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Reflections about my second year of teaching reading

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Reflections about my second year of teaching reading

Abstract

On the second day of school, I realized that four students had entered my first grade classroom – reading. As that school day concluded, at the beginning of my second year of teaching, I remember sitting down at my desk, and thinking to myself, "Now what?" These were not the students I was expecting.

In this paper I explain how I adapted my reading beliefs and teaching practices to meet the challenge the four students posed to me. I describe each student, and their reading behaviors. Next, I discuss perspectives about early literacy, in order to examine my beliefs in more detail. Then, I explore alternative teaching practices for reading instruction. I conclude by explaining how the students and my reading about the perspectives and alternative teaching practices affected me as a teacher.

Reflections about
My *Second Year* of Teaching Reading

A Research Paper
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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By
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Introduction

On the second day of school, I realized that four students had entered my first grade classroom—reading. As that school day concluded, at the beginning of my second year of teaching, I remember sitting down at my desk, and thinking to myself, “Now what?” These were not the students I was expecting. I had many emotions surging through me at the end of that day, but the one I remember most was—*fear!* I was fearful I was not prepared to teach them. I was also fearful I would not meet their parents’ expectations as their child’s teacher.

I recall I had a class of eighteen students—eleven boys and seven girls. I was teaching in a Catholic school in a small town. All but one of my students came from two-parent homes. Most parents were employed full-time. My students were happy, energetic, and a sociable group. The four advanced readers challenged my beliefs about reading instruction from the first day I met them. As a result of meeting them I began to reflect upon my views about teaching reading.

In this paper I explain how I adapted my reading beliefs and teaching practices to meet the challenge the four students posed to me. I describe each student, and their reading behaviors. Next, I discuss perspectives about early literacy, in order to examine my beliefs in more detail. Then, I explore alternative teaching practices for reading instruction. I conclude by explaining how the

students and my reading about the perspectives and alternative teaching practices affected me as a teacher.

My Classroom and Teaching Reading

My classroom reflected my beliefs about early reading instruction.

Although, I believed most first graders could not read school texts independently, my room was filled with print of all kinds and books ranging from picture books to easy chapter books. I hung vowel charts, color word posters, my word wall, and even the school's expectations at the front of my room. I wanted to give my students a print-rich environment. I wanted to provide many written materials for them to practice reading. I had a writing center that included pencils, pens, markers, colored pencils, stamps, paper, etc. In addition, I prepared a listening center with audio books that I felt certain that my students would benefit from listening to. I also read aloud several times a day to give them many opportunities to hear reading.

I began each day with a morning message on the board that I read aloud and my students occasionally joined me as they recognized words. I purposely made mistakes in my spelling and grammar so the students could help me revise my message. A typical morning message, for example, looked like this:

Good mornin boyz and girls. today is friday april 9, 2004 we will have p.e. toda at 9 25 it loooks lik it will be a sonny day. did you remember two reed your books last night ! i hope so?

love mrs. recker

This type of activity became our daily oral language instruction. Next, we formed flexible reading groups of four to five students. The students were grouped by ability (high, medium, low), based on recommendations from the kindergarten teacher. Aspects of reading I focused upon included sight word vocabulary and phonemic awareness. These features reflected my school administrator's expectations for entering first graders. I didn't see any reason to question these expectations. I asked students to read aloud to me from our basal reader one at a time in small flexible reading groups. I considered my groups to be flexible because students moved to different groups according to their improvement over time. I grouped the students by ability. Reading ability was defined by early reading "genres". The low group was placed with books that featured phonetically regular words (fan, can, man). The middle group was placed with short stories with one sentence to a page (sentences that sounded like every day speech). The high group read similar types as the middle group but with more words per page. Today, I realize that reading groups can appear very structured and limiting, yet

within each group I have more flexibility. However, at that time I had not yet discovered how to modify this reading group structure for my students. My groups were led this way because I followed directives from my building principal.

While I met with each reading group, the other students did seat work that included topics such as vowels, blends, and simple writing assignments. The seatwork served two purposes. First, to review key aspects of written language I was expected to focus upon in first grade (vowels, blends, contractions, compound words). Second, to maintain order in the classroom while I met with small reading groups. Students also had opportunities to visit reading, writing, and listening centers when they finished their seatwork. To conclude our morning language arts activities we met as a whole group and reviewed our “vowel of the day” and shared some journal entries.

My beliefs about reading instruction were demonstrated through each of these language arts activities. My morning message, for example, reflected my beliefs about the benefits of modeling written language because I believed that modeling was essential in teaching children how to read. I also encouraged them to visit each of the learning centers because I felt they each offered an essential element of learning to read. The reading center gave them an opportunity to “read” for pleasure. They could look at books; they could read with a partner, they could listen to their classmates read aloud. The writing center gave them an opportunity

to experiment with reading their own print as well as their classmates' writing. Some days I attached a writing prompt to the wall in the writing center. Other days I let them write (or draw) about anything they chose. As I mentioned earlier, the listening center gave them an opportunity to hear good readers.

Four Challenging Students

As I mentioned previously, four students—Bernie, Loren, Katie, and Anita¹—challenged my beliefs about reading in first grade. Within the first few days of school I invited each of them to read aloud to me so I could attempt to evaluate the “level” at which they were able to read aloud with “few mistakes” and “good comprehension”. According to the assessment results, each child was able to read with minimal mistakes (three or less) up until the end of the second grade level. To double-check these results, I also asked our Reading Specialist to complete a running record and ask comprehension questions. She agreed that they were reading “fluently” and with “good comprehension” through the second grade level.

As the year went by, this group of students continued to impress me with their extensive sight word vocabularies, inferences, and conclusions about what they had read. As a teacher it was my expectation that I would demonstrate these aspects of reading throughout first grade. These reading tasks were the substance

¹ All names are pseudonyms

of my first grade reading program. Since these students were so advanced, I felt I had little to offer them. Furthermore, they brought a very rich prior knowledge about my favorite first grade themes. It seemed my first grade reading curriculum had little to offer them. I was feeling fearful again. By the close of the second day of school I felt confused and incompetent. I had to decide how I would teach my four students -Bernie, Loren, Katie, and Anita - differently.

Alternative Viewpoints

Four years later I read an article by Patricia Crawford (1995) titled “Early Literacy: Emerging Perspectives”. In this article Crawford discusses six perspectives of early literacy theory, particularly reading readiness (matching sounds to letters). The six theories she discussed were maturational readiness, developmental readiness, connectionist, emergent, social constructionist, and critical theory.

According to Crawford, “Maturational readiness was seen as something that could be rationalized, measured by tests, and brought about by simply waiting for Nature to take its course”. (p.73). Developmental readiness emphasized the need for experiences and instruction in order to encourage reading (p. 73). The connectionist perspective reflects the idea that knowledge consists of relations between concepts, experiences, beliefs and other intellectual constructions. The emergent perspective of literacy is based largely upon the cognitive construction of

knowledge. Literacy learning is not viewed as the acquisition of a series of reading skills, but rather as a dynamic, ongoing process that begins long before children begin formalized schooling. Emergent theorists believe that children acquire literacy best through active engagement in meaningful, literacy related activities rather than through the direct explicit teaching of reading skills. (Crawford, 1995, p.80). The social constructionist perspective, although very similar to the emergent perspective, is unique in the fact that, like Vygotsky, social constructivists view language and literacy as cultural tools, which transform behaviors as they become internalized. (p. 81). They reject both the idea of universal stages (e.g. Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) and the concept of “emergent literacy” (Crawford, p. 81). Lastly, the critical perspective builds upon many of the same assumptions as the social constructivist theory (e.g. Solsken, 1993). Critical theorists believe that language and literacy learning happen within a social context, that literacy is specific to different cultures and communities, and that literacy learners are active sense makers who construct meaning based on their own social contexts. (Crawford, 1995, p. 82).

My Students

As I read the article, I began to imagine how each of the four challenging students reflected some aspects of these perspectives in the Crawford article. Based upon my beliefs about reading and my observations of the four students and

the assessments I utilized to interpret their reading behaviors, I felt confident that all four could be described from a developmental perspective. I believed my role was to provide experiences in order to facilitate readiness to read. Therefore, I continued to do (certain activities in my teaching of reading). However, each of the students also seemed to reflect some aspects of the other perspectives as well.

Bernie, for example, was the class comedian. He was very outgoing and sociable. He could recite many predictable books he had read to himself several times. He liked to read joke books. He especially liked books with riddles.

Mercer Mayer was his favorite author. He was somewhat of a reluctant writer; therefore, his writing abilities were not up to par with his reading abilities. I encouraged him by asking him to write about what he had read. That seemed to be easier for him than a journal entry or creative writing assignment. His daily work was always correct, yet very sloppy. His comprehension was outstanding. He came from a two-parent home where both parents worked full-time. He was the youngest of three children.

Furthermore, based on the observations I made of Bernie specifically, in the first few days of school and a conversation I had with his parents during parent-teacher conferences I felt Bernie also reflected the emergent perspective because his learning about reading and writing started long before he began first grade. Watching his mom read and enjoy books with his two older brothers fostered his

love of reading. He was definitely ahead of his peers in regards to his oral language development and in the process of learning to read, however, his writing skills were still slowly emerging. I continued to encourage him to write responses to the books he read during reading group and in his free time. He eventually began to see the connection between reading and writing; however, he was most successful when I let him write freely and was careful not to be too critical of his written responses.

The second student I felt was exceptional was Loren. He was a very quiet, shy, and serious student. He was never boastful of his intelligence. In fact, he often sat back and observed most lessons. If I wanted him to participate, I had to prompt him. Loren liked to read non-fiction books. He was fascinated by animal facts, perhaps because he lived on a farm. He wrote freely and enjoyed every minute of it. The assignment he enjoyed most was the day I gave him a book without words and asked him to write a story to go with the pictures. He was very eager to read these stories aloud to his classmates. They, of course, were in awe of his stories. I was too! He was very adamant about completing his seatwork neatly and correctly. He had a hard time accepting constructive criticism from me, although, it was rarely necessary. He, too, came from a two-parent household where both parents worked full time. He was the middle child of three children. I believe that Loren reflected the connectionist perspective. His parents shared with

me that they did at home many of the things I would have done at school. (His mom had some teaching experience.) They read several books to him daily beginning with pictures only, moved to books with one or two words per page, and then graduated to simple picture books. They would ask him questions as they read aloud with him and often encouraged him to tell them again at the end of the book what the story was about. Early on they asked him to draw a picture of his favorite part of the book, then eventually, he would write one or two sentences that retold the story below the pictures he drew.

The third student I felt was exceptional was Katie. Like Loren, Katie was very shy and reserved. It took me longer to realize her abilities because she never offered answers or comments during large or small group discussions. She was a very diligent and thorough student. She remains the most mature first grader I have ever taught. She was very serious about school and was very attentive at all times. She also loved to write. However, I could never get her to read any of her writing aloud to her peers. I could hardly get her to share her writing with her own parents at conferences. She had an incredible imagination that included details and dialogue. I kept many of her writing samples to share with future classes. She loved to read chapter books. She wasn't real picky about the series as long as it was a "chapter" book. I spent numerous hours reading the same books and preparing discussion questions so we could meet one and one. She loved our

“book talks.” Katie came from a two-parent household. Both of her parents were educators. She was the fourth of five children.

Like Loren, I feel Katie reflected the connectionist perspective. As I mentioned, both of her parents were teachers. From their conversation at conferences I gathered that their house was a very rich literacy environment. Having four other siblings and two parents to imitate and model her behavior from, she learned a lot about what it means to be a reader. She saw people reading many different forms of literature and using this literature for many different purposes. She saw people reading for pleasure every day of her life. She was read to every night before bed as were two of her other siblings so she heard many different kinds of stories and some even above her reading level that she listened to simply for enjoyment. Her father was a junior high English teacher so she saw him writing often and for different purposes. He told me at conferences that he often shared his writing with his children so he could have an opportunity to read what he had wrote as a means of self-editing. I think over the course of the first seven years of her life, Katie put all of these pieces together without realizing the importance and value of this thing called “reading”.

Lastly, I thought about Anita. Anita was a very good student. She understood the school reading and writing with little explanation; however, she didn't always choose to use her ability to the best of her potential. She would

rather be telling secrets, passing notes, or drawing silly faces than completing her seatwork. She was hard to keep on task a reading group; however, when she was called on, she somehow managed to answer correctly. She was a slow starter in the beginning stages of writing. She was very motivated to improve and soon did. She was very accepting of constructive criticism. She loved to read all sorts of books. She was exposed to a variety of literature. Her parents were also both educators. She was the younger of two children.

Ironically, Anita reflected the developmental *and* maturational perspectives. I felt if her parents hadn't been educators, Anita would be a candidate for the "sit back and wait" philosophy. Obviously she was ready at some level, or she wouldn't have acquired the skills she had, however, she seemed much more immature in her desire to move ahead with her peers. She would have been content to do the same thing the "average" classmate was doing and then she'd have more free time to visit or frolic among learning centers. On the other hand, she was well disciplined and accepted my prompts to challenge herself in the areas of reading and writing. She could read almost any book written at the first or second grade level which told me she understood the "whole" part of reading. It was my job to take each piece of this puzzle and teach each piece separately to deepen her understanding of the reading process.

Similarities Among the Four Students

Assisted by my reading of Crawford's article, I considered several similarities among this group. I learned after reading their home histories that all four children came from two parent homes. They had two parents who worked full-time. They had one or more siblings. They fell somewhere in the middle to end of their birth order, which lead me to believe that they most likely observed their siblings practicing reading and writing as well. Two of them came from homes where both of their parents were educators. Although, their personalities were quite diverse, their home environments seemed very similar. I spent a significant amount of time during parent-teacher conferences inquiring about the types of literacy activities (reading aloud, writing letters, playing board games, etc.) that occurred in their homes. One very important similarity is that all of these parents thought of these activities as an enjoyable way to spend time with their children. The similarities among the four students lead to reviewing reading aloud as a key literacy activity happening in their homes. In this section, I discuss reading aloud as a part of reading readiness by focusing upon readiness skills such as letter identification, phoneme recognition, and sight word vocabulary.

Reading Aloud As Part of Reading Readiness

In this section, I discuss reading aloud as a part of reading readiness by focusing upon readiness skills such as letter identification, phoneme recognition,

and sight word vocabulary. Regie Routman (1991) adds that reading aloud is seen as the single most influential factor in young children's success in learning to read. Additionally, reading aloud improves listening skills, builds vocabulary, aids reading comprehension, and has a positive impact on student's attitudes towards reading. She believes reading aloud is the easiest component to incorporate into any language program at any grade level.

After reading an article called "Daddy Read to Me", (McCarty & Ortiz, 1997), it was evident to me, that in most cases, the parents of my four advanced students were reading aloud to their children on a daily basis. McCarty and Ortiz believe that reading aloud makes a significant impact on children's success with learning to read. However, as I read the rest of their article, I became aware of additional practices that also could make a difference in early reading. The authors also claim that parents asked many questions during, and after, story reading. Asking questions encouraged children to become active listeners and to pay attention to what had been read to them. After reading, parents asked their children if they could recall the sequence of events. They also asked questions about the characters in the book, any unknown vocabulary words, and some parents even asked their child to respond to what they had read through writing.

Reading aloud also seemed to be the most simple, yet most powerful way I could model what good readers do. I read aloud several times a day. I read the

lunch menu, I reviewed the rules listed in the front of the room, I read during snack time, I read during reading groups, and I read books chosen to teach my thematic unit. Although, my students seemed to be non-participants they were gaining a great deal from hearing me read aloud. As I review my uses of reading aloud, I have come to realize that my beliefs about reading readiness and reading aloud aligned with my beliefs about a developmental perspective for early reading instruction. I relied upon reading aloud as a key experience to prepare my students for school reading.

Other Possible Explanations

More recently, I've read several articles that provide additional ideas for possibly explaining the early reading achievements of my four students. Shapiro and Doiron (1987) reported that the parents they interviewed for their article believed their children could learn a great deal about reading and writing by just making sure that paper, pencils, crayons, books, etc. were made readily available to their children. They also found that these particular households went beyond just making the materials available to their children, they also allowed their children to manipulate these tools, and "read" the books themselves. They also found that fathers were more likely to read more than just books with children. Fathers more typically read many different types of literature to their children including comic strips from the newspaper, their children's magazines, and directions for board

games. Children participate in literacy activities in this kind of environment (Goodman, 1980).

These practices make perfect sense to me because I believe a balanced reading curriculum and instructional practice includes a variety of lessons that go beyond simply reading aloud. I agreed with these authors that it's definitely a combination of activities that contributes to children learning about literacy.

McCarty and Ortiz (1997) also addressed recreational reading activities in their article. These fathers and their children read print found on board games, played a variety of word games, such as "hangman", and often read personal letters from relatives together. Fathers also read the print found on video boxes, worked through crossword puzzles, and read cereal boxes to model enjoyable reading to their children. The authors also attributed children having their own books; being read to frequently, visiting the library, and observing their parents model literacy practices with children's readiness for formal reading instruction.

DeBaryshe, Buell, and Binder (1996) concluded that some parents, when assisting their children with a writing assignment, might alter their teaching strategies in response to new skills and strategies they acquired at school or after receiving information about classroom instruction techniques. They felt the connection between the combinations of teaching approaches used at home and at school may have a positive impact on literacy acquisition. Whether children

benefit from a variety and/or replication of home and school instructional techniques is a question that needs further exploration.

Shapiro and Doiron (1987) reviewed early reading research and listed six conditions within the home literacy environment that have implications on school success. They named the following:

- 1) development of home language, language that develops in the social setting of the home without formal instruction and because of the basic need to communicate with the important adults in one's life;
- 2) hypothesis testing, when children are provided enriching experiences that allow new information to be gathered, as well as opportunities for language to grow;
- 3) experiences with the tools of literacy, meaning the ease of access children have to pencils, paper, books, and other materials needed to read and write in school;
- 4) modeling uses of literacy skills when children see adults as users of reading and writing;
- 5) using decontextualized literary language that is removed from its immediate social context—parents who talk about rhyming words as well as the alphabet or fairy tales or poetry are building children's

understandings about the vocabulary and concepts necessary to talk about how language in literature;

- 6) creating stories and storytelling to communicate one's own narratives, as well to share in the narratives of others.

These six conditions were also present in my second year classroom. I provided my students daily opportunities to orally share a story about something that happened at home, over the weekend, or during a holiday break. They were provided with experiences for learning in all of my learning centers. They were given the opportunity to gain new knowledge through books and activities I planned for each day. They were given opportunities to experiment with both oral and written language. My classroom was filled with paper of all kinds, pencils, markers, crayons, as well as other materials that were very visible and accessible to the students each day. I modeled uses of literacy every day. I read aloud, I read silently, I wrote notes by hand and on the computer. I also did a daily rhyme chart with the students. I taught them the difference between a letter, a word, and a sentence. I also taught what kind of words rhymed and I modeled rhythm within a story as well as poetry. Lastly, I spent a large portion of the school year modeling one way to create a story. I modeled stories that mimicked other stories and also stories I created from my own imagination. They illustrated their stories and often shared them orally.

Conclusions

As a result of meeting Bernie, Loren, Katie, and Anita, and reading a series of professional articles, I've come to two conclusions. First of all, some practices have *not* changed in regard to how I teach reading. I still incorporate, for example, my language learning centers in my classroom. I still post morning messages, ask students to journal, read aloud several times a day, post a word wall, direct whole group phonics instruction, and organize small flexible reading groups which incorporate reading aloud. I also hang vowel charts, phonics rules, and word wall "tips" in my classroom. I assign seat work for my students while I meet with small reading groups and I allow at least twenty minutes a day for silent reading. I admit a large part of why I do all of these things today is because these activities help me to meet district standards for what I'm required to teach. However, I also believe I have had great success with teaching students to read, write, and use language through these activities. I realize now that the students' needs are not always my first priority. Rather, the focus is upon the district's requirements. I would probably still do these things even if the district didn't require them, because I cannot wait for kids to mature. I need to intervene with instruction about reading skills and experiences to provide opportunities to read.

In relation to Crawford, I've come to realize that my view of reading mostly duplicates a developmental approach to early literacy—a view that was popular

sixty or seventy years ago. My conclusion is that I still maintain similar values and beliefs about teaching reading as I did before. I do this because these four students were an exceptional group and I have not had any students similar to them since that time. Therefore, I continue teaching reading with the idea that students have had little experience with reading when they come to my classroom at the beginning of the school year.

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