The Relationship Between Two Approaches to Teaching Literacy and the Reading Attitudes of First Graders

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO APPROACHES TO TEACHING LITERACY AND THE READING ATTITUDES OF FIRST GRADERS

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the Department of Education and Human Development State University of New York College at Brockport in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

by

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Abstract

This study was conducted in order to investigate the relationship between two approaches to teaching literacy—traditional basal-driven methods and literature-based whole language approaches—and the attitudes toward reading among first grade students.

The subjects consisted of 194 first grade students in two suburban school districts. The subjects were asked to complete a survey administered by their classroom teacher. This survey asked questions concerning attitudes toward reading.

Survey information was compiled and summarized in table and paragraph form. A statistically significant difference in attitudes among students between the two separate types of teaching methods was not found. The null hypothesis was accepted.
Acknowledgements

A positive attitude is necessary in order for any task to be a success. Many people helped to keep my attitude positive during my work on this thesis. Thank you to my husband, David, for all of his encouragement, support, patience, and understanding during the writing of this thesis. Thank you to my parents, Ted and Judy Ames, for instilling in me a love of reading. Thank you to Dr. Gerald Begy for his time and support. And a special thank you to the parents of the many children I have helped learn to read for allowing me such a privilege. I hope they always find reading an enjoyable adventure.
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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between first grade students who have been taught to read by teachers using traditional basal-driven methods and first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a literature-based, whole language approach.

Question to be Answered

Is there a statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between first grade students who have been taught to read by teachers using a traditional basal-driven method and first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a literature-based whole language approach?
Need for the Study

Probably all of us who have attempted to teach children to read have been frustrated in our efforts when those students whom we believed could be helped to improve simply could not be motivated to make the effort needed to succeed. Perhaps we, as teachers, have also been distressed by certain students who saw little value or usefulness in reading. On the other hand, we all probably have been pleased with the efforts of those students who demonstrated an interest in and excitement about reading. Attitudes toward reading seem to influence how much and how well children read (Guandt, in Alexander & Filler, 1976).

Studies have shown that a child's attitude toward reading is formed early in his/her academic career (Healy, 1965, Saracho, 1984,). Individuals' attitudes toward reading will have a profound impact on their reading ability, their desire to read, and their reading habits into adulthood.

With the recent changes in literacy instruction, from basal-driven programs to
literature-based instruction comes the inevitable questions: is it a fad? are they truly changes in method and technique? or do they represent major shifts in the way learning about literature and how to read takes place? (Wood & O'Donnell, 1991). As educators we wonder if it is worth the time and effort involved to make these instructional changes or will we find that the whole language philosophy has no measurable impact on children and their attitudes toward or success in reading? With the current move away from basal-driven methods of instruction toward literature-based methods of literacy discovery, it is imperative that teachers, administrators, parents and community members feel comfortable knowing that the whole language philosophy toward literacy really does make a difference with students.

Definitions

Whole language— For this study whole language will be defined as the use of a variety of real literature to teach reading in and of itself. The
emphasis in a whole language approach is on teaching reading for enjoyment and meaning, while developing a variety of reading strategies.

Basal-driven- For this study basal driven will be defined as a complete teaching package of materials in which a tight scope and sequence is followed. Skill instruction is a major focus of reading instruction.

Attitude- For this study attitude will be defined as a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation (Alexander & Filler, 1976, p. 1).

Summary

Research has indicated that the attitudes of children toward reading are formed relatively early on in their academic career and change little over time. These attitudes will affect not only their success in school but their success as readers in their adult lives. Because these attitudes change little over time, it is critical to introduce literacy in a manner so as to build
positive feelings toward reading. This investigation determined and compared the attitudes of children who were taught literacy through traditional basal-driven methods and those who were taught through literature-based methods.
Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between first grade students who have been taught to read using traditional basal-driven methods and first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a literature-based, whole language approach.

Introduction

This review investigates the connection between achievement in reading and attitudes of children toward reading by focusing on research studies done in these areas. The second section of this review will take a closer look at the two approaches to teaching literacy used in this investigation: traditional basal-driven methods
and literature-based whole language methods.

Achievement and Attitude

A child's first impression toward reading will have a lasting impact on his/her reading progress. Because an individual's reading behaviors are crystalized by the age of twelve (Healy, 1965), the first years of a child's academic career are critical to the development of a healthy attitude toward reading.

One of the long-range goals for beginning reading instruction is to teach young children to read for information and enjoyment, skills that can be used in their adult years. Children who enjoy reading will probably read more and thus enhance their knowledge of the world around them. Young children's initial responses toward reading have lasting effects. The attitudes acquired by children in beginning instruction strongly influence their later reading (Heilman, 1972 in Saracho, 1984, p. 19).

Thus, a major emphasis in beginning reading should be on developing positive attitudes toward reading. The principal value in developing positive attitudes toward reading is to foster a desire to read. Without this desire, children can
be taught to read but may choose not to, resulting in what Saracho characterizes as 'illiterate literates' (p. 19).

Education professionals widely believe that the development of positive attitudes toward reading in the formative years of schooling will create individuals who are lifelong readers. In a longitudinal study by Smith (1990) evidence suggests that reading attitude is a stable construct over time. Positive attitudes about reading that are fostered during the school years will remain positive in adulthood. The results also point out the importance of developing good reading attitudes among school children.

Because positive attitudes toward reading indicate a higher success rate in school and in adulthood it is important to develop these attitudes early in the academic career of children. A study by Parker and Paradis (1986) looked at the attitude development toward reading in grades one through six. Their results indicated that overall changes in attitude toward reading were minimal. This suggests to educators
that we must foster a desire to read in children as early as possible. Today’s teacher of reading cannot afford to ignore the attitudes of his/her students since attitudes often are important in the acquisition of reading skills and in the continued use of reading for information and recreation. Ransbury’s study (1973), involving fifth and sixth graders, showed that students attribute their attitudes toward reading mainly to their ability to read.

Dechant (1970) found that the attitude of a pupil is often at the root of his or her reading difficulty and that the solution to the problem of the reluctant reader begins with a change of attitude. Dechant states that ‘how learners feel about reading is as equally as important as the curriculum.’ Another researcher, Fader (1968), reported that student attitudes must be improved before one sees any lasting effects on performance.

Mathewson (1976) developed a model of the function of attitude in the reading process, focusing on five components: attitude,
motivation, attention, comprehension and acceptance. He placed attitude (the evaluative responses to aspects of reading input such as form, content, and format) as the central construct. In this model, Mathewson proposes that motivation and attitude work together to create the condition in which the child attends to and performs the cognitive processes necessary to comprehend material. He further states that if attitude is favorable and the motivation is appropriate, comprehension works at peak efficiency.

In a study conducted by Askov and Fischbach (1973) evidence suggests that since attitudes toward reading may become more positive as ability improves, perhaps our efforts as educators should be directed toward the improvement of reading skills and achievement. Just how these skills for successful reading should be taught has changed a great deal in recent years.

Approaches to Teaching Literacy

During the past decade, there have been
significant changes in the practices involved in reading instruction. These are the move from basal-driven to literature-based reading instruction, the move from emphasis on product to the emphasis on process, and, perhaps most significant, the trend away from teacher as technician or dispenser of materials toward teacher as professional or decision-maker (Wood and O’Donnell, 1991). For many years, reading instruction in U.S. elementary schools has been dominated by the use of basal reading series. The Commission Report, Becoming a Nation of Readers, describes basal programs as follows:

Basal reading programs are complete packages of teaching materials. They provide an entire reading curriculum, instructional strategies for teaching reading, a graded anthology of selections for children to read, and practice exercises (through workbooks and skill sheets). Basal reading programs are organized by grade level. An entire basal reading program would make a stack of books and papers four feet high (Anderson et al., p. 35).

New understandings about literacy acquisition have resulted in criticisms of the basal readers. The role of prediction in reading, particularly at the beginning stages, has received a great deal of
attention over the past decade. Wood and O'Donnell also point out that it is important that the stories encountered by beginners conform to their implicit knowledge of 'story grammar.' Another concern comes from the realization that skilled readers are fluent and that fluency requires a great deal of practice. Research shows that the amount of independent silent reading children do in school is significantly related to gains in reading achievement (Allington, 1984). Basal reading lessons do not allow for extensive silent reading practice. Studies have shown that many primary school children spend an average of only seven minutes a day doing 'real' reading (Anderson et al., 1985).

Goodman (1992) reports that whole language is much more than a method of literacy education. Rather, it is a complete curriculum philosophy. It integrates development of language, thinking, and content into a dual curriculum in which knowledge is built at the same time as thought and language are built (p. 360). Hoffman (1992) points out that while basal lessons are mostly
restricted to reading or writing lessons, whole language is part of all subject areas. Whole language teachers have criteria for the instructional and curricular decisions they make. They know why they read books to their students. They know what an 'authentic literacy event' is, and they reject cute workbooks that focus on non-functional, out-of-context skill drills. Instead, they provide rich experiences with literature for their pupils (p. 362).

Educators who believe in the whole language philosophy find that their instruction is child centered. Because the child's interests, thoughts, ideas, abilities and potential are considered, the resulting instruction is more interesting. Since attitudes tend to be highly specific to given individuals, it is difficult to suggest specific programs and instructional strategies which 'will work.' The teacher needs to try out ideas and use those that are most productive for given individuals or groups. Teaching strategies need not be spectacular or sensational. Often, the matching of
tried-and-true strategies with the interests and needs of the given students is all that is necessary to begin (Alexander & Filler, 1976, p. 65).

A whole language approach to teaching literacy involves tapping into a student's interests with the premise that it will help students find reading more enjoyable and meaningful. A 1971 study by Sauls (in Alexander and Filler, 1976) tested 865 sixth grade students to determine whether a relationship existed between attitudes and reading habits. The results of this study showed that there was a significant relationship between pupil scores on an attitude scale and the number of books read. Eller (1959) states that, "Presumably any time a student receives satisfaction from reading, his attitude toward reading matter in general and toward the teacher who led him to the particular satisfying reading matter becomes more favorable by some amount." p. 117.

Groff (1962) conducted a study to determine if attitudes of students toward specific content
Type materials were related to their critical reading scores. Three hundred and five fifth and sixth grade students read materials from four content area types: boys' sports stories, girls' mild adventure stories, airplane or flying stories, and manners or social relations stories. The correlations between attitudes toward content types of materials and critical reading scores were all significant. Groff suggests that 'the reading comprehension of an individual as he reads is influenced to a degree by his attitude toward content type of material being read'. Whereas basal programs have pre-determined stories to read for any given lesson, whole language approaches allow for students to be involved in deciding what types of materials can be read based on the interests of the class. Though there are usually curricular frameworks established by school authorities, in a real sense the teacher and the learners construct the curricula— they determine the actual experiences that they will have as they build concepts, values, schemata, and problem-solving abilities (Goodman, 1992, p. 360).
Newman (1985) states that learning to read is a process of experiencing language. Activities which involve fragments of language, which discourage children from taking chances, which don’t permit the exchange of ideas can only make learning to read more difficult for children (p. 31). A whole language approach is the opposite of this. Language is experienced altogether. Children are encouraged to take chances, share ideas with peers and react to literature in a variety of ways.

Literacy education is something that is focused on throughout a student’s school career. Therefore it is important to note that whole language is not just primary in its focus. It is at all levels: preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school, and even college (Hoffman, 1992).

Summary

The attitudes of young readers is vital not only to develop the skills necessary to become a healthy reader but to develop a love of reading
that will carry into their adult years. Because attitudes are formed early and remain relatively constant over time it is important to present literacy in a manner in which children not only have a sense of ownership but a feeling of enjoyment. Traditional basal-driven methods and literature-based whole language methods are two ways in which literacy can be introduced to beginning readers.
Chapter III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between first grade students who are taught to read using traditional basal-driven methods and first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a literature-based, whole language approach.

Question

Is there a statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a traditional basal-driven method and first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a literature-based whole language approach?
Null Hypothesis

There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean scores on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey for the two treatment groups.

Methodology

Subjects A total of 194 students participated in this study. The students were all members of eight randomly selected first grade classrooms in two separate suburban school districts. In four of the classrooms basal-driven methods were used to teach reading to the students. In the remaining four classrooms literature-based approaches were used to teach the students reading.

Materials The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey was administered for this study. This study was determined to have a reliability coefficient at grade 1 of .87.

Procedures The researcher randomly selected 8 classes of 25 students each from first grade
classes in two suburban schools in western New York. Teachers in each classroom were given The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey along with instructions for administering the survey.

**Analysis of Data** When completed, the surveys were returned to the researcher and scored according to the instructions found in The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. Data was presented and explained in table and paragraph form.

**Summary**

A random testing population of 194 first grade students from two suburban school districts were given The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. The tests were then scored by the researcher and results given.
Chapter IV

Statistical Analysis

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between first grade students who have been taught to read using traditional basal-driven methods and first grade students who have been taught by teachers using a literature-based, whole language approach.

Findings From the Analysis

The null hypothesis states there will be no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two treatment groups—those students taught reading through the use of basal-driven methods and those taught reading through the use of literature-based methods—on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey.
The null hypothesis was tested at the .05 level of significance. The results are presented in the following table.

Table 1 Attitude data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>z</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basal-driven</td>
<td>60.49</td>
<td>11.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole language</td>
<td>61.89</td>
<td>10.94</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
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$z_{crit} = +/- 2.24; p < .05$
Analysis and Interpretation of the Hypothesis

In Table 1, since the $z$ required is $\pm 2.24$ and the $z$ obtained is .87, the null hypothesis is accepted. There is no statistically significant difference between the two means.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was any statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading between students taught to read by teachers using basal-driven methods and those students taught to read by teachers using literature-based approaches. From the data collected in this study, it was concluded that there was no statistically significant difference.
Chapter V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in attitude between first grade students taught to read through traditional basal-driven methods and first grade students taught by teachers using a literature-based, whole language approach.

Null Hypothesis

There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean scores on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey for the two treatment groups.

Conclusions

Research shows that a positive attitude is critical when introducing and developing the
skills necessary to become a successful reader. Educators must be aware of the attitudes of their students. This is especially true in the early years of a child's academic career, when attitudes are beginning to develop. In recent years there have been changes in literacy instruction—from the more traditional basal-driven methods to the literature-based whole language approaches. Regardless of which method a teacher prefers, it is most important for children to develop a positive attitude toward reading in order to be a successful reader.

The results of this study do not show considerable evidence that one approach to teaching literacy is more effective than the other in helping students develop a positive attitude toward reading. However, the literature presented shows abundant evidence that by involving students in what they learn and how they learn, whole language approaches to teaching literacy can help to make learning to read an enjoyable experience for all students.
Implications for Research

The importance of a positive attitude toward reading has been studied and discussed by many researchers. This study investigated the attitudes toward reading of first grade students who had been taught to read by teachers using two different approaches to literature.

This study only examined the students in their first grade classroom. Their previous year(s) and experiences with literature and learning were not taken into consideration. These experiences may have an impact on their present attitude toward reading—either positive or negative.

Home experiences and parental involvement is also a factor that could affect a child's attitude toward reading. A family that feels reading is important and shows this attitude toward the children may affect their attitude toward reading in a positive way. Conversely, a family that does not feel that reading is important and shows this attitude toward the children may affect their attitude toward reading in a negative way.

The ability levels of students was not a
factor in this investigation. It may be important for educators to know how the attitudes of those who find reading challenging due to learning disabilities compares with those who have stronger reading skills. The attitude of such a child may make teaching him or her easier or more difficult.

One thought that this researcher has is there was virtually no difference in attitude between subject groups because they are still very young and the idea of reading is still very new and exciting to them regardless of what methods were used to teach them. If it were possible for the students to continue their educational careers within the same type of presentation—that is, students who have learned to read from teachers who used a basal approach were to continue learning in this manner and students who have learned to read from teachers who have used a whole language approach continue to learn in this manner—would both groups continue to have no statistically significant difference in attitude toward reading at the fifth grade level? At the tenth grade level? At the college level?
Implications for Classroom Practice

Information concerning the attitude of students toward reading is important to teachers of all grade levels. It appears from the results of the study that the particular method used for literacy instruction may not be the most influential thing where the forming of a student’s attitude is concerned. As Brown and Mathie (1990) stated in their book, Inside Whole Language: A Classroom View, we need to search out ways of making literacy learning more enjoyable and purposeful (p.2). Rather than focusing on the method used for instruction, educators may want to look at their own enthusiasm for and attitude toward reading. If we as teachers are seen in class to enjoy books, and if we talk about the satisfaction that these experiences give us, then we are providing a positive model for our students. ‘Do as I do’ is a powerful message, even when it is delivered indirectly.
References


1. How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?

2. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?

3. How do you feel about reading for fun at home?

4. How do you feel about getting a book for a present?
5. How do you feel about spending free time reading?

6. How do you feel about starting a new book?

7. How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?

8. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?
9. How do you feel about going to a bookstore?

10. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?

11. How do you feel when the teacher asks you questions about what you read?

12. How do you feel about doing reading workbook pages and worksheets?
13. How do you feel about reading in school?

14. How do you feel about reading your school books?

15. How do you feel about learning from a book?

16. How do you feel when it's time for reading class?
17. How do you feel about the stories you read in reading class?

18. How do you feel when you read out loud in class?

19. How do you feel about using a dictionary?

20. How do you feel about taking a reading test?
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey
Scoring sheet

Student name

Teacher

Grade

Administration date

Scoring guide

4 points  Happiest Garfield
3 points  Slightly smiling Garfield
2 points  Mildly upset Garfield
1 point  Very upset Garfield

Recreational reading  Academic reading

1.    11.    
2.    12.    
3.    13.    
5.    15.    
6.    16.    
7.    17.    
8.    18.    
9.    19.    
10.    20.    

Raw score: ____  Raw score: ____

Full scale raw score (Recreational + Academic):

Percentile ranks

Recreational

Academic

Full scale