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THINKERS AND TECHNICIANS IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Mary Dekker

I was recently involved in a conversation with colleagues returning from a reading conference and bursting with excitement.

One stated, "Do you know what I learned yesterday? When you use a basal reader, you don't have to use the stories in the order they appear in the book."

And another one added, "Yeah, and you can even skip the stories you don't want to use!"

Both were happy with their new-found knowledge but felt a bit embarrassed about the fact that deviating from a reading teacher's guide had never occurred to them before. I knew how they felt, since I had taught from a basal for years and rarely questioned why I continued to teach stories students did not relate to or ones they hated reading. As elementary teachers, many of us feel (or have felt) a non-critical compulsion to teach in the manner suggested by a teacher's guide. We become caught up in guides, kits, and prescribed curricula that require us only to carry out someone else's directions. Pressures to do so come from all sides: administrators, consultants, parents, and some-

times our own insecurities. But for whatever reasons we feel compelled to "play by the book," even more compelling reasons can be found to deviate from this behavior. I found some of my own reasons for doing so in books, articles, classes, workshops, and conference presentations.

But the most liberating source of data was my own classroom and the informal research I carried on there. So crucial was this personal research to helping me modify my teaching, that I suspect doing informal classroom research is the best way--for some the only way, perhaps--to free ourselves from our intense reliance on basal readers and their teacher's guides. In the very act of doing informal, classroom research we become what we must become to break free from old habits and old, rigid methods -- thinkers, not technicians.

Before discussing how teachers can liberate themselves through classroom research, we might briefly review the reasons they might want to do so. Current research, our own teaching theories, and our students' needs provide the needed rationale. Basing their ideas on both formal and informal research, experts on reading now view reading as an interactive process between the reader and the text, a transaction that occurs in a rich context that not only includes the text, but also the history, purposes, and meaning-making abilities of the reader. Most basals do not reflect this research, opting instead for an emphasis on the sequential acquisition of subskills. Such an approach also often violates our own teaching theories, especially if we believe (perhaps only implicitly) in a "whole language approach" in which complete texts and the readers themselves play a major role. It is frustrating to use a teacher's guide that doesn't guide us in a direction consistent with our own theories. More important, our students suffer from this situation. Most of us would

agree that a basal approach alone does not work for all of our students, particularly in terms of interpretive or critical reading. Also, many of our students who love to read do not necessarily enjoy what we call "reading" in school. But such students cannot benefit either from our own teaching theories or from current research until we liberate ourselves from a non-critical, technician's reliance on the procedures of the basal approach.

Becoming a classroom researcher can help us in that self-liberation. Sometimes referred to as a classroom-based researcher, the teacher-researcher usually does not attempt to carry out a quantitative study with a hypothesis, control of variables, and all the other characteristics that ordinarily come to mind when someone says "research." Instead, a teacher-researcher identifies one or more questions related to teaching or learning, then actively seeks the answers. In "On the Move," Martin explains that "teachers need not wait for inquiries to be initiated by others" (23). Once the questions are identified the teacher decides on a method of data collection and interpretation, and often writes a report for a local, state, or national publication. The report is usually a descriptive account of what the teacher found.

I am not suggesting that every teacher should feel compelled to do this. But in a broad sense, or an informal one, I think it is close to what a lot of us do anyway. If, for example, a class is too noisy we try to identify the reasons why and make appropriate changes. We look at what is happening in our rooms, and reflect on how we might make it better. In a very real way this is an informal type of research, and I think it can help teachers when applied to instructional areas. It helped me a great deal, especially with language arts teaching.

Last year, for example, I made several changes in my second grade reading program. One change was to devote 20-25 minutes of reading class time to silent reading where the students could choose the books they wanted to read. I made this change because I believed--like so many experts assert--that children do learn to read by reading and not enough time was being spent on reading in the elementary school. Devoting time to silent reading meant taking time away from skill instruction and reading groups. I did not take this step lightly. I was worried and felt guilty because even though I believe that there's a wealth of good reading material outside the basal, and that isolated skill instruction is ineffective, it was difficult to break away from past practice.

What made the task easier was the informal research I did. My research had two main questions. One, does time devoted to silent reading make students better readers? Two, do they assume more positive attitudes towards reading? Even with an informal research project some data has to be collected. I watched my students carefully and reflected on their reading behaviors which included their written work, oral reading, and other more elusive areas, like their conversations about reading, and at what time I saw them reading in the classroom. I recorded my observations and reflections in a log.

After I collected the data I was faced with the challenging task of interpretation. Reading performance is a difficult area to assess because of the complexity of the reading process, and because I wanted to look beyond the mere subskills of reading. Since I was not engaged in a formal piece of classroom-based research, I did not have a formal method for interpretation. Instead, I relied on ten years of experience with second grade readers to guide me through my first question. I found no evidence to suggest that time spent on

silent reading and less time spent on traditional instruction was harming my students. Oral reading, comprehension, and written work in reading were progressing well. In fact, as the year progressed they read more difficult books than I thought possible. Not only the bright students were reading Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Charlotte's Web after I read them orally to the class, but the average and below average readers were reading them as well. At first I thought they were not really reading these books. I thought the vocabulary alone was too difficult for second graders, not to mention the comprehension. So one day I asked one of my average students to read me the page he had just read from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. He not only did a great job of reading it orally, but told me in detail why he liked this particular part of the book. This was not an isolated incident, but happened later with other students as well. As a teacher-researcher I was no longer a mere technician; I was a classroom teacher who looked at and reflected upon the reading behavior of my students.

As for determining the effect of silent reading time on students' attitudes toward reading, again I relied on my experience with children this age. While there were always some children who loved to read and spent their spare class time reading, this was never a majority of my students. Last year from the very first week students made positive comments about reading. One student told me, "You really have good books in this room." By the second week students wanted to know if they could keep books they didn't finish during silent reading time in their desks. And by the third week some students complained that others were "keeping the really good books in their desks so no one else could read them." As the year progressed, I found students reading more often than in previous years, such as when they first got to school in the morning, and dur-

ing the day when their work was completed. The comments the students made about reading, along with the increase in students who chose reading over other activities, suggest that the students did assume more positive attitudes toward reading.

This was not a scientific study nor was it a structured classroom-based research project. It was an informal piece of research since I had no hard data and no formal means of assessing whether or not this new approach was beneficial to my reading class. I could only compare what happened last year to what had happened before. Yes, there were many other variables to consider. Each particular class has its own abilities and shortcomings. Perhaps last year's class already loved to read and I just gave them more of what they loved. Also, last year the class spent more time writing than students in other years. Both of these factors as well as many others may have had a bearing on reading abilities and attitudes. Drawing conclusions for any type of research requires a great deal of caution on the part of the researcher; this is especially true with the highly subjective nature of teacher research. But from my recorded observations and reflections, I do feel that time spent on silent reading had something to do with better reading performance and positive attitudes toward reading. The research provided enough evidence to try this approach this year with a new group of students where I will again observe and reflect. Thus, by assuming the role of teacher-researcher, I was not only able to make a needed change in my reading program, but I was also able to assess its effectiveness.

At this point it is necessary to consider the importance of classroom research and why more teachers need to become involved. An argument could

be made that many teachers already deviate from guides and programs without doing research. It is the research, however, that can provide every teacher with the confidence to create, branch out, and experiment. Boomer refers to research as "deliberate learning" (8). When teacher-researchers make a change they are "deliberately" or actively involved in discovering its effectiveness. Thus, the reflective nature of research can alleviate the feeling of uncertainty teachers feel when they deviate from the norm. Moreover, the research can then be used to satisfy parents, administrators, consultants, or other teachers who challenge the deviation from the book.

The teacher who does informal research is less likely to be intimidated by new programs, ideas, and techniques. Being a researcher allows the teacher to evaluate what works and what does not work with students. As Martin asserts, teachers "can ask questions that arise from their own classrooms, can make their own records, collect their own data, and modify their reaching in accordance with that they find" (23). No program or idea, old or new, has to be taken on someone else's authority. The teacher-researchers have found authority in themselves.

The teacher who takes on the role of researcher is a decision-maker, not a technician carrying out someone else's idea of what instruction should be. As decision-makers, teachers rely on past knowledge, experience, and expertise; they take a pragmatic approach while attempting to find effective teaching methods, and when found, they try to identify why those methods work. Thus, the teacher who undertakes informal research is engaged in an active, powerful role.

In "The Teacher as REsearcher," Berthoff defines research as "looking and looking again" (30). She further asserts that "we do not need new information: we need to think about the information we have" (30). This is profound advice for elementary teachers. We need to trust ourselves to ask questions and look for answers about what happens in our own classrooms. We need to realize that we are in the best position to make these decisions since no one knows the particular learning behaviors of students better than their teachers. And finally, we need to channel our intellectual and creative abilities into every facet of our teaching: we need to be thinkers--not technicians.

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