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ABSTRACT

A study examined teachers' views about the role of children's literature in reading instruction, how teachers use literature in classroom reading programs, and the congruence between teacher beliefs and teacher practice concerning literature-based reading instruction. Surveys were sent to a representative sample of 1,000 teachers in Ohio (200 from each of the grades 1 through 5; 350 teachers completed the survey. A stratified random sample of nine teachers was chosen from those who indicated on the survey that they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview and classroom observation. Results indicated that: (1) teachers, when using children's literature, have not changed their stance toward reading instruction but rather have adapted their basal teaching structure to literature-based instruction; and (2) teachers placed less emphasis on such areas as the elements of literature, the wholeness of text, or the craft of the writer and focused more on how literature supported other curricular areas. Findings suggest that teachers' definitions of literature-based reading emphasized materials and resources rather than a philosophical or theoretical orientation toward literature or literacy. (RS)

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Literacy and Literature in Elementary Classrooms: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Running Head: Literacy and Literature

Literacy and Literature in Elementary Classrooms: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

One of the recent major trends in literacy instruction is "literature-based reading" (Cullinan, 1989; Honig, 1988). While researchers have described various models for literature-based reading (Hiebert & Colt, 1989) and have presented the perceptions and practices of individual teachers (Scharer, 1992; Zarrillo, 1989), few have explored how teachers interpret literature-based reading instruction on a wider scale. Results from our initial research, "Children's Literature and Literacy Instruction: Elementary Teachers' Beliefs and Practices" (Lehman, Freeman, & Allen, 1992), of a select group of teachers already committed to the use of literature raised the following concerns: Do teachers have an underlying theoretical framework about literature-based reading instruction? What knowledge bases do teachers draw upon regarding literacy and literature? What stance do teachers have towards literature and its use in the classroom? To increase our understanding of literature-based reading instruction as it is carried out in urban, rural, small city, and suburban elementary classrooms at a range of grade levels, we replicated our earlier study on a state-wide basis.

Ohio is a particularly good site for a study on literature-based reading. For over 10 years an annual international children's literature conference attended by 2,000 people has been held in the state capital; regional children's literature conferences are sponsored annually by universities and professional

organizations; and, like many other states, a new state Model Competency-Based Language Arts Program emphasizes the use of children's literature.

The present state-wide study examined three questions that highlighted teachers' beliefs, their practices, and the relationship between the two in the area of literature-based literacy. (1) What are teachers' views about the role of children's literature in reading instruction? (2) How do teachers use literature in their classroom reading programs? (3) What is the congruence between teacher beliefs and teacher practice concerning literature-based reading instruction?

Method

Data for this investigation were gathered in two phases. Phase 1 of the project consisted of a survey providing quantitative information about teachers' perceptions and practices. During Phase 2 of the study, qualitative data were collected in the classrooms of a sample of teachers to validate teachers' self-reports of practices and their congruence with teachers' stated beliefs.

Phase 1

A two-part questionnaire was designed by the researchers to assess teacher perceptions of literature-based reading instruction and to identify related classroom practices. The teacher perception component of the questionnaire was modeled after the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (DeFord, 1985) and included 12 items to which teachers responded using a 5-point

Likert scale. The second component, instructional practices, was patterned after an instrument to survey practices in writing instruction (Freeman, 1989) and consisted of forced-choice questions as well as questions where multiple responses were possible. The questionnaire was pilot-tested and modified (with assistance from a consultant with expertise in survey instruments) based upon the preliminary results.

This survey instrument was sent to a sample of 1,000 teachers in Ohio, 200 each in grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Participants were selected from a stratified random sample of diverse types of school districts in the state (large, small, urban, rural, suburban). The sample was stratified from a complete listing of schools in the state provided by the state department of education. Three hundred and fifty teachers completed the survey.

Phase 2

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview and classroom observation from which a stratified random sample of nine teachers was selected. The interviews probed specific issues in more depth and were structured around three general areas: teachers' knowledge and understanding about children's literature, how they make instructional decisions, and how they assess children's growth. The interviews were tape recorded and field notes were taken. Classroom observations, guided by a checklist, focused on the literacy/literature environments. Slides were taken to capture this information visually. In addition, selected artifacts of

teacher-created planning materials and children's literature-related work were collected to provide further supportive information.

Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using several procedures. For each item, the percentage of responses was determined; means also were calculated for those items where appropriate. Respondent characteristics (teaching location, years of experience, grade level) were used as variables in computing analyses of variance. In addition, a canonical discriminant analysis was computed to determine the congruence between teacher beliefs and practices for the questionnaire. This technique provided insight regarding whether beliefs predicted which practice was used and which of the beliefs might be most related to the use of a particular practice.

Data from the nine interviews and observations first were content analyzed by examining the categories developed for the structured interview and the observation checklist. The second stage of the qualitative analysis was data driven. During multiple readings of the nine teachers' interviews, observations, and surveys, five continua emerged that reflected both diversity and similarity across the nine teachers. Data for each teacher then were coded according to the following five constructs (see Table 1): structure vs. non-structure; literacy vs. literary; outside

Insert Table 1 about here

decisions vs. teacher decisions; teacher-centered vs. child-centered; and, cognitive vs. affective. Data from four of the nine teachers were independently analyzed by each researcher, and differences in coding were resolved through discussion to establish interrater reliability.

Results

Results from the analysis of 350 surveys will first be discussed followed by findings from interview and observational data collected in nine classrooms.

Major Trends From Survey Results

Of the 350 public school teachers who returned the survey, 55% had taught 15 years or more while only 4% had taught less than four years. Almost one-fourth of the respondents (23.7%) were 1st grade teachers. In terms of teaching location, 36.26% of the respondents identified their school as rural, 29.82% as suburban, 18.71% as small city, and 15.20% as urban.

In the beliefs section of the questionnaire, teachers demonstrated strong agreement on several items. Seventy-seven percent of the teachers strongly agree or agree that "children's literature should be the primary component of a reading/language arts program" and that "it is important for schools to have a suggested list of children's books by grade level." Some items where teachers demonstrated strong agreement also were characterized by a large percentage of respondents who indicated that they were undecided. For instance, while 68% strongly agreed or agreed that "it is more important for children to read widely

than to engage in an in-depth study of one book," 20% were undecided about this issue. Similarly, while 53% indicated that "there are certain books that every child should read," 26% were undecided.

On other items, there was wide discrepancy in teachers' beliefs. These items included whether "teachers should develop their own literature programs rather than relying on published programs," whether "children should learn how to analyze books by their literature elements," and whether "children's literature should be studied using a structured, sequential curriculum." Responses to these items varied along the entire continuum from strongly agree to strongly disagree with more than 25% of respondents choosing the neutral or undecided option.

In terms of instructional practices, teachers were remarkably similar in several areas. More than 80% of the teachers report that their students have positive attitudes toward reading, that they read aloud to their class at least once a day, that students in their class have time to read a book of their choice daily, and that they read a wide variety of children's literature to prepare for teaching literature. Other practices elicited a variety of responses from teachers. While 18% of the respondents no longer used a basal reader in their classroom, 27% used the basal more frequently than literature. At least 20% of the teachers assigned children a specific extension activity following the reading of a book. Teachers' responses regarding how children are grouped for instruction varied the most. While 17% group students according to

reading ability, 29% do not use grouping at all, and 45% use flexible grouping dependent on the specific project or activity.

The most frequently used assessment procedures were projects/extension activities and teacher observation; the least frequently used was paper and pencil tests. However, 13.6% of all respondents do not assess literature study. Significant differences in assessment practices emerged based on teacher demographic information. Rural teachers and first grade teachers were significantly less likely to assess literature than their counterparts in other locations or grade levels. Rural teachers used reading logs/journals significantly more frequently than suburban teachers. First grade teachers used conferences and teacher observation more frequently than teachers in grades 4 and 5, who were more likely to use book reports, worksheets, and paper/pencil tests.

Teachers reported the following reasons for selecting children's books (beginning with the most frequently used reason): children's interest in the book, the literary quality of the book, curricular needs, the skills the books can be used to teach, and mandates from external forces.

Results of the canonical discriminant analysis support a significant relationship between certain teacher beliefs and practices. Analyses of variance provided information on the strength of the relationship as well as the specific nature and direction of the relationship. For example, those teachers who indicated that "students in my classroom have time to read a book

of their choice at least once a day" were likely to agree with the belief that "it is more important for children to read widely than to engage in an in-depth study of one book." Due to space constraints, a detailed discussion of these results is not possible.

Interview and Observation Results

Teachers varied considerably along the first construct of structure vs. non-structure (See Table 1). For example, Teacher A, a fifth grade teacher, had over 2,000 trade books in the classroom. However, there appeared to be limited opportunity for students to use the books. Basal reading materials were used exclusively on the first three days of each week and students read assigned novels on Thursdays and Fridays. Reading self-selected books was limited to time after students' assigned tasks were completed. Conversely, in Teacher I's classroom children had unlimited opportunities to interact with books in self-initiated ways. Desks were arranged in groups of five, and in the middle of each grouping was a "tub" filled with books for children to read. When the researcher entered the classroom, many children eagerly approached her to read books of their own choosing.

The second construct illustrates that, in general, teachers' purposes for using literature did not favor either a strong literacy or literary stance but rather clustered somewhere in the middle. There was little evidence that teachers used trade books to foster literary understandings beyond pleasure in reading. Activities related to literature were more likely to be used for

reading and writing instruction or connected to a curricular area such as science or social studies. For example, one teacher had developed "backpacks" on various topics in which were informational books, related objects and materials, suggested activities, and a response journal. Children took these "backpacks" home where they read the books and completed the activities with their parents. Overall, teachers selected trade books based on the books' appeal for their students and were consistent in their goal for students to read enjoyable books.

Third, an essential issue deals with who controls curricular and instructional decisions in the classroom: teachers themselves or factors external to teachers, such as mandated policies, teacher manuals, or courses of study. Most of the teachers did feel that the locus of control for curricular decisions rested with them. This data supports the survey results which indicated that 63% of all respondents use their own teaching guides and lesson plans and 55% either agree or strongly agree that they feel confident about teaching literature without benefit of a published program.

Classrooms varied along the fourth construct from being child-centered to being more heavily teacher-centered. A pattern emerged that displayed parallels between this construct and the amount of structure evident in these classrooms: most teachers who were highly structured had teacher-centered classrooms while child-centered classrooms tended to be less structured. One exception to this trend was Teacher B, a second grade teacher who relied heavily on the structure of a basal program, a curriculum guide, and

ability grouping of children in her class. She emphasized primarily books of authors included in the basal, and she named the basal program and other commercial materials as her favorite professional resources. But at the same time, her classroom contained prominent displays of children's literature-related artwork and writing, and she emphasized (along with most of the other teachers interviewed) the importance of child interest in her book selection.

Finally, the cognitive/affective construct refers to the emphasis teachers primarily place on selecting and using books affectively for enjoyment or cognitively as a tool to help children acquire knowledge about literature, literacy, or specific content. Seven of the nine teachers clearly took an affective stance while two teachers were more neutral. These findings expand the literary/literacy construct. Even when teachers had strong literary goals, they were expressed in terms of children's enjoyment of literature and their motivation to read books, rather than developing children's understandings of the writer's craft. Likewise, survey results indicated that 39% of the teachers identified "children's interest" as the most frequently used reason for selecting children's books.

Discussion

Several areas for discussion emerge from the results of this study. First, as with any current buzzword in education, "literature-based reading" has developed a somewhat elusive definition. To the teachers in this study, the term appears to

center on the use of specific materials and resources to teach reading, i.e. children's literature. Yet neither a consistent belief system nor set of theoretical principles seem to ground this interpretation of the term. In the survey data, large numbers of teachers were undecided on critical issues related to literacy and literature such as whether a structured, sequential curriculum should exist for literature. Results seem to indicate that teachers, when using children's literature, have not changed their stance toward reading instruction but rather have adapted their basal teaching structure to literature-based instruction.

Second, the results seem to point to a tension between the literacy-literary dichotomy. In other words, do teachers view children's literature as a means for instruction in reading or other curricular areas (literacy) or as an end in itself, studied for its own sake (literary)? In their responses, teachers seemed to place less emphasis on such areas as the elements of literature, the wholeness of text, or the craft of the writer and focused more on how literature supports other curricular areas. Such findings call for an examination of teacher knowledge regarding children's literature itself. Little research has investigated teachers' own knowledge base in children's literature and how that knowledge base affects what teachers do. For example, research is needed to answer questions such as: What criteria are used in book selection? Is literary quality a significant factor? What do teachers choose to do with the books themselves in terms of discussion, extension activities, and assessment?

Finally, this study raises several methodological issues. Which research methods are most useful to determine what teachers actually believe and practice? With a curricular trend as widespread as literature-based reading, it is critical to conduct valid and extensive research. Yet, how can researchers survey a large number of teachers and still investigate in enough depth to generate valid conclusions? The use of self-reported data is also limiting since the researcher assumes that the respondent will interpret the question as the researcher had intended and that the respondent will answer honestly. Although our survey was pilot tested, reviewed by an expert in survey methodology from a discipline other than education, and used in an earlier study, we still recognize that some of the questions may appear ambiguous. To gather data in more depth usually limits a researcher with finite funds and time to a much smaller sample which may not be representative of a wider population of teachers.

In conclusion, this study investigated how teachers interpret the term literature-based reading. We found that teachers' definitions of literature-based reading seemed to emphasize materials and resources rather than a philosophical or theoretical orientation toward literature or literacy. Much research remains to be done to determine more fully teachers' knowledge of children's literature, their stance toward the use of literature (literacy vs. literary), and their theoretical framework underpinning literature-based reading instruction.

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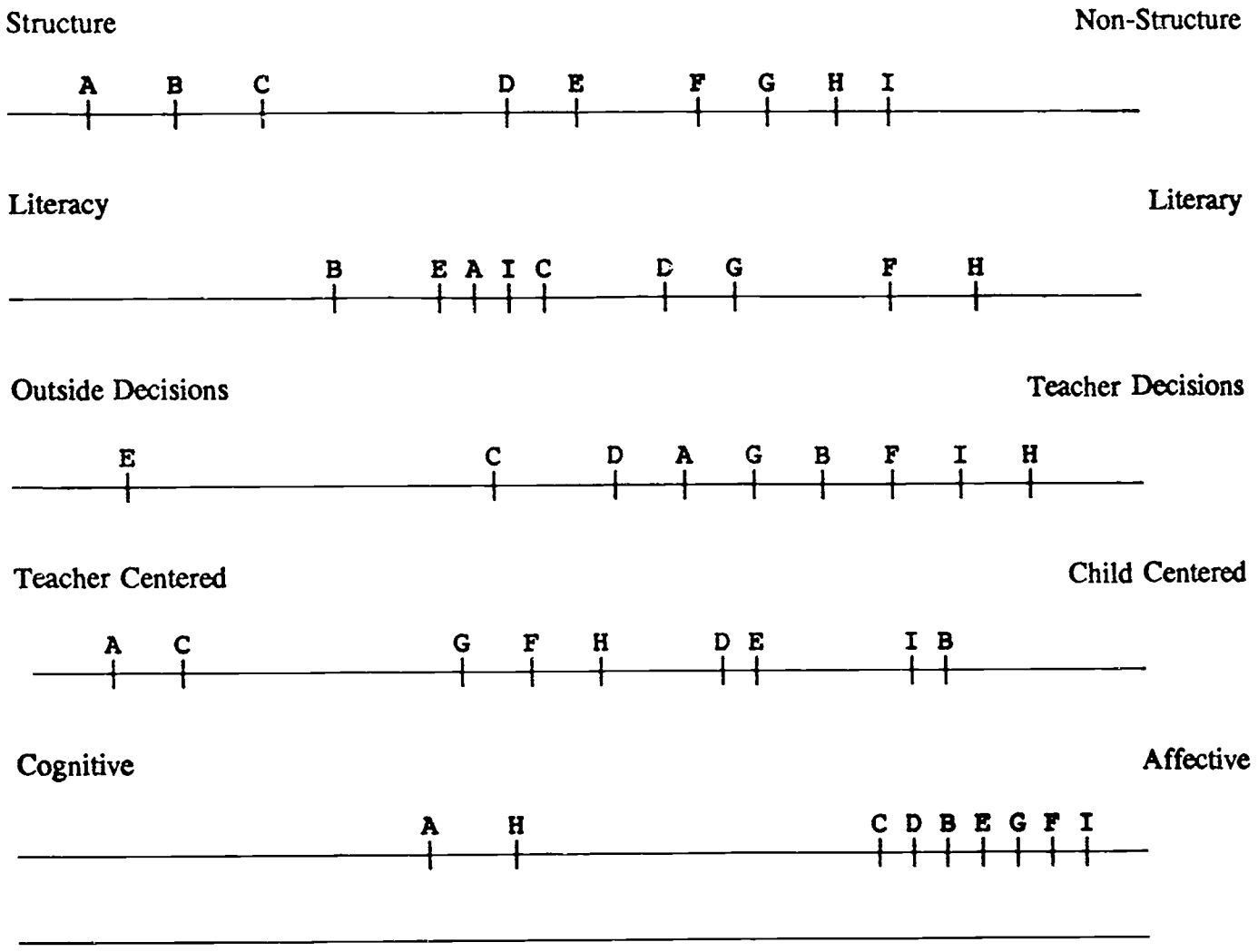
Table 1

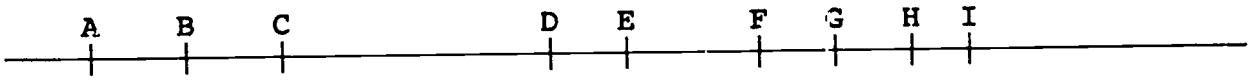
Teacher Interview Patterns of Data Reported Through Constructs



Note. Each letter represents one of the teachers interviewed.

Table 1

Teacher Interview Patterns of Data Reported Through Constructs

Structure	Non-Structure
	
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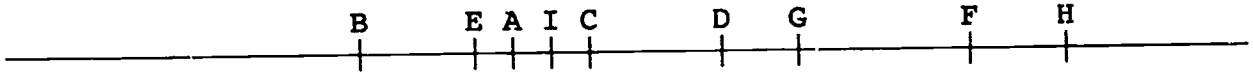	
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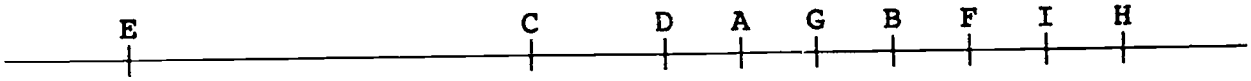
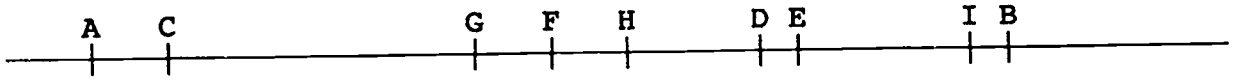
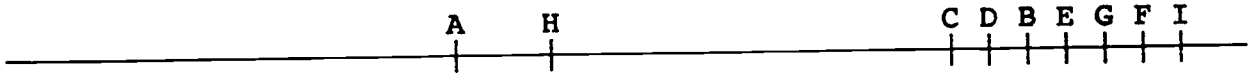
	
Teacher Centered	Child Centered
	
Cognitive	Affective
	

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