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ELEMENTARY STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS OF READING

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Many reading education authorities (i.e. Smith 1978; Stauffer 1975; Thorndike 1973) discuss reading as a meaning identification process in which the reader actively thinks about what s/he reads. Similarly, most classroom teachers include this relationship between reading and meaning in their definitions of reading (Green, Macaul, & Wood 1978).

Little research, however, has been done on children's perceptions of reading (Tovey 1976). How do children view reading? Do they also view reading as a process emphasizing meaning, or do they view reading as something else? The purpose of this study was to investigate children's definitions of reading, with a special concern for their view of reading as a meaning identification process.

Method

A total of 418 students in grades one through six participated in this study. Nineteen schools in five small Great Plains communities and one major city were involved. An attempt was made to balance the number of students from each grade level, as well as the number of males and females, and the students' performance levels. Classroom teachers rated students as above average, average, or below average readers.

During an individual interview each student was asked, "What is reading?" Children's responses were transcribed and later classified according to three definitions. These definitions were derived on the basis of a content analysis of all responses:

Definition 1 — Reading as a general activity

Statements classified as a general activity indicated that reading was viewed as something to do, just another part of the regular school day. Students typically told about their basal texts, where reading was taught, when it was scheduled, grouping procedures, or involvement with games, workbooks or commercial kits. Sample student responses included: "It's doing a lot of hard work at the center." "I guess it's something to do in school." "You have to use those books and go up in a group." "Reading is what we have in the morning." "That's when I get to work with Mrs. Fletcher."

Definition 2 — Reading as a word identification process

These statements focused on the use of sight words, contextual clues, phonics, and structural analysis skills used to identify specific words.

Sample student responses included: "It's putting letters together to know the words." "Well, if you don't know the word you can see if it looks like another word you know. Then you can say it." "It's looking with your eyes and hearing the letters talk." "Well, you pronounce the big words right and know the vocabulary." "Reading is looking at the other words to figure out new words you don't know."

Definition 3—Reading as a meaning identification process

The final definition focused on reading as an active search for meaning. The reader viewed reading as a thinking procedure, as s/he attempted to make sense from what was read. Sample responses included: "Once I get started I get really involved, and I feel like I'm there." "You travel to another world with a book." "Reading is understanding what somebody else is trying to tell you." "It's learning about different things." "Reading is really knowing what a story is all about."

Each child's response was classified according to these three definitions. In cases where students gave more than one definition, they were asked to identify their most important response. Graduate students enrolled in a reading specialist program also classified a random sample of the children's statements to establish the reliability of the researcher's categorizations.

Results

A 6 x 3 chi-square analysis was performed to investigate the effect of grade level on reading definition. The data indicate that grade level differentiated between students' definitions of reading ($\chi^2 \times 10 = 41.92$, $p = .01$). Figure 1 illustrates that the percentage of students identifying reading as a meaning identification process increases from 12% in first grade to 43% in fifth grade, then drops only slightly to 40% in sixth grade. Conversely, the percentage of students merely viewing reading as a general activity steadily decreases from 70% in first grade to 37% in sixth grade. It is interesting to note that the greatest percentage change in these two definitions occurs between third and fourth grade. The percentage of students defining reading as word identification remains quite stable, at about 19% through all six grades.

The data was further analyzed within each grade level according to the variables of sex and reading performance. No trend was evident considering sex. As figure 2 indicates, however, a greater percentage of above average readers defined reading as a meaning identification process, compared to below average readers. The percentage span between above average and below average readers also increases greatly from a 10% range in third grade to a 30% range in fourth grade. This increased range is observed at fifth and sixth grade, too.

Conclusions

The data indicate that as students progress from first through sixth grade they increasingly view reading as a meaning identification process.

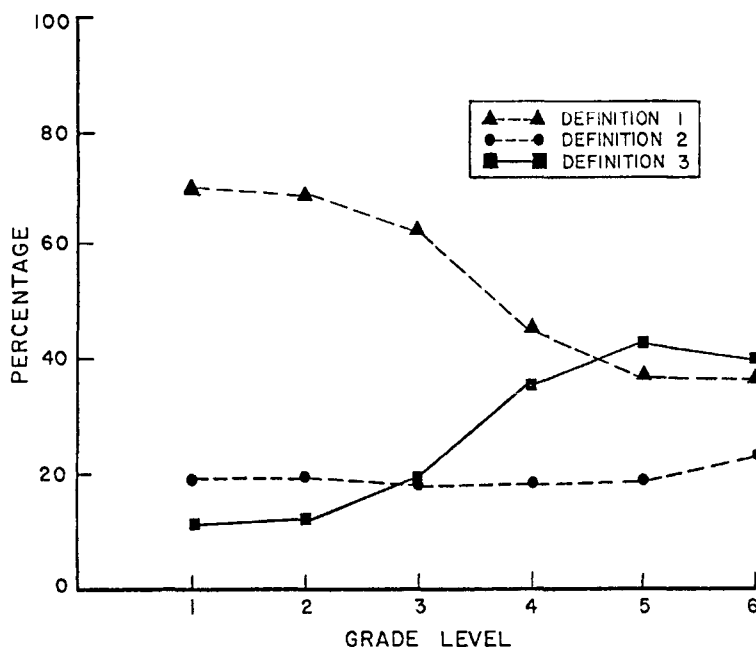


Figure 1. Percentage of elementary students identifying the three reading definitions.

More intermediate students defined reading as meaning identification compared to primary students. This is reasonable considering the typical stress on "learning to read" in lower grades and "reading to learn" in upper grades. Probably because most children are already adept at basic word identification procedures, intermediate teachers are able to emphasize the meaning identification function of reading.

Students progressing at below average reading levels, however, are often recycled through introductory level skill activities. Typically these children are given corrective instruction in word identification strategies. It is therefore understandable that they are less likely to think of reading as meaning identification. On the other hand, those who have already mastered these beginning skills, the above average students, more frequently define reading in this manner.

A question may then be raised. "If students do not think of reading as meaning identification, can their abilities be improved by instruction highlighting this viewpoint?" Psycholinguists (Cooper & Petrosky 1976) would answer "yes," since they maintain that the search for meaning is an essential strategy of a skilled reader. Certainly it may be argued that some prerequisite word identification skills are first needed before fluency can be attained. But, these skills should function only to enable students to search for meaning. This must be the ultimate goal of all reading programs,

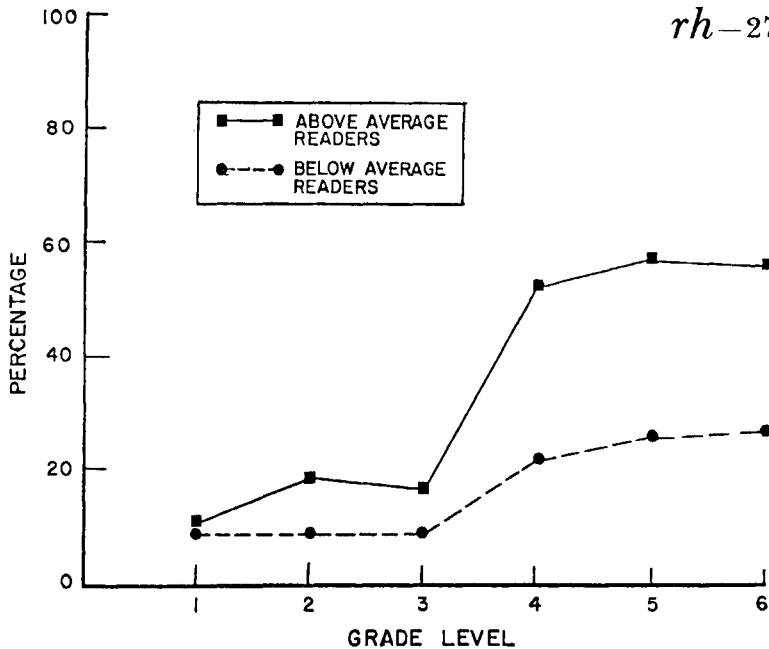


Figure 2. Percentage of above average and below average readers defining reading as a meaning identification process.

especially those for the below average child, who tends to think of reading as something else. Suggestions such as those provided by Stauffer (1968) and Pearson and Johnson (1978) offer practical methods to implement this outcome.

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