questions pertaining to teacher criticisms to the existing program, recommended changes, and other comments.

To obtain validity in the construction of the instrument, only those concepts which course instructors had identified as meaningful were used. Reliability was maintained by the rephrasing of specific questions throughout the instrument. Observation of the data indicated a high degree of consistency in the response to those items; thus, suggesting a high degree of reliability.

To maximize the validity of the information received, only first-year teachers who had completed Western Michigan University's Elementary Education Curriculum were used in the sample. The population was identified through the records of the University Placement Office and consisted of 200 first-year teachers. Of those teachers contacted, 170 or 85 percent returned their questionnaires.

The nature of the instrument precluded sophisticated statistical analysis, so the data were treated using percentages of the total sample responding to each section. Concurrently, an index of desirability (Table II) and an index of value (Table III) were constructed. These indexes were calculated by computing the mean (\bar{X}) response to the five point rating scale used in Section Three and Four. No other statistical treatment was applied to the data for the present study.

Conclusions. An analysis of the data indicated a general trend of the teachers to rate their introduction to the teaching of reading as average to poor. Of the 170 questionnaire responses only 24.8 percent indicated that the introduction to teaching reading skills ranged from

“excellent” to “good.” Moreover, 11.9 percent of the responses to the first section of the instrument fell into the “not discussed” category, and the indication was that one or more of the items were either not discussed or were not remembered as being discussed in the reading course.

TABLE I
AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES TO
EFFECTIVENESS OF SKILLS TAUGHT IN
THE INTRODUCTORY READING COURSE

7.6	17.2	32.9	30.4	11.9
Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Not Discussed

An in-depth analysis of the questions in Section One was made by clustering responses which had a high degree of commonality. This treatment confirmed the general trend for respondents to rate their introduction to the teaching of reading skills as “average to poor.” Each cluster reaffirmed this trend and paralleled the overall findings. Therefore, the course content, not the treatment of the responses, was responsible for the low profile of value.

Of the first-year teachers responding to Section One, an average of 34.3 percent perceived curriculum materials, teaching materials, and reading terminology as “excellent to good.” This was the highest rating given to any of the questions contained in this section. However, over 12 percent of the respondents indicated that materials which could be used in the teaching of reading had not been discussed in the basic reading course.

Questions dealing with the teaching of structural analysis, phonic analysis, word analysis, listening skills, and comprehension skills were rated as average to poor by more than 67 percent of the returns. Each of the above items was considered by the reading faculty to be an essential part of the reading process. The data seem to indicate, on the basis of the respondent ratings, that more attention had been paid by the university faculty to the introduction of reading terminology, teaching, and curriculum materials than to the teaching of basic reading skills. In summary, all items in Section One were concerned with the introduction to teaching skills necessary to the teaching of reading. In general, ratings indicated that over 62 percent of the first-year teachers were of the opinion that their introduction to these skills ranged from average to poor.

Determination of the core of content was the primary purpose of

the Second Section of the instrument. Due to the nature of this Section, all responses were forced into either “yes” or “no” categories. There seemed to be no clearly defined core of content, nevertheless, certain items were responded to by more than 50 percent of the sample. It is assumed that those concepts were present in at least one-half to three-fourths of the basic reading methods sections. The items responded to by more than 50 percent of the sample, indicating their presence in a large number of reading sections, were:

1. Learning principles applied to reading.
2. Discussion of individualized reading procedures.
3. Discussion of ITA procedures.
4. Discussion of language experience procedures.
5. Discussion of linguistics.

A number of questions in Section Two had responses which were relatively evenly distributed between the “yes” and “no” categories. These dealt with:

1. Demonstrations of reading techniques.
2. Opportunities for role-playing.
3. Ways and means to organize reading groups.
4. Discussion of ITA.
5. Discussion of SRA.
6. Discussion of linguistics.

It may be assumed that at least one-half of all the reading sections introduced experiences relating to the concepts noted above. Thus, eleven of the eighteen items listed in Section Two could be identified as core content in slightly more than 50 percent of the reading classes. The remaining questions concerned with administering, scoring, and interpreting standardized reading tests, preparation of structured reading lessons, and how to deal with individual reading problems had few respondents stating that these had been included in their reading course. Thus, these items were not classified as a part of the general core of content in the basic reading course.

Section Three of the instrument was designed to determine the percent of teachers who actually had the various experiences listed in that section, and to rate those experiences on a five point scale. Although the faculty had listed the experiences as being valuable, respondents consistently indicated that these experiences were not available to most of them. It could be assumed, therefore, that with the exception of three items, the remaining concepts were included in only a few of the many basic reading sections offered at the university each semester.

The three items from Section Three which had at least 30 per cent or more of the sample stating that the experience had been available to them were:

1. A laboratory experience.
2. Preparing and presenting sample lessons.
3. Teaching demonstrations.

In each of the above instances, the perceived desirability was rated between 3.5 and 4.3. The highest available index rating was 5.0 which translated these experiences into a rating of "extremely valuable." Thus, the perceived desirability of having them included as a part of the basic reading course was rated from "valuable" to "very valuable."

There was considerable discrepancy between the availability of class experiences for teachers and their stated index of desirability for including those experiences in the basic reading course.

The data clearly indicate that the experiences listed in this section were available in only a few of the reading sections. Nevertheless, teachers rated every item as valuable enough for inclusion in the basic reading course. A complete listing of those items is given in Table II.

TABLE II
AVAILABILITY-DESIRABILITY OF EXPERIENCES
IN BASIC READING COURSES

<i>Experiences</i>	<i>Non- Availability*</i>	<i>Desirability</i>
Laboratory Experiences	65.4	4.3
Preparing-Presenting Sample Lessons	69.4	3.5
Administering-Scoring-Analyzing		
Reading Tests	60.0	4.3
Teaching Demonstrations	73.5	4.4
Observation of Classroom Teaching	95.9	3.5
Team-Taught Course	95.9	3.5
TV-Teaching Demonstrations	96.5	3.5
Visits to Reading Clinic	82.9	3.9

*Percentage of respondents indicating experiences were NOT available in the basic reading course.

Section Four of the questionnaire presented five proposals for change in the existing reading program. Teachers rated all of the proposals as having some value. No proposal for change was rated lower than 3.3 or "valuable" on the five point rating scale used.

The data conclusively show that teachers believed a reading center and clinic would be very valuable to them. Statements in Section Five tended not only to support this finding, but also suggested the creation of a Resources Center in which reading aids, materials, and other resources could be found and used by students.

Respondents rated item three, Section Four, (Demonstrations of audio-visual materials useful to reading instruction) as very valuable. According to the findings of this study, curriculum and teaching materials are an integral part of the core content of the basic reading course. However, the data indicate that few demonstrations of A-V devices relating to the teaching of reading were presented. Nevertheless, teachers overwhelmingly endorsed the need for demonstrations of A-V devices useful in the teaching of reading.

Smaller class sizes and self-evaluation experiences were rated as valuable by respondents. However, these points were not considered to be an issue of any great importance. Data seem to indicate far more teacher concern for instruction dealing with teaching skills and methods needed to improve their own performance in the classroom. It is apparent that respondents did not perceive class size and the self-evaluational use of video-tape as proposals of great value to the improvement of their classroom performance.

Programmed materials and self-instructional devices seem to hold little value to the respondents. Although respondents rated these at 3.3 (valuable) on the value scale, there seemed to be more interest in personal interaction with the instructor. Comments about this were found frequently in the statements at the end of the questionnaire.

A final question, following the proposals in Section Four, asked teachers to rate the preparation they received and its help to them as a teacher of reading. Responses to this question averaged 2.6 for a rating of "little value." This rating was consistent with the other sections of the questionnaire, particularly Section One in which 63.3 percent of the teachers indicated the introduction to teaching skills as "average to poor." An additional 11.0 percent indicating one or more concepts were never discussed in their reading section.

Criticisms of the existing program supported the relatively low rating given to teacher evaluation of their preparation for teaching reading. In essence they were of the opinion that too much class time was spent on "meaningless platitudes," and "generalizations" which seem to have little if any meaning when applied to classroom teaching situations. General comments indicate that teachers also felt a lack of attention had been paid to teaching of reading skills, to plan-

ning and structuring a reading class, and to discussions of classroom procedures.

TABLE III
PERCEIVED VALUE CHANGES DESIRED

<i>Proposals</i>	<i>Index of Desirability</i>
Resources Center	4.4
Self-Evaluation Using Video-Tape	3.9 +
Demonstrations of Audio-Visual Devices	4.2
Smaller Class Sizes	3.9 +
Self-Instructional Devices	3.3
Preparation received in Reading Course	2.6

The findings of the present study seem to show that the basic reading course, as currently taught, does not meet the needs of the student.

These findings indicate a need to study rigorously and upgrade the art and science of effectively teaching reading methodology to undergraduate students preparing to become elementary classroom teachers.

Summary of Conclusions. From the data obtained in the present study, the following conclusions seem warranted:

1. The majority of first-year teachers were of the opinion that the reading course, at best, gave them a meager introduction to the teaching of reading.
2. Word attack skills were not well taught, if they were indeed mentioned at all in class. Yet teachers believed that they needed to learn how to teach these skills.
3. Most teachers found themselves teaching in the self-contained classroom and using basal reading materials.
4. A very large number of teachers believed that administering, scoring, and analyzing reading tests is of great importance, yet few had such instruction in the reading course.
5. Many teachers were of the opinion that some type of facility should be available for observation and their own practice in the teaching of reading skills to pupils.
6. Most teachers were of the opinion that their basic reading course was filled with banal minutia and inapplicable generalities. Consequently, they expressed a desire for more concrete and effective techniques of teaching reading.

Recommendations for Further Study. In view of the findings of this questionnaire study, described in the present report, the writers recommend the following:

1. An ongoing inservice program for all university reading teachers should be undertaken immediately. The purpose of this program would be to:
 - a. identify a core of content for the basic reading course.
 - b. acquaint instructors with instructional media.
2. Bring into operation a Resources Center which will make available:
 - a. reading instructional materials and related resources.
 - b. demonstration reading lessons.
 - c. evaluational devices useful to classroom teachers.
3. Establish a permanent, yearly study to determine the effectiveness of the undergraduate and graduate reading courses offered by the university.
4. Provide placement of students for observation and participation in classroom teaching situations.
5. Institute a seminar in reading to be conducted in conjunction with the student teaching experience.
6. Provide opportunities for students to examine and use standardized reading tests as well as formal and informal diagnostic instruments.
7. Examine the placement of the basic reading course in the Elementary Teaching Curriculum.