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# LISTENING TO STUDENTS ABOUT READING

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Too often teachers and administrators rely solely on standardized test scores to determine a student's achievement or attitude toward a subject. Criterion measured tests probably come closest to assisting teachers in diagnosing and prescribing instruction. But, increasingly, it becomes clear to educators that we need to "back-up", "stand-back", and "talk to" students about their learning processes. In other words, educators must consider the pupil's view toward learning in school while planning appropriate tasks for students.

Where students were traditionally viewed as passive recipients of instruction, there now is a growing recognition of the experience children bring to the classroom learning situation. A review of studies has shown that students actively struggle to make sense of school and learning (Weinstein, 1983). The thought that students may not perceive the intent of instruction has great implications for improving teacher effectiveness.

Information about the quality of instruction and instructional intent may be discovered by tapping the student's point of view on the learning to read process. Although children's awareness of various facets of the reading process has been previously investigated (Mason, 1967; Downing, 1970; Johns & Johns, 1971; Tovey, 1976) the thrust here is somewhat different. The intent of this exploratory study is to examine perceptions of reading in terms of both developmental characteristics and implications for reading instruction.

## Instrument

The interview questions were designed to elicit responses in four categories: (a) the definition of reading; (b) the purpose for reading; (c) the process of reading; and, (d) the teacher's instructional intent.

## Subjects

Preservice teachers randomly selected three subjects from classrooms being observed for a course requirement. Interviews were conducted with 18 subjects in kindergarten, 21 subjects in third grade, and 30 subjects in sixth grade. The subjects were drawn from below average to average socioeconomic school districts located throughout rural eastern North Carolina. The racial and sexual composition of the sample were comparable. The interpretation of the results should consider the subjects' involvement in phonic emphasis reading programs.

The Definition of Reading

To determine whether children view reading as a process of deriving meaning from print, each subject was asked "What is reading?" Of the 69 responses, 26 subjects (38%) viewed reading as a meaning-making process. The majority of the subjects (62%) perceived reading as a process involving "sounding-out" or "word-calling". Grade level differences did occur, however, with more kindergarten students defining reading as meaning-related than either third or sixth graders (see figure 1). This finding is in conflict with a similar study (Tovey, 1976) which found more meaning-related responses elicited from older students. Perhaps more concentration today on skills at each grade level along with greater student awareness of instructional intent account for the percentage increase of "word-calling" responses by third and sixth grade subjects. Furthermore, since the phonic approach was stressed in the population sample may have accounted for the differences in the two studies.

Sample responses at each grade level include:

	<u>What is Reading?</u>
Kindergarten	--Telling a story --Words in a book
Third	--Something learned in school --Something you learn words in
Sixth	--Learning to recognize words --Skills and books

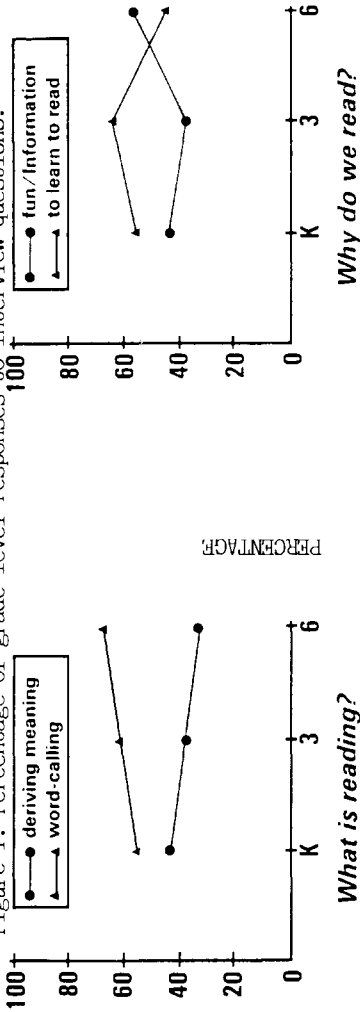
An interesting finding was that almost all students believed reading was an act to be performed in school, a school-related activity. The teacher request "Get out your reading books; it's time for reading" perpetuates these early misconceptions. Giving students more purposeful, recreational type of reading activities and using diverse reading materials should help to curtail the faulty thinking that reading is only when you are in a school reading group. Also, teachers can discuss with students the relevancy of each reading task; if this can't be done, then the question arises whether the skill should be taught at all.

The Purpose for Reading

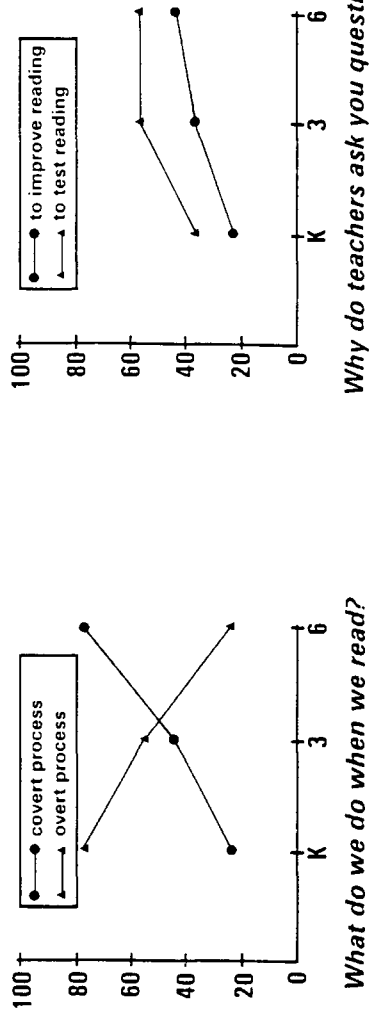
When asked "Why do we read?" 33 responses (48%) viewed reading as a source of "fun" or a method of gaining information. Grade level comparisons (see Figure 1) generally revealed the younger students viewing reading as an activity necessary to learn to read. As one kindergartener stated "So that when you get older you can read." Typical responses were as follows:

	<u>Why Do We Read?</u>
Kindergarten	--So we can learn to read --The teacher tells us to

Figure 1. Percentage of grade level responses to interview questions.



GRADE LEVEL

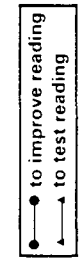


PERCENTAGE

*Why do teachers ask you questions about your reading?*

*Why do we read?*

*What do we do when we read?*



- Third grade                   —When you're older you'll know words  
                                   —So you'll know what to do in your  
   workbook
- Sixth grade                   —To learn about things  
                                   —So the teacher can find out what area  
   you're strong in and what area you are  
   weak in

It is clear the task of learning to read is emphasized by the responses. To the younger students reading is a task to be conquered. "One is learning to read." It is only when you're older, sometime in that nebulous future can you really read. However, some sixth graders (43%) still think reading is improving skills.

The types of reading activities students are involved in everyday, especially in the early grades, foster the idea learning to read is a never-ending process. As students complete one word list, basal, or workbook/skill sheet, another immediately takes its place, the only difference being a little longer, thicker, or more difficult.

Having students, even kindergarteners, read or be read to, for various purposes, such as recreational reading, would portray a true meaning for reading. Materials geared at the independent level, although scarce at the beginning stages, can be written by the students (via language experience approach) or by a teacher, using the controlled vocabulary of the preprimers. Students need reinforcement of vocabulary in many different reading sources, for example the word boy printed in a preprimer is also boy in a language experience chart story, word list, or on a cereal box.

### The Process of Reading

The question "What do you do when you read?" was asked to assess subjects' view of the reading process. Of the 69 responses, 23 subjects (33%) viewed the process of reading as an overt action (e.g., sound out words). Sample responses elicited from the three grade levels are:

#### What Do You Do When You Read?

- Kindergarten               —you talk out loud  
                                   —look at pictures
- Third grade                 —you see words and say them  
                                   —read stories and do workbook pages
- Sixth                         —remember what is read  
                                   —think of words and what they mean

Developmentally, the responses by grade level generally reveal a progression of overt action upon a reading material (i.e. talk out loud) to an internalized, covert action (i.e., think of words). Expectedly, older students are more cognitively aware of the internal processes needed to decode print (see Figure 1). An alarming

aspect, however, is that, as students progress toward reading competence, there appears to be an increasing notion one must read every word and remember it in some manner to derive meaning from print.

Reading orally, answering questions, marking answers on dittoes and workbook pages are events students are engaged in frequently each day. The attitude toward reading encouraged by such activities is "one must read carefully every word to obtain the right message so one can answer questions correctly" — a tremendous task, especially for a beginning reader, yet struggling to "break the code".

To develop a meaning-related concept of reading, the students need to actively seek meaning as they read. Teachers can encourage students to skim material for main ideas, predict what the story or book will be about, and discourage the notion that there is "one right answer". Questioning skills are at the heart of effective reading instruction. Carefully pre-planned and open-ended questions will facilitate an accepting environment in the search for meaning.

#### Teacher's Instructional Intent

The question "why do teachers ask you questions about your reading?" was asked to assess the subjects' ability to determine the teacher's instructional intent. Thirty-six (52%) of the 69 subjects thought teachers were testing them (e.g. "to check on me"). Another 36 percent viewed the questioning as a means to improve their reading skills. Eight non-categorical responses were elicited: (seven "I don't know" from kindergarteners, and one third grader replied, "My teacher doesn't ask questions.")

Typical grade level responses are:

#### Why Do Teachers Ask You Questions About Your Reading?

Kindergarten	—to see if we listened —because she wants you to learn
Third grade	—to see if you read it —it can help us to think better
Sixth grade	—to find out if you read or just looked over it —so you can understand your reading

Across the three grade levels it is evident a greater proportion of subjects believe teachers ask questions to test them on material read. This assumption, of course, is not entirely false. Comprehension checks are a major focus of the directed reading lesson. Durkin's study (1981) revealed teachers in grades three through six as interrogators, confusing children as to how the questioning was related to the learning to read process.

As educators, we must provide a conducive environment for

students to learn to read. Instead of workbooks, ditto sheets, and unending questions dictating the reading program, students should be given reasons why they are studying a certain skill or topic and how, in this case, questioning is related to learning how to read. Teachers, basal book authors, and others should also question their own motives in asking so many questions. Selective questioning geared at the various levels of thinking or designed for specific purposes will be a more meaningful approach in teaching students to read.

### Summary

The age-span responses, to a great extent, are due to developmental differences in how a student views the environment. The egocentrism of a five year old is characterized by concentration on immediate objects and actions (e.g. reading is a book or words). What cannot be discounted, however, is the impact of the reading program, per se, on the students' perceptions. The methodology and amount of instructional emphasis on various facets of the program will influence or formulate perceptions toward the learning to read process.

Students' perceptions in this study revealed some negative aspects of a phonically-oriented reading program. Interviewing students about their reading instruction will help teachers to enrich those areas lacking in a single faceted program. The findings, limited in terms of generalizations, warrant at least a closer look at present reading techniques. It is clear students are not perceiving the intent of all reading instruction.

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