

THE REALITIES OF TEACHING READING

IN TODAY'S CLASSROOMS

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(Master of Education Research In Progress)

Paper presented to the

Australian Association for Research in Education

Perth

November 1993

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by

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an outline of the descriptive research in which I am currently engaged, for my Master of Education. In addition, some of the early findings are presented and discussed. The aims of the research were to conduct an in-depth examination of the teaching@reading strategies used by primary teachers; the reasons teachers gave for their choices of teaching@reading strategies; and the factors they identified as having significantly öinfluenced their beliefs about reading and their öpedagogical reading practice. The primary sources of data were interviews and video@taped lessons. Data analysis to date has revealed that a diverse range of teaching™reading strategies were practised. There were also signs of emerging trends in some of the areas examined, such as the influence of recent, widespread, professional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

While engaged in a period of frequent relief teaching, I became aware that a variety of the teaching@reading strategies being used in schools. This informal observation led to the desire to investigate, more formally, the teaching@reading strategies being used by Perth teachers. I also wanted to find out what caused teachers to choose their particular strategies. This further led to a desire to identify the significant factors which had influenced teachers' beliefs (theoretical orientations) and pedagogic practice. I therefore sought to answer the following questions:

(1) What teaching@reading strategies are currently practised

by teachers?

(2) What reasons are given by teachers for their choices of teaching@reading strategies?

(3) What factors affect teachers' teaching reading practice?

(4) What are the significant sources of influence on practising teachers?

2. BACKGROUND

An examination of the literature in areas relevant to the research included literature on teachers' choices of teaching@reading strategies, factors related to teaching reading, the relationship between teachers' practice and their theoretical beliefs, influences on teachers, and research methodology. The following represents a sample of some of the literature examined in these areas.

Within the broad area of school@based learning situations, there are an unlimited number of ways in which teachers may choose to provide a learning environment. Their choice of methods of teaching a subject, for example reading, may be influenced by many factors including their own experiences as a child, their tertiary studies and/or work@based factors. Traditionally, however, many

researchers have found that teachers' choices of teaching@reading strategies are influenced by their beliefs about what reading is, how it occurs, and the reasons for reading (Cambourne, 1979; DeFord, 1979, 1981, 1985; Harste and Burke, 1977; Lipson and Wixson, 1991; Weaver, 1980).

More recently, however, the teaching of reading and writing have been seen as changing according to a number of factors, including the text, the content, culture, context, purpose, class and gender (Furniss and Green, 1993). As a result, descriptions of the teaching of reading have necessarily become more complex.

Researchers involved in studies of teachers' theoretical beliefs about teaching reading and their practice have, in the past, often placed teachers into pre@conceived categories which related to pre™determined reading orien"tations, which they believed matched those of the teachers' (DeFord, 1979, 1981, 1985; Goodman, 1982; Kemp, 1985; Kidston, 1985; Parker, 1985; Rumelhart, 1977; Sloan and Whitehead, 1986; Smith, 1985; Weaver, 1980).

Subsequent to my reading of the literature, including that which is mentioned above, the objectives of the current study and the particular method of inquiry were developed. A conceptual map

on the nature of teaching reading also emerged. This conceptual map was a diagrammatical representation of the interaction among the likely domains of influence on teaching@reading practice, as I saw them. At the time of writing this paper, the following domains had been identified:

a)the participants' beliefs about reading or the teaching of reading (philosophy/theoretical reading orientations);

b)significant influences on, and experiences of, the participants, both his"torically and currently, about reading and the teaching of reading;

c)the factors which influence the participants, both historically and currently whether liberating or restrictive; and

d)the characteristics of the participants themselves.

The solid arrow@lines show where a domain DOES affect another, and the dotted arrow@lines show where a domain MAY exert influence on another. Time and context are seen to affect all concepts.

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3.METHOD

As this study involved observation, interpretation and description, an ethnographic style of research was adopted. The inductive nature of ethnographic research suited the exploratory nature of this research. In particular, the notion of developing a theory from observations (Harste, 1993) suited this study. Merriam and Simpson (1984) state that "many of the same techniques of ethnography are used in case studies and grounded theory studies. Case study and grounded theory approaches do not have as a major focus sociocultural interpretation and so are even more useful to educators and trainers of adults who wish to conduct exploratory research within their field of practice" (p. 95).

Participants included both male and female primary teachers who were teaching in or near the Perth metropolitan area. The sample included teachers from both government and private schools,

some of which were coeducational. At the time this paper was written ten of the twelve intended participants had been interviewed, eight had been videotaped and five had been interviewed for the final time.

The main sources of data were the interviews and the videotaped lessons. Additional data collected included participants' information sheets, teaching documents supplied by the participants and the researcher's own journal. The data directed the analysis in a similar manner to grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In addition, the data were examined in order to inform the domains and the relationships.

3.1 THE INITIAL INTERVIEWS

The initial interviews were semi-structured. The focus of the information sought was that which answered the research questions. The method of eliciting information from participants varied considerably, according to the researcher's judgement of each individual situation. In some interviews direct questions were asked; in other interviews the participants were asked to describe situations and/or imagine themselves in hypothetical situations. Sometimes the participants talked at length, providing information with little prompting. During these varied situations the researcher concentrated on ensuring that the answers to all research questions were being acquired. All other information collected, however, was examined as it may have led the study in new directions or may have been valuable, additional data.

3.2 VIDEOTAPED LESSONS

Participants were videotaped while teaching, usually for a day's continuous taping, or the equivalent time. Videotaping included language and/or reading lessons and a number of other different lesson types. The participants were invited to help judge whether the videotaped material was sufficient to provide a fairly typical sample of the way they teach reading across the curriculum. On the one occasion it was not, further videotaping was undertaken. If participants had not been given the opportunity to comment on whether the videotaped material was reasonably representative of their reading instruction, conclusions regarding the participants' teaching/reading practice would be less reliable.

3.3 FINAL INTERVIEWS

The follow-up interviews were semi-structured. They included joint viewing of parts of the videotaped lessons, as a stimulus to gain additional information and a greater understanding of the perspectives of the participants. By viewing parts of the tapes, the

participants and the researcher were able to discuss and examine exactly what had happened at a particular time, and why. These follow-up interviews were also audio-taped and transcribed.

3.4 INDEPENDENT CHECK OF INTERPRETATIONS

It is planned that data analysis will be checked by an independent expert who will examine the video tapes and transcripts of randomly selected participants. Interpretation of data and the conclusions drawn will be among areas discussed with the researcher.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis is currently under way. Although the theoretical framework provided a basis for data organisation and analysis, it is viewed as being a dynamic model, and is continually being refined, modified and extended by the data. My analysis also guided the ongoing inquiry.

In response to the research questions, some of the early findings are indicated below. Following that, other findings are discussed.

(1) What teaching-reading strategies are currently practised by participants?

In general terms, the participants used a wide variety of strategies to teach reading. While some were consciously employed, often during reading lessons, some were unconsciously used, particularly during the teaching of other subject areas. Strategies identified were too numerous to fully list here, however the variety of strategy types used is demonstrated by the following sample:

- . Discussion on meaning of texts. (7)
- . USSR/DEAR or similar. (6)
- . Use of written instructions. (5)
- . Shared Book. (4)
- . Teaching reading novel. (3)
- . Phonics drill/game related to reading. (2)
- . Round robin reading. (2)
- . One to one, teacher-pupil reading. (2)
- . Reading-related cloze. (1)
- . Collaborative reading in small groups. (1)
- . Reading-related worksheets, phonics based. (1)

(The numbers in brackets represent the numbers of participants, of the eight who have been video@taped, who used a similar strategy to the one identified)

(2) What reasons are given by participants for their choices of teaching@reading strategies?

Participants' reasons for choosing particular strategies varied from specific responses which related to particular strategies, to general responses which related to the choices of strategies ögenerally. Although a high response rate indicated that a high number öresponded in a particular way, their responses did not necessarily refer to their reading instruction generally, and may have only applied to a few particular strategies. A sample of responses follows:

- . You've got to do it this way to fit everything in. (6)
- . It's a First Steps strategy. (6)
- . It's practical. (5)
- . It's the best way I know at present. (5)
- . The children enjoy this. (4)
- . I'm happy doing this. (3)
- . It suits my assessment/records requirements. (3)
- . Children need phonics. (3)
- . Children respond well to this strategy. (2)
- . It gets good results. (2)
- . Don't know how else you'd do it. (2)
- . You can do anything to teach reading these days. (2)

(The numbers in brackets represent the numbers of participants, of

the eight who were video@taped, who responded similarly to the corresponding comment)

(3) What factors affect participants' teaching@reading practice?

- . I need to do something suited to First Steps assessment. (4)
- . The books I can access. (3)
- . The open plan design means I have to think about how noisy a strategy will be, or whether next door will be too noisy for us. (2)
- . I have to do it in parts because of timetable restrictions. (2)
- . The number of children in the class. (1)
- . The availability of blackline masters. (1)
- . The availability of an aide. (1)

(4) What are the significant sources of influence on practising participants?

- . The W.A. Ministry of Education's First Steps Program. (7)
- . Study I am doing. (3)
- . Another teacher. (2)
- . My initial training. (2)

Some additional findings have also emerged. An area of widespread influence is the W.A. Ministry of Education's new "First Steps" scheme. It appears to be well understood by participants and seems to have influenced classroom practice to some degree with most participants. The First Steps strategies seem to have been implemented in reasonably consistent ways. By comparison, some of the literacy schemes which have previously been widely in@serviced apparently left teachers confused about the theory, and the practice were applied loosely. Although this may be seen to be a positive result, one participant suggested that as a result of the way the östrategies have been so widely embraced, and the similarity in First Steps teaching strategies across year levels, both children and teachers were becoming bored with them, and they were therefore losing their appeal. This participant suggested that the situation which existed prior to the First Steps' in@servicing, where teachers all taught using their own strategies, was preferable. This was stated despite the fact that she voiced appreciation of the value of many of the strategies. This participant also suggested that the widespread adoption of First Steps' strategies was likely to reduce in time.

During the final interview, any apparent practical/theoretical inconsistencies were discussed, and usually resolved. The different uses and interpretations of some terms, such as "whole language" accounted for most of the differences. On one occasion there was an apparent inconsistency between a participant's beliefs and the strategies she used. This was resolved when the participant, while explaining her teaching style, recognised the mis@match and reflected on her beliefs. This reflection resulted in the participant modifying her stated beliefs. This öparticipant believed that her current choices of strategies were more practical and enjoyable for teachers and students than those östrategies which she believed were more suited to her theoretical orientation, and those which she had used, by preference, in the past. By deciding that her current, modified strategies were probably better anyway, the participant's beliefs themselves may have undergone change, possibly as an indirect result of the influence of the study.

Almost all participants so far have some similar general reading education aims, such as the intention that children should be able to recognise text and attribute appropriate meaning to it. The way the aims were achieved is what tended to differ greatly. Two quite

different teaching@reading approaches became apparent. They involved either the teaching of reading in isolation, as a subject in itself; or teaching reading during lessons on other subject areas. So far, two subjects were found to have taught reading primarily as a separate subject, and six taught reading concurrently with other subjects.

Clarification of participants' theoretical orientations was sometimes aided when participants' beliefs about early reading instruction were considered in relation to the "top@down/bottom@up" continuum (Sloan and Whitehead, 1986). Although participants fairly readily classified themselves as being more closely aligned to one or the other of the extremes, all participants to date have included some features of teaching which is suggestive of both approaches, although to different extents. The willingness and ease with which most participants applied the terminology "top@down" and "bottom@up" to their own teaching possibly related to the widespread exposure those terms have received in Western Australia over the last ten years. Despite the researcher's initial intention to avoid using previously constructed categories, discussion about these theoretical positions was seen as useful, on many occasions, for provoking thoughtful responses.

This study gains strength and creditability from the way that the participants were voluntary, willing subjects whose beliefs and practices were examined intensely in pursuit of a valid conceptual model. The extent to which the model would be applicable to a wider sample could be the subject of a future study.

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