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A CASE STUDY OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS IN THE PROCESS OF PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING A DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN

by

Beverly J. Bruneau

Researchers studying the development of knowledge about written language from an emergent literacy perspective have found that young children learn about print through active and meaningful engagement in real life tasks. That is, they develop understanding about the functions of written language through daily encounters with environmental print (Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1982); through gradually developing ability to conventionally read stories through repeated readings of favorite storybooks (Pappas, 1985; Sulzby, 1985); and through learning to write through the process of developing their own systems of invented spellings (Bissex, 1980; Dyson, 1982; Read, 1975). Important print knowledge is learned through the active processes of constructing and testing hypotheses concerning written language (Bissex, 1980; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982) and through sharing experiences with print with important others (Snow, 1983; Teale, 1982).

This active process of literacy learning stands in marked contrast to the type of instruction more typically found in kindergarten classrooms in which basal readiness material prescribes the reading program (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). That is, children are taught to read through teacher led instruction which focuses on predetermined skills. Emergent literacy research, however, suggests that early learning should focus on children's prior literacy learning, rather than on a hierarchically arranged skills program (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Therefore, teachers need to adjust the learning experiences they provide to match with the children's construction of print knowledge. Importantly, the role of the teacher changes from that of a dispensator of a preplanned curriculum to that of a curriculum developer.

To develop ability to construct their own curriculum requires teachers to learn more than a few new activities or teaching strategies (Teale, 1987). Teachers would need to develop ability to study carefully their own students' literacy learning and use such study to make decisions about appropriate learning activities. An important problem for teacher educators becomes one of helping teachers develop their abilities to think carefully and plan for their own instruction.

Traditionally, teacher education programs rarely are concerned with thoughts or current practices of teachers (Fals, 1987; Goodwin, 1987). However, if teacher learning is perceived as active learning from a cognitive developmental framework, teachers' current knowledge and beliefs about teaching become important components of a teacher education program (Shulman, 1986; Fieman-Nemser, 1986). That is, new understanding leading to changes in teaching develops through teachers personally constructing or reconstructing

information based on prior or current knowledge of teaching (Red & Shainline, 1987; Wildman & Niles, 1987). A beginning component of a cognitive developmental approach to teacher education is to understand the learner. The current practice of individual teachers becomes an important area of focus in helping teachers develop new knowledge of teaching (Wildman & Niles, 1987).

Further, to help teachers develop new roles in teaching, teacher educators need to understand what teachers believe is important in their present approach toward teaching (Bolin, 1987). For example, research by Shannon (1983) has indicated many teachers believe that basal textbooks, planned by experts, provide better reading experiences than teacher planned lessons. Teachers holding this belief would have difficulty in replacing basal programs with activities they themselves design. Taylor, Blum, and Logsdon (1985) found only one half of their kindergarten teachers able to successfully implement emergent literacy changes and hypothesized that differences in teacher beliefs may have contributed to variances in implementation.

Importantly, teacher beliefs may not be consistent with teacher actions or even with other beliefs held by the same teacher (Elbaz, 1981). Conflict among teacher-held beliefs and among beliefs and actions has been suggested as an important factor to consider in helping teachers develop knowledge of teaching and in facilitating teacher change (Oberg & Field, 1986; Red & Shainline, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a teacher education program designed to introduce teachers to the findings of emergent literacy research from a developmental perspective. Questions, therefore, focused on both the teachers' existing programs, beliefs, and curricular changes. Three research questions examined the teachers' programs as they were beginning to learn of emergent literacy research: (a) What kind of reading and writing program was typically provided the children prior to the teachers being introduced to emergent literacy information; (b) what did the teachers believe about kindergarten reading and writing; and, (c) were there conflicts between the teachers' beliefs and actual teaching. The question regarding what kinds of curricular changes the teachers were able to implement was used to examine curricular change.

Method

Background of the Study

A university class was requested by kindergarten teachers working in a rural school district located in southwestern Virginia as a means of assisting in rewriting a curriculum guide for their district. The course was team-taught by three instructors and was planned around themes pertinent to developing a child-centered, hands-on approach toward kindergarten instruction; hence, the term "developmental" was often used. Approximately three sessions were devoted to discussion of early literacy learning and a brief review of recent research was presented. Emphasis was placed on having children write their own stories and on having teachers accept invented spellings as evidence of growth. The importance of providing children opportunity to read and reread storybooks, as well as

interact with teacher-led story reading, was emphasized. The use of learning centers was introduced as a means of integrating learning across content areas, and of providing opportunity for sustained reading and writing in functional print settings.

Participants

Three experienced kindergarten teachers who attended the university class were chosen to participate in this study. Among the considerations which led to their selection were: they appeared interested in developing ideas presented in the class; they had worked together and form a collegial support system (Warren-Little, 1982); they appeared to enjoy talking about their teaching and sharing their concerns with the researcher; and, they were all recommended by the assistant superintendent of instruction as competent teachers.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through participant observation and audio-taped interviews. Two research cycles were conducted, the first running concurrently with the university class for five weeks during April and May. The second cycle was conducted during the following September during which time the researcher took on a more active role of modeling teaching strategies, such as DL-TAs and echo reading, as well as initiating a writing center in two of the classrooms. This role was in response to teacher request. During both cycles the researcher observed for approximately two hours at weekly intervals in each of the three classrooms. Each teacher was interviewed at the beginning and end of the first cycle and weekly during the September cycle. Open-ended elicitations, such as talk about the part of the day you like best, were used to gather information about teachers' perspectives concerning the ideas presented in class and their beliefs about kindergarten teaching.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the procedure of categorical analysis outlined by Spradley (1979) in which domains were constructed and organized into taxonomies. Themes and assertions were then derived from each data source (Erickson, 1986). Themes and assertions common to all four data sets were then compiled, triangulated (Denzin, 1978) and examined as they related to each of the research questions.

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Findings

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Daily Reading and Writing Program

The data indicated that the process of teaching and learning reading and writing in each of the three kindergartens was based primarily on a model of teacher-led instruction. The teachers planned and conducted four major instructional periods during the day:

opening, unit time, basal instructional time (spring only) and center time. During the opening, the children read classroom helpers' names, days of the week, and weather words. During unit time instruction, children listened to teachers read books about a particular topic (farm animals in the spring, school life in the fall), answered teachers' questions about the topic, and constructed a daily project which often involved coloring, cutting, and pasting. During basal instruction, the teachers read from the teachers' manual as they instructed the children in basal workbook lessons.

The role of the children was generally passive. That is, the children were to listen carefully, answer when called upon, complete their workbook assignments correctly, and even construct their unit project by carefully following a model. The one time of the day when children were actively involved with the materials and when teachers had an opportunity to interact with the children in a facilitative manner was during center time, a block confined to no more than forty minutes a day, which was, furthermore, often cancelled; one teacher cancelled it on a certain day to use the time to catch up on the readiness book. The teachers often used the time to do their record keeping or prepare materials for the next day. One teacher stated, "I know I shouldn't do this, but I use center time to make things and I don't really get involved with them." Taken together, teacher actions suggest that the teachers did not take advantage of the opportunity for interaction provided by center time.

Opportunities for reading and writing were limited. Only children in one of the classes had access each day to library books. The only writing required of the children during May was printing their names on their work and correctly underlining and making shapes in their readiness workbooks. Children had little opportunity to interact with environmental print or engage in functional print usage. There was no print used in centers as labels or as directions for the children.

Teachers' Beliefs

Three important beliefs concerning kindergarten teaching emerged through an examination of the data. Two of these beliefs appeared to be consistent with the program the teachers had developed. First, the teachers believed in the importance of teacher-led instruction. That is, they believed that when teachers led children in lessons, learning was greater than during child-centered activities. One teacher described three components of teaching, "stand up teaching, making materials, and having center time. The stand up comes first. That is what you must do." The teachers, in fact, often spoke of children's activities during center time as play. They wrote learning objectives for their teacher-led periods, but omitted them for student-centered activities.

Similarly, teachers believed that textbook materials presented a more cohesive instructional program than lessons they, themselves, had developed. In describing the strengths of the phonics program, one teacher stated, "I agree with it. I have to be more structured to teach the sounds." A second teacher described her perception of why the math program is weak. "In math, we don't have a definite program, so it doesn't get our attention. We do a lot of math, but it doesn't come together." The teachers also believed

that scores on yearly achievement tests indicated success of their programs. Student math scores were low. Therefore, the teachers were concerned with their math teaching. Student scores on reading readiness, which emphasized phonics, were relatively high. The teachers believed these satisfactory scores in reading were indicative of a good reading readiness program.

Also consistent with the existing program was the belief that ability to write required an advanced level of muscular maturity and should be developed through instruction in the correct production of letters. Explaining why her group did not do well in handwriting, a teacher stated, "This group is not ready for pencils. They are young. Their muscles are not developed enough. For many it's difficult to get them to write their names." They supported their phonics program, which they taught each year between January and March, because it required very little writing. An extension of the belief that children were not ready to write is the belief that children must be taught to form the letters correctly. A teacher resisted a writing center because, "I know what they will do, they'll scribble. Then some will try to copy letters and I'll have a hard time teaching them the right way."

A third set of beliefs concerned the teachers' conception of an ideal kindergarten program. All three teachers said they believed that developmental kindergartens were the best way to teach and included within their definitions a hands-on, activity-oriented program based on the learning needs of each child. These definitions of an ideal kindergarten focused on matching learning to the needs of the children and in providing active learning experiences. One could speculate that the teachers were simply giving lip-service to the concept because it would please the researcher. However, when two of the teachers spoke of their first year of teaching kindergarten (in which they stated they taught in a more child-centered manner) they did so with warmth and enthusiasm. Further, the teachers also expressed eagerness to have the researcher work with them in the fall, especially in helping with the development of center time. The teachers expressed the belief that external constraints prevented them from teaching in this more child-center manner.

Conflicts between Beliefs and Program

The teachers, aware of conflicts between their belief in an ideal kindergarten and the kind of instructional program they provided, cited the following external constraints which they believed prevented them from becoming more child-centered in their teaching. First, all three felt that they were required to be directive, that is, to conduct lessons in a teacher-led fashion. Components of teacher-led instruction included the requirement that they write specific learning objectives for each lesson in their planbooks as well as document specific skills learned by the children. One teacher summarized, "The supervisor says she is up for developmental, but when you come right down to it you have to do this, and that, and document that you've done it."

A further constraint cited was the lack of time to teach in a child-centered manner. One teacher complained of the time the required program demanded. "The readiness skills, you've got to start them at the beginning so you can cover them." Another teacher talked about the difficulty of attempting to teach during center time. "You know, I attempt to work

with some children, but I am needed to help solve problems in another center." The fact that these teachers did not have aides or student teachers to assist them in working with children and in preparing materials was also mentioned as a factor inhibiting implementation of child-centered instruction.

Emergent Literacy Changes

The teachers did feel that some of the ideas presented in the university class might feasibly work within the constraints of their situation. One teacher incorporated the use of a daily morning experience story. Two of the teachers were interested in developing a writing center in their rooms, a new kind of center for them. One teacher felt her group had done so poorly in handwriting during the previous year, that the new approach might be worth trying. She was initially troubled by the lack of a definite program and her belief that children were not mature enough to begin writing. She stated, "I just don't know what to do with children at this age. I know that their little muscles are not developed to do writing." She observed the researcher work with children in the center at which time the children drew pictures and dictated messages. By the third week the teacher felt more confident in her ability to handle the center. However, like the other two teachers, she continued to have difficulty in describing the learning which occurred in the centers and using the descriptions to plan future activities. All three teachers experimented with DL-TAs, a strategy which engages students in predicting story sequence (Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1987), initially modeled by the researcher. Consequently, the children became more involved in listening to stories. All three teachers felt a definite need to improve their math program because of the previous year's low math achievement scores. Consequently, improvement of math instruction became the teachers' main focus.

Discussion

The findings of this particular case study of three kindergarten teachers during a three month period are limited. Other teachers and their specific teaching situations may be very similar or very different compared to the teachers studied here. However, the findings raise important issues of concern to teacher educators wishing to help teachers develop more emergent literacy-based kindergarten programs.

The teachers enumerated several external constraints they felt inhibited their ability to teach in a more child-centered manner. These constraints included administrative pressure to teach in a teacher-led fashion and limited time to both teach and plan. Such constraints appear to be important environmental factors which need to be addressed in helping the teachers develop a more child-centered program.

Secondly, the process of understanding teachers' beliefs and concerns about their own teaching as well as changes in these beliefs, as they began to develop awareness of findings of educational research has been suggested as an important component of teacher development (Bolin, 1987; Red & Shainline, 1987; Wildman & Niles, 1987). The teachers studied here held conflicting beliefs -- beliefs that learning occurs best through teacher-led

instruction of formally developed programs and the belief that an ideal kindergarten is an active child-centered program. How the teachers will resolve this conflict, if they do, and how the teachers' beliefs will interact with increasing knowledge and experience with emergent literacy-based activities is an important area of continued study. Such understandings of teacher beliefs and concerns has been suggested as important knowledge for teacher educators wishing to become more responsive to the needs of individual teachers (Wildman & Niles, 1987).

A third important issue concerns the kind of knowledge needed by kindergarten teachers as they begin to develop emergent literacy-based program. The teachers studied here initially received information on activities they might try out in their classroom to engage children in print. However, information about activities as not enough. The teachers also needed to develop the ability to carefully observe their students and to use the observations in planning literacy lessons.

As Teale (1987) has suggested, as emergent literacy research begins to focus more on classroom applications, it needs to be concerned with the process of both student and teacher development. Emergent literacy research suggests teachers need to observe carefully to understand their students' learning needs and build instruction from this knowledge. A developmental approach toward teacher education suggests that teacher educators, too, need to observe teachers to carefully understand teacher learning as a necessary first step in working with teachers to collaboratively develop emergent literacy-based kindergarten programs.

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