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Aid for the School Principle: Evaluate Classroom Reading Programs

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Abstract

Most school systems require the principal of a building to make judgments about the quality of each teacher's instructional program as part of a process of rating teachers. Since reading instruction is generally conceded to be the most important part of the elementary school curriculum, there is frequently concern for evaluation of that component of the school program.

AID FOR THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: EVALUATE CLASSROOM READING PROGRAMS

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Most school systems require the principal of a building to make judgments about the quality of each teacher's instructional program as part of a process of rating teachers. Since reading instruction is generally conceded to be the most important part of the elementary school curriculum, there is frequently concern for evaluation of that component of the school program.

When required to evaluate reading instruction, however, many principals have stated that they do not always know what constitutes a good reading program. Because of the necessity for administrators to be generalists rather than specialists in the curriculum area, many principals express concern at their lack of the in-depth knowledge in the area of reading needed to judge teachers fairly and to spot weaknesses in programs that should be corrected. Information presented in this article will provide the administrator with guidelines to aid him/her in the evaluation process.

Although many types of reading programs are currently being used nationwide, more teachers use a basal reader approach to reading instruction than any other type of program. For this reason, the information presented below is intended for use in evaluating teachers' implementations of basal reader programs. However, much of this information can be used, either as stated or in a modified form, with other approaches to reading instruction.

A lesson as thorough as the one that has been suggested below will frequently take more than one class period to complete. Teachers evaluated based upon this information should be encouraged to aim for such a thorough and well-balanced program even though it may require more than one class period of instruction time. Often teachers hesitate to devote so much time to one lesson for fear of not covering all lessons in a book or all books by the end of a school year. Principals can be instrumental in alleviating worries about whether a certain set of materials is completed on a given date by emphasizing the importance of the quality of instruction and not merely the quantity of materials covered. Such an emphasis could eliminate the necessity of remedial instruction for some children. Throughout the present article, the term "reading lesson" will not mean a single class period, but the complete, well-balanced lesson as suggested in the description which follows. This type of lesson often takes two to three days to complete.

Two pairs of researchers, Harris and Serwer (2) and Chall and Feldman

(1), found that regardless of which approach to reading instruction was used, if teachers were well-trained in the use of that particular approach and that if their teaching behaviors were characteristic of that specific approach, pupil achievement was higher. If this is so, then teachers using a basal reader approach, and principals evaluating those teachers, need to be aware of the techniques and procedures characteristic of any basal reader approach to reading instruction.

Often, reading instruction is unsuccessful because it is not carried out in the manner in which it was intended to be put into practice. For example, it is unfortunately assumed by some that using a basal reader approach to reading instruction consists solely of oral reading of the stories in a book with no discussion or extending lessons related to the material read. When pupils then fail to achieve, the lack of achievement is blamed upon the approach rather than upon the incorrect implementation of the approach.

Authorities in the area of reading spend many months planning a careful sequence of well-balanced lessons based upon sound research to form the core of a good basal reading program. Teachers should be aware of the planned content and techniques for a lesson and the reasons for including these. This is not meant to imply that teachers should be slaves to manuals or to the dictates of publishing companies. Undoubtedly, there are activities suggested in some basal reading programs which research has shown to be less than helpful in fostering reading achievement. The thoughtful, informed teacher will ignore such suggestions. It does mean, however, that teachers should have sound reasons for deciding to eliminate any aspect of a lesson. For example, sometimes teachers decide that only the literal type of comprehension questions listed at the end of a lesson will be used. Interpretive and evaluative questions are eliminated because “they take too much time.” This approach is not conducive to raising the quality of children’s understanding of materials they read. The suggestions below will give the principal guidance in regard to which areas are too vital to exclude.

It should be noted that all items suggested will not take place every day. The amount of time the teacher is able to spend with each reading group precludes this. It is almost always necessary to spend more than one class period on each complete reading lesson. On any given day he/she observes a reading group the principal should see some of the practices described and should see almost all of the practices if he/she returns to observe the same group for two or three days in succession.

Finally, the description presented here pertains only to formal instruction in reading. A program that prepares students to read well and extensively will include time *each* day for students to read independently in materials of their own choice, time for the teacher to read aloud to students, and time for students to share their experiences with books through oral discussions, writing, and other activities.

The BIG 5 in a Basal Reading Lesson

1. *Preparation for reading* Suggestions for preparing students to read a

given selection are generally found in teachers' manuals which accompany basal reader programs. Examples of these are suggestions such as using specific questions that require students to associate previous knowledge with information in the story or activities such as pointing out a story's setting on a map. The procedure of preparing students to read is frequently neglected, but should not be since this preparation is often important to a student's successful comprehension of the story. By carefully selecting suggestions from the manual, time devoted to this portion of the lesson may be brief.

2. *Guided silent reading* – Silent reading should usually precede oral reading in each lesson. Questions may be asked *before* the student reads various parts of the story to help him/her establish a purpose for reading. Questions asked *before* a student reads often aid his/her comprehension. The questions asked afterward may only *test* the student's comprehension.
3. *Discussion* – Comprehension questions asked of the students after the story has been read should include all levels of questions, that is, questions which require literal, interpretive, and evaluative and creative responses. A literal question requires the student to recall information that has been stated in the text. A question that calls for an interpretive response requires the student to infer, draw conclusions, see cause-and-effect relationships and engage in other kinds of thinking that go beyond a simple memory response. Questions that require evaluative and creative responses do not have single correct answers, but allow the student to offer an opinion or make and defend a judgment. An example of such a question is "Do you think Doug would be a good person to be given responsibility for an important project? Why or why not?"
4. *Oral re-reading* – Occasionally the teacher may plan for an entire selection to be re-read orally after silent reading has been completed. More frequently the teacher will have the students re-read only selected parts of the material. In any event, oral reading should be included in the lesson often enough for the teacher to assess the growth and accuracy of each student's knowledge of sight vocabulary, decoding skills, and strategies important to successful reading.
5. *Reviewing skills, concepts, and strategies* – Several types of exercises may be included in a thorough reading lesson. Over the period of two to three days usually required for this type of reading lesson, all or some of the following areas should be covered. Frequent omission of any of these areas may be detrimental to the reading growth of some students. (a) Sight vocabulary—exercises to insure that students will later have recognition of new words that have been introduced in the story may be included. Activities of this type are especially helpful if they are carried out in a contextual setting. (b) Decoding skills and strategies—practice in the use of some phonetic and structural analysis skills, and especially in the use of context clues, is important to student's continual growth in reading. (c) Meaning vocabulary—attention should be given to

meanings of unfamiliar words. (d) Comprehension opportunity to engage in various levels of comprehension should be included in the reading lesson. (e) Other types of activities and exercises may be included.

Sometimes exercises from teachers' manuals can be adapted so that students may carry out the activities independently. If this procedure is used, the teacher should discuss the first one or two questions or activities with the students before they work the exercises independently. Usually written work or independent work of this type should not be assigned unless the teacher plans to check the work. Sometimes checking of completed work can be accomplished as a group activity with the students checking their own papers or can be arranged so that the students share the work they have produced with another student. Periodically, the teacher should check each student's work individually.

If students have workbooks that accompany the reading series, and if time is short, they may occasionally do activities and exercises found in the workbooks in lieu of exercises suggested in the teacher's manual. If this procedure is used, the teacher should work through some examples with the students before they are assigned to work independently and the assigned work must be checked.

If exercises are occasionally carried out as independent work, this procedure can be alternated with doing the exercise on the chalkboard or with the reading group working together orally on an activity. As teachers become adept at designing their own high quality reading activities, these activities may be substituted for less interesting exercises found in some teachers' manuals . . . if the teacher-made activity accomplishes the same purpose.

In order to teach a thorough reading lesson, the teacher should usually plan to spend more than one class period working on each selection or teaching unit.

A further suggestion to the principal is that he/she distribute copies of the above description of a well-balanced reading lesson to teachers *at the beginning of the year*. As a part of their strategy to eliminate failure, Nagel and Richman (3) state, "If you want somebody to learn something, for heaven's sake tell him what it is!" It is assumed that the purpose of evaluation is improvement. Making teachers aware of specific practices upon which they will be evaluated, allows teachers to work toward these goals.

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