

The First Grade Studies
Guy Bond and Robert Dykstra, 1967/1997

One of the earliest comprehensive studies in the history of how young children begin to learn how to read. (27 different individual projects coordinated by 27 different directors in which a cadre of researchers compared first-grade reading programs from 1964 to 1967.

Cold War
Flesch's (1955) Why Johnny Can't Read
Sputnik (1957)
U.S. losing ground in education to Russia
National Defense Education Act which channeled funds to bolster the nation's education programs
War on Poverty, but studies did not deal with at risk populations

Three research questions:

1. To what extent are various pupil, teacher, class, school, and community characteristics related to pupil achievement in first-grade reading and spelling?

Answer: Negligible. "To improve reading instruction, it is necessary to train better teachers of reading rather than to expect a panacea in the form of methods and materials"(p.416). This insight provided a necessary impetus for future staff development research.

Prior to the First-Grade Studies, research did not focus on how teachers interacted with children in the classroom. More than 30 years later the National Reading Panel report makes a recommendation that is quite similar to this, indicating that staff development in literacy for teachers is related to improvement of student achievement in reading, spelling, and comprehension.

Joyce and Showers: 4 important components of staff development: theory, demonstration, practice, and coaching.

Majority of communities and schools targeted in this project were more or less homogeneous. Maybe the lack of significance related to reading is the result of the data being collected from various sites that could not be contrasted with populations more diverse in terms of poverty, race, culture, and linguistic backgrounds. Contrast these findings with Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) and the National Reading Panel report (2000).

2. Which of the many approaches to initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of the first grade?

ITA

Basal Plus Phonics
Language Experience
Linguistic
Phonic/Linguistic
Basal (alone)

Basals of the 1960: controlled vocabulary; a teacher-proof scripted teacher's manual; and a classroom instructional management system relegated to teaching children in three distinct reading-leveled groups.

Phonics was taught sparingly in favor of instruction in high-frequency sight words, structural analysis features, meaning emphasis, and discourse about stories composed by academics rather than authors of authentic children's literature.

Answer: classrooms using an integrated approach, which combined systematic phonics with reading for meaning and writing, far surpassed those using mainstream basal programs. "No one approach is so distinctly better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively" (p. 416).

The First-Grade Studies is one of the first U.S. national research reports to point to the advantage of using an early code-emphasis, which is quite similar to Chall's (1967) findings, showing that systematic, early code instruction improves children's spelling and comprehension. Bond and Dykstra's (1997) indicated that approaches that included systematic phonics instruction far exceeded the use of straight basal programs in word recognition achievement. Integrated approaches (connecting reading and meaning, systematic phonics) significantly surpassed the basal-alone approaches.

3. Is any program uniquely effective or ineffective for pupils with high or low readiness for reading?

One of the most striking findings was the persistence of project differences in reading achievement, even after adjustments were made statistically for differences in pupil readiness for reading. Evidently, reading achievement is influenced by factors peculiar to school systems over and above differences in prereading capabilities of pupils. (1997, p. 415)

Epiphany: from that moment on, there would need to be a paradigm shift away from "reading readiness" to a whole new concept of literacy that would evolve to what we now refer to as "emergent literacy."

Another startling finding: "Obviously, the ability to recognize letters at the beginning of first grade was related to reading success in all of the methods and programs employed in the study: (1997, p. 365). The importance of children learning the letters of the alphabet produced the single most predictive relationship to future success in reading. The second most important predictive relationship to future success in reading was the "Phonic/Linguistic treatment where the Phonemes test correlated best" (p.365).

Convergent research over 30 years verifies: a. knowledge of letter names; b. ability to discriminate between word sounds (phonemic awareness).

Strengths of the Study

The First-Grade Studies influenced the research of beginning reading for the next 30 years.

1. Future studies began investigating the role of the teacher and classrooms rather than centering on comparisons of methods and materials.
2. Professional development in literacy.
3. Concept of readiness and emergent literacy
4. Predictiveness of knowing letter names and being able to discriminate word sounds
5. Importance of invented spelling and invented writing activities in advancing children's learning of phonics
6. Systematic phonics is a necessary and effective way to teach all children to read, regardless of method, and that it worked regardless of students' socioeconomic status.
7. Teaching children more words faster, and questioning controlled vocabulary formats.
8. Basal only methods did not fare well in comparison to other approaches which combined phonics.

Limitations

1. "Studies were not submitted to the levels of analysis characteristic of later efforts" (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998).
2. Bond and Dykstra do not provide a discussion section to help readers project how the findings of this study could be useful to practitioners or to recommend how some ancillary findings might require further investigation.