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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to develop an improved program of teacher education in diagnosis of reading difficulties in a graduate reading practicum. Fifteen teachers in the pilot study worked with one or two students daily for 6 weeks. The pilot study offered some indication that teachers' preservice and inservice experiences may have emphasized mechanical procedures and failed to prepare them adequately for the roles of problem solver and educational decision maker. The program objectives remained the same for the second year, but efforts increased to prepare the new cohort of eight teacher-participants for ethnographic data collection. Results of the second year study indicated the following results: (1) teachers needed and requested guidance in observing, recording, and interpreting children's reading behaviors; (2) prior teaching and learning experiences had greater transfer and impact on teacher's observations than textbooks or lectures; (3) affective components of reading dominated teachers' observations; (4) concept of problem solving by trial teaching was unfamiliar to the subjects; (5) video taped lessons may be more useful to teachers when the instructor first demonstrates observation and problem-solving techniques in a non-threatening situation; (6) courses for preservice teachers should provide specific instruction and carefully sequenced opportunities for practical experience in observation skills and collaborative problem solving; and (7) teachers must be given opportunities for problem solving and decision making, not only in undergraduate and graduate education, but in their daily work in the schools. (Two tables of data are included.) (MG)

Observing Reading Behaviors: A Learned Skill

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There are a number of reasons why preservice teachers, and even experienced teachers, need guidance and practice in the observation of children's reading behaviors. First, newer techniques in reading/language assessment, variously called naturalistic, continuous, and ethnographic assessement, rely heavily upon observation or "kid watching" (Goodman 1978, Marzano 1987). Also, the teacher-as-researcher movement is a growing phenomenon. An assumption behind both trends is that the teacher will be adept at observing and recording relevant data.

Naturalistic assessment and the teacher-as-researcher are both powerful ideas for the improvement of teaching, for more valid reading assessment, and certainly, for the empowerment of teachers as problem solvers and educational decision makers. For example, teachers who are perceptive and skilled observers can begin to break away from the bondage of standardized testing. A third area of professional growth accompanying the teacher-observer experience is that the teacher begins to question educational assumptions, and eventually, expands in understanding of reading and learning processes (Clay 1982).

That teachers automatically know what and how to observe, however, cannot be taken for granted. This article discusses a two-year descriptive study of 22 teachers in a graduate reading practicum, some of the pitfalls they encountered in their initial attempts at observing and recording reading behaviors, and offers suggestions for assisting inservice and preservice teachers in learning to collect relevant data through observation.

Naturalistic Assessment Rationale

The purpose of the study was to develop an improved program of teacher education in diagnosis of reading difficulties in the graduate reading practicum. Research findings pertaining to the nature of reading clearly point out the inadequacies of traditional assessment techniques based upon the skill-deficit model (Valencia and Pearson 1987). Marzano, et al. (1987) stated that the skill-deficit model of reading disabilities, which was popular in university remedial reading programs in the past, is based on the premise that reading diagnosis is ". . . a linear process of giving tests, interpreting results, and prescribing instruction." In this model comprehension is viewed as a product, and diagnosis yields deficits, labels, and grade levels (Glazer and Searfoss 1987).

Today, reading is regarded as a totality, greater than a sum of its parts, and a complex process of individual strategies to construct meaning (Carbo 1987). Reading comprehension is considered a process; and diagnosis is tentative, based upon observation and trial teaching, in addition to objective data (Glazer and Searfoss 1987).

Ethnographic assessment, a term used here synonymously with naturalistic assessment, complements current theories of reading in several ways. First, it occurs in naturalistic and authentic reading-writing-language processing activities. If reading is a process of constructing meaning for text, ethnographic assessment provides a window to the child's strategies for constructing meaning (Valencia and Pearson 1987). Second, it overcomes many of the disadvantages of current standardized tests, e.g., that the passages are too short to be adequate stories; and therefore, students are denied opportunities to use their knowledge of passage structure for constructing meaning (Baker and Stein 1978, Carr 1983). Also, the teacher who observes in a natural reading task is able to determine the extent of a student's background

knowledge of the topic and ability to apply prior knowledge, important factors in reading assessment (Wittrock 1987).

Finally, naturalistic assessment is not a one-time case study, in contrast to the traditional or clinical model. Instead, it is a continual process of data collection, hypothesis generation, trial teaching, and new hypothesis generation (Glazer & Searfoss 1987).

Pilot Program Description

Teachers in the pilot study worked with one or two elementary- or adolescent-age students 60 minutes daily for six weeks. Daily objectives were, among others, that the children would enjoy stories while listening to a fluent oral reading model, read connected text, express ideas orally and in connected writing, develop metacognitive comprehension strategies (through modeling and direct instruction), participate in language experience, structural linguistic and shared reading experiences, and in activities to promote critical and creative thinking, progress in skill development and application (principally through content), and finally, to make frequent trips to the library to select books for informational and pleasure reading. These experiences were designed not only for the children's benefit, but also to create opportunities for the teachers to interact with them and to enable teachers to observe relevant reading behaviors.

Teachers in the practicum were instructed to maintain daily logs in which they briefly described the lesson or task and the results in terms of student reaction and reading behaviors. It was expected that these observations would form the basis for problem solving and for any decisions to administer formal tests of reading, language and cognitive development. Little guidance was given in what and how to observe; rather, the intent was for the graduate students to discover important aspects of reading behavior through group and discussion and problem solving in which the instructor was a participant. Bailey et al. (1988) described a similar attempt in a

reading practicum in an article which she aptly called, "Problem Solving Our Way to Alternative Evaluation Procedures."

Results of the Pilot Study

The results of initial attempts at naturalistic assessment using observation logs were somewhat frustrating for teachers; although, fortunately, the experiences for children in the practicum were highly successful. As experienced teachers, they were very good at writing lesson plans, motivating students, and teaching; but, they seemed insecure in observation of children and problem solving. They lacked facility in knowing what and how to observe, and how to document and interpret the findings.

Notations in the logs were analyzed and classified as to the following types: (1) affective reactions, including attitude toward reading, cooperation, interests, self-concept, learning style preferences, and attention span; (2) passage comprehension, including accuracy of recall, metacognitive strategies; (3) schemata or prior knowledge, which included any reference to student's background experiences or general information; (4) use of story structure; (5) oral reading fluency; (6) sight vocabulary; (7) word attack skills; (8) concepts of print (9) linguistic competence, including listening vocabulary (receptive), oral language competence (expressive), and sentence comprehension. There were three other categories of observations, (10) references to trial teaching; (11) references, based upon observations, to need for further testing of a specific type; e.g., "Vocabulary seems limited; follow up with a listening vocabulary test;" and (12) a miscellaneous category for any comments that seemed relevant to the diagnosis, but could not be otherwise classified.

The mean frequencies of observations in each category are shown in Table 1. affective reactions and sight vocabulary lead the observations, followed by comprehension, and oral reading fluency.

The pilot study offered some indication that teachers' preservice and inservice experiences may have emphasized mechanical procedures, and failed to prepare them adequately for the roles of problem solver and educational decision maker. That teachers were frustrated with the experience in which they were to decide what and how to observe, and make decisions based upon their observations is reflected in the comment of one teacher, "I just wish you would *tell* us what to do!"

The first logs were primarily lesson plans with few comments or interpretations of children's reactions. However, the content of the logs changed somewhat over the six-week period of observation and working with children, a fact attributed to feedback from the instructor, informal discussion among cohorts in the class, and increased insight into the reading process (Clay 1982).

Second Year of the Study

The program objectives remained the same for the second year of the study, but efforts increased to prepare the new cohort of teacher-participants for ethnographic data collection. Three major changes in the program involved (1) informing teachers of the categories for classifying observation logs, (2) the frequent video taping and playback of lessons to facilitate observational skills, and (3) effort to increase collaboration and small group problem solving.

A visual inspection of the means and rankings in the Tables reveals little change in rankings of the spontaneous observations and records of teachers. Regardless of the treatment, certain categories of behaviors were observed with high frequency, while others were seldom noted.

During the course of six weeks, the observation logs for most individual teachers appeared to change markedly from the initial attempts to the final weeks of observation. This result was again attributed to the roles of feedback, group problem

solving, and the fact that understanding of reading expands through the process of observing, and possibly, the video taping.

The greater structure of the second year, e.g., listing the categories of observations, seemed to reduce teacher frustration. The video taping, however, was not popular, even though teachers became more confident with experience and with the reassurance that the tapes were for their personal viewing and not used to evaluate their teaching.

Discussion

This was a descriptive study in which data were collected systematically; however, there was no experimental design and no attempt to control variables. The subjects were all experienced teachers, predominantly from rural areas of a midwestern state. There were 15 in the pilot study and 8 the second year, and only two were male teachers. All were pursuing masters in education degrees and had recently taken the prerequisite course, Diagnosis and Remediation of Reading Difficulties. In this course the major activity and source of student involvement was the administration and interpretation of an informal reading inventory (IRI). Otherwise, it was largely a "read-about," lecture/discussion course that emphasized the linguistic bases of reading, the top-down model, naturalistic assessment and the examination and interpretation of standardized tests. The study took place in the next course, a practicum in which students applied prior learning in their work with children who had reading difficulties.

Conclusions

Given the limitations of the study, the following conclusions may be warranted; although, generalizing of conclusions to a larger population should be undertaken with caution.

1. Teachers in the study needed and requested guidance in observing, recording, and interpreting children's reading behaviors.

2. Prior teaching and learning experiences, and the effects of the hands-on administration of an IRI, appeared to have greater transfer and impact on teachers' observations than textbooks or lectures on the linguistic aspects of reading.

3. The affective components of reading, e.g., children's attitudes, behavior, and self-esteem, dominated the teachers's observations, both in the pilot study and the second year attempt to influence skills in observing reading.

4. The concept of problem solving by trial teaching, i.e., trying more than one teaching method, activity, or type of material to see which way a child learns best, and selecting tests to administer on the basis of observed need, was unfamiliar to the subjects, although mentioned with increasing frequency in the second year.

5. While the data did not appear to be strongly in support of the video taping and group collaboration interventions, that does not warrant the conclusion that they were ineffective procedures.

Video taped lessons may be more useful to teachers when the instructor first demonstrates observation and problem-solving techniques in a non-threatening situation using taped lessons from the past. Increasing the time and efforts to facilitate collaboration and group problem solving among the practicum cohorts, while providing some degree of structure, may yet pay dividends.

6. Given the efforts necessary for experienced teachers to become efficient "kid watchers," the implications are that courses for preservice teachers should provide specific instruction and carefully sequenced opportunities for practical experience in observation skills and collaborative problem solving.

7. Finally, the results of the study imply that teachers must be given opportunities for problem solving and decision making, not only in undergraduate

and graduate education, but in their daily work in the schools, if they are to be prepared adequately for the roles of problem solver and educational decision maker.

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Table 1

Mean Frequencies of Observations

Categories of Observations	Pilot Study	2nd Year Study
Affective Reactions	12.1	20.0
Passage Comprehension	9.7	9.0
Schemata, Prior Knowledge	4.1	3.0
Story Structure	2.0	3.0
Oral Reading Fluency	9.1	8.0
Sight Vocabulary	11.1	7.0
Word Attack Skills	6.3	5.0
Concepts of Print	4.8	6.0
Linguistic Competence	6.9	5.0
Trial Teaching	.5	3.0
Basis for Further Testing	0	2.0
Miscellaneous	2.0	5.0

Table 2

Rankings by Percentage of Behaviors Observed

Pilot Study	Percent	Second Year	Percent
Affective Reactions	17.63	Affective Reactions	11.84
Sight Vocabulary	16.18	Passage Comprehension	11.84
Passage Comprehension	14.4	Oral Reading Fluency	10.53
Oral Reading Fluency	13.26	Sight Vocabulary	9.21
Linguistic Competence	10.15	Concepts of Print	7.89
Word Attack Skills	9.18	Linguistic Competence	6.59
Concepts of Print	6.99	Word Attack Skills	6.59
Schemata	5.98	Miscellaneous	6.59
Story Structure	2.92	Story Structure	3.95
Miscellaneous	2.92	Schemata	3.95
Trial Teaching	.07	Trial Teaching	3.95
Basis for Further Testing	2.92	Basis for Further Testing	2.63