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

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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 allo­
cate 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 se­
quency 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 pro­
gress "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 observation 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Basal</th>
<th>Individualized</th>
<th>Language Experience</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Percent of tchrs using basal rdg. approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gr.</th>
<th>2 Sub groups</th>
<th>3 Sub groups</th>
<th>More than 3</th>
<th>No set groups</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of tchrs. using 3 grps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>.86—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
<td>.77—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>.88—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>.84—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Have</th>
<th>Have Not</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of teachers who have not moved students:

- Grade 1: .86
- Grade 2: .92
- Grade 3: .91
- Total: .90

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Have</th>
<th>Have Not</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of teachers who have not regrouped children to meet needs:

- Grade 1: .97
- Grade 2: 1.00
- Grade 3: .88
- Total: .95

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hawkins, Michael L. "Mobility of Students in Reading Groups," Reading Teacher, Vol. 20, November 1966, 136-140.
