Running head: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR READING INSTRUCTION

Children's Literature for Reading Instruction in the Elementary Classroom

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This paper will examine the use of children's literature for reading instruction in the elementary school classroom. Teaching students how to read, and how to use reading for both knowledge and enjoyment, is a fundamental part of the elementary curriculum. The best method with which to instruct children in this essential skill has long been a source of conflict within education. One facet of this debate has been the relative importance of basal reading texts and "authentic" children's literature. As a future school media specialist, this topic holds special interest for me. Currently accepted best practice will influence collection development in school libraries, as well as the amount of collaboration between media specialists and teachers on reading curriculum.

Position papers and guidelines from the National Council of Teachers of Reading (NCTE) will be presented, including its recommendation that children's literature serve as the basis for reading instruction. An article by Daniels, Zemelman, and Bizar (1999) on research supporting the Whole Language movement illuminates similarities between that movement and the NCTE's position. An article by Martinez and McGee (2000) traces the changing place of literature in classroom instruction throughout the history of our country. Research by Morrow (1992) describes the effects of literature-based instruction on students' academic achievement.

The National Council of Teachers of English has issued several position statements and guidelines related to the place of children's literature in teaching reading (NCTE, *On Literature-based Reading Instruction,* 1988; NCTE, 1997; NCTE, May 1, 2004; NCTE, n.d.). Upon reading these statements, it becomes clear that the NCTE adheres to an educational philosophy closely related to that of the Whole Language

movement (Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999). Both emphasize the importance of access to a variety of authentic literature in the classroom, and literature's place at the center of reading instruction (Table 1).

One example of the NCTE's position is an assertion of "the necessity of a print-rich classroom environment that includes a variety of children's literature, such as information books, stories, nursery rhymes, song charts, poems, and books with predictable language and themes familiar to children" and the resolution that "NCTE advocate that such texts be a major component of literacy instruction" (NCTE 1997). Related to the emphasis on authentic literature is a corollary position against reliance on basal reading texts as the primary tool for teaching reading. Several of the NCTE's statements mention basal readers specifically and warn against using them to the exclusion of literature, saying, for example, that the NCTE believes in the value of "…opportunities for all students, regardless of their established reading ability, to read and respond to literature beyond basal readers and other programmed materials" (NCTE, n.d.).

Basal readers were historically composed of material written solely for reading instruction. The text was often quite repetitive and used a limited vocabulary, reflecting the prevailing theories of teaching reading at the time. If children's literature were included in the basal reader, the stories were shortened and adapted to match that theoretical schema. Literature was believed to serve primarily as entertainment, not a tool for learning to read (Martinez & McGee, 2000).

The Whole Language movement was instrumental in moving teaching practices away from basal readers and toward the use of children's literature. Teachers began

Table 1 – Comparison of NCTE and Whole Language

NCTE Guidelines	Whole Language strategies
Teach students about reading within the context of authentic reading using texts with authentic language.	Using classic children's literature
Read to students daily using a variety of text types, including various types of fiction and non fiction and multicultural literature, on a variety of topics to build their students familiarity with written language and their background knowledge on a variety of topics.	Reading aloud daily
Provide regular opportunities for students to engage in a variety of authentic literacy experiences in social studies, science, math, and other curricula areas	Embedding literacy activities in broad interdisciplinary themes
Provide daily opportunities for students to read books of their own choice in school	Structuring independent reading and writing

From The National Council of Teachers of English (2004), *On Reading, Learning to Read, and Effective Reading Instruction: An Overview of What We Know and How We Know It* and Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar (1999), *Whole Language Works: Sixty Years of Research*.

"rejecting the synthetic language and rote exercises of commercial basal programs, [and] invited children to read whole, real children's literature and to discuss and write about it" (Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999, p. 33).

In recent years, basal programs have responded by incorporating more authentic literature into their textbooks (Martinez & McGee, 2000). A survey of teacher practices by Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester in 1998 (cited in Martinez & McGee, 2000, p. 132) found that most teachers (83%) use some combination of children's literature and basal textbooks. Only 2% relied entirely on basal readers and 16% used only literature tradebooks. Whether intentionally or not, most teachers seem to be following the recommendations of the NCTE on the use of authentic literature in the classroom.

In the elementary school with which I am most familiar, the NCTE could see its suggestions in practice. Every classroom has its own collection of tradebooks, used both for instruction (reading groups or book clubs) and also for personal enjoyment reading ("Drop Everything and Read"). The library offers a wide selection of tradebooks in its "Novel Approach" collection. These novels, which supplement the main library collection, are reserved for use in whole classroom or large group reading lessons. The librarian often works with groups of upper grade elementary students in literature circles, where books are read and discussed around a theme.

Although this particular school district has adopted and purchased basal reading texts for all elementary classes, how much they are used varies at the school and classroom level. At my school, basal readers are used most heavily in the early grades, with the frequent addition of children's literature. The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades use

mostly tradebooks. The media specialist I questioned about the school's policies mentioned that the quality of basal leaders has improved drastically since she began teaching 24 years ago (personal communication, Judith Williams, Library Media Specialist, Childs Elementary). In short, I believe this school's balance of approaches fits quite well with the pattern of teacher practices found by Baumann et al, and also operates in the spirit of the NCTE recommendations.

I selected Lesley Morrow's 1992 research study to compare to the NCTE guidelines because it was one of the few I could find that actually gave the full details of a scientific inquiry into this topic. Most of the other articles I found were of a more anecdotal nature. Several were only surveys or reviews of the research and did not provide the details on data collection and analysis that I needed. In addition, Morrow's study fit well with my topic, in that she examined the impact of moving from a basal text instructional model to one that combined basal readers with literature-based instruction. Since this combination approach appears to be the reality for most children, I was interested to see if the research would demonstrate an improvement in student achievement over basal readers alone. The results would either help support or refute the policies of the NCTE.

Morrow was specifically interested in how well a literature-based approach would work for minority children, but I don't believe that the focus on the ethnicity of her subjects limits the ability to generalize her results to all students. In fact, it was feared that minority children might be helped less by this approach than other children, so any successes should generalize well.

The research questions addressed in Morrow's study related to whether literature-based reading instruction would improve: reading comprehension; writing ability; language complexity and vocabulary; standardized reading test scores; and students' attitudes toward reading and toward the literature program. One additional question raised in this study was whether an added home-based literature element would improve the above factors more than the school-based program alone.

The setting for this study was not specifically stated, but a California public school setting seems to be implied. The author's use of the California Test of Basic Skills as a standardized test and discussion of busing for racial distribution within the school district seem to support that conclusion.

The subjects were students in nine second-grade classrooms, with all classes having a similar distribution of ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Three classes were randomly assigned to each of three test groups: control, which received no intervention or change in curriculum; experimental group 1 (E1), which received literature-based instruction at school, plus a program to encourage literature activities at home; and experimental group 2 (E2), which received literature-based instruction and no home reading program. The program was instituted over the course of a full school year.

Four measures were taken of students' literacy achievement. These included standardized test scores in reading and language; tests of story comprehension and understanding of story structure and sequence; ability to create original written and oral stories; and vocabulary and syntactic complexity. In addition to literacy achievement, the students' use of literature inside and outside of school was monitored, and lastly, students' and teachers' reactions to the changes in instruction were noted.

In the experimental groups, teachers continued to use the basal reading textbook. However, the amount of time spent with the basal reader and its workbook was decreased significantly in order to include more literature and literature-based activities. Thus, the total amount of reading instruction time remained constant across all groups.

The treatment received by the first experimental group (E1) had four components. The first component was the establishment of classroom literacy centers. These centers included a selection of books from many genres, grade levels, and cultural viewpoints. Manipulatives such as felt boards, books on tape, and puppets were available in each center, as well as writing materials for student use. "The literacy center demonstrated the importance of literacy by having a special place in the classroom for that purpose. It also made literature accessible, and introduced children to several modalities for engaging in active, social, literacy activities." (Morrow, 1992, p. 258)

The second component was the addition of teacher-guided literature activities. Teachers read to children daily (something that had not been their practice before), and presented at least three activities per week based on literature. Some of the activities included having students retell stories, storytelling with manipulatives, connecting literature to other content areas, and writing activities, among others. Three to five times per week, this group also received the opportunity to engage in an independent reading and writing period that lasted for thirty minutes.

The last treatment component for this group was the addition of a home-based reading program. Parents were invited to three training session to learn about ways to share literature with their children at home. However, only 38 of 56 parents attended any of the training sessions, and of those, only 10 attended all three meetings.

The second experimental group's (E2) treatment differed in only one way from the first group: they did not receive the home-reading component. All other components were identical. The control group continued on in their usual pre-study activities, using the basal reader.

Results of the study showed that both experimental groups scored higher than the control group on all measured outcomes, with the exception of standardized test scores. On most measures, the two experimental groups did not differ significantly from one another. The home-based program did not seem to add to the achievement of students, but Morrow believed that increased parental involvement could have had a positive effect.

Literature-based instruction did not improve the standardized test scores of children in the experimental groups, a result that Morrow did not find surprising because "standardized measures have not been sensitive to literature instruction" (Morrow, 1992, p. 271). In fact, the author seemed to feel vindicated in showing that students receiving literature-based instruction did just as well as the control group on standardized tests. It seemed as if she were responding to critics who had implied that a literature-based approach would hurt test scores.

Children in the experimental groups showed an increase in performance on tests of literacy achievement, including recall, story retelling, and creation of original stories. The experimental groups also used a greater variety of words in their writing; however, this effect was not noticeable in oral language tests. Children in the experimental groups read more books and magazines at school and at home, and the amount of reading they did increased steadily over the course of the school year.

Attitudes of both teachers and students toward the literature-based program were positive. The children found the new activities to be "fun", which Morrow translated into three separate types of enjoyable features: choice of activities (at the literacy center and during independent reading time); new comfortable surroundings for reading and writing (quiet corners with rugs and pillows); and an atmosphere of positive interaction (children helped one another and teachers spent more time interacting with individual children or small groups). Teachers overcame their concerns about time- and classroom-management and felt that students were learning well.

Achievement across ethnic groups did not show any significant differences. Morrow found that "concerns about literature-based instruction and the achievement of children from diverse backgrounds are unfounded for the type of program used in this investigation" (Morrow, 1992, p. 271-272). She also suggests that a balance of instructional strategies incorporating both direct skills (basal) and experiential learning (literature) may be the best approach to help the most students to succeed.

It seems that, for literature-based instruction, the revolution has already taken place. Most teachers are convinced of the importance of including literature in their reading instruction. The future will present new challenges and opportunities for teachers of reading, including the quickly increasing amount and quality of nonfiction and the rising importance of online text. Changing political tides will also play their part, with new calls for accountability stressing standardized tests and, in some corners, attempting to blame low scores on literature-based instruction and reinstall direct skills instruction to a place of prominence (Martinez & McGee, 2000).

This latest trend back toward phonics and decodable texts does not signal the end for literature in the classroom, however. As Daniels, Zemelman, and Bizar (1999) point out, these

> supposed rivals are not actually claiming the same territory. Decodable-text programs focus only on beginning readers and on just one literacy skill: phonics. Whole Language offers a comprehensive reading and writing program for all children, from prereaders to students throughout their school years. (p. 32)

Martinez and McGee (2000) envision more a cooperative arrangement than a turf war, where tradebook authors and publishers will respond by producing series of easily decodable literature for young readers (p.139). It seems that teachers have already found the key to the future: balance.

The use of literature in the elementary classroom promotes exactly the kinds of thinking that researchers like Hyde and Bizar (1989) are finding to be so important. Reading is a holistic cognitive process that cannot be completely broken down into its component parts. It is also a constructive process where meaning is built from text with the help of prior knowledge, context, and active thinking (Hyde & Bizar, 1989, p. 59-61). Basal readers, text decoding, and phonics instruction alone will not accomplish that deeper understanding. "Literacy involves more than comprehending the literary object…reading involves perceiving the complex relationships offered by multiple perspectives. We are moving toward a definition of reading that moves beyond comprehension and response into what we call deep thinking" (Martinez & McGee, 2000, p. 139). In this more complex view of reading and literacy, literature is essential.

In my future career as an elementary school librarian and media specialist, the extent to which literature in used in the classroom will determine much of my focus. Given the current state of teacher practices, I believe my primary job will be to build a collection that supports the work of teachers in their reading instruction. That will mean an extensive supplemental collection of good novels and nonfiction, at all grade levels and in many genres, to be used in large group instruction. It will mean collaboration with teachers, so that I can help them incorporate literature into their curriculum in new and exciting ways, both in reading lessons and across other content areas. Increasingly, it will also mean searching out easily decodable literature for the youngest readers, in addition to other texts that meet the needs of each ability level.

If I were to find myself in a school where basal readers were the focus of reading instruction, I would feel it part of my job to slowly introduce the benefits of using a literature-based approach to teachers through collaboration and gentle persuasion. I would offer articles such as Daniels, Zemelman, and Bizar (1999) as an introduction to the research in support of literature-based instruction. I would attempt to entice the teacher with ideas of how several academic standards could be met at once using literature across the curriculum. Especially given the findings that teachers need not abandon their basal reading textbooks completely, gradual change would certainly be feasible.

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