A Critical Look at the Reading Approaches and Grouping Patterns Currently Used in the Primary Grades

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Abstract

The survey reported here was conducted to determine the most common reading approach currently used by elementary school teachers in grades 1, 2, and 3. An important goal of the survey was to gain more information regarding primary teachers' grouping practices during reading. The authors also made special efforts to determine whether or not teachers regroup children according to the child's more immediate needs.

A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE READING APPROACHES AND GROUPING PATTERNS CURRENTLY USED IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

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The basal reader approach has been used for many years by elementary teachers. Findings of a survey conducted by Groff (1962) indicated that basal readers were the prime source of reading material and that children were not mobile in their groups. This study was replicated by Hawkins (1966) in a different part of the country, and substantiated Groff's findings. Hawkins theorized that since teachers depend heavily on the program specified in basal materials, and did not want them to miss some essential skill, they were reluctant to move children. He stated that teachers may lack some factor (adequate time, diagnostic tools, administrative support) to properly identify specific reading needs of their pupils. Additionally, Hawkins found that pupils were grouped for reading instruction on the basis of "general" reading ability. Results of a New England survey conducted in 1969 showed that 95% of the classroom teachers in the primary grades used this approach. In more recent years, however, the advantages of other approaches such as the individualized and the language experience have been pointed out by reading experts.

The survey reported here was conducted to determine the most common reading approach currently used by elementary school teachers in grades 1, 2, and 3. An important goal of the survey was to gain more information regarding primary teachers' grouping practices during reading. The authors also made special efforts to determine whether or not teachers regroup children according to the child's more immediate needs.

Method

Subjects

Two hundred and twenty-five teachers from 100 elementary schools representing 50 school districts in New York State took part in the survey. The sampling represented the middle socioeconomic class. Of the 50 school districts, 38 consisted of a population above 20,000. Six consisted of a population of between ten and twenty thousand, while the remaining six had a

population of less than 10,000. The total number of teachers, 225, were divided evenly among first, second, and third grade, and all of the teachers taught in self-contained classrooms.

Procedure

The examiners either personally delivered or mailed the following questionnaire to over 450 teachers of grades one, two, and three. Of the 150 questionnaires sent to each grade, 81 were returned for grade 1, 80 were returned for grade 2, and 75 were returned for grade 3. The first 75 questionnaires returned at each grade level were included for use in the study, for the purpose of balance. The survey occurred four months after the beginning of the school year and included the following questions:

1. Grade level   1   2   3

2. I use the following reading approach in my classroom.

       a. Basal
       b. Individualized
       c. Language Experience
       d. Other
       e. Mixed

3. I have divided my class into the following number of reading groups.

       a. one
       b. two
       c. three
       d. more than three

4. After the reading groups were firmly established, I _____ changed a child from one group to another during this particular year.

       a. have   b. have not

5. I _____ allocated a certain amount of time every week to regroup children in order to work on a specific reading problem.

Scoring

The total number of tallies were divided according to the grade level of the respondent and responses were converted into percentages. Responses to questions two, three and four were counted only if the respondents had indicated using the basal reader approach in the first question (see Table A).

Results

As the survey shows, a high proportion of children in the primary grades are in classrooms using the basal reader approach. In addition, the vast majority of children are assigned to a high, medium, or low group. Once this assignment is made, it becomes difficult for

a child to be reevaluated and placed in a different group. Further indications are that few teachers allocate time on a regular basis to regroup the children according to immediate needs.

Findings indicated (see Table A) that nine out of ten teachers, randomly sampled from the first three grades use the basal reader approach. In grade 1, 70 of the 75 respondents used basal reader. In grade 2, 65 of the 75 teachers used the basal approach. In grade 3, 68 of the 75 teachers used basal reader approach.

As shown in Table B the most common organizational pattern used by teachers who had adopted the basal reader approach was to divide the class into three subgroups. Approximately 84% of the responding teachers divided their class into three reading groups.

Statistics further showed that, once the groups were established, few children were changed from one group to another, even though they had been in school for five months. The responses obtained from teachers (see Table C) indicated that once a child was assigned to a particular group, he/she would most likely remain in that group. Of the 203 teachers who had used the three group plan, only 21 had changed children from one group to another. Ninety percent of the teachers had not changed a child from one group to another even though school had been in session for five months.

Table D shows the amount of regrouping of children for specific skill development done by teachers using the basal reader approach. Findings indicate that about ninety-five percent of the teachers surveyed who used a three group organizational pattern did no regrouping of children.

Implications

Obviously, most teachers still rely heavily on the basal reader approach. One may speculate that teachers feel more secure with an approach that provides a sequence of reading skills rather than one that does not. A primary objective for the teacher becomes one of organizing the classroom to permit each child to progress "in the acquisition of sequenced developmental reading skills" (Zintz). The results of this survey showed that most teachers use the three group concept where an entire class is divided into low, medium, and high subgroups.

The collected data raised a number of questions. Even though school had been in session for four months, only ten percent of the teachers had moved students from one group to another. Can this be called flexible grouping? Why have nine out of ten teachers chosen not

to move students from one group to another? Could the same reasons mentioned by Hawkins fifteen years ago account for the lack of mobility today? Do teachers still depend too heavily on basal material and are they afraid children will miss an essential skills if they are moved?

A final major observations relates to the finding that 84% of the teachers did not allot a certain amount of time every week to regroup children in order to work on a specific reading problem. Hawkins (1966) inferred that "teachers may lack some factor to identify the specific needs of pupils." This could be a possible reason for the lack of regrouping. However, teachers may teach to specific needs informally or individually rather than regroup children according to these needs.

In summary, the findings of this study seem to indicate that grouping within classrooms is no more flexible today than it was fifteen years ago. While "rigidity" is difficult to define, it appears that educators should reexamine their grouping practices to determine if their procedures allow for maximum growth for the individual child.

TABLE A

Grade	Basal	Individualized	Language Experience	Other	Percent of tchrs using basal rdg. approach
1	70	3	2	0	.93
2	65	9	0	1	.87
3	68	3	4		.90
Total	203	15	6	1	.90

Number of teachers using each of the reading approaches in grades one, two, and three.

TABLE B

Gr.	2 Sub groups	3 Sub groups	More than 3	No set groups	Total	% of tchrs. using 3 grps
1	5	60	5	0	70	.86–
2	7	50	8		65	.77–
3	2	60	6	0	68	.88–
Total	14	170	19	0	203	.84–

The above graph indicates the number of subgroups each teacher who used the Basal Approach organized in each classroom.

TABLE C

Of the 203 teachers using the Basal Reader Approach in the survey, number of teachers who moved children from one group to the next.

Grade	Have	Have Not	Total	% of tchrs who have not moved students
1	10	60	70	.86
2	5	60	65	.92
3	6	62	68	.91 –
Total	21	182	203	.90 –

TABLE D

Of the 203 teachers using the Basal Reader Approach, number of teachers who regrouped children to meet more specific needs.

Grade	Have	Have not	Total	% of tchrs who have not regrouped children to meet needs
1	2	68	70	.97 –
2	0	65	65	1.00
3	8	60	68	.88 –
Total	10	193	203	.95 –

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