Starlit Meredith

EDRG 444

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Mr. Nguyen:

I am writing in order to propose some improvements to our current literacy program based on best practices gleaned from a report issued by The National Institute for Literacy. As you are well aware, literacy is integral to every child’s education and there are a considerable amount of studies regarding literacy. The National Institute for Literacy has compiled a report together that focuses on high quality research that met a stringent list of criteria. From this research, they have developed a set of best practices in teaching literacy supported by multiple studies.

Within reading instruction, it has been found that there are five areas that educators should be focusing on: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Frequently, phonemic awareness and phonics are seen as one and the same, but they are two very distinct components of learning to read. Phonemic awareness is “the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words,” while phonics “is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between the letters that represent those sounds in written language” (p. 1). This may seem like a very fine distinction, but phonics instruction is quite dependent upon phonemic awareness.

Research has shown that both phonemic and phonics instruction is most effective when used early on (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). I would like to propose that our kindergarten and first grade classrooms begin to utilize both phonemic and explicit phonics instruction. In the case of phonemic instruction, it has been shown to be more effective to focus on one or two types of phonemic manipulation, particularly blending and segmenting phonemes within words and to present the material to small groups of students. In the case of phonics instruction, a systematic and explicit program should be utilized, as it has been found to be the most effective way to present phonics. By systematic and explicit I mean that sets of letter-sound relationships should be carefully selected and introduced in a logical instructional sequence. Phonics instruction can be continued after the first grade to help students to aid in reading comprehension, but as it is much more effective earlier on, Kindergarten and first grade classrooms should have a much more intensive program.

Fluency is “the ability to read a text accurately and quickly” (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 19). Fluency is an integral component leading to comprehension of texts. Readers that are fluent do not have to expend as much thought decoding the words; rather, they can focus on determining the meaning of what they are reading. In order to be considered a fluent reader, a student must demonstrate two criteria. They must be able to read aloud in a normal talking voice and with expression.

Research on fluency instruction has shown that it takes “considerable time and substantial practice” ((Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 19) in order to become a fluent reader. Furthermore, in order to become fluent, readers must learn to recognize words within the context of a variety of reading materials. This means that presenting children with flash cards of vocabulary is not the most effective way to encourage recognition when reading or fluency. Research has shown that students must read a literary work aloud at least four times before gaining fluency. Furthermore, research has shown that frequent modeling of fluent reading is imperative for gaining fluency while reading. Fluency instruction should begin in the Kindergarten classrooms and continue through the upper grades. Reading aloud to the students should be a frequent practice in all classrooms. Also, partner reading should be encouraged during reading instruction in order to provide practice and feedback to each reader.

Vocabulary is defined as “the words that we must know in order to communicate effectively” ((Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 29). When a reader comes across a text containing words that he/she are unfamiliar with, it is difficult for the reader to derive meaning. Vocabulary is learned both directly and indirectly, with research showing that vocabulary is increased primarily through indirect means. However, this does not mean that students do not benefit from direct instruction.

The two most effective ways of providing direct vocabulary instruction are through specific word instruction and teaching students word-learning strategies (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Research has found that the most effective way to provide specific word instruction involves three main strategies: teaching specific words before reading, active engagement with new words and repeated exposure to words in a variety of contexts. The most effective word-learning strategies include learning to use dictionaries and thesauruses, utilizing context clues and learning word parts, particularly prefixes.

Finally, text comprehension is the main reason one reads and the very goal of literacy instruction (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Without comprehension, reading becomes a meaningless activity. There are two main ways that readers activate comprehension during reading: reading with a purpose and thinking actively. Both of these activators work hand in hand. Reading with a purpose guides the reader’s thoughts and helps him/her sift through the information provided to find the answers they are ‘looking’ for, while thinking actively allows the reader to analyze the information being provided and relate it to themselves.

All reading instructors should teach students how to use graphic organizers. Graphic organizers are wonderful tools that help children learn the organizational structures of what they are reading (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Understanding the organization of a text greatly aids the student in comprehension. Students should also be encouraged to monitor their own comprehension by becoming aware of what they do understand and learning to identify what they do not understand. Once they understand what they do and do not understand, they can then be taught methods to further aid comprehension, such as looking back or forward through the text or restating difficult passages in their own words. Comprehension instruction should also utilize question-answering strategies and summarizing. The most important thing to remember when teaching comprehension strategies is that students must know and be able to utilize a variety of strategies, as there is no solitary strategy that is compatible with all types of texts.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my proposals. I hope that you find this compilation of research as helpful as I did.

Sincerely,

Starlit Meredith

References:

Armbruster, B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001, September). Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read. Retrieved September 01, 2011, from National Institute of Child Health and Human Development: <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/PRF-teachers-k-3.cfm>