

Implementing a Workshop Approach to Reading
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Abstract

Implementing a workshop approach to reading instruction presents many challenges for classroom teachers. These challenges come from external pressures such as high stakes testing, administrative edicts and peer pressures. They are also generated internally from lack of experience with instructional resources, variety of student experiences, and narrow definitions of reading and reading instruction.

Introduction

In the neo-conservative backlash we currently find ourselves in as literacy educators (Taxel, 1999), instructional approaches that include children's literature in the elementary reading curriculum, commonly referred to as literature based instruction (Raphael & Au, 1997) or reading workshops (Atwell, 1998), are being challenged by current federal legislation and its support for scientifically-based commercial reading programs (e.g. Open Court, Direct Instruction). Teachers implementing workshop approaches, utilizing children's literature as a primary resource for instruction, are coming under fire to provide scientifically-based reading research to support their instructional choices. (Patel Stevens, 2003; Yatvin, Weaver, & Garan, 2003).

Proponents of code-based approaches to reading instruction have suggested that literature-based approaches push the teaching of phonics and reading skills to the periphery of the reading program (Foorman, Francis, & Fletcher, 1998). In addition, the inclusion of systematic, explicit phonics instruction in a reading workshop or balanced approach has been touted as the answer to the current "literacy crisis" in America's schools (Meyer, 2002).

Considering the political nature of the current debates in reading instruction and what constitutes scientifically-based research (Allington, 2002; Garan, 2002), literacy educators need to be concerned with more than the quality and breadth of the research used to support instructional decisions and programs. Literacy educators and classroom teachers also need to be concerned with the characteristics and abilities of the readers developed and supported in schools, the quality of the conversations among children and teachers, and the effects of standards and standardized assessments on the reading curriculum (Eisner, 2001; Noddings, 1997).

With a shift in the political climate aligning to more conservative values and the rapid expansion of high stakes testing (McGill-Franzen, 2000), the role of children's literature may be reduced to an instructional device designed to teach children how to decode more effectively and identify the main idea of a reading selection in order to secure higher scores on standardized tests. Responding to political pressures, elementary teachers are being forced to adopt reading instructional practices and commercial reading programs that focus on decoding and comprehension strategies designed to raise standardized test scores, rather than utilizing children's literature in a workshop approach to reading instruction (Putney, Green, Dixon, & Kelly, 1999).

A workshop approach to reading instruction generally includes, but is not limited to, the reading and discussion of authentic children's literature, the teaching of comprehension strategies in the context of reading, opportunities for students to read and explore texts independently, small group literature studies, shared and guided reading instruction, and instruction for decoding text (Serafini, 2001). Several of these components, in particular reading aloud and time for independent reading, were not directly supported by the findings of the National Reading Panel (*Report of the national reading panel: Teaching children to read*, 1999), to the extent that instruction in decoding and comprehension strategies was supported. Because of this, many teachers have been challenged to provide evidence in order to defend a workshop approach to reading instruction by school administrators, and state and federal authorities.

In this article, I will discuss various challenges to implementing what I have described as a workshop approach to reading instruction. These challenges have been offered by in-service and pre-service teachers during literacy workshops, college courses, and interviews conducted in association with the implementation of Nevada Reading Excellence Act. The teachers interviewed were taking classes as part of the federally funded Reading Excellence Act. In Nevada, the Nevada Reading Excellence Act paid for the course work and training of two literacy specialists for each school that qualified for funding under the requirements of the grant. These literacy specialists in training were supported through the grant to take classes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in literacy education, assessment, and instruction.

In addition to describing the various challenges offered by classroom teachers, I will describe some possible resolutions to these challenges in the hope that teachers will find ways to implement a workshop approach to reading instruction during these troubling times. The various challenges offered by classroom teachers can be loosely categorized as external challenges, those that are imposed from outside the classroom, and internal challenges, those challenges involved with teachers' professional development and instructional decisions.

External Challenges

Many of the challenges of implementing a workshop approach to reading instruction come from entities outside the classroom. Challenges levied through political mandates and testing programs, and by administrators, parents and peers, were all indicated by teachers during interviews and professional development workshops. Approximately, eighty teachers, most of them with at least five years experience as a classroom teacher, were interviewed and surveyed through their course work in becoming a literacy specialist. In response to these challenges, some teachers gave up their workshop approaches and followed the lessons included in mandated commercial programs, while others closed their doors and tried to hide what they were doing from their administrators. Other teachers indicated they were trying to educate their administration about the importance of workshop approaches, or lobbying their local district officials for more choice in their instructional approaches by providing evidence of the effectiveness of components of a reading workshop. In spite of these efforts, teachers seem to have little voice in the decision making process concerning the reading instructional approaches they will be allowed to implement.

High Stakes Testing

Undoubtedly, the most common challenge offered by teachers implementing a workshop approach to reading instruction in their classrooms is the pressure associated with raising students' scores on high stakes, standardized testing. Teachers frequently ask, "How do we prepare students for standardized tests if we don't teach to the test during reading instruction?" Many teachers perceived a disconnect between instruction for test preparation and instruction for reading in the world.

While many of the skills and strategies necessary for readers to be successful on standardized tests are also necessary for readers to be successful in a workshop approach, other reading skills, for example, finding a main idea or sequencing elements of the story plot, may not be emphasized in a workshop approach. Because of these distinct contexts, it may be more effective to separate the teaching of skills for standardized tests from the instruction in the reading workshop. In other words, rather than teaching reading as a single cognitive operation that can be applied universally to poetry, newspapers, novels and test passages alike, teaching standardized test passages as a separate genre, in the same manner we would teach poetry different from expository texts may help readers be more successful in both contexts (Santman, 2002).

It is important that teachers call students' attention to the structures and elements of this unique "standardized test genre". Deconstructing the elements and structures of standardized tests require teachers to make elements of these tests explicit so students can attend to these elements and be successful on these standardized measures (McCabe, 2003).

Administrative Pressures

In today's public schools, administrators are under tremendous pressures to raise test scores and produce evidence that their school is not leaving any children "behind." Some administrators do not support workshop approaches to reading instruction, preferring instead the implementation of commercial reading programs and scripted lesson formats in order to insure uniformity and control over instructional practices (Ohanian, 1999). In contrast, in a workshop approach all literacy lessons are not scripted out in advance, nor are they contained in a teacher's manual. This lack of control over the content and sequence of literacy lessons in a workshop approach concerns many administrators that feel having all children working on the same thing at the same time will ensure quality instructional experiences (Eisner, 2001).

In light of the growing implementation of scripted instructional programs, it is important to educate administrators about workshop approaches that support developing readers. Administrators have the right to know why teachers are using particular instructional approaches; however, the responsibility falls on teachers to defend their instructional practices and provide a rationale and evidence of the effectiveness of their instructional decisions. Unfortunately, if the only way to defend reading instructional practices is through narrowly defined reading research or increases in standardized test scores, teachers may have a difficult time defending their instructional decisions.

Many administrators have not read the same professional materials that literacy educators have, nor have many of them taken classes or attended workshops and

conferences that focus on reading instruction. Because of this, reading teachers need to be able to articulate the theoretical foundations for their instructional practices, explain how they address any mandated curriculum standards and testing requirements, and demonstrate why they organize their instructional approaches the way they do.

Parental Expectations

Parents want to see classroom environments and instructional approaches that remind them of the types of experiences they remember when they were in school (Newkirk, 1991). Unless teachers learn to demonstrate and adequately explain why a workshop approach is superior to the instruction these parents experienced, parents will not support how teachers are teaching. Providing parents with a series of opportunities to help them understand contemporary instructional approaches, through parent nights and teacher conferences, help parents see the value in what teachers are doing. Continuous reporting of student progress and well-planned parent interactions can help parents see the value in a workshop approach. To be successful in doing this, teachers need to talk to parents in jargon-free language and model for them what their children will experience throughout the school day. Connecting what parents experienced with what teachers are doing in reading workshops, explaining the differences and helping parents understand the instruction their children will experience, will help teachers garner parental support.

Internal Challenges

Some of the biggest challenges offered by teachers to implementing a reading workshop approach are the lack of professional development opportunities that address the use of children's literature, inadequate resources and instructional materials, a limited knowledge base in reading processes and literary theory, and the wide variety of experiences and abilities that students bring to school. As teachers work to implement a reading workshop, they need professional support to address the continuing challenges of using literature and developing instructional experiences in the workshop. With so much money in school districts going to training in particular commercial reading programs or for purchasing basal anthologies and consumable worksheets, there is little left over for the purchase of children's literature or professional development opportunities. Teachers are being trained how to follow a commercial program, but they are not being given time and support for learning about the processes of reading, children's literature and how to support the readers in their classrooms.

Lack of Experience with Children's Literature

Because course work in children's literature is not a requirement in many states and teacher education programs, a significant number of teachers attempting a workshop approach to reading instruction don't have enough knowledge of children's literature to know what is available or how to use the resources they are given (Hoewisch, 2000). Teachers using literature as their primary resource for teaching reading need to keep abreast of current publications in the children's literature market. For many teachers, a refresher course in children's literature would enhance their ability to teach in a

workshop approach. In addition, spending some Saturday mornings in a local children's book store reading new books and revisiting classic texts would be beneficial.

In addition to experience with children's literature, teachers need to read and discuss professional articles and publications that focus on literary theory, children's literature and reading workshop. Opportunities for teachers to discuss literary devices, analyze the elements in the art and design of picture books, investigate the interplay between illustrations and text and begin to understand how readers construct meaning in transaction with the literature they read will support their instructional decisions in a reading workshop (McGee & Tompkins, 1995).

Definitions of Reading and Reading Comprehension

Whether teachers acknowledge it or not, their beliefs and theoretical understandings about reading and learning to read will affect how they teach (Dias, 1992). Until teachers are able to put aside outdated theoretical models and understandings of the reading process, the changes made in instructional practices will be largely cosmetic. Just because teachers are utilizing children's literature in their reading instruction does not mean they have changed their theoretical understandings.

The basalization of literature (Shannon & Goodman, 1994) refers to the process of treating children's literature in the same manner as a scripted lesson from the teacher's manual. Requiring chapter quizzes, asking students literal recall questions and searching for a single, main idea in every book are based on a modernist theory of reading and meaning (Elkind, 1997). Until there is a parallel shift in theoretical understandings that accompanies the changes in instructional resources, there will be little changes in how reading is defined, taught and assessed (Serafini, 2003).

Varying Levels of Student Experience

Teachers often lament about the wide variety of experiences, abilities and interests that their students bring to their classrooms. However, this concern is one of the primary reasons for implementing a workshop approach to reading instruction. A workshop approach is more responsive to the needs of individual children, disregarding the "one-size-fits-all" approach of many commercial materials. In workshop approaches, the teacher is seen as a decision maker, conducting lessons and creating learning experiences based on the needs of the readers in their class. Having all students working in the same book at the same time is about control and comfort, not effective teaching. Workshop approaches allow readers to choose from a wide variety of texts. Teachers can address individual needs based on readers' abilities, experiences and needs.

Research has suggested that addressing students' individual needs is an important aspect of effective reading instruction (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Although this may challenge teachers' traditional notions of reading instruction, forcing them to work in guided reading groups and individually with readers, the research is overwhelmingly in favor of individualizing instruction to meet the needs of all learners (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Teachers need to put aside instructional practices that have been shown to be ineffective.

Concluding Remarks

The National Reading Panel (Report of the national reading panel: Teaching children to read, 1999) makes specific recommendations about decoding and comprehension instruction, but does not state that a workshop approach to reading instruction is ineffective or should be abandoned. While particular educators and administrators have tried to interpret the report as mandating scripted lessons and programs, members of the panel have been adamant in their position that they did not endorse particular programs in the report (Garan, 2002).

The document stresses the importance of decoding and explicit instruction in word level strategies, but does not suggest that this should entail the entire reading program. A workshop approach does not suggest the teacher sit back and let students learn to read by simply spending time with quality literature. Instructional decisions are made by teachers to address the needs of the students in their classrooms, rather than coming from a commercial program. In the hands of a quality teacher, basals and instructional materials become resources to use, rather than a series of lessons to be read aloud.

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