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What Is Important In Reading In Middle Level Classrooms: A Survey of Classroom Teachers' Perceptions

Tom Davidson
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Should reading instruction in middle level schools be aimed at helping youngsters to acquire more specific, isolated skills of how to read? Or should the focus of reading in middle level schools be on assisting learners to become readers? An answer to both of these critical questions might be — yes. Middle level learners (10 to 14 years old) should grow both in their skillfulness as readers and in the process of becoming readers. Research data and current instructional practices can be found to support both of these positions.

Reading has long been viewed by teachers as consisting of a process of decoding graphic symbols into words (Hayes, 1991). It has been viewed equally long as the process of acquiring the skills of comprehension — getting meaning from what is read (Hittleman, 1988). Schools, middle level schools included, have consequently invested great amounts of time, effort, and money in the development of learner competence in the various collections of word identification, phonic and structural analysis, vocabulary development, and/or comprehension skills. In short, reading has been viewed by these schools as the

acquisition of the skills of how to read (Cecil, 1987) and schools in their instruction have responded accordingly.

Reading scholars have noted, however, that many middle level schools, as well as schools in general, place too much emphasis on the mastery of the skills of how to read (Anderson, et. al., 1985). They assert that mastery of the skills of how to read should be de-emphasized (Alexander and Fuller, 1976; Applebee, Langer and Mullis, 1987; Cecil, 1987; Fenwick, 1987; Veatch, et. al., 1979); that greater emphasis should be placed on involving learners in the process of becoming readers (Cecil, 1987; Speigel, 1981; Veatch and Acinapuro, 1978); and that practices in middle level reading programs which extend and enrich learner involvement in activities and experiences which will facilitate their growth in becoming readers should be expanded (Anderson, et. al., 1985; Applebee, et. al., 1987; Ciani, 1981; Davidson, 1987; Davidson, 1991; Pence, 1973).

The purpose of this study was to determine what reading practices are considered to be important in middle level classrooms (grades four through eight) according to what middle level teachers perceived to be most emphasized in their schools. The researchers sought to determine if these teachers believed that reading practices related to skills mastery were considered to be more important, or, if practices related to the process of becoming a reader were considered to be more important.

Procedures

For the purpose of this study the characteristics of skills mastery reading programs were considered to be concerns for learner scores on standardized achievement tests and/or "level" tests; the practicing of specific, isolated skills of reading and the use of skill practice workbooks and

worksheets; and the "covering" of all skills designated for specific reading levels and/or grade levels. While there are certainly other practices which are representative of skills based reading programs, the researchers took the position that these features were some of the most typical.

Programs designed to encourage students to become readers were characterized by concern for the availability of a wide variety of reading materials in each classroom; provision of a regular daily time for learners to read silently in materials of their own choice; the teacher reading aloud daily to learners from high quality, high interest literature; use of the creative and language arts by learners to share reading with others; and a reading environment in the classroom that promoted the use of reading for pleasure and as a vehicle for learning. There are other practices which are used in the process-oriented reading programs; however, these were thought to be common to most.

The instrument used to determine teachers' perceptions of reading practices in their middle level schools was a specially prepared research survey (see Figure 1) developed by the primary author. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements of belief about the implementation of the reading program — five statements of practice associated with skills mastery (items *a* through *e*) and five statements associated with the process of becoming a reader (items *f* through *j*).

Middle level teachers were asked to rank the statements of reading practice from 1 (the practice receiving the greatest emphasis) to 10 (the practice receiving the least emphasis), using as a base their perceptions of what received the greatest amount of emphasis in the reading programs in their middle level (grades four to eight) schools.

Figure 1

SURVEY: What Is Important In Reading

What is considered to be important in the reading program in your school? Below are listed 10 statements regarding reading practices in schools. This survey seeks to find out your opinion about the significance of each of these practices in the reading program in your school. To do this, you need to do the following:

1. Read all 10 statements of practice before doing anything else.
2. After having read all of the statements, consider how important each one is *as you see it* in the reading program in your school.
3. Rank all of the statements from the one you feel is considered *most important* in your school to the one you feel is considered *least important.* Give the one that is *most important* a ranking of 1; the next a ranking of 2; the next 3; etc.: to a ranking of 10 for the one that is *least important.*

a. _____ setting aside a daily time for children to read independently in materials of their choice
b. _____ providing a classroom environment that promotes, and stimulates interest in, reading independently for pleasure and/or to learn
c. _____ practicing specific skills of how to read
d. _____ children achieving acceptable standardized test scores
e. _____ providing a well stocked classroom library
f. _____ setting aside at least one reading period a week for children to share books they've read through creative and/or language arts
g. _____ "covering" all the skills in your reading level
h. _____ having children complete workbooks and/or worksheets of skills practice
i. _____ children passing "level" tests
J. _____ reading aloud to children daily from high quality children's literature

The survey was completed by 59 middle level teachers enrolled, over a three year period, in graduate courses in the Middle Grades and Reading Education Department at West Georgia College. Only certified middle level teachers (grades four to eight) participated in and completed the survey. The responses of the teachers completing the survey were tallied according to the rankings given to each reading practice statement. The tallies for each statement for each

ranking were totalled to yield an over-all total score for each statement which yielded the over-all rank order found in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Overall Ranking of Statements of Reading Practice by Middle Level Teachers

Rank	*Statements of Practice*
1	Children achieving acceptable standardized test scores
2	"Covering" all the skills in your reading level
3	Practicing specific skills of how to read
4	Providing a classroom environment that promotes, and stimulates interest in, reading independently for pleasure and/or to learn
5	Children passing "level" tests
6	Having children complete workbooks and/or worksheets of skills practice
7	Reading aloud to children daily from high quality children's literature
8	Setting aside a daily time for children to read independently in materials of their own choice
9	Providing a well stocked classroom library
10	Setting aside at least one reading period a week for children to share books they've read through creative and/or language arts

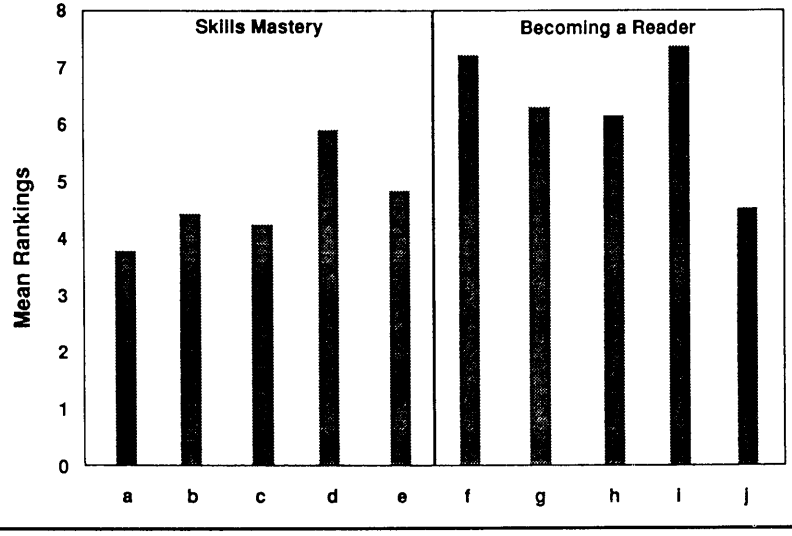
Results

Analysis of the final rankings of the 10 statements of reading practice by the middle level classroom teachers surveyed was done in two ways. First, the final rankings themselves were examined to determine what patterns were apparent in the teachers' responses. Second, the ranking of the 10 statements was statistically analyzed to determine the differences between the sets: the five statements of practice which reflect skills oriented reading programs, and those five which reflect a focus on the process of becoming a reader. To do this inferential analysis, a dependent *t*-test investigating differences among sums of

ranks was used. In order to examine the rankings of the items on the survey, the mean rankings of the statements were organized as illustrated in the bar graph shown in Figure 3. Examination of the bar graph reveals that the middle level teachers identified the five statements associated with *skill mastery* emphasis as receiving greater emphasis in the reading programs of their middle level schools than did those skills associated with *becoming a reader*. Four of the five statements in the *skills mastery* cluster (items *a*, *b*, *c*, and *e*) had the lowest mean scores of all the items (thus indicating that they received the highest rankings). The exception within the *skills mastery* cluster, item *d*, had a mean rank which placed it sixth, only one position removed from being ranked among the five most emphasized practices as ranked by the middle level teachers surveyed.

Figure 3

Bar graph of mean rankings of statements of practice*



*** Note: Since items were ranked from 1 to 10, the lower the score, the higher the rank.**

It is of particular interest to note that three practices — achieving acceptable test scores, covering skills and practicing skills (items *a*, *b*, and *c*) – most closely associated with skills oriented reading programs – were ranked first, third and second in emphasis.

The middle level teachers surveyed also consistently identified the five statements associated with the process of *becoming a reader* as less evident in their middle level schools. Four of the five statements (items *f*, *g*, *h*, and *i*) associated with the cluster *becoming a reader* had the highest mean scores indicating that these statements were perceived to be considered of less importance than the *skills mastery* cluster by these school programs. The exception in this group of statements, item *j*, had a mean rank which placed it fourth in the overall rankings.

It is of interest to note that in the group of practices associated with the cluster *becoming a reader*, three practices consistently identified as having a positive impact on the development of emerging and continued literacy with middle level youngsters (Davidson, 1991; Veatch, et al., 1979) were ranked in this second tier. These three skills — reading aloud to youngsters, independent silent reading and an accessible classroom library (items *h*, *g*, and *f*) — were ranked seventh, eighth and ninth in importance by the teachers surveyed.

To determine if the rankings of the five statements reflecting a perceived emphasis on *skill mastery* (statements *a* through *e*) were significantly different from the rankings of the five statements reflecting an emphasis on *becoming a reader* (statements *f* through *j*), a dependent *t*-test was computed. The mean rank for statements in the first cluster, *skills mastery*, was 4.627. The mean rank for the

statements in the second cluster, *becoming a reader*, was 6.383. The dependent *t*-test computed between the means of the two representative reading practice clusters was significant ($t(57) = -3.359$, $p < .001$). The significant *t*-ratio confirms that the teachers perceived the two sets of statements quite differently. Items that represented a *skills mastery* approach to reading received a significantly higher ranking than did items that represented emphasis on the process of *becoming a reader*.

Conclusions and recommendations

Reading instruction should, in our opinion, focus on both the acquisition and development of skills of becoming a reader as well as building the processes of emerging and developing literacy. However, according to the findings of this study, both areas are not perceived by teachers as having equal value or occurrence in their middle level classrooms. Skills mastery strategies which focus on the activities of how to read receive the greater emphasis in the middle level schools while those practices having to do with the process of becoming a reader receive significantly less emphasis. If this sample of middle level teachers is typical, then teachers of grades four to eight perceive that skill mastery strategies drive the reading curriculum at the expense of the strategies that foster reading and literacy. With the growing national emphasis and debate about whole language (Harp and Brewer, 1992), literature based reading (Speigel, 1981), and "becoming a nation of readers" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985) this perception of dominance by skills over process suggests that it is imperative for schools to become more inclusive in their reading practices and strategies.

Insuring that middle level learners acquire the skills of how to read is, without question, an important part of the

reading program of the middle level school. But, it is only a part. Of equal significance is the process of the middle level learner becoming a reader. Sponsoring skills mastery to the exclusion of developing a reader is to fail in one of the major missions of the middle level school.

Given the findings of this study, middle level school educators need to rethink the perceived narrow focus and emphasis of current reading programs. Teachers must begin to shape reading practices to be more consistent with the broad inclusive definitions of middle level education. Reading must become a vehicle which contributes significantly to meeting the developmental literacy needs of the middle level learner. Reading must become the vehicle to empower the middle level youngster as a learner — an independent, self reliant, and self directed consumer of reading. Reading must be used as a strategy through which learners experience higher level thinking, decision making, and problem solving in their reading, and as a result become responsible learners and persons.

Administrators and curricular planners must expand the perceived narrow focus of the reading program. Schools must begin to use reading practices which engage middle level learners in reading for pleasure, use reading as a tool for learning, integrate reading into their values as persons, and ultimately become persons who are readers.

All those involved with middle level schools must work to see that reading becomes a process that goes beyond skills mastery and test success. Teachers must view reading as a life long literacy process as well. The reading program must prepare middle level learners for the language based world in which they will live and work as adults. Reading programs must expand in scope and

become a vehicle for information acquisition, information processing, information judging, and information using. Wide and varied reading must be used to open the world and its cultures to the mind of the middle level learner in order to prepare them for the smaller world of the future.

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