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Challenge Accepted

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CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

Linda Shannon McConnell

Have you really evaluated your reading program? Is it possible that you have one set of textbooks in your room, and you think a new approach in teaching reading is out of the question? It is time, right now, to take a good look at what can be done in the teaching of reading.

I am no longer using A method for teaching reading! Instead, I have correlated the best criteria from several methods into my own. This is a program which seems to fit the students and the teacher perfectly—after all, we made the program to fit our needs.

Research on Methodology in Teaching Reading

Just to catch up with a little of the latest research (1, 4, 6, 8), are you aware that the elementary schools are lagging behind in the field of methods? No matter what method you may be using for teaching reading, it has not been proven the best! Whether you are using the three group plan, individualized reading, language experience, ungraded, or team teaching, the results show that none of these may be any better than the whole group method employed by many teachers, but considered a rather “old-fashioned” approach. Research does prove that the teacher is the deciding factor, regardless of the method employed. No one method is best for all children, and children differ widely in the kinds of instruction they need. It is also generally agreed that a wide variety of approaches must be utilized in order to get best results with most children.

Organization of Reading Program

Go with me, if you will, back to September when my fourth graders were beginning the school year. The reading program had been partially planned, but of course the children had to be the core of that program. After observing and evaluating the children as to their reading abilities, I found there was a range from 2.0 to 7.3. I talked to each child and asked him to explain for me the part he liked best of all about reading. There were some who could think of nothing, but most of the students liked to read library books, read aloud, and act out stories. After the children revealed something that they liked to do, we then organized groups in which they could do just that! They came into these groups by choice and for a few weeks these were our reading or interest groups.

I remember our library group and how well the children prepared for each class. Each day we went over new books or they read a story from more difficult ones. They helped in the planning, and we decided that we should study only one “thing” each day. We had such activities as telling the others in class about animals, or finding some words that told about weather, or reading a paragraph and letting us guess what kind of a book they were reading. This proved to be very popular, and it ended with our whole class participating! Before the end of each session, we decided what we would do to prepare for the next day, and we tried to use an idea from each one in the class.

Individual and Group Instruction

By this time, I felt that the children and I were beginning to know each other well, and it was time to delve into our reading program. Again, I talked to each child, read with him, and we tried to find one or two main areas in reading in which the child needed to improve. The children were then placed into groups according to need. We had four groups concerned with the following objectives:

1. Word Recognition
2. Interpretation of new ideas
3. Silent reading for fun
4. Oral reading for others

We used our basal readers in these groups because I feel that it is the best way to develop the reading skills necessary for fourth graders. Since the children in these groups were reading at many different levels we worked along with the units in our books. The children read the stories at their own pace, and we usually discussed the story, words, and characters twice a week. We also used our workbooks, but different groups worked on the pages that we thought were most helpful. While all of the children were reading in their basal readers, we had the opportunity to enjoy field trips, make a class notebook, and participate in class discussions. Not one child was taken out of this group because he was a “slow reader.” All of the students were encouraged to read additional books on the same topic, but at their own reading level. During our work with groups, the children reported on the stories they were reading.

By having children in groups, they have a chance to tell others what they are reading, and it gives them an opportunity to improve their own reading skills. Once the children know WHAT they need to accomplish and understand WHY it will help them, many problems seem to disappear.

Related Reading Activities

The children enjoyed variety in their reading activities. There is a file box on my desk, where each child keeps a record of the library books he has read. Just to keep in mind what the children are reading, we often have our "You Tell Us" game. Our chairman for the day gets the file box and asks each child to tell us about the story or book recorded on his file card.

At all times, each child has at least four books to read. He has his basal reader, a library book, a supplementary book, and a skill building book. The basal reader was used when we had groups and also as a reference book when looking for words or ideas. Their library books change frequently, and when they finish reading a book, they record the title, author, and date finished on their file card. The children are free to choose any book that they want to read and are encouraged by our room chairman to tell us about it.

The supplementary books are selected many ways. I may give them a book to read which is near their independent reading level, or they may choose from several books. This usually works well, but many times they want a book that someone else has just finished! We have a chart on which they may write the names of the books they have read. Sometimes the children are asked to complete an exercise to show their understanding of the reading. For example, they may fill in an outline, describe the main character, draw a picture to illustrate the sequence of events, or present an oral report, possibly by imitating one of the characters or using puppets. The children keep their own reading notebook which includes all of their written work, reports, and words looked up in the glossary.

The skill building books, such as the *Reader's Digest* series, come in many different forms. I have found this type of reading very satisfactory, especially for those students who need additional help. These books are presented to the children individually to facilitate their skill development. We have sample copies of different reading series and about 15 different workbooks which give the child a chance to choose a page he would like to read or I may select a story, have the child read it, and then answer specific questions. Any weekly paper, such as the *Junior Scholastic*, may be cut, pasted on cardboard, and used by several children when working on specific skills. With four different types of reading books in their desks, they have a fine selection to read.

There are, of course, many activities in which the whole class participates. Dictionary work is one of our class projects. Our room chairman puts several words on the board each day for the children to look up, pronounce, and explain. This works well because any time the children are doing the work and I am in the background, they feel a real sense of accomplishment. We're finding that the dictionary is becoming a real friend, especially when writing reports . . . he's always waiting with the right word, but never talks back!

Making Use of Free Reading and Creative Stories

Another fun time we have is FREE READING. The children are encouraged to bring new material for free reading time. Sometimes they read special science material, books on hobbies or any other material which interests them. I am tempted to copy down some questions since many children read the same article or book, but who likes to answer an assortment of mimeographed questions? Enjoyment of reading is stressed here.

Let's also remember to give our students a chance to be creative. We often write a story, perhaps about being an animal, then they draw a name out of our hat, and that person reads the story aloud. For a bulletin board display, the children corrected, copied, and illustrated the story that they had written and read to the group. They seemed to enjoy seeing their story illustrated by someone else, especially when the picture didn't look at all like what they THOUGHT they had been writing about! This also provides an opportunity to show the necessity for correct writing, punctuation, spelling, and word usage.

Before I go further, let me explain what I have been doing in phonics. At the beginning of the year, we went over the necessary vowel sounds and consonant blends. I made several tests of my own. Nonsense words are excellent to determine whether the child can actually sound out words. For some time I have had one group doing this. We meet at least once a week and have worked on the alphabet, the sounds, and the blends. It is not necessary for all of the children to continue this, since they apparently have found their own special way for learning new words. We use the blackboard with the group because writing on the board is such fun and they are also using their hands when writing the word. Often I put a series of three words on the board, then read a sentence omitting a word. They are to find the correct word and then copy it on the board. This has been most effective in developing word attack and word meaning skills. The

children are urged to use the dictionary if in doubt. It may seem as though we have so much to do in reading that there is little time for other things, and in a way this is true.

The children have made excellent gains in their reading. They have a good basic background in reading skills and display commendable attitudes toward reading. Nothing thrills me more than to find my students really enjoying a good book and eager to tell their friends about the story.

Because of the fact that ALL of the children have been getting group instruction usually three times a week and have had individualized reading the rest of the time, we are now ready for our complete individualized reading program. The children will continue to work in their reading notebooks, but supplementary reading will be stressed. We are going to begin with everyone choosing a biography and giving a report with flannelboard material. Then each child may continue to choose whatever book he may want to read and will have at least one conference a week with me.

Summary

It is important to remember that instruction should be planned as it is needed. Start where the child is and give him the amount of help needed for maximum progress. It doesn't matter what kind of method you use, just be sure that it is helping the child. I have attempted to set up a program that is flexible, one that can benefit EACH child.

A Challenge to All Teachers of Reading

Try making a similar program to fit your needs. Being flexible does wonders for motivation. Your enthusiasm will show and it's catching! As teachers of reading, we have been offered the challenge of providing each child with a good basic foundation in reading. Plan your instruction *with* and *for* your particular students—success will surely follow!

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Linda Shannon McConnell is a 1959 graduate of Western Michigan University. She has taught in the early elementary grades and is presently teaching fourth grade language arts in the Gull Lake Community School System. While working on her M.A. degree, she is specializing in reading and soon will be writing her thesis in this area.