

Research Reports

A Reading/Language Arts Program Supplies Input for Decision Making

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How can a school staff evaluate its reading/language arts program to develop strategies for decision making about future directions? The following report describes one staff's attempt at such an evaluation and the decision making that resulted. Various data-collection techniques were used to evaluate specific program areas. Examples of those techniques and some discussion of the diagnostic use that was made of the evaluation are presented.

Description of Population

The school is located in a rural area of central Maryland and is one of the district's Title I schools. It has a population of approximately 600 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. The pupil-staff ratio is about 30 to 1 with specialists in the areas of vocal music, physical education, media, reading, and special education.

The staff has made commitments to a number of teaching strategies to improve the reading and language arts abilities of students and to develop and reinforce positive self-concepts. The commitments evolved from staff involvement in a two-week summer workshop. The main emphasis of all the strategies is "success," through focusing on children's strengths.¹ The strategies employed include: daily sustained silent reading time, daily sustained writing in a diary, use of language experience, diagnostic teaching, use of parent volunteers, peer tutoring, and contract spelling.

By implementing strategies that enhance the possibility of a successful learning environment, it was hoped that the positive self-concept of each

learner would be developed. Every effort was made to assure that every child had the opportunity to demonstrate strengths to the teacher, to peers, and to self.

The summer workshop involved the school principal, primary teachers, aides, and parent volunteers. This involvement of professionals, para-professionals, and parent volunteers in the same initial experience contributed to the follow-through of the ideas developed at the workshop.

Since the workshop involved only primary-grade personnel, those attending committed themselves to the task of sharing their ideas with the rest of the school staff and obtaining a commitment from them. Commitment to specific strategies was accomplished during staff meetings prior to the opening of school. Several of the strategies were quickly put into practice, but additional in-service activities were needed for the teachers on contract spelling, diagnostic teaching, and learning centers.

Consultants made monthly visits to the school giving specific help, guidance, and encouragement to the teachers. The school's reading teacher also gave assistance in the classrooms. The principal became involved in an ongoing staff development program through day-by-day follow-ups of the classroom experiences, providing released time for teachers to meet with consultants, organizing parent volunteers to assist teachers with new ideas, and obtaining necessary materials and supplies. Teachers were encouraged to adapt the ideas to suit their own situations. The problems and concerns that were discussed provided the basis for making changes in strategies as needed.

The above article was originally presented in October 1975 at a meeting of the College Reading Association in Bethesda, Maryland.

¹Linda B. Gambrell and Robert M. Wilson. *Focusing on the Strengths of Children*. Belmont, California: Fearon Publishers, Inc., 1973.

Table 1. Evaluation—Innovative Practices
(Number of Teachers Reacting to Each Innovation)

Innovation	I Value It					It Is Effective With My Children				
	Little		Greatly			Little		Extremely		
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Personality of the Week	1	2	1	4	7	2	1	3	2	7
Sustained Reading			2	6	7			2	8	2
Sustained Writing		6	2	2	2	4	4	1	2	1
Multilevel Learning Centers	1	1	6	6		1	3	5	3	
Use of Parent Volunteers			1	2	13			5	1	10
Contract Spelling			1	2	8			3	8	

The evaluation reported here was a part of the basic plan. By collecting data and using them diagnostically, teachers became involved in the decision-making process. We have noted that it is not uncommon for teachers to struggle to make an innovation successful; yet, they often receive no feedback and have only to face another innovation. We suggest this as a partial explanation for the failure of many innovations to be maintained as a part of the teacher's strategies.

General Evaluation

Several types of data were selected to evaluate the teaching strategies and to provide the basis for different in-service thrusts—teacher surveys, student questionnaires, parent surveys, direct observation by the consultants and principal, and standardized test scores.

For example, all teachers rated the teaching strategies generally, according to how they valued each and according to how effective each strategy was with their students. A one-to-five point scale was used, ranging from "little value" to "great or extreme value." (See Table 1.)

The data from this table and others like it were used diagnostically, not statistically. If a teacher valued a strategy but did not find it useful with children, an effort was made to determine why. Assistance was provided to teachers so that valued strategies could be made effective. On the other hand, if teachers did not value a strategy, we assumed it would not be effective with chil-

dren. Instead, we worked with those teachers to determine why the strategy was not valued. In a few cases, teachers were encouraged to stop using the strategy they did not value and work toward another objective.

Sustained Writing

Note that the teachers' value of sustained writing was low as was the effectiveness of this strategy. Therefore, a sampling of the children's diaries or logs was collected at each grade level and examined by the consultant and principal and rated in four areas: story quality, neatness, use of complete sentences, and story length. In most cases, the quality of writing had not improved and teachers were not satisfied that this strategy was accomplishing anticipated results.

On the basis of this information, at the end of the first year, a staff decision was made to change and, at some levels, discontinue the commitment to sustained writing. Some teachers decided to try the same technique with more structure and teacher-direction. At the end of the second year, six teachers reported using the strategy with more effectiveness as a result of the change.

Parent Volunteers

Notice in Table 1. that parent volunteers were valued greatly. It was a natural step to see how parents felt about the volunteer program, so

we asked them to complete a short questionnaire. (See Table 2.)

Parents reported that they felt most helpful when working directly with children. They did not value checking papers, carding and shelving books, or working in the health room. The parents requested increased orientation with the teacher to whom they were assigned and more information about the reading program. As a result, the school arranged for preservice training for parents with the classroom teachers and the reading teacher. A volunteer parent-coordinator worked with the staff to arrange for other in-service activities during the year as needed.

Language Experience Approach

Teachers completed a questionnaire about the language experience approach to reading. (See Table 3.)

This questionnaire revealed that most teachers at the first and second grade levels were using the language experience approach only once or twice a week even though they listed many instructional values in this approach. The final question provided the reason: lack of experience and knowledge about using this approach to reading and need for help in typing stories. This information provided the basis for in-service meetings to give help to teachers and aides in this area. Additional parent help was enlisted to type or print stories and word cards.

Table 2. Questionnaire for Parent Volunteers

1. During what type of activity did you feel most helpful as a parent volunteer?
2. During what type of activity did you feel least useful?
3. If the parent volunteer program were to change:
 - a. What would you suggest be added?
 - b. What would you suggest be dropped?

Table 3. Language Experience Approach
(First and Second Grade Teachers)

1. How often do you use the language experience approach?
2. Do your children maintain word banks?
3. What is the greatest instructional value you see in the language experience approach?
4. What prevents you from using the language experience approach more often?

Contract Teaching

Contracting—a strategy reported to be of high value to teachers in Table 1.—was begun in the area of spelling, grades two through five. Six children per grade were selected at random to complete a questionnaire. (See Table 4.)

The children involved in contract spelling reported liking the *award*, being able to choose their own words, and talking with the teacher about their contracts. They liked least having to write sentences with their words or not making their contracts. Of the 24 children in the sample, 17 reported feeling "good" and 7 "fair" about spelling work.

Learning Centers

Direct observation of the learning centers in the school was made by the consultant and principal. Most centers lacked written objectives and there was not much variety to the kinds of centers being used. This provided another thrust for in-service. Teachers were given help in constructing manipulative centers, and in making more centers multileveled to provide for the individual differences of students within a class. Teachers were encouraged to post objectives (either teacher's or child's) for each center. The second year's evaluation showed teachers to be including several characteristics of the learning centers. (See Table 5.)

Table 4. Contract Spelling
(Six Children Per Grade—Second through Fifth)

1. The thing I like best about spelling is _____.
2. The thing I like least about spelling is _____.
3. How do you feel about your spelling work?
(good, fair, poor)

Table 5. Learning Center Evaluation
(Second year—on-spot observation and teacher's interview for 90 learning centers)

	Percent
1. Percent of centers multileveled	65
2. Percent of centers manipulative	55
3. Percent of centers with written objectives	63
4. What conditions most helped you use centers?	In-service help with construction
5. What conditions interfered with your use of centers?	Lack of time

Table 6. Comparison—Iowa Test Scores
1970 and 1975

Iowa Test	Third Grade Percentile		Fifth Grade Percentile	
	1970	1975	1970	1975
Vocabulary	77	90	77	93
Reading	81	94	51	75
Spelling	88	97	75	92

Table 7. Comparison of Students in Lower and Upper Quartiles

(Readiness Test (K), Iowa Test—Third Grade, Fifth Grade)

	Readiness Kindergarten	Iowa Test Third Grade	Iowa Test Fifth Grade
Percent in First Quartile	30	9	5
Percent in Fourth Quartile	15	36	33

Approximately two-thirds of the learning centers observed were multileveled and had written objectives. More than 50 percent were manipulative. Obviously, if centers continue to be stressed, teachers will need time and help to continue using them effectively. Future in-service should stress the importance of manipulative and multileveled centers.

Standardized Test Results

Finally, the researchers took a look at standardized test results over a five-year period. It is obvious from Table 6. that the trend is toward higher standardized test scores in the areas of the in-service. These types of gains were not noticed in all subtests. Percentile scores were obtained from means of grade equivalents. (See Table 6.)

This information provided another basis for an in-service thrust: to help teachers with some strategies to improve the reading comprehension skills of the fourth- and fifth-grade students.

Looking at the standardized test scores of the students who remained in the school from kindergarten through fifth grade, comparison was made of the percentage of students ranking in the first and fourth quartiles on the readiness test given in kindergarten, and on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills at third- and fifth-grade levels. The data showed a definite decrease in the numbers of students in the lower quartile and a significant

increase in the numbers in the upper quartile. (See Table 7.)

While we recognize that the readiness test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills were normed on different populations, which therefore prohibits us from comparing them statistically, the substantial differences in the numbers of students at the lower and upper quartiles by the fifth grade seem to support the idea that the program has been effective for many students.

As we followed students into the middle school we found that the progress continued. Students from this school achieved approximately 30 percentile points above the middle school's average norms in vocabulary, reading, spelling, and composite score.

Summary

This informal school-level evaluation provided much data for decision making. First, it showed how teachers really felt about techniques that focus on student's strengths, as well as the relationship between how they value and use such techniques. The data provided information that indicated the need to change some of the strategies. The data also provided information to help the school improve an ongoing program. Finally, the data helped the staff to determine the areas where additional in-service was needed.

Involving teachers, students, aides, and parent volunteers in this kind of evaluation resulted in a unified effort toward our major goal of improving the educational program and providing opportunities for successful experiences for all the students. [E]



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