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A study of a language program focusing on basic writing skills and creative writing activities and the affect on the writing skills of third grade students

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" A STUDY OF A LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM FOCUSING ON
BASIC WRITING SKILLS AND CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES
AND THE AFFECT ON THE WRITING SKILLS
OF THIRD GRADE STUDENTS "

A Project Proposal Submitted to
The Faculty of the School of Education
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Arts

In
Elementary Education
by

Zelma Jane Ballard

San Bernardino, California
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APPROVED BY:

Advisor

Committee Member

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today there is much discussion and controversy about the writing ability of children in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Almost daily one can read in some publication about the failings of the schools in the area of teaching writing skills.

If the goals set by the California educators involved in Early Childhood Education, as recorded in The National Observer⁸, are to be met, teaching of the Language Arts in the elementary schools of California must become more skill oriented.

Evidently many people feel that greater attention needs to be given to the teaching and learning of basic skills in writing. The skills of punctuation, capitalization, and correct word usage have to be considered as the important elements in this discussion. Spelling and handwriting are skills that have also been included in the Language Arts controversy.

Greater emphasis on writing skills has to begin at the primary level. When children begin writing, whether creative or subject area directed, an awareness of correct word usage and punctuation should be developed.

For children with reading problems their own writings can open the door to reading success. One should always read what one writes. Children enjoy reading their own writings and in most cases, enjoy sharing their writings

⁸ Duscha, Steve. "Impossible Goal." The National Observer. December 14, 1974. p. 10.

with classmates and the teacher. Therefore, the written work should be readable by others and the content should be written in such a fashion as to be understood by others.

Different teachers approach the Language Arts in different ways by using various methods of instruction and emphasis. This is as it should be. A teacher should utilize the method with which he or she can work best. Some of the more important factors in the teacher's methodology and approach however, is readiness, ability, and maturity of the students.

The writer recognizes the controversy regarding black English and other dialects.^{17, 21} However, we as teachers must also be realistic regarding the future of the children who come from different cultural backgrounds and from impoverished homes and/or environments. These children need speech and written models, and the teacher is their model for standard English.⁶ Teachers should work with these children in an accepting and tolerant manner while providing guidance. The writer agrees with Thomas, "We need to help all children learn to read and write that rather artificial form we call standard written English."²⁴

¹⁷ Lavatelli, Celia S.; Moore, Walter; and Kaltsounis, Theodore. Elementary School Curriculum. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1972.

²¹ Shafer, Susan. "Messin Wif Language." Elementary School Journal, Vol. 76 No. 8 (May 1976) 500-505.

⁶ Dawson, Mildred A. and Dingee, Frieda Hayes. Children Learn the Language Arts. Minneapolis, Minn.: Burgess Publishing House Company, 1966.

²⁴ Thomas, Owen. "Guest Forum: Teaching Children About Language." Elementary English, Vol. 51 No. 1 (Jan. 1974) 11-19.

We live in a society where the accepted written and spoken communication norm is the "...rather artificial form we call standard written English."²⁴ Therefore, these children with special language problems should be given extra special attention in a positive manner.

In the course of this research, the writer has read material written by black writers. None of these writings were composed in black English. In fact, one research source stated that black parents do not want their children taught black English in the schools.¹⁷ These parents feel that their children will learn black English through interaction with peers in the neighborhood and on the playground. I have found this to be true with my own child.

The concern of the educator should be to provide instructions in a program of Language Arts concentrating on skills and including other written activities such as creative writing for all children. Special consideration should be given to those who have a need.

²⁴ Thomas, Owen. "Guest Forum: Teaching Children about Language." Elementary English, Vol. 51 No. 1 (Jan. 1974) 11-19.

¹⁷ Lavatelli, Celia S.; Moore, Walter; and Kaltsounis, Theodore. Elementary School Curriculum. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1972.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Language Arts in this paper will exclude the formal or structured reading program. The definition of Language Arts will mean -- the activities of writing, listening, spelling, and speaking. These were the major concern of activity with class during the Language Arts instructional period. This definition is compatible with Language Arts as defined when separated from the formal reading program in the research.^{4, 17, 12, 6.}

Even though this study was concerned with Language, and not the formal reading, reading was actively in progress at all times. Just as spelling and word study skills take place in the formal reading program.

Basic skills should not be relegated to a secondary position in any Language Arts program. Lavatelli, Moore, and Kaltsounis¹⁷ made this point as well as Evans¹⁰ in his writing about Language Arts.

Schell²⁰ was concerned with spelling and the importance of proofreading. Writing is a form of communication and

⁴ Burrors, Alvina L.; Ferebee, June D.; Jackson, Doris C.; and Saunders, Dorothy O. They All Want to Write. New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1952.

¹⁷ Lavatelli, Celia S.; Moore, Walter; and Kaltsounis, Theodore. Elementary School Curriculum. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1972.

¹² Greene, Harry A. and Petty, Walter T. Developing Language Skills in the Elementary School. Allyn and Bacon, 1971.

¹⁰ Evans, Robert. "A Glove Thrown Down." Elementary English, Vol. 44 No. 5 (May 1967) 523-527.

²⁰ Schell, Leo M. "'B' In Composition; 'C' in Spelling." Elementary English, Vol. 52 No. 2 (Feb. 1955) 239-242.

one must spell well in order to communicate written ideas and thoughts to others. Therefore, spelling is a factor in any written work. Students should be taught that spelling has out-of-school relevance also.

The writer writes for himself or herself about himself or herself. At times, the writer may be assigned written work that says, "I am" or "I think" Especially with young children, writings should reflect a positive self-image and an improved self-confidence as the child grows mentally and physically.¹⁶ In the classroom, this was a goal of our "Tooting My Horn" writings. Tooting one's horn is the colloquial expression for saying positive things about one's self. In the classroom each child would express himself or herself under such titles as, "My Best Sport," "My Best Subject in School," and "I am Very Good at _____."

Listening skills are an important part of Language Arts. This fact was mentioned by several writers. Stewig²³ recommends reading literature to children as a major motivating activity. Greene and Petty¹² devoted an entire chapter to listening skills in their book. They commented on listening as a receptive activity of the Language Arts. It is not a passive activity and should not be regarded as such.¹²

¹⁶ Lapp, Diane and Fram, Ralph D. "The Neglected I." Elementary English, Vol. 52 No. 1 (Jan. 1976) 45-48.

²³ Stewig, Hohm Warren. Read to Write. New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1975.

¹² Greene, Harry A. and Petty, Walter T. Developing Language Skills in the Elementary School. Allyn and Bacon, 1971.

Listening should be developed in the total learning setting of the elementary school. According to Greene and Petty¹² the teacher must decide the level of listening that is appropriate for each activity.

Hayden²² described a study by Miller and Ney which evaluated the effect of oral language exercises on the writing of fourth grade students. They found that the group of students who received exercises in oral language designed for transfer to written work wrote more freely, used more of the structure taught, and also used more complex sentences than did the control group.²² Oral and written communication must be considered together. In order to enjoy and participate in many Language Activities, our children must be active listeners as well as speakers.

Thomas²⁴ states that literature provides a writing model for children. He also makes extensive comments regarding communication in oral form.²⁴ The child comes to school with "ready-made" oral communication skills. He or she speaks a foreign language, may be bilingual, or speaks with dialectical influences, but nevertheless he or she communicates orally. The teacher is the liaison between the child and the school.

Once children begin to participate in creative writing lessons, their writing lessons must contain some sessions

¹² Greene, Harry A. and Petty, Walter T. Developing Language Skills in the Elementary School. Allyn and Bacon, 1971.

²² Shane, Harold G.; Walden, James; and Green, Ronald. Interpreting Language Arts Research for the Teacher. Washington D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A., 1971.

²⁴ Thomas, Owen. "Guest Forum: Teaching Children About Language." Elementary English, Vol. 51 No. 1 (Jan. 1974) 11-19.

with open ended subjects.^{7, 18} However, one writer, Evans,¹⁰ feels that children should not be left to their own ideas too frequently during creative writing time. Too much free creative writing causes a drain of ideas and constant looking inward. He states that most creative writing should be guided. Evans¹⁰ agrees with Stewig²³ as both state that children should do lots of writing based on observation.

Respect should be shown for the students privacy during the sharing time. Some students like to read their own work aloud, others prefer that the teacher do the reading. Usually there are several students who will share with the teacher only. Dyer⁹ had several students in a class of seventh graders who never shared with the class but shared their writings with him. Older students may not want to share due to content of writings. The writer found that younger children tend to be shy about reading aloud or sensitive about content, especially if it is about the student's family.

The skills area of Language is the area found most deficient by public critics.²⁸ In order for a writer to

⁷ Desner, Tobe I. "Creating a Literature Program for Primary Children." Elementary English, Vol. 52 No. 1 (Jan. 1975) 59-63.

¹⁸ Lowe, Bonnie. "Individualized Creative Writing in the Open Classroom." Elementary English, Vol. 52 No. 2 (Feb. 1955) 167-169.

¹⁰ Evans, Robert. "A Glove Thrown Down." Elementary English, Vol. 44 No. 5 (May 1967) 523-527.

²³ Stewig, Hohm Warren. Read to Write. New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1975.

⁹ Dyer, Daniel. "When Kids are Free to Write." English Journal, Vol. 53 No. 1 (Jan. 1976) 11-16.

²⁸ _____. "High School Grads: Why Can't Some Read, Write, Do Math?" The Press. July 21, 1976 p. A-4.

write well, (content and usage) and legibly, he has to be familiar with basic writing skills including spelling. This is especially true regarding content, the work may be typed in order to obtain legibility.

If, as many writers in the Language Arts field state, writing skills are a very important part of the Language Arts curriculum, then the classroom teacher is going to have to become a more active teacher of writing skills. What the student is taught and learns in the elementary school is measured by the output in the form of his or her writings and other Language skills during the secondary school years.²²

²² Shane, Harold G.; Walden, James; and Green, Ronald. Interpreting Language Arts Research for the Teacher. Washington D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A., 1971.

III. HYPOTHESES

A Language Arts program based on the teaching of basic writing skills along with creative writing activities will not help children in a third grade class increase their mastery of language skills.

Significant growth will not be shown on a testing tool in which a pre-test and a post-test of written language basic skills is completed.

IV. PROCEDURE

A. Subjects

Subjects were thirty third grade students. The students were residents of the community of Grand Terrace in Colton, California. The classroom population changed during the year.* Originally there were thirty-two students but one boy and one girl moved before the post-test was given.

The racial composition of the group was twenty-six Anglo students, three Mexican students, and one Chinese student. This is mentioned to explain consideration of students with none standard English speaking and writing problems.

However, the only student with a total non-English background was the Chinese student. Two of the Mexican students were bilingual. Both of these students spoke English frequently at home. The other Mexican child does not speak Spanish. English is the only language spoken in the home by the children in this family. The ages at the time of the pre-test ranged from seven years to nine years, and at the time of the post-test the range was from eight years to ten years.

B. Research Procedure

Three days a week, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, the activity during the Language Arts period was concentrated on word usage, word structure, sentence recognition and sentence writing. Punctuation and capitalization usage was also studied on the skill days.

Word usage involved practice in using words from the Dolch 220 word list in sentences and proofreading. The

* The study involved the students of the 1975-76 school year.

proofreading involved using "were" and "was," and "come" and "came," and such word combinations as "don't" and "doesn't" correctly.

There was much work on identifying the root word, and adding prefixes and suffixes to make one's writing more interesting and descriptive. Word structure also involved the study of syllabification.

Students had to practice reading and identifying sentences. They had to practice distinguishing between sentences and phrases. Words from the Spelling list and from the reading lesson were used to write sentences. Punctuation and capitalization were an integral part of the sentence writing lesson on the skill days.

Word usage covered the use of words frequently used in speaking and writing, but often used incorrectly. Much time was spent in using words that need helping words such as "come" and "run" and their partners that do not need helping words, such as "came" and "ran".¹⁹

Much time was used initially on expressing oneself in sentences orally and in writing. Students learned to distinguish a sentence from a phrase orally. This activity was to give practice in expressing an idea in a complete thought. Lack of ability in using words in thought groups is a problem faced by many children in primary grades.²⁷ There were many lessons using descriptive words (adjectives). These lessons were given orally, prior to written assignments.

¹⁹ Price, Edith H.; Miller, Flora B.; and Ketterman, Mabel. Individual Corrective English. Cincinnati, Ohio: McCormick-Mathers Publishing Company Inc., 1962.

²⁷ Turner, Thomas N. and Terwilliger, Paul N. "Multi-Dimensional Creativity." Language Arts, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Feb. 1976), 155-159.

Most of the written work completed on the skill days was corrected in the classroom. Sometimes the work was corrected with the class group, but most frequently, the teacher corrected the work with the individual student. The activities in Individual Corrective English¹⁹ for grade three were utilized often for the skill work. Teacher structured quizzes were also used as an evaluation device to check mastery of a particular skill.

Creative writing activities were the focus of the Language period two days a week, Monday and Friday. By the reading of stories and poems to the students, interest was created in story writing and poetry writing. Activities of this nature developed listening and comprehension skills. Desner⁷ and Langdon¹⁵ have used these methods successfully with students.

Spelling was a part of the total program. However, during the fall months the teacher did not insist that students spell all words correctly. As the year progressed, students themselves became more aware of correct spelling and made most corrections themselves. Twenty minutes a day, four days a week, were devoted to a structured spelling lesson. Every week words from the list were studied and supplemental words were added. The extra words were from their

¹⁹ Price, Edith H.; Miller, Flora B.; and Ketterman, Mabel. Individual Corrective English. Cincinnati, Ohio: McCormick-Mathers Publishing Company Inc., 1962.

⁷ Desner, Tobe I. "Creating a Literature Program for Primary Children." Elementary English, Vol. 52 No. 1 (Jan. 1975) 59-63.

¹⁵ Langdon, Margaret. Let the Children Write. London: Longman Group Limited, 1970.

Social Studies lessons and writing lesson. Usually, words that were misspelled frequently in previous creative writing lessons were also included. Additional words were chosen from a suggested list in the Spelling book. These lists gave more practice with words of a particular letter pattern, double consonants and syllables; and vowel pattern, long vowel and silent "e", etc.*

Each student had his or her own Spelling book in which words were written that he or she needed. Additional words were added to their list whenever a student needed to know how to spell a word. The pages of the book were in alphabetical order so words were written on the appropriate page.

The Dolch 220 Words List was placed on one Bulletin Board at the front of the classroom. This list was used extensively by the student at the beginning of the year. The list remained on the Bulletin Board until students became proficient at using their own spelling notebooks and other sources for spelling information.

After the words were removed, this space was utilized as additional space for students' creatively written work.

*Kottmeyer, William and Claus, Audrey. Basic Goals in Spelling Level 3. San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1972.

V. EVALUATION

A. Measure and Tests

The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills was used to evaluate the students' progress. The test results were charted. Students were numbered from one through thirty and pre-test and post-test scores for each student were shown. Growth in terms of months and years was computed and noted.

Results show the rank of the individual student in terms of being at, above or below third grade level at the time of the post-test.

B. Limitations

Readiness and ability to write standard English would affect this proposed study. Children of nonstandardized English backgrounds would probably begin the creative writing sessions later in the year. Much more time would have to be spent on oral lessons. The teacher must also be aware that not all students will need the same amount of work with writing skills. There should be other activities available on the skill teaching days for the student or students who do not need to work on a particular skill.

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