A PARTICIPANT OBSERVER'S CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE WRITE TO READ PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Write to Read Computer program. It includes a review of the literature on methods that contribute to effective reading curricula and presents results of research done on Write to Read.

The discussion will include how and when the program began, who developed and supported it, and an overview of the system.

This study takes an in depth look at the activities and purposes that comprise each station in the Write to Read program. In addition, the materials used in each station and the management of the Computer Center are explored.

The study examined:

1) What activities of the Write to Read program teach decoding skills?

2) What activities of this program help in developing a better reading vocabulary and word-meaning skills?

3) What activities and strategies in the Write to Read Center develop reading comprehension?

4) What activities and strategies in the Write to Read Center extend literature appreciation and understanding?

5) What research based strategies in the Write to Read Center relate reading to other Language Arts activites, such as invented spelling?

6) How often in the Write to Read Center are children

given the opportunity to read their own writings?

Research indicates that the Write to Read program is successful in teaching phonetic reading skills and creative writing, and promotes self esteem across socioeconomic, race, and gender boundaries. Differences of scores were found to be significant between Write to Read and non-Write to Read in kindergartens, but were not significant between Write to Read and non-Write to Read in first grades. This may be because traditional kindergartens do not teach reading and writing skills (Slavin, 1991).

Results also show that learning to spell phonetically does not undermine the ability to learn correct spelling patterns. However, Write to Read does not appear to contribute to learning to read beyond the child's level of complexity or write beyond his developmental stage.

According to the analysis, the most consistent flaws of this program seem to stem from inadequate training of teachers and aides, lack of support from regional offices, and inadequate training in computer assisted instruction (CAI). The expense of this program is a major factor when questioning its value in comparison to other successful literary skills programs.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This study investigates the Write to Read program to examine if its methods are effective in teaching reading and writing, and to determine if the results of evaluations justify the expense of the program. Six questions were investigated.

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4) What activities and strategies in the Write to Read Center extend literature appreciation and understanding?

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6) How often in the Write to Read Center are children given the opportunity to read their own writings?

The Write to Read Program is a multi-dimensional reading program used in kindergartens and first grades to teach reading and writing simultaneously. Its precept is that children will learn to read and have a greater interest in reading if they learn to read what they have written. It

proceeds from the assumption that children are as curious about language as they are about other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, with support and encouragement they will use that curiosity to develop their power over language. It begins with the active process of writing rather than the more passive process of reading. It stresses creation first followed by correctness later (Wallace, 1985).

This computer program is used instead of, or sometimes in addition to, the basal reader. It uses thirty words to introduce the 42 phonemes. As the child uses his cognitive ability to grasp the letter sounds, he then uses this same ability to form his own words, thereby writing his own stories. As the child understands more about letter-sound associations, his stories grow and are more sophisticated. He may even choose to edit and correct spelling as he is introduced to more phonemes through the words he learns on the computer.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Write to Read uses Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) and other components necessary for learning to read and write.

This study is a content analysis and real world operation of the Write to Read Program and investigates what activities in the Write to Read Center promote learning to read. A content analysis is a research technique "for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Burleson, 1952, p. 18).

According to Borg and Gall (1983, p. 512) "most content analysis in education have been aimed at answering question directly related to the material analyzed." Therefore, it was determined that content analysis was the most justifiable method to describe the content of the Write to Read program.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Theoretical and Critical Literature

Literature indicates the best reading curricula include certain skills that help children to become good readers. Those skills are phonics (decoding), language and vocabulary skills (print identification, grammar, and basic sight word knowledge), comprehension (recall), writing (encoding) and invented spelling, and literature (poems and story identification) (Cullinan, Hammond, Strickland, 1987).

New and traditional curricula rely on these basic strategies to guide their methodology when creating environments that teach children to read. Qualities that make up good reading programs will be discussed in this chapter, along with research on Write to Read.

Phonics

For years there has been controversy between advocates of whole-word learning - reading for meaning - and those who advance the use of phonics - decoding - as the best way to teach reading (Educational Leadership, 1981). Chall's study led her to conclude that better results when reading for meaning come with programs that emphasize phonics at the start, than with programs that stress meaning at the beginning

(1967). She goes on to report that a stronger phonics approach for beginning reading tends to result in higher word recognition scores early in grade one than does a sight word list or a weaker phonics emphasis (1989).

The goal of reading is comprehension. But before comprehension takes place, one must be able to decode, or recognize words. Chall's research indicates the stronger phonics programs produce better results in both recognition and comprehension (1989). She says, "given time, phonics is advantageous both for word recognition and for comprehension. The advantage of phonics in beginning reading is in facilitating word recognition and fluency, which in turn facilitates reading comprehension" (1989; p. 524).

The teaching of phonics is one method that has been praised for results in learning to read and condemned for the way it has been taught. Phonics worksheets have been criticized for not being meaningful to the child and not developmentally appropriate for particular age groups, such as kindergarteners. Harp (1989) emphasizes the child's need to see the connections between word attack instruction and creating meaning when he reads. Conducting phonics instruction with materials apart from the books children are reading and the pieces they are writing works against this important connection. Reading programs that teach children to read and write through the use of dittos and workbook

pages reflect practices that are developmentally inappropriate (Dailey, 1991). Dolores Durkin (1976) reported that commercial materials (especially workbooks) commonly have children work on tasks that will not advance their ability to read. Even advocates of phonic instruction, such as Chall, did not recommend teaching phonics in isolation (1989).

Testing in the 1980s has shown that any decline in reading achievement in the 1980s may stem in part from less phonics being taught, and when phonics is part of beginning reading programs, children can read and enjoy more challenging books, and books of higher quality, at an earlier age (Chall, 1989).

Language and Vocabulary Skills

The best reading curricula create a stimulating learning environment whereby reading, writing, listening, talking, and thinking are integrated (Cramer, 1994). This opposes earlier views that listening, reading, speaking, and writing were acquired independently of each other (Smith & Robinson, 1980).

There is more to teaching comprehension, vocabulary, and language skills than just simple recall, identifying known words, and reading and writing, respectively. For a student to have mastered comprehension skills, he must be able not only to recall events and details of a story, but also to sequence

events, predict outcomes, identify the main idea, draw conclusions, and compare and constrast (Cullinan, Hammond, Strickland, 1987).

Language and vocabulary skills are more than just decoding and encoding. Before a child begins to write his stories on paper, he may have stories in his thoughts that he may wish to tell through dictation. Taking dictation from children provides a model of the processes and concepts of writing (Hayes, 1990). Using context for word-meaning, identifying opposites, identifying one's own name in print, using pronouns and simple punctuation are all skills that make up vocabulary and language learning.

New literary and language approaches emphasize flexibility in materials and activities, student and teacher choice, and viewing each child as a unique individual (Spiegel, 1992). These approaches encourage children to try things that may be new to them, to experiment with all types of literature and language , and to become risk-takers. They provide many different types of literary materials from books and tapes to word-processors. These may be more fulfilling than focusing only on one tool such as a basal reader.

A well-rounded reading curriculum uses many components to make up the learning environment: 1) reading to children; 2) shared book experience 3) sustained silent reading; 4) guided reading; 5) individualized reading; 6) children's writings; 7) modeled writing; 8) opportunities for

sharing; 9) context area reading and writing; and 10) creative writing (Cramer, 1994). These components teach and reinforce the literary skills necessary for children to become good readers.

Invented Spelling

One of the biggest concerns of the phonemic process of learning to read is the lack of emphasis on correct spelling patterns. Invented spelling is when children apply what they know about sounds and letters to their early writing. This systematic process enables children to take control of their learning and become independent writers (Dailey, 1991).

Researchers are beginning to be aware that this kind of approach in writing reflects positively on the child's ability and enthusiasm in reading. Mann, Tobin, and Wilson (1987) report that as children improve in the phonetic sophistication of their invented spellings, later success in learning to read words becomes much more likely. Cunningham and Cunningham's research suggests that invented spelling and decoding are mirror-like processes that make use of the same store of phonological knowledge (1992). In other words, what children know about decoding a word may come from what they know about writing a word with spelling invented from their own knowledge base. Invented spelling during writing is increasingly seen as possessing reading