

Snapshot #9

Literature-Based Reading Instruction Pine Butte Elementary School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Methods and techniques used in the Pine Butte Elementary School literature-based reading program are supported by findings from the effective schools research. As synthesized in *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1984), supportive research findings include the following classroom-level elements:

1.1 Instruction is guided by a preplanned curriculum.

- Learning goals and objectives are developed and prioritized.
- Instructional resources and teaching activities are identified, matched to objectives and student developmental levels and recorded in lesson plans. Alternative resources and activities are identified, especially for priority objectives.
- Resources and teaching activities are reviewed for content and appropriateness and are modified according to experience to increase their effectiveness in helping students learn.

1.4 Instruction is clear and focused.

- Lesson activities are previewed; clear written and verbal directions are given; key points and instructions are repeated; student understanding is checked.
- Students have plenty of opportunity for guided and independent practice with new concepts and skills.

1.5 Learning progress is monitored closely.

- Teachers frequently monitor student learning, both formally and informally.
 - Regular, focused reviews of key concepts and skills are used throughout the year to check on and strengthen student retention.
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SITUATION

Pine Butte Elementary School is located in Colstrip, Montana, a town with a population of approximately 4,300 now, following a peak of approximately 8,000 during the five-year construction of a huge Montana Electric Company coal-burning power plant in the early 1980s. The influx of construction workers, plant personnel, and their families resulted in rapid

expansion in the school district. Prior to plant construction, the district included one school building and now includes four: two elementary schools (K-5), a middle school (6-8), and a high school. While construction workers have left the area, plant workers now form a significant portion of the district population, which also includes ranch and farm families and American Indians, primarily from the nearby Northern Cheyenne Reservation. There is a strong tax base in the district, among the highest in the state; this status may be affected by efforts now under way in Montana to equalize school funding.

The curriculum is articulated across the district for grades K-12, and is outcome based. Objectives have been identified for all content areas, and curricula have been developed based on these objectives. Locally developed criterion-referenced tests are used in language arts, math, science and social studies to measure student performance annually in grades K-12. Standardized tests are also used to measure progress through units in particular content areas.

There are 342 students attending Pine Butte Elementary School in grades K-5, forty-two percent of them American Indian children. The staff includes twenty certified classroom teachers, eight specialists, and eight aides. Class size is small, between sixteen and twenty-three students. There is an effort across the school to improve student performance in the academic areas and a current emphasis on higher-order thinking skills.

CONTEXT

Pine Butte emphasizes whole group instruction in its reading program. Classes of students are moved through the reading objectives as a group, with teachers and aides helping students who are slower to master particular objectives and providing supplementary learning opportunities for those who more quickly reach objectives. Objectives are tied to a basal reading series, and teachers lead the students through the curriculum as they work through the reading series.

A majority of teachers in the school are now supplementing reading instruction with a literaturebased reading approach wherein individual children select, read and discuss books from the school's library. This approach has been very well received by the teachers who have voluntarily implemented it, and it has been successfully used with students at all grade levels in the school.

The literature-based reading approach was first brought to the school by teachers returning from a 1986 conference on programs for gifted and talented students. Initially used by three teachers with full support of the principal, the approach is now being used by three of four teachers of grade two, two of three teachers of grade three, two of four teachers of grade four and both teachers of grade five. Growth of use of the program has resulted from teachers' interest and voluntary application of the approach in their classrooms.

Teachers can apply the approach in a variety of ways. All students can be involved in literature-based reading after they complete their daily work, or all students can use their books for the reading period one day each week. In other applications, all students can use books for reading for a set period of time (a quarter, a month), or the teacher can use this approach only with students who have mastered the objectives in the flow chart. Some teachers use combinations of these applications.

All teachers are, however, following the approach and implementing major program components. Typically, the program is introduced using a story (or stories) from the basal reader. First, the teacher introduces the concept of the "literature wheel," a pie-shaped chart identifying various types of literature. This helps students understand the wide variety of books available to them and leads to familiarity with such literary terms as fiction, nonfiction, biography, fantasy and others.

Next, the group of students is introduced to three major components of literature: plot, character, and setting. Still using the story, students learn to identify and describe what happens, who is involved, and the situation place, and time of the action.

As the group progresses through the story, students complete an exercise to consider and describe predictions about what is going to happen in the story. These predictions are written down and used later for discussion of the story. The students are also taught to formulate, write down, and provide answers to comprehension questions -- questions that delve into the plot, character, and setting -- to demonstrate that they understand the content of the story. As a final assignment while reading through the story, students are required to identify and write down vocabulary words -- words that are new or unclear.

Once the story has been completed, students then individually select an activity to complete, choosing the specific task they will do to confirm their understanding of the story content. These activities can be widely varied and may include:

PLOT

- Mapping: drawing a series of pictures of key elements of the story in the proper order
- Collage: photos, magazine clippings, headlines or other items that demonstrate the story plot
- Folded sequence: a sheet of paper folded into thirds, one picture on each third of the paper demonstrating, in order, the introduction, climax and conclusion of the story
- Timeline: a linear chart in time increments (hours, days, weeks, etc.) indicating key actions in the plot
- Cartoon strip: a sequence of drawings similar to a newspaper cartoon

CHARACTER

- Mobile: a mobile of descriptive words about the main character
- Creative dramatics: the student comes to class in costume as the character, makes a presentation about who the character is and what happens to the character, and answers questions from the class about the story
- Diary: rewriting the story in the first person from the character's point of view

SETTING

- Diorama: a three-dimensional depiction of the setting in the story
- Poster: a large drawing of the place where the action takes place
- Maps: the geographical setting and the route characters take in the story

Students are allowed to choose one activity to complete. Teachers make sure that students understand all tasks so they can make the selection and then continue to work with the students to assure that activities are successfully completed.

After the program components are taught to the students, the teacher then begins the literature-based approach. The group-based reading instruction is then supplemented by individualization as students apply the techniques they learned with the story. First, the teacher reteaches the "literature wheel" and creates individual literature files for each student. Depending on the grade level, files may contain, among other items:

- Record sheets to keep track of the student's progress through the program steps with each book selected
- Prediction sheets for recording predictions for each book
- Vocabulary lists to record new words, the sentences in which they were used, and their definitions
- Comprehension question sheet to record comprehension questions

- Comprehension question answer sheets to record answers
- Reading logs to record dates and number of pages read for students to mark progress as they read the book

These files become the record keeping system for the program.

Students then select the book they will read, either from a prescribed reading list or by exploring library shelves. The school librarian is actively involved in the program and works with classes as they come to choose their literature.

After looking through the book and examining the cover, students fill in prediction sheets about the book. Then, in whatever configuration the teacher has elected to use, the students proceed to read their books. In classrooms where students read their books one reading period per week, students are expected to read one book per quarter; in those where students are exclusively focusing on literature, they are typically expected to read at least one book per month.

As students reach the mid-point in their books, they are responsible for arranging for mid-conferences with the teacher; these are individual meetings to discuss progress. Teachers query students on structure, characters, predictions and vocabulary. Students at this point select the activities they will complete for this particular book.

Students then finish reading the books and meet again with teachers in a post-conference. Once again, predictions, vocabulary and comprehension questions are discussed, and arrangements are made for completion of the activities. Grading systems vary, but it is typical that the literature-based reading becomes as much as one-third of the individual student's reading grade.

The program has been very successful in the school. Students' motivation has increased, and they no longer need to be forced to read. They are more involved in reading, and their comprehension skills are much more advanced. While test scores have shown no dramatic trends over the past five years, there has been steady increase in learning skills for students as they progress through the grades. Most importantly, American Indian students are succeeding as well in this approach as other students.

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EXAMPLE: PLOT MAPPING

A second grade class of approximately 18 students is learning the technique of plot mapping using a short story from the basal reader. This is their first introduction to the technique, which they will later use as they read books.

In guided, silent reading, the students all read the story, a tale of friends Frog and Toad. Then, in discussion of the plot, setting, and character, the class together selects a sequence of six major events in the story.

The teacher then explains that in a plot map each student will draw pictures in circles on a large sheet of paper to demonstrate these six key events in the story. Students all get out drawing materials and all draw and number the six circles in the same order.

The teacher then leads a discussion of how best to illustrate these elements of the story: how to differentiate between Frog (green) and Toad (brown), how to show the grass (vertical green lines) versus the forest (brown trunks, green leaves), etc.

Using the six plot elements outlined and featuring characters and settings, students draw six pictures in the circles. The resultant drawings are all very similar, and students now understand

what a plot map is.

EXAMPLE: BOOK SELECTION

A third grade class has learned the elements of the approach and students are now ready to select their first book. The teacher asks them to get their literature folders out and take out the list of recommended books. They read through the titles and circle several books that sound interesting.

The teacher then reviews the "five-finger rule," a technique whereby students judge for themselves if the books they select are appropriate to their own reading level. Students recall that they are to open to book to any page and read, holding up all five fingers on one hand. Every time they find a word that is too hard for them on that page, one finger goes down. If they put all five fingers down on the same page, they must then exchange the book and find another that is not so difficult. The review is completed with a discussion of how they use the card catalog.

Students line up and go to the library, book lists in hand. At the library, they go to the card file and look up, then locate their books. They find seats with their books and proceed with the "five finger rule," some returning books to the librarian and getting another. Every student checks out a book.

The students return to the classroom with their books and examine them, speculating on what the books might be about and filling out prediction sheets. They then begin reading the books.

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