

2-1-1999

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### **Recommended Citation**

Morawski, C. M. (1999). The influence of perceived sibling position on reading perceptions: Implications for reading teacher education. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 39 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol39/iss3/2](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol39/iss3/2)

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# **The influence of perceived sibling position on reading perceptions: Implications for reading teacher education**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Teachers' critical examination of their perceived sibling positions in the family, particularly in relation to reading development, can provide them with valuable insights about their current perceptions and behaviors related to content area instruction. This paper explores the findings obtained from 188 elementary and secondary preservice teachers' responses to a questionnaire that focused on perceived sibling position as an influence on reading perceptions. Teachers' perceived sibling positions and reading abilities within their family constellations receive special attention. Further consideration centers on possibilities for practice for reading teacher education in the content areas as well as directions for future research.

Content area teachers, with their subject expertise, are in an instrumental position to bring meaning to numerous kinds of texts (e.g., maps, graphs, reports) while they enhance their own classroom practice. Specific examples of applications that would facilitate active participation in content reading instruction are reflective reading of historical novels (Smith, 1993), effective use of visuals (Rakes, Rakes & Smith, 1995), and development and implementation of knowledge models (Mosenthal & Kirsch, 1991). The application of such practices requires reflective teachers who are able to engage their students in the conscious construction of meaning. Kinney-Sedgwick and Yochum (1996) noted that "clearly, moving from traditional approaches to constructivist approaches in content area literacy learning requires changes in the thinking of teachers regarding their role and that of their students as well as the role of the text as the purveyor of the curriculum".

Teachers' acceptance and conscious use of content area instruction have varied. Investigations concerning many different factors such as workplace constraints and inservice support (O'Brien & Stewart, 1990; Rafferty, 1992-93; Sturtevant, 1991) have established a better understanding of teachers' reactions to content methodology. In order to contribute further to this body of knowledge, an exploration of the perceptual information that educators hold about themselves as readers as well as the reading process warrants serious consideration. In view of the transition to more constructivist methodologies where self-understanding is essential, the study of this factor is especially relevant. According to Morawski (1997) "individuals' perceptions, based on their subjective interpretations of life events, affect the choices they make. In the case of teachers, these perceptions have the potential to influence participation in teaching and learning" [including the area of content reading] (p. 246). Given the amount of content area reading children do in school, teachers' choices and self perceptions will play a very significant role in student participation.

From the theoretical perspective of Individual Psychology, the sibling position that an individual assumes in the family constellation offers significant information for understanding an individual's perceptions. It is not the child's number in the order of successive births that influences character. Rather, it is the personal interpretation of the situation into which each child is born that affects the formation of an individual's personality or pattern of behavior (Shulman, 1962). Teachers' critical examination of their perceived sibling positions in the family, particularly in relation to reading development, can provide them with valuable insights about their current perceptions and behaviors related to the reading process, including content area instruction.

This paper explores the findings obtained from 188 elementary and secondary preservice teachers' responses to a questionnaire that focused on sibling position in the family constellation as an influence on reading perceptions. Teachers' perceived sibling position and reading abilities within their family constellations receive special attention. Further consideration centers on possibilities for practice for reading teacher education in the content areas as well as directions for future research.

## BACKGROUND

According to the theory of Individual Psychology, the "family constellation indicates the characteristic relationship of each member of the family to each other" (Dreikurs, 1964, p. 20) and "is actually a form of

life history study and personality inventory" (Shulman & Mosak, 1988, p. 75). More specifically, an investigation of an individual's family constellation discloses personal perspectives and attitudes about self and others as well as fundamental approaches to life tasks, including the teaching of reading. A major determinant in the development of an individual's frame of reference is the psychological position that one creates in the sibling context where each member strives to find a significant place of belonging.

The research literature recognizes the influential and varied dynamics of the sibling relationship. After studying the sibling patterns of 600 readers, Otto (1965a, 1965b) concluded that "samples of good readers tend to include more eldest and only children, and samples of poor readers tend to include more later-born children" (1965b, p. 57). He speculated that the literacy achievement of the eldest child is attributable to such factors as the desire to keep ahead of younger siblings, undivided parental attention, and a strong need for approval.

The notion of the eldest as the more proficient reader and the younger as the less able one has received additional support in the literature. Doake (1988) observed that it is not unusual to find the older child overpowering the younger during family reading time. Such control could persist to the point where the younger child regularly seeks alternative activities that parents often misinterpret as a lack of interest in reading. Beames (1992) noted that "as a consequence of their endeavors to find a place in the family, siblings tend to develop contrary personality traits and interests. Where one is successful academically, another may be athletic" (p. 118).

Other research has illustrated this principle of distinction in the sibling grouping. Morawski (1992) found that a fifteen-year-old male's resistance to participate in reading and writing activities was a direct response to his sixteen-year-old sister's above-average performance in the area of literacy. As stated by this boy, "my sister is the best reader and writer..., but I am the smartest in mechanical stuff" (p. 89). Leman (1993) noted that "parents tend to spend more time reading to their first-born children" (p. 286). Consequently, this child, rather than the younger sibling, acquires a head start on becoming the scholar in the family.

Although trends regarding the firstborn child as the more proficient reader have emerged, other studies revealed different literacy behaviors relative to sibling configuration. Dreikurs, Grunwald, and Pepper (1982) presented a case of a third-grader who developed reading problems after the birth of her baby brother. Up to this point she had been a model "only" child, never causing her parents any aggravation. This child's

reading difficulties allowed her to compete with her brother for their parents' attention without risking her status as the "good" sibling in the family.

Beecher (1947) analyzed the situation of a fourteen-year-old girl who was reading without retention and little concentration. He found her two younger male siblings to be active competitors who caused the girl to be on guard constantly with small hope for success. Ferguson (1984) stated that "in some families the oldest girl may be constantly discouraged and belittled while a later-born male is given wide rein" (p. 18). In this situation it appears that the girl may have assumed the role of a younger sibling.

A case study by Lieben (1967) focused on an eleven-year-old male whose reading difficulties demanded and consequently received a large amount of attention within the family. Interestingly, it was the other sibling, a nine-year old male with above-average reading abilities, who was experiencing emotional difficulties. According to Milstead (1988), "the brother or sister of an LD child may actually feel guilty for achieving academically while the LD child falters" (p. 538).

As this review indicates, there are many different factors stemming from perceived sibling relationships that influence individuals' interpretation and application of their literacy abilities. The recognition and reconstruction of these factors can help individuals engage more consciously in productive uses of reading and writing. (Morawski, 1992). In the case of educators, the knowledge of their own literacy stories from a sibling perspective can illuminate and strengthen their current practices related to content area reading. The present study was conducted to begin to investigate the application of perceived sibling position to reading teacher education in the content areas.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Two hundred and seven preservice teachers voluntarily completed a questionnaire regarding perceived sibling position and reading development. This study concentrated on the analysis of 188 completed questionnaires. The two main reasons for the elimination of the remaining questionnaires were: (i) the omission of vital information, such as demographics and perceived sibling position and (ii) participants' self-identification as "only" children, a category that had insufficient numbers to include in the analysis of data.

Recruitment of participants took place in a one-year Bachelor of Education program at a Canadian university. To be eligible for this program, prospective teachers needed a minimum of an undergraduate degree. Seventy-three percent of the teacher participants were females while 27% were males. The age range was early twenties to mid-fifties with a mean of 28. They represented three established teaching divisions for certification: Kindergarten to grade four (48%), grades four to ten (23%), and grades seven to thirteen (29%). A break-down of teaching majors reveals one (general) for primary-junior and four (language, social science, math/science and arts) for the latter two divisions.

### *Procedure*

During a 45 minute period in class the teacher-subjects responded voluntarily in writing to a questionnaire. A trained research assistant administered the questionnaire and read the contents to the teachers before they began writing their responses. The assistant also answered pertinent questions and explained key concepts such as perceived psychological position.

In particular, the questionnaire requested: (a) pertinent demographic information including age, gender, teaching division, and teaching major; (b) their perceived sibling position ("first born", "middle", "youngest", "only") and an explanation for their choice; and (c) their perception of their reading proficiency ("high", "average", "low") within their sibling context. The above four categories used for identifying perceived psychological position are well-established ones within the research literature, particularly associated with Individual Psychology (Campbell, White, & Stewart, 1991; Melillo, 1983; Pilkington, White, & Matheny, 1997; White, Campbell, Stewart, Davies, & Pilkington, 1997).

### *Analysis of data*

Teacher subjects were first grouped according to their perceived sibling position in the family constellation ("first born", "middle", "youngest", "only"). The numbers in the "only" category were not sufficient to take into account in the analysis of data. Therefore, the analysis concentrated on the remaining three groups--"first born", "middle", and "youngest". A chi-square analysis, using the probability of equal to or less than 0.05, determined if significant differences among the three groups existed for perceived reading ability ("high", "average", "low").

## RESULTS

*Distribution according to Perceived Position*

The distribution of teacher participants according to their perceived sibling position was 41% for "first born", 19% for "middle", and 40% for "youngest". No significant representation existed among the three groups for gender, teaching division, and teaching major. Some specific examples of statements that documented the teacher participants' choices of sibling positions are as follows:

*Oldest*

- I am the oldest sibling in my family and felt very much that way... I'm a take charge kind of person.
- I am the firstborn and the oldest. I was born first and that is the way it is.
- I was always the oldest. I didn't learn of my older brother until I was 6 or 7 years old.
- My sister was younger so I had a certain responsibility to look out for her.

*Middle*

- Second born--always felt like the meat in the sandwich.
- I always have viewed myself as being "the middle child".
- It is interesting because I always saw myself as the middle child. For a long time it was just the 3 of us and then my parents had 2 after-thoughts.

*Youngest*

- I have always perceived myself as being the baby because I was always labeled as one.
- And in fact, I still remain the baby of the family.
- I perceived myself as the youngest in the family even though I have a twin sister.
- She's a few minutes older than me.
- Definitely the youngest! The baby of the family--everyone's younger sister!

*Differences in perceived reading ability*

The analysis regarding perceived reading ability yielded significant differences among the three groups. Teacher subjects from the "first born" group viewed themselves primarily as "high" proficiency readers

(83%), rather than "average" (9%) or "low" (8%). A similar but less pronounced pattern emerged in the "youngest" group where teacher subjects also perceived themselves as "high" proficiency readers (63%) more often than "average" (20%) or "low" (17%). In contrast, the teacher subjects from the "middle" group viewed themselves as "average" proficiency readers first (50%) followed by "high" (36%) and then "low" (14%). ( $N=188$ ,  $X^2 30.6$ ,  $p \leq 0.000$ ). No significant differences for perceived reading ability were found for gender, teaching division, or teaching major.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### *First born*

Perceptions and reading development. The research literature supports the "first born" teachers' perceptions of themselves as "high" (83%) proficiency readers. The findings from the administration of a questionnaire to 170 children indicated that "first" children rated themselves higher in eleven traits including "intelligence", "high standards", and "hard worker" (Lohman, Lohman & Christensen, 1985). Investigations into the actual intellectual and academic performance of this sibling position reinforce this perception. In a study involving 615 junior high school students, Oberlander and Jenkin (1967) found that "first borns" surpassed "later borns" in intellectual ability and academic achievement. McGlynn (1969) found that first borns were over-represented among 306 students in a specific college and 23 students obtaining a grade of "A" in a psychology course at the same school.

Two factors, parental expectations and the birth of subsequent siblings, appear to play integral roles in the development of perceptions and related actions associated with this position. As noted by Dreikurs, et al. (1982), "first born children represent their [parents'] dreams and ambitions" (p. 59). Consequently, parents tend to concentrate on discovering and actualizing these children's potentials to learn and perform. In relation to reading, many teacher subjects who identified themselves as "first born" noted that their parents placed great emphasis on literacy acquisition.

The birth of other siblings often leaves "first born" children feeling dethroned and subsequently motivated to reestablish their place of significance in the sibling constellation (Perlin & Grater, 1984). The oldest sibling, consequently, competes with the younger ones to be first in all activities (Angers, 1974). According to Forer (1977a), "the arrival of a second child seems to intensify...anxiety about performance, and



thereafter the firstborn struggles to regain parent approval and love" (p. 66). Leman (1993) offers that compliance and love secures such approval. For example, "first born" children are more likely to adhere to the political and religious views of their parents. Wisdom & Walsh (1975) point out that such actions contribute to "first borns" being "more dogmatic or rigid in their beliefs as a group" (p. 35).

"Firstborns" striving for status in the sibling constellation can transfer to other settings where they tend to seek approval through compliance and academic accomplishments. Phillips, Bedeian, Mossholder, and Touliatos' (1988) assessment of 835 professional accountants' personalities showed that "firstborns" scored significantly higher than "later borns" on measures of "dominance", "good impression", and "achievement by conformity" as assessed by personality inventories. When placed in the situation of learning to read, such characteristics could govern the participation of "firstborns".

Possibilities for application. According to the research, there are two considerations worth discussing regarding the implementation of content area reading in the classrooms of "first born" teachers who perceive themselves as "high" proficiency readers. First, the need for affiliation and the dependence on approval of others such as administrators and parents, could influence the extent to which these teachers might use content reading practices. For example, if the subject department coordinator encouraged teachers to employ content area reading strategies, then a "first born" teacher might feel compelled to comply with the coordinator's recommendations. On the other hand, an absence of administrative directives could lead to "first-born" teachers maintaining a more traditional approach to subject instruction with the inclusion of content strategies seen as an obstacle to covering the course material.

A second consideration for "first-born" teachers who view themselves as "high proficiency" readers is the above-average perceptions that they hold about their own reading abilities. These perceptions would be particularly relevant to the situations of challenged readers. Not being able to identify with such readers, one could speculate that "first born" teachers might misinterpret these students' lack of progress and other behaviors as apathy, defiance or inability. Consequently, content instruction might become more teacher directed and focused on conveying specific content information as the "first born" teachers mistakenly attempt to direct and remediate students' learning and related behaviors. As a result, opportunities to help students develop content reading strategies could decrease while situations that reinforce

their faulty perceptions as problem readers could increase (Morawski & Brunhuber, 1995).

### *Youngest*

Perceptions and reading development. "Youngest" siblings are in a distinct position as they never experience displacement by a younger brother or sister. Rather, their predecessors have already established the standards and degree of competition within the sibling constellation (Adler, 1970). The "youngest" may become the speeder and surpass all others, or may become the most discouraged and feel inferior to the others and expect consideration and service from them (Dinkmeyer, Pew, & Dinkmeyer, Jr., 1979; Dreikurs, et al., 1982).

The "youngest" teachers, who as a group perceived themselves as "high" proficiency readers three times as often as "average" or "low", appear to represent the former type. "Lastborn" youngsters, according to Forer (1977a) will have high estimates of themselves if reared in a benign environment and not suppressed by parents and other siblings. In a study that focused on the sibling position of teachers, Northcutt and Newlon (1985) surveyed a group of elementary school teachers regarding sources and degrees of perceived encouragement related to their work. They found that the "youngest" group of teachers perceived themselves as being the most encouraged, particularly by their students and other teachers. Siblings in this "youngest" position often receive the benefits of extra parental time, more lenient child rearing practices, and sibling interaction.

In comparison to the first born, the "last boy or girl may avoid handicaps, like anxiety about achievement...because less is expected of the baby" (Forer, 1977a, p. 69). Hence, a less intense atmosphere in the home coupled with sibling interaction and a more relaxed set of expectations on the part of the parents could very likely explain the differences in the perceived "high" literacy ratings between the "youngest" (63%) and the "oldest" (83%) groups in this study. That is, the "youngest" teachers perceived themselves as "high" proficiency readers; however, this was to a lesser degree than the "first-born" teachers. Being less concerned with the approval of others (Forer, 1977b) and more independent (Weiner, 1973), the teachers in the "youngest" group may not have felt as compelled or anxious about developing their potential to read.

Possibilities for application. In view of the research, two factors would merit attention regarding the application of content area reading in the classrooms of "youngest" teachers who may strive to reach ahead in

their practices. First, it is possible that their lower need to seek approval through conformity combined with their less structured experiences in the family would make them more open to trying and even developing new content area practices. According to Forer (1977a), "later children have their life roles less clearly structured by parents and are freer to indulge in fantasy, to pretend and play" (p. 78). Consequently, they are able to cultivate their creative side (Eisenman, 1964). Rather than being motivated by the department administrator to employ content strategies in the classroom, it is conceivable that these "youngest" teachers would independently use them for improving and varying their instruction in the classroom.

The second factor concerns these "youngest" teachers' background knowledge regarding their sibling position that they bring to the instructional process. "Youngest" teachers who choose to be strivers may become goal-oriented as they urge their students to develop their literacy potential in the content classrooms. For those students who are not able to respond positively to such encouragement, "youngest" teachers, however, may be in an advantageous position to understand these students' particular needs. Starting out at the bottom of the sibling hierarchy, "last-borns instinctively know and understand that their knowledge and ability carry far less weight than that of their older brothers and sisters" (Leman, 1985, p. 104). Hence, it is possible that a combination of content strategies and affect would govern the instructional agendas of the "youngest" teachers.

### *Middle*

Perceptions and reading development. Not having the advantages of the oldest or the benefits of the youngest, "there is no inherent uniqueness in the position of the middleborn child, whose role in the family is consequently less well defined" (Kidwell, 1982, p. 225). Preceding children usually influence subsequent ones as they attempt to develop their own style of life (Leman, 1985). In the area of reading, if the older sibling is a proficient reader, then the next one will select another avenue to find a place of belonging in the family. As their "average" rating (50%) of themselves as readers indicate, this set of circumstances could apply to the "middle" teachers in this study. From an Adlerian perspective, one could assume that they saw many of their older adjacent siblings as stronger readers.

It is worth noting, however, that a more proficient sibling does not always precede every middle child. For example, in the case where there are four siblings in a family, a third child immediately follows a sibling

who may be a less able reader. Consequently, this third child forms a self-image as the more capable reader. According to Leman (1985), there is no way to predict which way children who perceive themselves as middle born might develop because they "bounce-off" the ones directly above them. Although half of the "middle" teachers in this study saw themselves as "average" readers, there were 36% who viewed their reading proficiency as "higher" than their other siblings.

Possibilities for application. The research suggests that there are two basic matters that deserve further thought while considering the use of content area reading in the classroom of a "middle" teacher. To begin with, "middle" individuals tend to be free spirits who often have new ideas and the independence to try them (Leman, 1985). For instance, Lieberman, Shaffer, and Reynolds (1985) found that there is a tendency for persons who are of intermediate birth order to be more likely candidates for participation in scientific revolutions. "Middle" individuals tend to be more original in approaching life tasks, especially if their preceding sibling exhibits more "firstborn" behavior in the form of dependency and affiliative responses (Eisenman, 1964). In the classroom setting, therefore, it is possible that "middle" teachers would employ a variety of alternative instructional strategies such as teaching through multiple intelligences (Pirie, 1995). Employment of such strategies would be especially beneficial for the students of those "middle" teachers who may lack the confidence as readers to make direct use of content area literacy in their courses. That is, these alternative strategies may not formally fall within the area of content area reading instruction, but they can still enhance literacy development.

It would be reasonable to speculate that the "middle" teacher would challenge any questionable directives from the administration, such as a requirement to use only one reading program for all students in a junior high school. Experienced in the "middle" role, these teachers would be in an advantageous position to identify those students who are experiencing literacy difficulties, including lower self-esteem. According to Kidwell (1982), "achieving status, affection, and recognition among siblings and feeling special in the eyes of one's parents is apparently more difficult for the middleborn and is reflected in overall self-assessment" (p. 234). One could hypothesize that this situation would also include reading proficiency.

## NEXT STEPS IN RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Although the limited number of cases analyzed and discussed in this study prevent firm conclusions from being drawn, the preliminary findings contain valuable considerations for future application and investigation. Included below are possibilities for practice followed by directions for future research.

*Possibilities for practice*

Used in combination with existing knowledge and practices, teachers' examination of their sibling positions could provide further knowledge to help them understand their acceptance and use of content area reading instruction in subject classrooms. For instance, a "first-born" teacher with "high" reading perceptions may benefit greatly from participation in class meetings where students with reading difficulties express their concerns about learning in subject classes. A team involving teachers of various sibling positions and reading perceptions could offer support and insight to each other as they attempt to implement content literacy instruction in their school. Tutoring a discouraged reader may help overachieving "youngest" teachers to set more realistic instructional goals that take into account the varied reading abilities of their students. On the other hand, some "middle" teachers could come to recognize that their lack of confidence as readers stemmed from a myth created in their own sibling context.

The combined use of specific methods and tools in the teacher education program could assist teachers in reflectively constructing their content literacy autobiographies by way of perceived sibling position. Verbal interaction in the form of dyads, small group and whole class discussions complemented by journal activities have the potential to act as the vehicles for this construction (Morawski, 1995). Pertinent activities taking place in both the teacher education classroom and on-site settings, would generate the working material for critical reflection. Specific examples of such activities are bibliotherapeutic exercises (Morawski, 1997), co-listed and team teaching situations (Davis, 1990; Grubb, 1991), teacher-student meetings (Morawski, 1992), and field experiences with readers in difficulty (Memory, 1983).

*Directions for future research*

1. Increase the sample size of teacher subjects surveyed to: (i) help determine if their perceived sibling positions in the family constellation

reveal similar patterns to those found in this study and (ii) help ensure the inclusion of "only" teachers.

2. Look for between group patterns related to such additional factors as gender and teaching major designation.

3. Administer an attitudinal scale or questionnaire on content area instruction so that the results can be examined in relation to the information on the teacher subjects' sibling configuration.

4. Explore the relationship between the distribution of sibling positions found within specific subject areas and the frequency of use of content reading instruction in those subjects.

5. Conduct a case study of the application of sibling constellation to reading teacher education and content area literacy. Employ a variety of data collecting methods such as focus group interviews, pre- and post-questionnaires, and follow-up conferences to clarify responses and obtain additional relevant information from the teachers who participated in the course.

As part of the study, select a group of these teachers to maintain journals in which they include their thoughts and feelings regarding their experience with the construction and application of their literacy autobiographies by way of sibling configuration. Ask teachers to consider such factors as experiences of significant moments as well as learning structures and activities that fostered these events.

To obtain the course instructor's perspective, she or he would need to regularly record and critically examine notes pertaining to the implementation of practical recommendations regarding perceived sibling position. This phase of the research would focus on such factors as the suitability of the activities for guiding teachers in their construction, reflection, and, subsequent instructional modifications concerning subject literacy.

6. An important extension of the investigation would concentrate on the long-term effects of teacher education practices related to content reading instruction by way of perceived sibling configuration. Interview teacher participants after a specific period of time to determine the impact that their exposure to sibling configuration was making on their instructional perceptions and practices concerning subject literacy. For example, toward the end of the school year, interview those teachers involved in the course during the previous fall term. Questions would focus on such issues as the impact that their own sibling autobiographies are having on instructional responses to students' literacy needs in their subject classrooms.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As suggested by Vacca (1994), "developing insights about ourselves as readers can prompt us to think about the connection between the role of reading in our personal lives and the messages about reading telegraphed to our students" (p. 673). In the subject classroom, such communications have the potential to promote or hinder students' participation in the learning process. It is important, therefore, that teachers critically examine their reading perceptions in relation to their classroom practices. The concept of perceived sibling position from an Individual Psychology perspective offers an important theoretical and practical focal point for facilitating such active reflection. The findings of this study contain valuable working material for conducting further research on the application of perceived sibling position to reading teacher education in the content areas.

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