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Controversy

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CONTROVERSY

G. M. Chronister

As time passes we seem to roll on from one controversy to another in the area of teaching children to read. We have had and still do have arguments concerning basic reading programs vs. individualized instruction. During the last several years we have accumulated evidence of the operation of both programs. While all are not models of research, they give us a clearer picture than we have had to date.

Philip J. Acinapuro(1) investigated the Individualized Pattern and a Three Ability Group Pattern in his thesis done in 1959. In it he compared three experimental and three control classes in grades 4, 5 and 6 over a ten-month period on the basis of achievement, interest, and attitude. He found statistically significant differences favoring the experimental group in silent reading achievement, total oral reading achievement, and evidence showing superiority for neither group in vocabulary development or in positive attitudes toward reading.

The study by Sam Duker(3) reports the results of an individualized reading program carried on by student teachers. The experimental group gained an average of six months while the control group gained two months as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test. Other observations were that the experimental group evidenced enlarged vocabulary, read more books and enjoyed reading more.

Reporting an experimental study of individual reading, Howard Karr(6) found that his control group exceeded the experimental group in comprehension and vocabulary.

Alton Stafford's(8) evaluation of an individualized program in Los Angeles reveals that results were unfavorable for the majority of the children in the experimental groups when compared with district and national norms. He found no significant differences between results achieved with superior and average students, and further, no differences in reading vocabulary and reading comprehension growth.

A widely quoted study usually called "The Roseville Experiment" was done by Harry W. Sartain(7) in 1960. Its stated purpose was to compare pupil growth in reading in both an individualized and basal program using the same students as control and experimental groups. Sartain's findings are more explicit than other studies concerned with this area of investigation. He found that all children in top groups gained equal amounts, children in middle groups gained similarly, and slower pupils made better progress in the control (basal) group.

Observations of the strength of the individualized program were the individual conference, extensive reading, responsiveness of the top students, and individual improvement. Weaknesses observed were restlessness of slower pupils who do not work well independently, the lack of opportunity to teach new vocabulary, and difficulty of diagnosing reading maladjustment. Questions regarding the permanency of skills briefly taught are raised. Inefficiency of skill instruction and frustration of trying to fit two ten-minute conferences per week into the schedule for every child are additional weaknesses.

The above studies are fairly representative of research concerned with comparing one method with another. Many more studies have been reported, some of which, because of the lack of good research techniques, must be classified “action” research.

The careful reader, who makes an analysis of this research, soon realizes a wide gap between what is described as a “basal reader approach” and a “basal reader program.” None of the authors nor publishers of basal reading series have contended that their materials are the entire reading program but merely the vehicle through which basic skills in reading may be taught in a sequential manner. We find a broad variety in basal reader use, not only in areas where experimental comparisons are being made, but also in systems where there is acceptance of the school effort. A fault lies, not in the basal series approach, but rather in the individual teacher’s use of it.

I have visited teachers who were conducting what they described as a basal approach at opposite ends of a continuum. One had raced through several basic reading series with little thought given to skill development during the year while another complained to me that, with all the supplemental additions she had used to support her basal series, she could not finish the book. And these teachers in the same building! Obviously we are not at all speaking of the same thing when we loosely describe a program as being a basal series program. The misuse of these materials has undoubtedly led to much of the furor we hear from anti-basal sources—and with some reason. We know now that there is no single approach to teaching reading which answers all problems and is a panacea for all disabilities. The teacher variable as well as other factors in local situations all are contributing to success or failure of given programs.

It would appear that, especially with new, insecure teachers, we need a framework in which they can operate with reasonable success. The basal series provides such a framework. In the same building we

have experienced teachers with strong preparations who are quite able to teach reading by any process yet conceived. Those who know the appropriate time to introduce the various skills are in a strong position as teachers.

A consensus of opinion by recognized experts in the field of reading including Emmett Betts(2), Arthur Gates(4), the late William Gray (5), and Paul Witty(9) deserves consideration. They reflect the attitude which many have held concerning reading instruction. Namely, that teacher variability precludes regimentation in reading instruction and that the best reading programs will include the better, more useful aspects of several methods of presentation.

There are two places, especially, where we need to consider the individualized approach with children. They are first, the middle grade boys and girls who are among the better readers and secondly, a place where it has been used for many years, in remedial or corrective instruction. Teachers who regularly work with boys and girls whose reading skills are exceptionally well developed are plagued by the paucity of ideas needed to keep these children productively occupied. Here, then, the individualized approach can be a very useful tool. (I hesitate to use the term individualized because of its lack of definition.) Many teachers are presently using such an approach with their advanced pupils.

The remedial reading teacher, of pure necessity, has had an individualized approach to reading instruction from the beginning. In this setting, more than any other, is the teacher's imagination taxed to provide interesting, readable materials for pupils who have already experienced years of failure in the reading process.

It appears imperative then that teachers develop an eclectic approach for use in their classrooms. We cannot continue to look for an ultimate in methodology which will take into consideration, with no effort on our part, the many different instructional problems met in everyday practice.

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