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Looking Ahead With Hope: Reviving the Reading Maturity Construct as Social Science for Adolescent and Adult Readers

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Abstract

“Reading maturity” is a construct that looks broadly at reading development encompassing not only basic reading skills but reading habits, attitudes, and dispositions. It has a rich history and this article calls for a need to make reading maturity a necessary part of the literacy curriculum. It offers a working description and reviews past history of the construct, discusses why reading maturity is important, and provides ideas about monitoring progress toward reading maturity. This article asserts that the reading field has developed a solid understanding of how students acquire basic reading skill and content area literacy abilities. However, a compelling and unified larger purpose for reading education seems absent, particularly for adolescent and adult readers. This article suggests that renewed attention to reading maturity could help address this. It contends that attention to reading maturity should involve more than general notions of becoming “well-read.” Instead, it should include a balanced social-science approach to intentionally and systematically monitoring student progress toward reading maturity. Suggestions are offered to help begin this process including free online access to a reading maturity assessment and planning instrument called *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001).

Introduction

Although we may find ourselves in uncertain economic and geopolitical times, storm clouds can also provide a background of hope. In fact, we may actually be poised for a bright future. Education, particularly reading/literacy, may be in a similar situation. Several years ago, reading researcher Anthony Manzo (2003) suggested in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* the possibility that reading/literacy is not actually in a crisis as is popularly conceived, but may be about to enter a sort of literacy Cambrian Period, a rich transformative era in which life on earth blossomed. More recently, Vickie Jacobs (2008), in the lead article in an issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* dedicated to the topic of adolescent literacy, echoes this optimistic view, calling our upcoming adolescent literacy opportunities unprecedented (p. 13). Although we do still have many literacy challenges to confront, taking a step back to look at the larger picture points toward agreement with Manzo's and Jacobs' optimism. In order to get there, though, we need to give more attention to *Reading Maturity*, a literacy construct that looks broadly at reading development to include not only basic reading skills and abilities, but also reading habits, attitudes, and dispositions.

Six areas comprise the reading maturity construct that is outlined in this paper: reading attitudes and interests, reading purposes, reading ability, higher-order literacy, kinds of materials read, and personal adjustment to reading/transformational reading. Each of these will be more fully discussed as will an assessment tool for this construct, *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001).

I became involved with this topic in 2001 when completing a study looking at quantitative relationships between five literacy-tethered variables: reading ability, higher-order literacy, proficient reader subtypes, reading maturity, and epistemological maturity (Thomas, 2001). After several years of subsequent reflection and research in a variety of other educational strands, as a professor of education and a literacy researcher, I have been compelled back to working with the idea of reading maturity, asserting that it is quite consequential to reading/literacy education, the educational enterprise in general and to society at large. This article addresses reading maturity through several questions: How might we describe it? Why is it important? What are we doing with it now? How could we start monitoring progress toward it? The purpose of this article is to bring attention to the reading maturity construct for those both concerned with and optimistic about the future of literacy education and the larger mission of education in general.

Background: Reading and Reasoning

A holistic definition of reading could be: the act of simultaneously reading the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines (Gray, 1951; Manzo, 2003; Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Manzo, Manzo, & Estes, 2001). “Reading the lines” involves decoding the words to reconstruct the author’s basic message. “Reading between the lines” involves making inferences to reconstruct the author’s implied messages. “Reading beyond the lines” involves judging the significance of the author’s message and constructively applying it to other areas of knowledge and experience.

Social science research in reading and subsequent classroom instruction and assessment has tended to focus on the basic elements of decoding and comprehending. It has paid less attention to reading beyond the lines, or the text-tethered reasoning and decision-making that should naturally be part of meaningful reading experiences (c.f. Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Thomas, 2001). And, beyond this, reading research and instruction has paid relatively little attention to those additional items relating to life-long mature reading such as: reading attitudes and interests; reading purposes; reaction to and use of ideas found through reading; kind and quality of materials read; and transformational reading, or the ways reading might foster personal change and whole-person growth.

As a result, the reading field has developed scientifically-based understandings of the text-dependent reading process, especially for “beginning” and “intermediate” readers (cf. Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Carver, 2000; Chall, 1983). This accomplishment should not be trivialized in any way. The amount of high quality research on the fundamentals of learning how to read is impressive and important (i.e. research on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text-dependent comprehension). Basic reading skill is essential and it is no small task to help whole populations acquire it. It is primary to the mission of reading education, but it is not where we should stop when envisioning what it means to become optimally literate.

The Importance but Present Lack of a Unified Concept of Reading Maturity

It seems important to have a named and unified reading maturity construct toward which we could foster student development. This would provide us with some “so what?” synergy relative to reading instruction, like seeing the benefits of an engine fully firing compared to the separate parts laid out on the workbench. That is, we’ve done well understanding the basics of teaching children to read, but are

we wisely seeing the pieces meaningfully brought together, revealed by adolescents and adults growing into highly literate, life-long maturing readers? As Fisher (2004) has lamented, “At the secondary school level, teachers and administrators have focused on ensuring that students can read and that they understand what they read. Unfortunately, less attention has been focused on providing students time to read and ensuring that they do read” (p. 138).

Additionally, a unified reading maturity construct may provide a psychological boost by clarifying and advancing the deeper and perhaps hidden aspirations underlying our pursuits of literacy. Educators should be able to answer with conviction the questions “Why teach reading?” and “Why read?” The answers should be sensible and coherent but also elevated towards a level of reading maturity. “To do well in school” or “to get a good job” or “to strengthen the workforce,” while important, are not sufficiently inspiring for the long run. We need targets closer to our souls to do our best with them. Teaching students how to read is essential but should be a means for a more significant goal to which we attend with increased diligence and intention: continued progress toward reading maturity. .

Reading maturity is not a new concept to the field of literacy education. Over 50 years ago it was a keen interest of William S. Gray (Gray, 1951; Gray & Rogers, 1956), a most respected scholar in the reading field. It has also been of interest to Jeanne Chall (c.f. Chall, 1983) and Anthony Manzo (Manzo & Casale, 1981, 1983a, 1983b). “Reading maturity” has an entry in *The Literacy Dictionary* (Harris & Hodges, 1995), and a handful of other scholarship has addressed it in some manner (c.f. Casale, 1982; Henk, 1988; Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Maring, 1979; Maring & Shea, 1982; Maring & Warner, 1984, 1986; Smith, 1996; Smith & Sheehan, 1998; Stauffer, 1969; Thomas, 2001; Thompson, 1984). Some elements of the reading maturity construct are currently present in the literacy education field, even if perhaps somewhat fragmented. For example, several key principles are represented in Standard 5 of the International Reading Association’s (IRA) Literacy Standards (c.f. Armbruster & Osborn, 2002) and the IRA’s position statement on promoting adolescent growth (c.f. Jacobs, 2008, p. 13). The “five building blocks for teaching children to read” (c.f. Armbruster & Osborn, 2001) address some key elements of reading maturity, namely the vital role of reading comprehension and the sub-skills for acquiring it. And, of course, literature and language arts are deemed valuable, especially in elementary schools where we see wide-spread influence of Harvey Daniel’s (2002) “literature circles,” a steady stream of Scholastic Book Fairs, read-athons, and the promotion of children’s literature,

and in middle school and high school required communication arts classes.

And yet reading maturity has not been seen on the popular “What’s Hot” or even the “What’s Not” lists published annually by the IRA, by name or as an integrated construct (c.f. Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Garrett, & Barrera, 2006; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011). Nor is it a focus of reports like the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It’s also not a focus in the standards for middle and high school literacy coaches (c.f. IRA, 2006). It is part of a relatively recent NEA report (Gioia, 2009), even though the report flatly states that *schooling* is not part of this trend or effort. Although “adolescent literacy” has been increasing in “hotness” in recent IRA “What’s Hot” lists (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011), as a practical matter, interestingly, acquiring reading maturity still does not seem an essential part of “reading achievement” in education today. Despite the earlier efforts of seminal reading scholars like Gray, Chall, and Manzo, as well as countless others, a focus on reading maturity is not yet included as an indicator of school success or academic achievement. It is not part of secondary teacher training; it is not prominent in reading or educational textbooks; it is not a common topic in our journals; it is not in our standards as a unified construct; and it is not often applied to systematic classroom practice.

Reading maturity as a holistic goal feels absent from the current mainstream conversations of education and we need to bring it back. Perhaps the history and development of the reading field, our educational systems in general, (and/or society, c.f. Chall, 1983) needed time to evolve until this point where we are now prepared for a breakthrough. Again, the recent NEA report (Gioia, 2009) offers glimmers of hope, as do aspects of the IRA’s recent “What’s Hot” lists (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011). The NEA report draws increased attention to student literacy development at the age in which growth toward reading maturity might gain increased traction and “What’s Hot” lists deal directly and on a national scale with several aspects of the reading maturity construct. Whatever the case, there is still much to learn about text-tethered reading issues, or the abilities and inclinations involved with growth toward reading maturity. This is especially true for adolescent and adult readers who, by conventional measures, may be considered proficient (i.e. they learned to read) but whose lack of growth toward reading maturity goes largely unattended.

Reading Maturity as Social Science

Our practical social science-based reading research and instruction culture, from which educational policies, practices, and funding often arise, focuses on teaching students how to read, and with the growth of content area literacy, how to learn from their reading (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; IRA, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005, 2009; Swafford & Kallus, 2002). However, there does not exist as much on how to systematically promote reading maturity as a life-long pursuit. It is commonly understood as a *philosophical* issue that it is important to be “well-read.” Established movements like the “Great Books” programs, books like Mark Edmundson’s *Why Read?* (2004), the contributions of scholars like Mortimer Adler, Harold Bloom, and E.D. Hirsch as well as the existence and survival of the humanities attest to this issue especially for older adolescent and adult readers (c.f. Adler, 1940; Bloom 2000; Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1988).

However, as a practical matter in current school culture, reading maturity seems relatively untouched as *social science*: reading maturity is neither discussed, delineated, nor monitored in an organized way. Subsequently it doesn’t receive diagnosis or remediation/ intervention. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, the person who does not read good books has little advantage over the person who can’t. We do little in school in a systematic or research-based way, to help address this. We talk about the idea of being well read and teach basic reading skills and require some minimum English/language arts competencies, but in daily practice we don’t often pull all these elements together in a somewhat coordinated way in order to work systematically and intentionally toward reading maturity as social science. We do, however, teach kids how to read; help kids who struggle with learning to read; have effective approaches for helping kids learn from their reading, although more needs to be done with encouraging advancements being seen in content area literacy (Jacobs 2008; Manzo, 2003; Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005, 2009); have respected descriptions of reading maturity to draw on; and think that “being well-read” is valuable. However, the question remains, do we have wide-spread systematic routes for seeing kids and adults grow toward reading maturity? We measure basic reading proficiency and we require students to earn English/language arts class credits, but there is not much evidence that we have intentional plans for seeing people through to reading maturity. We pay relatively little attention to alliterates and other non-optimal types of proficient readers. One notable thing we *are* seeing is that basic reading skill does *not* seem to ensure that additional elements of reading maturity will necessarily follow (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Chall, 1983; Chase, 1961; Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996; Manzo & Manzo, 1993;

Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Thomas, 2001). And this is troubling, particularly considering the demands on citizens of our world today. An illiterate culture might not govern themselves as well as they could, nor as well as they need to in order to flourish.

There has been a general lack of commitment in social science research to understanding proficient readers who may have undetected needs in making progress toward reading maturity (Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Thomas, 2001). Potential reasons for this include: lack of clear, widely known definitions or construct descriptions and the controversial nature of developing or advancing such descriptions; lack of assessment instruments; and lack of resources and/or accountability measures and incentives to address all but “remedial” readers, especially in our high-stakes testing culture. In addition, it is possible that education has not been ready to work on this level of reading development yet, and there has been a tacit lack of valuing the construct by adolescents and the general public, particularly when specific aspects of it are juxtaposed with multimedia-saturated entertainment options. There also may be reluctance by educators to cast light on their colleagues and/or students, i.e. some literacy professionals, school teachers, and/or social scientists who have not made progress toward reading maturity themselves (c.f. Powell-Brown, 2003/2004). This could prove uncomfortable to address or cause the construct to go unrecognized (Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Thomas 2001). And finally, growth toward reading maturity involves personal epistemological development (Thomas, 2001) which may lead to critical thinking, reflection, and assumption-challenging that educators may praise but actually find personally unsettling (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005). Too much cognitive dissonance can lead to neglect of an issue if not resolved; deep down this may be legitimate cause for resistance toward reading maturity. Nevertheless, the benefits may outweigh the unsettling parts; tackling what challenges us can lead to meaningful advancements. Hopefully we can find the resolve to press on.

Reading Maturity: Historically Described

As the construct has emerged over the past 50 years, relatively few reading scholars have employed definitions or working descriptions addressing the concept of reading maturity. Harris and Hodges (1995, p. 211) define reading maturity as: “a high level of reading development in which the individual reads expertly, widely, profitably, and responsibly.” Casale (1982, pp. 4-5) extrapolated the following definition from Gray and Rogers (1956), the “chief populists of the term:”

Reading maturity is a state of reading ability typically reached in adult life

as a product of overall development, instruction, experience, and years of extensive reading. Its chief features are accurate, high-level comprehension, objective thinking, and the ability to speak back fluently and analytically that which has been read with little or no prompting.

Chall (1983, p. 87) identifies “Stage 4” and “Stage 5” as the highest levels of reading growth in her scheme on stages of reading development. As she describes them, Stage 4 readers read widely from a broad range of complex materials, both expository and narrative, with a variety of viewpoints, acquiring this level of reading through wide reading and study of the physical, biological, and social sciences and the humanities; high quality and popular literature; newspapers and magazines; and systematic study of words. Stage 5 readers read for their own needs and purposes with reading serving to integrate one’s knowledge with that of others, leading to synthesis and creation of new knowledge. This level of reading is acquired through wide reading of ever more difficult materials, reading beyond one’s immediate needs, and by participating in activities requiring integration of varied knowledge and points of view.

Harris and Hodges (1995, p. 211) cite this excerpt from Gray and Rogers (1956):

Maturity in reading as one aspect of total development is distinguished by the attainment of those interests, attitudes, and skills which enable young people and adults to participate eagerly, independently, and effectively in all the reading activities essential to a full, rich, and productive life. . . In the satisfaction of interests and needs through reading, a mature reader will continue to grow in capacity to interpret broadly and deeply.

The following passage about reading maturity from Gray and Rogers (1956, p. 237) uniquely transcends a focus on reading *skills* to express what should be the loftier transformative goals of education:

The crucial point along the route to maturity in reading is the time at which reading begins to inspire the reader, to give him a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction in the activity, and to exert a conscious integrative effect upon him. This is the point at which reading ceases to be a mere intellectual exercise of grasping and remembering meanings. It is also the point at which reading loses its quality of vicariousness and speaks directly to the reader. Stated positively, it is the point at which reading begins to bring about significant conversions, to make changes in one’s core of values, to broaden interests, to open up new horizons, and to provide new and improved ways of thinking about things. When reading begins to

assume these functions in the individual's life, then he is on his way to maturity in reading. The reading-growing-reading-growing process has become self-generating.

Substantial scholarship respects and accepts Gray's work as a meaningful "established precedent" (c.f. Chall, 1983; Manzo & Manzo, 1990; Smith & Sheehan, 1998; Venezky, 2003), although it has not been broadly advanced or applied. Gray and Rogers's (1956) research remains a seminal work on the reading maturity construct, generally neither surpassed nor ardently debated by others showing interest in this topic. For this reason, this article suggests a working description of reading maturity derived from Gray and Rogers' 50+ -year old work, not discordant with the subsequent work of others like Chall and Manzo, which may help carry the construct forward today. As Jacobs (2008) said in response to the encouraging new attention being paid to adolescent literacy, "We would do well in the shock of this most recent 'awakening' to proceed. . . with studied concern that acknowledges and builds on the research and practices of our predecessors" (p. 13).

An Expanded Working Description of Reading Maturity

Gray and Rogers (1956) examined a set of subcategories, after researching various options, which best constituted the reading maturity construct. In my previous research for this article (Thomas, 2001) I interpreted, applied, and in some cases extended or adjusted these into six subcategories, influenced also by the work of Casale (1982), Manzo and Casale (1981, 1983a, 1983b), and Manzo, Manzo, Barnhill, and Thomas (2000). I have identified the following six subcategories of reading maturity: reading attitudes and interests; reading purposes; reading ability; reaction to and use of ideas to apprehend (higher-order literacy); kind of materials read; and personal adjustment to reading/transformational reading (Thomas, 2001).

Because of the complexity of the reading maturity construct, particularly in the richly textured multicultural tapestry of our schools and society, an important caveat is in order. Much like a journey, progress toward reading maturity should be seen more as a *direction* than as a prescribed *destination*. As a direction, reading maturity is something we can agree upon as a primary goal for *all* progressing readers, even as we acknowledge diversity in individual pathways and eventual destinations. In the expansive working description of reading maturity that follows, there is no prescribed reading canon. Further, it is culturally neutral, without specific social mores, save for the assumption shared by many to sensibly move in that direction. In addition, advancement of the reading maturity construct should not be seen as dissuading at all from culturally responsive pedagogy (c.f. Ruggiano Schmidt

& Lazar, 2011), but rather as a useful tool for advancing student-centered curriculum and instruction that promotes individualized progress toward reading maturity for students of all cultural backgrounds.

This article proposes to describe the reading maturity construct, heavily influenced by Gray and Rogers (1956) by delineating the characteristics of a maturing reader. The complex nature of reading maturity does not lend itself to concise definition, previous efforts from respected scholars notwithstanding; however, this should not keep us from attempting to clearly delineate general characteristics of a maturing reader. As such, what follows is not a tightly packaged definition like we're accustomed to in our age of sound-bites but is sufficiently detailed for the complexity of the construct, providing specific characteristics we can evaluate and toward which we can promote growth.

Area 1: reading attitudes and interests. A maturing reader is one who enjoys reading, has a high interest in reading, and finds reading potentially stimulating or exciting. A maturing reader reads frequently and sees reading as an important part of life. A maturing reader has a wide breadth of reading interests, liking to read about many different things. A maturing reader also has a depth of reading interests, reading extensively on certain topics, enjoying reading to learn about things that interest them.

Area 2: reading purposes. A maturing reader reads for valuable and varied reasons including: for pleasure; to learn more about things of interest; to gain new knowledge; to improve understanding of life; to understand others better; and to understand herself/himself better. A maturing reader is also aware of his/her purposes for reading and chooses strategies accordingly, making an effort to actively engage with what is being read, reading with both purpose and flexibility.

Area 3: reading ability. A maturing reader can read proficiently and fluently, understanding most of what she/he reads, getting a good grasp on the literal ("reading the lines") and implied ("reading between the lines") meanings presented. A maturing reader is comfortable with his/her reading ability and does not mind reading aloud and often earns grades in school that would indicate good reading comprehension abilities.

Area 4: reaction to and use of ideas apprehended (higher-order literacy). While reading, a maturing reader often thinks about other things she/he already knows about the topic and is often prompted with new ideas and insights while reading. A maturing reader is able to make generalizations and personal conclusions about what is read, and can use reading to help make decisions. When a maturing reader reads, he/she can combine ideas he/she already has with ideas in what is read to

form new personal understandings. A maturing reader reads with an attitude of inquiry and asks her/himself questions while reading. A maturing reader tends to suspend judgment, evaluating the main idea of what is read by looking for supporting points. While reading, a maturing reader recognizes ideas that may have personal or societal value, and is able to construct new ideas from what is read.

Area 5: kinds of materials read. A maturing reader reads intellectually challenging material, enjoying reading material that goes beyond “easy-reading.” A maturing reader likes to read things that inspire thinking, reading materials that contain rich ideas. A maturing reader enjoys reading about mentally stimulating topics and frequently reads materials at relatively difficult reading levels. A maturing reader enjoys reading materials that foster better understanding other people and that broaden understanding the world. A maturing reader is intellectually enriched by most of what he/she reads, enjoying reading materials that teach her/him things he/she did not know before.

Area 6: personal adjustment to reading/transformational reading. Reading may help a maturing reader change perspectives about things and provide motivation for personal changes. When a maturing reader learns something valuable from credible reading sources, she/he usually applies it to actions in her/his life. Reading can transform actions, thinking, and values of a maturing reader, and a maturing reader can recall personal transformations as a result of things read. Reading makes a maturing reader carefully consider changes that he/she should make in life, causing personal reflection. Some of the character of a maturing reader is shaped by what she/he reads.

Because of the importance of the construct, we should treat reading maturity deliberately, not leaving it to chance as a hoped-for by-product of schooling that some students acquire but others apparently do not. To do this we should move next to issues of measurement or monitoring.

How can Progress toward Reading Maturity be Measured or Monitored?

Gray and Rogers’ (1956) efforts at measuring reading maturity and subsequent refining efforts by Manzo and Casale (1981, 1983a, 1983b) represented ambitious and ground-breaking attempts to promote reading maturity by evolving practical definitions, measurement, and intervention strategies. As noted in Casale’s prologue (1982, p. x), however, the classic paradox of not adequately measuring a construct for lack of construct definition, and not defining a construct for lack of adequate measurement, have challenged efforts to define and measure reading maturity. And this chicken/egg quandary may contribute to the rather narrowly focused high-

stakes reading assessment culture that we currently see across the nation. Our ideals sometimes wilt from the pressures of day-to-day demands so we eventually tend to most value, in practical terms, what we are held accountable for. In many cases this means we value what we can or choose to measure (c.f. Schein, 1992). If we measure only limited aspects of reading development (basic skills and basic comprehension), those become what we pursue, rather than the broader and deeper reading maturity literacy construct for which I argue in this article. If, however, we could bring renewed attention to this bigger picture of reading development, starting with efforts in a *direction* rather than one set *destination*, we can start making improvements to this problem. If we can (re)gain a collective sense of valuing progress toward reading maturity, we can also find ways to assess and monitor it. And, if we can assess and monitor it, it may expand our current school testing culture from its present narrow focus to a healthier, broader state, thereby fostering further pursuit of progress toward reading maturity.

Although Chall (1983) did not thoroughly address assessment of her 4th and 5th stages of reading development, Gray and Rogers used an ethnographic case study approach for assessing reading maturity while Manzo and Manzo (1983a; 1983b) constructed an assessment battery. These efforts could be re-examined as possible points to resume reading maturity assessment. Additional traditional assessment tools could be created and applied, perhaps in combination: anecdotal records; teacher checklists; student-teacher conferences; student journals or literacy logs; peer assessment; and student portfolios. Something as simple as a self-assessment instrument could move us at least one step forward.

The Reading Maturity Survey

I designed *The Reading Maturity Survey*, originally called *The Reading Survey*, (Thomas, 2001), a simple self-report instrument available online (for free) at: www.ucmo.edu/readingmaturity. The six subcategories of the survey directly address the six elements of reading maturity described earlier. It contains 60 questions, 10 from each of the six reading maturity subcategories. Each question is answered on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = “a lot like me,” 3 = “somewhat like me,” and 1 = “not like me”). The score for *The Reading Maturity Survey*, treated as interval scale data, is the mean of the 60 item scores for an individual. The subcategory scores for each of the six areas of reading maturity can also be generated. The split-half reliability of the instrument was calculated in an earlier study (Thomas, 2001), when it was given to 82 college students, using the six subcategory scores of each instrument. The correlation between halves was .85 and when the Spearman-Brown formula was

used to estimate the reliability coefficient for the whole instrument, it was .92. It has no time limits but is estimated to take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Over the last several years this instrument has proved useful in varied settings. It has been helpful when applied in programs designed to improve secondary school-wide literacy. It has been a tool for secondary teachers to use in their classrooms and literacy programs—recently several different teachers and schools in different parts of the country have used it with their students. It has also been applied to a study measuring the reading development of preservice teachers (Theiss, Philbrick, & Jarman, 2008-2009). And it has been a valuable teaching tool for challenging preservice teachers and graduate students through integration in teacher preparation coursework, addressing the premise that for teachers to be good literacy providers, they should be making progress toward reading maturity themselves (c.f. Powell-Brown, 2003/2004). Development of a shorter version of the instrument is also underway, as well the addition of “next-steps” scaffolding materials to aid in student reflection and planning for progress toward reading maturity. This information about *The Reading Maturity Survey* is shared to illustrate that it is not terribly difficult to begin assessing and promoting progress toward the lofty reading maturity target; further use of this tool by others is certainly welcomed.

Advancing Reading Maturity: What's Next?

In her seminal work on stages of reading development, Chall (1983) organizes the reading development process into five stages. Stages 1 and 2 address the basics of learning to read; Stage 3 addresses beginning to learn from reading; and Stages 4 and 5 describe key aspects of reading maturity. The future of reading in schools should involve a three-part focus which could align with Chall's reading development scheme. First, we should continue the emphasis, currently in the spotlight, of doing all we can to help students with the basics of literacy (Chall's Stages 1 & 2), helping them *learn to read* (i.e. doing an excellent job with instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text-dependent comprehension). Next, we should bolster the good start taking place with content area literacy (Chall's Stage 3), or equipping students to learn *from* their reading as they progress through higher grades (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; IRA, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2005, 2009; Swafford & Kallus, 2002). Then, as the larger vision rousing these literacy efforts, we should systematically and with a balanced social science rigor, become more serious about Chall's 4th and 5th Stages, the task of literacy education aiming toward reading maturity.

Specific Suggestions for Educational Practice Involving Reading Maturity

The following suggestions may be sensible for us to consider. First, teacher education courses and graduate studies in literacy education should discuss the importance of teaching toward reading maturity rather than only to avoid illiteracy. We need renewed emphasis on the idea that mature reader profiles, as diverse in detail as they will be, should be the highest goal of literacy education. Reading maturity, despite its complexity, should be (re)raised as the expressed goal of literacy education (and perhaps education in general). This may start through simple avenues like reviving Gray and Rogers (1956), Chall (1983), and Manzo and Casale (1981, 1983a, 1983b) and by referencing articles like this one and others previously discussed that have addressed reading maturity. This should also include more coverage of reading maturity in literacy education textbooks and in teacher education courses. This increased awareness of and appreciation for the importance of progress toward reading maturity would then hopefully carry into conversations with educational policy makers and eventually to the general public, impacting this second item, next, as well.

Second, we should honestly look at how our current high-stakes testing environment, focused on basic reading skills, diverts attention from progress toward reading maturity. Pursuing reading maturity sometimes conflicts with classroom realities in current school culture. We need stakeholders from all facets of the educational enterprise, including teachers, administrators, teacher preparation institutions, parents, policy-makers, and law-makers who can advocate for more thorough/more broad assessment of reading development, that ideally includes progress toward reading maturity as the target. As described earlier, basic reading proficiency is essential and it is no small task to acquire it. It is a primary part of the mission of education but it is not where we should stop when envisioning what it means to become optimally literate. Only avoiding illiteracy, as vital as this is, may be akin to building half a bridge—it's important but not complete. For our society to thrive into the future, basic reading skill is not enough; unwise is the society that confronts illiteracy but leaves alliteracy unchallenged. Our large-scaled approaches to reading assessment need to take account of this and until our current testing culture improves, progress toward reading maturity will remain unchallenged.

In addition, and as one possible partial remedy for the problem identified in the previous item, all students in grades 6-12 should have a literacy profile or portfolio. Thankfully, as more attention is being given to secondary/adolescent literacy development (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011; IRA, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Manzo, Manzo, &

Thomas, 2005, 2009), the suggestion of these profiles or portfolios is no longer as novel as it would previously have been. This profile should travel with students through middle and high school. It should contain data on literacy skills from a traditional variety of basic reading and writing proficiency measures, but should also include intentional monitoring of progress toward reading maturity, including reading habits and dispositions. *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001) described earlier could easily be used to facilitate this process; it is the type of practical tool that could be a key element for assessment of and reflection on literacy development beyond basic reading skill. Literacy profiles or portfolios could be created and updated in English/language arts class, in the sort of reading-focused classes that are currently emerging in middle schools and high schools, or even in the typical home-room hour common in many secondary school settings. For instance, one simple requirement of a middle school reading class or a high school English/language arts class could be the creation, updating, monitoring, and presenting of such a literacy profile/portfolio as a semester or annual project. This portfolio could then travel with students as they progress through grades 6-12, not unlike the other files and records that students have. In this way we could begin to systematically monitor and report on student progress toward reading maturity and develop appropriate interventions or literacy mentoring where applicable.

Finally, we should attempt to leverage the opportunity we now have with adolescent literacy moving more prominently into the spotlight (c.f. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, 2009-2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010-2011; Jacobs, 2008). Secondary principals and other school leaders across the country are paying increased attention to adolescent readers and are aligning curriculum and resources accordingly. As they establish solid school-wide literacy programs (c.f. Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas, 2009), they could pursue programs, including curriculum, professional development, faculty and financial resources, and program assessment, that promote both basic reading proficiency and the goal of progress toward reading maturity. In so doing, basic reading proficiency should increase, while growth toward life-long literacy development is enhanced.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of philosophical claims about the importance of being well-read. It has the potential to quicken our consciences, spur reflection and growth, broaden our horizons, and change the direction of a person's life. It arguably has soul-shaping potential (Adler, 1940 & 1977; Edmundson, 2004) and is a cultural and societal asset (c.f. Chall, 1983; Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice,

1996). Becoming well-read also relates to intellectual and epistemological development (Chall, 1983; Thomas, 2001). Clearly, the broad reading maturity construct transcends reconstructive reading, moving into the realm of constructive reading with a strong relationship to issues in general maturity and overall development (Thomas, 2001). It is not my intention to naively suggest that reading maturity is a panacea for all the challenges facing us, nor a golden pathway to all we aspire to become. Overall health, wellness, and human flourishing surely involve many factors including physical fitness, nutrition, sleep, spiritual growth, relational contentment, mental health, and sound general learning and appreciation of life. However, reading maturity can make important contributions to overall human and societal well-being. It seems reasonable to expect growth in reading maturity to positively impact people on a personal level which should in turn impact the health of society (c.f. Chall, 1983). The long-term wager behind this paper is that working to delineate, monitor, and intentionally promote progress toward reading maturity should help us grow, even if only in relatively small degrees, closer to our ideal selves, becoming more content, intelligent, compassionate, and responsible citizens, helping us work together to shape a better world.

This article suggests a working description of the reading maturity construct, why it's important, how we could start monitoring growth toward it, and ideas for next steps. It contends that in our educational system we currently do fairly well with teaching students the basics of how to read and are now improving with content area reading advancements as well. However, the remaining concern is that we still don't acknowledge a compelling unified and higher-level aspiration for reading. In short, I suggest that this missing goal should renew our attention to reading maturity. Importantly, a key point is that this pursuit needs to involve more than generalized notions of becoming "well-read." Instead, we need to take a balanced, organized, and intentional approach to systematically monitoring student growth toward reading maturity using tools such as the *Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001). We can work together to get the reading maturity construct back into the conversation. Now is a great time to begin.



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