



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

Leveled Children's Literature and the Adult Learner

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Background:

I investigated whether leveled children's literature would prove to be enjoyable and profitable in helping the adult nonreader progress toward becoming a fluent reader. I chose to investigate this topic because occasionally I would hear someone state, "No adult wants to sit and read children's books." Many people assume that adults will be offended if they are handed children's literature to read. I take issue with the idea that having adults read children's books is a "no-no" because, personally, I love to read children's books. In addition, I have noticed too many other people taking great pride and enjoyment in reading children's literature to tiny tots.

I also chose to investigate this topic because I firmly believe that all nonreaders need to build a firm foundation, built line upon line and precept upon precept, in order to progress in reading. I recall behaviorists stating that some adults have emotional problems due to the fact that they never learned to crawl. These adults were instructed to crawl in order to help overcome their problems. Likewise, I believe there is a connection between the non-crawler and the nonreader in that the nonreader also needs to go back to steps that were never taken in order to plug in missing links.

I had an inkling that if I presented adult non-readers with a print-rich environment of children's literature (which at every level of text difficulty would allow the learner to read for meaning and enjoyment right from the very beginning stages of his/her instructional program), then fluency would come.

My program, the Oak Grove Adult Education Center in Westmoreland County, incorporates adult basic and secondary education. I have adult low-level readers and/or adult nonreaders. Often I have noticed them struggling to read materials that are too difficult for them. This setting affords me the opportunity to place in the hands of the learner reading material that is at a level where he or she can be successful.

Inquiry:

What happens when adult learners are presented with leveled children's literature as their reading materials?

Data Collection:

Mr. Major is a 67-year old gentleman who entered my class unable to read, and he could barely sign his name. Despite these limitations, Mr. Major is a hard worker (although retired) and possesses the finer things of life. He was very committed to attending

class and extremely punctual; absences only started toward the end of the year when some family problems arose or when he had special church obligations. Mr. Major would often state that he could not understand some of the other participants who started the program but did not continue.

I focused my research on Mr. Major because, although formal instruction had begun three years ago, he showed very little signs of progress. The two previous instructors had focused on teaching him the much needed basics of alphabet recognition and phonics. Attempts at reading were made but the books were given at random. I had high hopes that my theory about leveled children's literature would work for him. Mr. Major would read out loud during our sessions together.

As a researcher I wanted to have some insight into the role leveled children's books could play in a nonreader's life. Leveled children's books represent rich literacy experiences that offer, at every level from 1 to 20, explicit instruction for skills and strategies including phonics, word recognition and decoding. They offer continual challenges for the learner at every level for meaning. And they offer related illustrations. I began by conducting interviews with staff

members who previously had worked with Mr. Major. I documented in observation journals what I saw and heard during ten 2-hour class sessions. I also audio taped, transcribed and/or video taped each session, which I analyzed for patterns of actions and reactions to the children's literature. My primary sources of data, however, were the Running Record that is a detailed procedure for observing, recording and analyzing a learner's oral reading behavior, and the pretests and posttests on high-frequency word lists. Other data were collected through literacy lesson plans that track fluent writing, word analysis and reading levels, and comparisons of writing samples to determine whether growth had taken place.

Findings:

Based on my observations, I am able to conclude that:

- Mr. Major's vocabulary increased (Pretest=9 words; Posttest=30 words)
- Mr. Major progressed from level 1 to level 10 in the 10 sessions we met.
- As Mr. Major watched himself progress from one level to the next, improvement came easier.
- Growth took place during the 10-minute writing spree (Pretest=6 words; Posttest=10 words).
- Writing was enhanced from phrases to sentences.
- Nonproductive coping mechanisms were beginning to dissipate, i.e., Mr. Major would spell words

before attempting to pronounce them, such as c-a-t, c-a-t, cat. This nonproductive behavior began to be seen less frequently as he moved to higher levels.

- Mr. Major sometimes displayed intimidation when presented with a book that appeared to be wordy or lengthy.
- Mr. Major expressed discouragement when the first two readings of a book would go well but on the third or fourth rereading he made mistakes.
- Mr. Major still displays some letter-recognition/letter-sound confusions.
- Mr. Major did seem to be able to relate to the stories and found many of them amusing. Here's what he said about the children's books:

"I feel good about going up the levels." (2-17-99)

"I just read 16 pages!"

"Mr. Grump is me (chuckle, chuckle)." (3-10-99) [Mr. Grump is a story book character who is grumpy everyday until midmorning when he gets a kiss from his wife which turns him into a charming man.]

I began this project with the inkling that if an adult nonreader had leveled children's books presented to him/her, that person would progress toward becoming an independent, fluent reader. The results of the data overwhelmingly support this.

Conclusions:

The project worked well. When I continue this project in September, my hope is that there will be an expansion from one research participant to a small group because a lot of learning takes place amongst peers. There will be very little changed, but I will make some additions, i.e., read-along tapes, choral reading, more opportunities for learners to produce writing samples.

Although a book may be children's literature, if it is written at an inappropriate level for the learner, frustration will set in and very little learning will take place. On the other hand, this research suggests that if a readable text is used, the learner becomes confident to read the text independently through repeated readings. My next step will be to take Mr. Major from level 10 through level 20 by the continued use of leveled-children's literature which enables strategies and skills, perhaps previously taught in isolation, to be introduced and practiced in the context of a story. Once the Learner reaches level 20, what makes for having appropriate materials for adults? My inquiry journey continues. □

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The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research, groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems, arising from their own practice. Practitioner research is a long-term learning process that occurs, over the course of months, within a supportive group and continues as researchers carry out projects in their classrooms and programs. Through brief reports that they write practitioner researchers contribute their knowledge to others in the literacy education field. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999, is available on the Internet at <http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html>

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