

98-6 A Review of Approaches to Reading Instruction

Summary

During the past ten years, reading instruction has been a contentious topic, both in Wisconsin and nationwide, as school boards and others have debated the merits of phonics versus whole language instruction. Phonics instruction is considered a skills approach to reading instruction: skills approaches are intended to provide students with a method for pronouncing unfamiliar words without reliance on context or pictures for clues. In contrast, whole language instruction is considered a context approach to reading instruction: context approaches are intended to expose students to literature and teach reading skills in the context of this literature.

The scope of reading achievement problems in Wisconsin is difficult to determine. Although Wisconsin students have generally scored well on reading comprehension tests, especially when compared to national averages, not all Wisconsin students are reading at a basic level. For example, the State's 1997-98 Knowledge and Concepts Examination showed 7 percent of fourth-grade students in Wisconsin scored below the basic reading level.

Many believe that teaching methods affect student achievement, but researchers differ about which teaching approach teaches students to read most easily, best promotes reading enjoyment, and is most appropriate for students who are having trouble learning to read. Therefore, we were asked to review what teaching approach Wisconsin teachers are using.

Instruction in phonemic awareness—the recognition of the smallest meaningful sounds in the English language—and in phonics—the connection of these sounds to printed letters—forms the foundation for a skills approach to reading instruction. Some of the materials used by skills-approach teachers include:

- flashcards;
- workbook and worksheet exercises; and
- decodable texts, which are written stories containing words that are made up of letter and sound combinations students have already learned.

Use of literature and writing activities forms the foundation for a context approach to reading instruction. Typically, a context approach will involve the student in the selection of reading materials to be used for instruction. In addition, students will often write stories and share them with the class through published class writings. Critics of context approaches suggest these approaches lack structure and do not provide necessary skills instruction for students with reading difficulties. Conversely, critics of skills approaches assert that these approaches focus too much on isolated skills development and do not provide an opportunity to apply reading skills to literature.

Researchers have highlighted the strengths of both a skills and a context approach to reading instruction. As a result, the national trend among education professionals and researchers is to combine the strengths of these approaches by supporting a mixture of approaches. Education professionals have suggested that an effective mixture of approaches should include early emphasis on phonics skills, exposure to literature, and frequent writing activities.

To determine the reading instruction approach used by Wisconsin teachers and the state's school districts, we surveyed a sample of kindergarten through third-grade classroom teachers and district curriculum professionals. Their responses were consistent with national trends that support a mixture of approaches: we found that over 90 percent of Wisconsin teachers report using a mixture of approaches to reading instruction. We also asked respondents to identify a skills (phonics-related) or a context (whole language-related) emphasis within their approach, if appropriate:

- 40.6 percent of teachers and 35.8 percent of district respondents reported a skills (phonics-related) emphasis;
- 33.1 percent of teachers and 34.7 percent of district respondents reported a context (whole language-related) emphasis; and
- 20.8 percent of teachers and 21.4 percent of district respondents reported using an approach with no specific emphasis.

Given the philosophical differences between teaching approaches, it might be expected that teacher and district instructional activities would differ according to reported teaching approaches. However, we did not find many such differences. Rather, teachers and district curriculum professionals reported using a variety of both phonics-associated and whole language-associated instructional resources and techniques regardless of their reported teaching approaches. Contrary to what was expected, we also found that teachers do not consistently employ the same teaching approach they were taught as undergraduates, although a majority of teachers reported that their degree program was at least somewhat important to the development of their teaching approach.

The State's influence over reading instruction has been primarily through the Department of Public Instruction, which establishes teacher licensing requirements, approves teaching degree programs, and provides resources to help school districts create their reading curricula. Coursework in reading instruction, required for all future teachers, varies depending upon the type of license being pursued. Since the type of instruction and the emphasis that the required elements receive is determined largely by individual institutions of higher education, the Department reviews the 33 teaching degree programs in Wisconsin to ensure that their graduates seeking teacher licenses have met the requirements for licensure. Of 26 institutions that responded to the Department's survey, the 25 offering elementary education programs indicated they offer one or more courses designed to teach university students instructional methods for reading and language arts that include phonics.

The Department of Public Instruction has recently proposed changes to Wisconsin's teacher licensing requirements and the institutional program approval process. These proposed changes are similar to those being proposed or adopted in other states, including a move toward broader-based licenses and teacher education programs that would measure future teachers' proficiency relative to stated program goals rather than courses and credits completed. Although the Department anticipates these changes will have a minimal effect on reading instruction, it is not clear how the changes will affect the method the Department uses to ensure that licensing requirements are met by teaching degree programs.

In response to public concerns about reading achievement, some states, including Wisconsin, have expanded the scope of their influence over reading instruction by introducing new reading instruction legislation to address a specific instructional method, such as phonics; developing statewide educational standards; and revising resources provided to school districts to aid in the creation of their reading curricula. In Wisconsin, recent legislation to take effect on July 1, 1998, requires that kindergarten to sixth-grade teachers who wish to receive or renew their licenses must first have successfully completed training in reading instruction that teaches appropriate instructional methods, including phonics. The Department is required to ensure that all teachers, except those exempted through a life license, have met this requirement. Wisconsin has also recently adopted model educational standards, including English language arts standards. By the beginning of the 1998-99 school year, school districts will be required to have adopted these or other standards.

Finally, we reviewed the process the Department used to develop its *Guides to Curriculum Planning*. These guides are used by school districts to aid in the development of their curricula. Many of the guides are outdated; for example, the three reading-related guides were published in 1985, 1986, and 1989, respectively. Nevertheless, survey responses from curriculum professionals across the state show high use of these guides despite their age: 94.1 percent of the 271 respondents reported use of at least one of the reading-related guides in the development of their district's kindergarten through twelfth-grade reading curriculum.

The Department recognizes a need to update the curriculum planning guides and plans to make revisions using a task force process similar to the one used to create the original set of guides. Curriculum planning guide task forces were made up of education professionals from across the state who were knowledgeable about the particular subject areas of the guides. The Department achieved geographical representation on its original task forces; however, several of the

original guides' major subject area task forces lacked elementary and middle school teacher representation. Sections of each original guide were written by individuals or small groups of task force members who reported making guide content decisions through a consensus process based on then-current research. We include a recommendation for how the Department can expand participation in the task force process for the guide revisions to ensure this and other reading instruction issues, such as the State's model educational standards, are addressed in the revisions.
