

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT READING: THE VOICES OF STUDENTS IN
THEIR K-12 JOURNEY

by

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The initial objective of this study was to gain insight from students about their K-12 reading experience. In fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade the data were collected while conversing with students in focus groups. Conversations were centered around the *Focus Group Checklist* which was divided into three parts: 1) Teacher-Assigned Reading. 2) Read and Interact with Text; and 3) Content Areas. The second objective was to outline a process for documentation of student opinions about K-12 education programs. The results of this study indicated that, (1) background building prior to reading assignments acted as a motivational component that enabled the fifth grade students to make personal connections with text. (2) In both middle and high school, there was a diminishing in the practice of activating students' prior knowledge. (3) Vocabulary instruction consisted of relearning words that fifth grade students were already familiar with or knew well and. (4) limited opportunity for the application of "new" words. (5) Requirement for the learning of new words decreased as students moved through high school. (6) Instruction for question and answer relationships consisted of directing fifth grade students to reread or even pointing out where "answers" were found.

in the text; (7) Instruction that included modeling, utilization of samples, and specific criteria for question and answer responses were provided only for the “advanced” students in eighth grade; (8) Reinforcement of literal responses from text were provided for eleventh graders instead of instruction for a critical response based on multiple sources and; (9) the “advanced” classes were often provided with explicit criteria and detail about how to answer questions. Recommendations and implications for policy based on the voices of the students were presented.

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Preface

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CHAPTER I REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literacy Past and Present: A Brief Historical Perspective

The most common definition of literacy is the ability to read and write (Willis, 1997). In the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) literacy is defined as “the quality or state of being literate; knowledge of letters; condition in respect to education; especially the ability to read and write (p. 1026). A toddler “reads” Pepsi and Coke logos to his mother, while deciding on the purchase of beverages at a grocery store. A pre-school student scribbles symbols on paper and gives the “message” to her parents. As they grow and develop, these children are showing indicators of emerging literacy. Can we define a point in their lives when they will reach the status of “literate?” What criteria will these children need to meet in order to flourish as “highly literate” adults?

Literacy Redefined: A New Standard of Proficiency

Information continues to expand at exponential rates, and is now doubling every three years or even faster (Ross and Bailey, 1994). The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd rev ed. contains more than 315,000 entries. Golden parachute, hair weaving, telemarketing, and video text were added to the first edition along with 500,000 other new entries (Flexner and Hauck, 1994). With many technical terms never included in the general lexicon, the average count of words in the English language is approximately five million (Landau, 1984). The sheer number of new words raises the standard for students who must acquire a larger vocabulary than any other generation (Gunning, 1996). Though unfathomable in today’s technologically savvy world, there was a time when a signature defined a status of literacy in society. Signatures on wills (1650-1795) were analyzed as a representative measure of literacy among white males and females in seventeenth century New England (Lockridge, 1974). Signature evidence was also used as a determinant of women in colonial New England being looked upon as “less

literate” than men (Harris, 1989). According to Monaghan (1998) the New England colonies legislated that both males and females learn to read, but writing instruction was required only for boys. The signature evidence underestimated a woman’s reading abilities. Many of the girls who learned to read, never learned to write. During World War I, soldiers were given literacy tests to help determine qualifications for officer training. An Alpha form of the test was given to “literate” soldiers, while a Beta form was reserved for those deemed “illiterate”(Willis, 1997).

Literacy Over Time: Stagnation and Decline

According to Willis (1997) definition and purposes of literacy in the 19th and 20th century can be assigned to three areas: literacy as a skill; literacy-as-school-knowledge; and, literacy as a social and cultural construct. Prior to formal schooling, how did man acquire “literacy as a skill” to communicate on a daily basis?

For primitive man “literacy” did not begin with an alphabetic principle, but with messages drawn in the air. Either following or combined with use of “air gestures” came the birth of the pictograph. Pictures and monuments were used to explain information and ideas (Ross and Bailey, 1994). Eventually, it became necessary to represent sounds of progressively complex language systems. Symbols for reading and writing were evolving into systematic characters. Tablets of stone and wood were used in place of bark, bone, or skin. Quintilion, the Great Roman Educator of the first-century, mentioned wooden tablets containing letters for use in teaching of reading and writing. If these were the first “reading textbooks” the hornbook definitely followed in progressive development. The horn-book has been described as the very first book of children (Tuer, 1968). The earliest horn-books contained nothing but the alphabet either inscribed in wood or simply written inside. Later horn-books contained syllables and religious selections (Tuer, 1968). Before the invention of printing, the primer opened with the criss-cross-row or alphabet arranged in horn-book fashion.

The terms “primer” and “BC” were eventually applied to all elementary books for children’s use (Tuer, 1968).

A reflection on beginnings of literacy-as-school-knowledge may cause a nostalgic longing for a “back to the basics” mentality of reading and writing instruction. Stedman (1996) believed it made sense to revisit traditional practices and policies of an earlier era if performance truly has been on the decline. According to Coulson (1996) reading and writing scores of high school seniors and adults have declined over the last decade. Chall (1996) also concluded an overall decline in reading achievement based on both tested and anecdotal information.

Though Resnick and Resnick (1977) indicated a need for change in literacy instruction, they did not advocate a move “back to the basics.” Current expectations are not comparable to those of the past. History does not provide a determination of change to be made. Even if past practices were compatible with our post-modern world, would they even be worthy of embracing?

According to Coulson (1996) the ability of public schools to provide a minimum amount of competence in reading and writing has been relatively consistent over the last hundred years. Daniel Resnick and Lauren Resnick’s (1977) report of standards for literacy showed that instructional models of the past have aimed at attaining low literacy levels for large numbers or high literacy levels for an elite few. For over a century, mediocrity prevailed and now even the “elite few” are underperforming. The number of high achievers declined in recent decades and advanced levels of literacy have dropped (Coulson, 1996). Trends in national and international literacy studies show that illiteracy perceptions have decreased in the unschooled population while actually increasing in the schooled population (Chall, 1996). Ignorance to the drop in advanced levels of literacy and number of high achievers is becoming commonplace (Coulson, 1996). It is clear that as today’s standards of literacy increase at astounding rates, student performance fails to grow in accordance.

Literacy in the Workplace

“The single most important thing to remember about any enterprise is that results exist only on the outside. The result of a business is a satisfied customer... the result of a school is a student who has learned something and put it to work ten years later.”

Peter Drucker

The New Realities

An Education Crisis in America

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1998) about one-third of students never learn to read well enough to become successful managers of secondary educational tasks. Though students are motivated and competitive in reading throughout the early grades, they fall behind by the end of high school (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1996). With the exception of a few, the two-thirds who are learning to read are not achieving what they can and should (Bruce, 1999). Sending children to school achieves real literacy for only two out of three students (Mullis, Cambell, and Farstrup, 1993). The NAEP found that too many students are finishing high school without basic reading skills. In 2000, 43% of African-Americans, 36% of Latinos, and 17% of Caucasian students graduated as below basic readers (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1996). From 1994 to 2000, there has been only a two percent gain in proficiency. Our country's reading achievement is almost flat (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000). How did our nation arrive at a place where there is such an enormous deficiency in students' skills? During the 1980's, several reports awakened the United States to its educational crisis. The Hudson Institute's Workforce 2000, and Work and Workers for the 21st Century showed that American Workers were not prepared to meet the skill or technology demands of employers (Tyson, 1990).

In addition to these reports *A Nation at Risk* (1983), *The Report Card*, and *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985) helped to fuel dissatisfaction with American schools (Willis, 1997). Of all these, *A Nation at Risk* was a major impetus for taking action to improve educational standards in our country (Ravitch, 2000). The United States responded with an effort to improve public schools through tighter curricula, higher standards for teachers, and increased testing for everyone. In spite of solid intentions, lack of funding and absence of necessary accountability measures for states and individual school districts resulted in reform that never occurred (Ravitch, 2000). By the end of the decade student performance remained unchanged (SCANS, 1992).

In 1991, with support of the nation's governors, President Bush announced America 2000. The initiative consisted of six national educational goals for the year 2000: (1) improving readiness for school, (2) increasing high school graduation rates, (3) improving student achievement, (4) raising science and mathematics achievement, (5) improving adult literacy and skills, and (6) ridding schools of drugs and violence. The election of President Clinton in 1992 brought new changes to federal policies that resulted in his own proposal for systematic or standards-based reform. Goals 2000 helped to initiate identification of state content standards, an aligned curriculum, and development of rigorous academic assessments (Vinovskis, 2003). It also provided for aid to local school districts to help increase student achievement. Creation of a federal board to review and certify new state and national standards was another piece of Goals 2000 to be implemented by then President Bill Clinton (Ravitch, 2000). When Republicans took control of Congress in 1994, President Clinton had not appointed anyone to the board so it was eventually abolished (Ravitch, 2000).

Target objectives for Goals 2000 were allowed to lapse as efforts for research and long-term planning and development were not supported by either party (Ravitch, 2000).

In 1994, the Improving Americas Schools Act (IASA) became law. This reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 for five years and tied state funding for Title I to creation of content standards. The Improving Americas Schools Act (IASA) was also the impetus for adequate yearly progress (AYP). Initially, guidelines for AYP were vague specifying only that it “result in continuous and substantial yearly improvement of each local education agency and school sufficient to achieve the goal of all children served under this part meeting the state’s proficient and advanced levels of performance (Wenning, Herdman, and Smith, 2002). According to IASA, state standards were to be established by the 1997-1998 school year. In addition to this, objectives and assessments of AYP were to be in place by 2000-2001. None of these occurred until the passing of No Child Left Behind (Wennig, Herdman, and Smith, 2000). NCLB reauthorized the ESEA for twelve years and continued the standards-based reform approach of the IASA (NCLB, 2001). It was designed to support all students in attainment of high academic standards by requiring states to create annual assessments that measured students’ reading and math performance in grades three through twelve (Bracey, 2003). NCLB tightened provisions concerning adequate yearly progress by requiring states to identify annual measurable objectives for student performance. This was done to ensure that groups of students disaggregated by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, or English proficiency become proficient in reading and math by 2014 (NCLB, 2001). This law also required states to develop and implement a statewide accountability system to ensure that all schools made AYP (NCLB). Schools not making AYP would be identified for increasingly rigorous sanctions designed to improve instruction and performance (NCLB, 2001).

The passing of NCLB heightened emphasis on accountability to an extent never before witnessed in educational reform (NCLB, 2001). School-wide Title I and targeted assistance programs were required to employ effective methods and instructional strategies grounded in scientifically based research (NCLB, 2001). In accordance with NCLB school improvement plans, professional development, and technical assistance provided to low-performing schools were required to utilize research based strategies that had a proven record of effectiveness (NCLB, 2001).

Reports released in the 1980's confirmed that America faced not only an education crisis, but a skills crisis as well (Tyson, 1990). For years, business organizations have claimed that workplace skill levels of Americans did not keep pace with needs of rapidly changing markets facing global competition (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). By 1993, the business community was preoccupied with education. The skills, knowledge, and behaviors needed for entry level employment were higher and very different than those needed for college. Preparation for higher education was always viewed as an "honorable thing."

In contrast, preparation for employment in a workplace was never respected or looked upon as "important" by Americans. As a result, graduating seniors were not prepared for the workforce (Daggett, 1993). A growing number of companies were forced to reimburse remedial training for employees and anger was rightfully directed towards the nation's education system (Tyson, 1990). Tyson (1990) questioned whether the K-12 education system was producing the highly-qualified students required by an advanced information society or workers more suitable to meet an economy of "hamburger-flippers" demands.

In *What Work Requires of Schools* (1991), the Secretary's Commission argued that elementary and secondary schools be required to meet drastically different goals.

In order to bring all students to a higher, previously unattainable level, experts agreed that reinventing of elementary and secondary education was imperative. The Commission recommended a restructuring of schools based on four premises. They were intended to better prepare young people for productive employment in our competitive economy:

- Teaching should be offered “in context,” that is, students should learn content while solving realistic problems. “Learning in order to know” should not be separated from “learning in order to do.”
- Improving the match between what work requires and what students are taught requires changing how instruction is delivered and how students learn.
- High performance requires a new system of school administration and assessment.
- The entire community must be involved.

(SCANS, 1992).

Daggett (1993) also believed that America’s K-12 education system did not deliver skills, knowledge, and behaviors needed to succeed in the workplace. Though the United States made slow, incremental improvement on test scores over the years, performance with workplace competency skills did not measure up. The skills required for successful performance on the job became higher and higher each year. In 1950, 60% of America’s workforce was comprised of unskilled workers. By the year 2000, it dropped to just 15%. After graduating, students were not able to transition to a technological information-based society (Daggett, 1993).

In *High Skills or Low Wages* America was alerted to the notion that they were “unwittingly” and “silently” choosing to settle for low skills. Acceptance of the public school officials who failed to prepare students for the workforce or the companies who cut wages to remain competitive was a silent agreement to the consequences. A serious “wake-up-call” was given to Americans when Clinton and Magaziner (1991) reported that the “choice” would lead to an America where 70% of people would see their dreams slip away.

As government and industry escalated the demands for new skills, businesses expected every worker to be literate at fairly high levels (Bernhardt, 1992). In *High Skills*, the recommendation to America for meeting the growing skill demands and increased literacy standards of the workplace was to mobilize the people. According to the report, the people were considered America's most vital and valuable asset. In particular Clinton and Magaziner (1991) were referring to the approximately 70% of students who would not graduate with a college degree.

By providing frontline workers such as bank tellers, farm workers, truck drivers, and retail clerks with the ability to do more highly skilled jobs, employment and wages would increase. If each operation required fewer people this would ultimately allow the United States to compete more effectively in a global economy (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991).

In 1989, the Commission on the Skills of the American workforce was formed in hopes of steering a new course for the United States (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991). The commission was comprised of a research team that included 23 loaned executives from companies, unions industry associations, and the Department of Labor. The research team probed into several industries both in the United States and abroad. More than 2,000 people at 500 firms and agencies analyzed government and private reports. The purpose of the Commission was to identify problems Americans faced and recommend feasible solutions (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991). *High Skills or Low Wages* outlined the five problems and recommendations of possible solutions. One problem identified by the Commission was that America prepared only a small fraction of its non-college bound students for work. This caused them to flounder in the labor market, moving from one low-paying job to another. Many reached their mid-20s never being seriously trained (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991). Tyson (1990) also believed that the United States faced a shortage of skilled, highly-productive jobs capable of providing income growth for the average non-college bound American.

In addition to this, Daggett (2003) asserted that many entry-level jobs had even higher reading requirements than the more advanced positions. According to Crain (1984) John Hopkins University completed a survey that followed careers of 20,000 high school seniors. Employers who hired the students were given a survey that inquired about traits and abilities they considered important in recruitment and hiring.

Adult literacy and reading of materials as difficult as a newspaper were both identified within the top-five most important skills and abilities (Crain, 1984).

In relation to the problem of non-college bound students having difficulty finding work, the commission recommended that the National committees of business, labor, education, and public representatives convene to define standards for two-to-four year programs of professional preparation in a broad range of occupations. The programs should combine general education with specific occupational skills and a significant work component (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991). In view of increasing expectations for literacy skills it is the opinion of the researcher that progress in proficiency is of dire importance for these students as well. The Chatham-Savannah Compact (1992) investigated workplace skill requirements as part of its effort to increase employability of public school graduates. The Compact defined employability in terms of minimal requirements, however the goal was to encourage development of skills beyond the minimal level. Priority “skill areas” for entry-level employment were structured in the SCANS framework and included specification of skills in relation to resources and information. “Acquires and Evaluates Information” was just one skill area identified under the heading of information. Graduates were expected to perform all of the specified tasks related directly to reading: written work instructions, work orders, labels, safety warnings, product instructions, work orders, labels, safety warnings, product instructions and product manuals.

Directions in textbooks, manuals and handouts, road/street signs/symbols, maps, tests, logs and journals, telephone books, dictionaries, schedules, job announcements, advertisements, computer printouts, classified advertisements, insurance forms, warranties, contracts and agreements, tax forms, legal notices, plans, and blueprints.

(Chatham- Savannah Compact 1992)

Another problem addressed by the Commission on Skills of the American Workforce was that the United States was not well organized to provide highly skilled workers in support of high performance work organizations (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991). The Commission recommended establishment of employment and training boards. They advised federal and state governments to collaborate with local leadership for supervision of the new school-to work transition. Local employment and training boards would serve as vehicles for management of the programs (Clinton and Magaziner, 1991). The Council of Chief State School Officers was also one of the many supporters who stressed the importance of the school-to-work initiatives (Lewis, 1990).

Tyson (1990) believed that the Nation's educational system was essential to development of worker competence and company competitiveness. High-productivity workplace organizations were dependent on workers who could do more than basic reading, writing, and arithmetic (Tyson, 1990). According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) many adults were not even equipped with the basic literacy skills required to function productively in the workplace (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad, 1993). Many businesses looked upon workplace deficiencies as a failure on the part of the schools to provide skilled workers (Smith, 2000).

To many in the business community, it was rather unfortunate if "Johnny" could not read, but it was a national catastrophe if he could not meet job requirements of the American economy (Tyson, 1990).

By 1995, nearly a dozen states pledged to revamp their education, training, and labor-market systems to help create the highly skilled workforce called for in “High Skills or Low Wages?” (Olson, 1995). Members of the High-Skills State Consortium decided to pursue the five major recommendations outlined in “High Skills” over the next five to 10 years:

- Requiring that all students earn a certificate of initial mastery, based on high standards.
- Creating alternative routes for dropouts to attain the certificate.
- Building occupational-skills standards and a school-to-work system to help youths meet them.
- Devising incentives for employers to create businesses that use skilled workers and advanced production method.
- Creating an efficient labor-market system that meets the needs of workers.

(Education Week, 1990).

The business community clearly recognized a need to lead an initiative for higher standards as they feared the achievement gap would result in economic peril for America in the global economy (Daggett, 2003). In fact, as students entered the workforce rapid changes and profound skill demands were taking place (Smith, 2000). The achievement gap was no longer confined to the difference between high-achieving students and the nine sub-groups identified in No Child Left Behind. Nor was it relevant only to underperformance of American students in comparison with many other industrialized nations (Daggett, 2003). According to Daggett (2003) the gap had now extended to the difference between high school graduation standards and “real” world requirements. This aspect of the achievement gap was evidenced by difference in workers’ qualifications and literacy demands of the workplace (Smith, 2000).

A survey conducted by the steering committee for the New York City Workplace Success Day (1991) reported that workplace literacy deficiencies forced an increase in the number of applicants interviewed for positions. Deficiencies in written communication skills of employers were reported by 90% of respondents (Steinburg, 1991). In addition to this, more than half of the executives who participated in the survey believed the need for employees with basic literacy skills would increase substantially over the next five years (Steinburg, 1991). The American Management Association of Personnel Executives (1999) also found that participating employers were encountering problems with their workers' literacy skills. Employers perceived more than a third of job applicants as lacking requisite literacy skills to perform job requirements (Grimsley, 1999).

In order to define competency skills required for success in the workplace, the Secretary's Commission for Achieving Necessary Skills identified a set of workplace Know-How. The five competencies and three part foundation of skills were identified as requirements for solid job performance:

Workplace Competencies

- Resources- They know how to allocate time, money, materials, space, and staff.
- Interpersonal skills- They can work on teams, teach others, serve customers, lead, negotiate, and work well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Information- They can acquire and evaluate data, organize and maintain files, interpret and communicate, and use computers to process information.
- Systems- They understand social, organizational, and technological systems: they can monitor and correct performance; and they can design or improve systems.
- Technology- They can select equipment and tools, apply technology to specific tasks, and maintain and troubleshoot equipment.

Foundation Skills

- Basic Skills- reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, speaking and listening.
- Thinking Skills- the ability to learn, to reason, to think creatively, to make decisions, and to solve problems.
- Personal Qualities- individual responsibility, self-esteem and self-management, sociability, and integrity.

(SCANS, 1992)

The SCANS Know-How was a combination of foundation skills and workplace competencies. The competency and skill criteria that resulted from SCANS (1992) were intended to set the agenda for what students were taught in the nations schools. Most high schools did not teach SCANS Know-How or require it in awarding of diplomas (SCANS, 1992).

In addition to SCANS, many organizations also reported on identification of specific skills that high school students were expected to acquire in order to function in a rapidly changing economy (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). In *Workplace Essential Skills: Resources Related to the SCANS Competencies and Foundation Skills* (2000) reports encompassed a wide-range of organizational summaries pertaining to skills needed for success in the workplace.

Summaries included the Washington Workplace Competency Worksheet. Education, business, and labor groups identified a core of related competencies deemed necessary for occupations from entry-level to technical. Reading and Writing were two of the ten competency areas identified on the worksheet:

Reading

Locates, understands, and interprets information written in English prose and contained in technical documents (manuals, graphs, and schedules), determines the main idea in text, identifies relevant details, facts and specifications, recognizes biased information, and evaluates the accuracy, appropriateness, style, and plausibility of reports proposals, and theories of other writers.

Writing

Communicates thoughts, ideas, information, and messages in writing, writes or types legibly and clearly, records information completely and accurately, composes and creates graphs and flowcharts, uses language, style, organization, and format that are appropriate to the subject matter, purpose, audience, etc., and edits, revises, and corrects information.

High Schools and the Changing Workplace (1984) also identified a list of competency areas required of high school graduates entering the workforce. In the outline, the National Academy of Science (NAS) members explored specific criteria for Reading and Writing:

Reading

Understands the purpose of written material, noting details and facts; identifies and summarizes principal and subsidiary ideas; identifies inconsistency in written materials, verifies information and evaluates the worth and objectivity of sources, interprets quantitative information (e.g. tables, charts, and graphs).

Writing

Gathers information suitable for the purpose, organizes information in a logical and coherent manner, uses Standard English syntax, applies the rules of correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, uses reference books such as a dictionary, thesaurus, and an encyclopedia, writes legibly. (Panel on Secondary School Education for the Changing Workplace, 1984).

Washington Basic Skills were developed by the state of Washington in collaboration with the Center for Remediation Design's Project of the States. Reading Comprehension for Employment was one of the three major areas consisting of 13 total skill domains. Domains within Reading Comprehension included: (1) following directions (2) looking up and obtaining information (3) filling out forms and documents (4) understanding financial and legal documents and (5) problem solving (Washington Basic Skills).

Also included in the summary was the High School Curriculum Survey. Baxter and Young (1980) conducted a survey of 2,110 school administrators, teachers, high school seniors, and personnel directors.

The purpose of the survey was to compare high school curriculum to student employability. Respondents were asked to rank-order skills and attitudes they thought were most important for young people entering the workforce. Of the 16 skills and attitudes identified, reading and understanding what was read ranked second on the list. Dependability was the only attitude considered more important than the skill of reading in the workplace (Baxter & Young, 1980).

The international Center for Leadership in Education (2002) found that workplace reading requirements, even for entry-level workers were substantially higher than the reading level required to pass most state proficiency exams. Even entry-level jobs often had higher reading requirements than more advanced positions in the same field (Daggett, 2003).

In the future, demands for a higher function of literacy will become even more complex. In addition to this, high levels of literacy, sometimes referred to as high literacy will be required of more people (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). High literacy is the ability to think deeply, efficiently, and effectively with concepts and ideas (Dole, 2000). Learning mindfully will also become more important (Langer, 1997). Mindful learning, described as sideways learning, deals with openness to the novelty of a subject or skill.

It is learning while actively noticing differences, contexts, and perspectives (Langer, 1997).

In spite of the growing demands surrounding requirements for advances in literacy, many states contemplated lowering their definition of proficiency. States were concerned about the number of students who might fail to make (AYP) Annual Yearly Progress (Daggett, 2003). How can the United States continue to settle for or even accept a lower-standard of literacy in a world that is requiring increasingly high literacy levels in order to survive?

The knowledge explosion witnessed the last half of century will pale in comparison to knowledge in the next century (Kibby, 2000). Upon close examination of skills in our technological information-based society, it is apparent that we will see a significant increase in the academic competency required to become a productive worker, consumer, and citizen (Daggett, 2003). The United States must address excellence and equity for all students as no other nation in history has attempted to do if we are to adequately prepare them for the world in which they will live and work (Daggett, 2003).

Lagging Literacy.....The Status of Reading Today

“If you can read this, you can probably pass social studies, American history, and American literature. If you can’t, you certainly wouldn’t be reading the Kappan, and most likely you probably didn’t do so well in social studies, history, and literature. If you can read this, you can thank teachers who know how to teach reading; the colleges or universities that taught those teachers how to teach reading; the professional development programs that helped your teachers improve their teaching for reading.”

Kathy Christie

According to a report published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001) the United States is losing ground in literacy (Christie, 2001). The overall reading performance of all 17-year-olds fell between 1992 and 1994 (The Economist, 1997).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that average reading scores of 12th grade students in 2002 were lower than 1992. When results from an international survey of 16 25 year old high school graduates were analyzed, the findings were astounding. More than half of U.S. students who graduated from high school but did not continue their studies performed below the literacy level international experts say is necessary to cope with demands of life in today's society. An alarming 60% of U.S. students underperformed while Finland had only 10% (Christie, 2001).

In spite of reform movements over the past 30 years, many American children are not reading well (International Reading Association, 2000). In 2003, slightly fewer than one-fourth of students were considered proficient. About 37 percent did not even meet the basic level for reading in 2003 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2003). Education Crisis (2003) reported that one out of every four high school seniors has difficulty reading.

According to the *School Library Journal* (2001) many experts believed the overwhelmingly dismal results of United States reading achievement indicated a need for a greater focus on early literacy. In 2001, many states were approaching the problem in a variety of ways including either required or supported "research-based" programs for teaching reading (Christie, 2001). Colorado provided Read-to-Achieve grants for reading instruction in early elementary grades. Virginia's Early Intervention Reading Initiative (K-3) collaborated with the University of Virginia to assist teachers with assessment and instructional recommendations based on current research (Christie, 2001). California K-3 teachers were required to pass a competence assessment in reading instruction.

The state of Utah even enacted a scholarship program that helped elementary teachers obtain their reading endorsements (Christie, 2001). In 1997, the passing of Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act required multiple, ongoing assessment in first and second grades.

Students not at grade level were given a reading assessment plan designed to help them acquire necessary skills. Wyoming passed legislation that required district implementation of reading assessments for first and second grade students.

Beginning in the 2001-2002 school year, students not exhibiting appropriate reading competence were given specialized assessment to identify reading problems. Each student was placed on an individualized reading plan in an attempt to remedy the difficulty (Christie, 2001).

Based on the recent activity of various states, it is clear that much of the focus on intensive reading preparation and remediation has occurred in primary grades (K-3). In the opinion of the researcher, while emphasis on early reading instruction is extremely important, it should not overshadow the need for a continued intensive focus throughout the middle and high school grades. According to the International Reading Association (2001) some people believed that reform efforts had focused so much on decoding, and that had resulted in unimpressive scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test for fourth grade students. Even at that level, the test measured sophisticated comprehension skills (International Reading Association, 2001). From about grade 4 on, a major transition between the stages of learning to read and reading to learn took place. According to Gunning (1996) reading to learn is marked by wide application of word-attack and comprehension skills. Much greater emphasis is placed on grasping informational text. The vocabulary and conceptual load also increase significantly. (Gunning, 1996). From grades 4 through 6 and beyond, students were required to comprehend numerous concepts, many quite abstract, in science and social studies. Reading material was longer and more complex. Students were expected not only to comprehend material but also to carry out complicated sets of directions from mental maps of concepts (Gunning, 1996).

Learning to read is definitely not something that ends for students after fourth or fifth grade (Broaddus and Ivey, 2000).

In fact Gunning (1996) believed many children performed relatively well in reading until they hit the stage of reading to learn.

Prior to their encounter with this transitional stage, students were carried along by strong decoding skills and the ease of reading mostly narrative material. Students experienced most difficulty when faced with concept-laden expository text characteristic of the reading to learn stage (Gunning, 1996). Though reading demands become increasingly complex and sophisticated as students enter this transitional period in school, it is apparent to the researcher that reading instruction does not keep pace with or meet the needs of these changes. From the researcher's perspective, many educators feel the task of teaching reading begins and ends in the elementary schools. Mann (1997) told of a seventh grade teacher who mentioned to the principal that some students in her math class did not know the alphabet. An eighth grade teacher indicated to the same school principal that only a few students were able to read the new science textbook. In disbelief, the principal visited these middle school classrooms. Then as test scores from the previous year arrived, she went about an active search for possible solutions (Mann, 1997).

Although students were expected to read purposefully in content area classrooms by the middle grades, teachers contend that many students "can't read, won't read, or will read but fail to comprehend most important information from text" (Blintz, 1997 p.20). From middle school on, evaluations of readings become much more elaborate and reflect an evolving set of standards for judging (Gunning, 1996). Even with the growing complexity of reading tasks in middle and high school Mann (1997) was the only person on a staff of 42 middle school teachers who taught reading in her classroom. The reality is that many middle school teachers were reluctant to teach reading, either because they felt inadequately trained or because they considered it someone else's responsibility (Gee and Forrester, 1998).

In spite of these issues Mann (1997) believed the teaching competency would be a significant factor as more students came into sixth, seventh, and eighth grades unable to read. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1994) indicated that students in this age group did not demonstrate higher level comprehension skills.

Middle school habits and attitudes towards reading were of equal concern. In general, research showed that adolescents did not engage in much reading for pleasure (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988). Gunning (1996) believed that as students were caught up in adolescence and the need to be with peers, they typically did the least amount of reading at this stage.

In the researcher's opinion, issues of skill deficiency and poor attitude compound to create an even greater need for focus on reading instruction into middle and high school years. Even when confronted with these concerns, many teachers fail to take action. Mann (1997) told of a middle school science teacher who conferred to the Language Arts department that teaching of reading skills was not her job. She also approached the principal to explain that Language Arts teachers should spend time teaching expository reading skills and use of content area textbooks. If this was done, she could proceed with her curriculum and teach what she was supposed to teach-science (Mann, 1997). The Language Arts Department responded by outlining their responsibilities. They stated that teaching of literature, story, poetry, and essay was allotted into a 42-minute period. Within this time frame, they could barely teach what they were accountable for let alone teach reading. (Mann, 1997). In 1997, Barry told of a southwestern high school that opted to drop remedial reading from its curriculum in hopes of emphasizing a strong content area reading program. Implementation was supposed to occur with the support of the reading specialist and other reading staff. In the end, content area teachers refused to cooperate and the program was dropped (Barry, 1997).

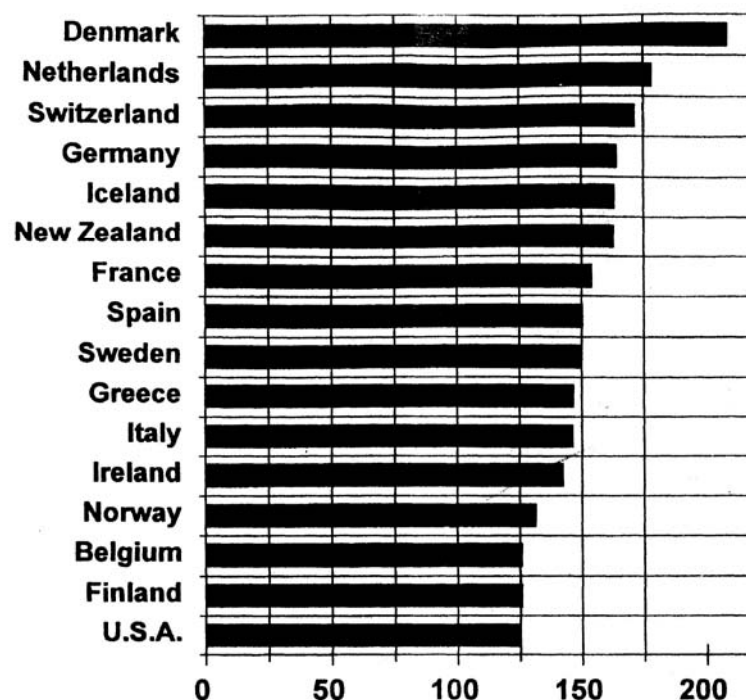
Many content area teachers commented that they did not even know how to teach basic reading as they never had reading methods courses(Mann, 1997)

According to Vacca (1998) the general neglect of adolescent literacy is evident in “educator’s policy, school curricula, and public mindset that does not appear to extend beyond learning to read and write in early childhood and elementary school” (p. 605).

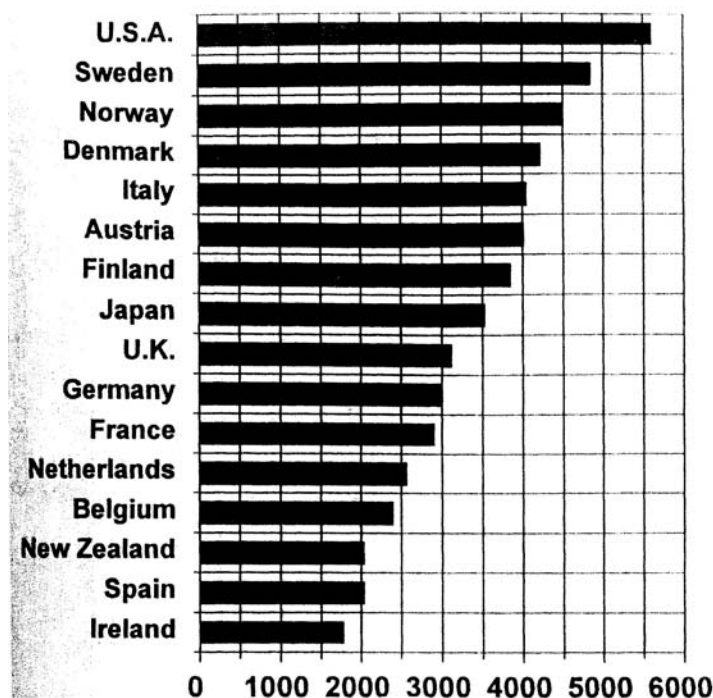
Barry (1997) suggested that allocations for secondary reading programs needed to be rethought in light of recent findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In 1994, *NAEP reading: A First look-findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress* reported that the average reading proficiency of twelfth-grade students declined significantly from 1992 to 1994. The decline was observed across a broad range of subgroups (Williams, Reese, Campbell, Mazzeo, and Phillips, 1995). In 1997, principals were asked to respond to a nationwide survey related to identification of programs and practices in place for high school students having difficulty in reading (Barry, 1997). Despite the fact that most respondents said they had maintained a program for students who struggled with reading, educators across the country expressed concern about reduction in secondary reading services (Barry, 1997). An educator from the northeast reported that as budgets were cut in her middle school, positions for reading teachers were given up. A teacher in the mid-west explained how reading labs were once in place at the high school so students had the opportunity to sign up for a semester with the goal of improving reading skills. This was an elective class opened to anyone, and individualized programs were designed for each student. When central administration decided it was no longer fashionable, the lab closed (Barry, 1997). How could it not prove beneficial to provide all students with access to some form of reading instruction at the high school level? The International Reading Association (1993) asserted that all high school students must be able to understand a written text for nearly every class they take.

Why does it take struggling readers to justify implementation of high school reading instruction? Even high achieving students benefit from using more efficient ways to extract meaning from text and integrate it with prior knowledge (International Reading Association, 1993). At the high school level, each kind of text makes special demands on the reader (International Reading Association, 1993). What will it take for middle schools and high schools to realize the necessity of changing its perception of the appropriateness of reading instruction?

According to Tyson (1990) the glaring reality is that all of the advanced industrialized countries provide high-school educations for all students that equal or exceed those we provide for only the college-bound. *Education Crisis* (2003) reported that in comparison to other industrialized nations U.S. third graders came out on top while eighth graders were in the middle. By eleventh and twelfth grade students in the United States were at the very bottom. The average progress (difference between nine and fourteen year olds) was 159.5 points (see figure 1) for 16 participating countries.



Progress was only 124.9 points for U.S. students (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995). In regard to reading literacy, U.S. students were last in the rank-ordering of progress among the 16 countries (Organization for Cooperation and Development, 1995). In addition to this, the United States spends more for both primary and secondary schools than any European country, including Norway and Sweden (see figure 2) (Organization for Cooperation and Development, 1995).



Increasingly, our high-school graduates are also trailing those of the newly industrialized countries (Tyson, 1990). In *Education Crisis*, former secretary of education William Bennett made the statement that relative to students in other industrialized nations “the longer you stay in school in America, the dumber you get (Education Crisis, 2003). Is it possible that progressive movement through our K-12 education system acted as a detriment to students’ skills?

Could Bennett’s claim of “more time in school making students stupid” carry any legitimacy?

Many experts were not buying it, and disagreed with any assertions of an “educational crisis.”

In fact, Allington (2002) argued that there was absolutely no evidence of decline in America’s reading achievement. According to Bracey (1997) national reports about the failure of American schools to educate students had been around for over a century.

Allington (2002) asked “so what’s new?” (p.3) in response to the continued campaign for improved schools, teaching, and reading instruction.

Compelling stories of personal illiteracy following years of schooling were continuously recorded in books and permeated television documentaries throughout the United States (Allington, 2002). Was Fox’s *Breaking Point: Education Crisis in America* (2003) simply another attempt to justify the need for federal involvement in the public school curriculum? Are the NAEP’s annual reports of student proficiency giving a truly accurate account of student performance? According to Allington (2002) the NAEP proficiency levels- Basic, Proficient, and Advanced-used to report reading performance were substantially flawed.

The NAEP (2000) defined achievement levels as follows: Reading Achievement levels (Grade4)

Basic

Fourth-grade students performing at the Basic level should demonstrate an understanding of the overall meaning of what they read. When reading text appropriate for fourth graders, they should be able to make relatively obvious connections between the text and their own experiences and extend the ideas in the text by making simple inferences.

Proficient

Fourth-grade students performing at the Proficient level should be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of the text, providing inferential as well as literal information.

When reading text appropriate to fourth grade, they should be able to extend the ideas in the text by making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making connections to their own experiences. The connection between the text and what the student infers should be clear.

Advanced

Fourth-grade students performing at the Advanced level should be able to generalize about topics in the reading selection and demonstrate an awareness of how authors compose and use literacy devices. When reading text appropriate to fourth grade, they should be able to judge text critically and, in general give thorough answers that indicate careful thought.

(National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000).

Allington (2002) explained that current NAEP reports of nearly 40% of fourth-graders testing at the below basic level were simply not true. Students who achieved the basic level should have literal comprehension of grade-appropriate texts. Historically, achievement of the basic level was considered on-grade level reading. Only problem, in the opinion of the researcher is what was once considered “on-grade-level” reading may not measure up in today’s world of elevated expectations for literacy. As information and knowledge increase, high literacy will be required of more people (Dole, 2000). In *Preventing Reading Difficulties*, the National Research Council asserted that current reading difficulties grew out of rising literacy demands as opposed to declining levels of absolute literacy (Snow, Burns, and Griffen, 1998). Either way, in the researcher’s opinion, student performance is not growing in accordance.

In reference to below basic achievement on NAEP reading assessments, Allington (2002) explained that all we really knew was that students were unable to read fourth-grade materials with literal comprehension. He explained further that they may have been able to read fourth-grade materials without comprehension.

It was also possible that they read accurately and with comprehension, but too slowly for completion of passages in time allotted (Allington, 2002). In regard to “reading” without comprehension, the researcher questions whether or not this could even be considered reading.

When Gunning (1996) explained the process of comprehension he stated: “without it, there is no reading, since reading is the process of constructing meaning from print. Comprehension is a constructive interactive process involving three factors-the reader, the text, and the context in which the text is read.” (p.193).

While the argument of time limitations interfering with basic level achievement was more plausible to the researcher, reading without comprehension was not.

Allington (2002) also stated that it was false to suggest students falling into the Below Basic level were non-readers, could not read independently, or could not read simple children’s books. The researcher strongly believes that in today’s world of increased expectations for literacy, students who were not able to read “more than simple children’s books” in fourth-grade might encounter a multitude of difficulties in all subject areas as they move through school. Not to mention the problem compounding when faced with requirement of functioning in the workplace. In reference to achievement of the proficient level, Allington (2002) explained that a student must be able to read grade-appropriate texts, make inferences, draw conclusions, and make connections to their own experiences. In the researcher’s opinion, it is important that readers are capable of all these and more. According the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1999) if reading was considered as an intellectual act encompassing more than literal decoding of print on a page, research does not show American students reading with critical intent and interest (Thompson, 1999). An administrator from the Department of Education explained that reading now entails reading for understanding, and thinking (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Researchers at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1999) identified six traits of critical reading. These traits or knowledge areas were identified as conventions, comprehension, context, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation (Thompson,1999).

Each of these traits came directly from research in both assessment and educational practices. They specify the six critical reading skills needed to develop readers who could process knowledge from print, make meaning of it, and apply the meaning in other situations (Thompson, 1999). Following the researcher's examination of the critical knowledge areas, students achieving proficiency as defined by the NAEP also exhibited five of the six traits. An advanced reader showed all five including the sixth critical reading trait of evaluation.

The researcher strongly believes that students need to reach the proficient level as opposed to the "historically defined" on-grade-level performance equivalent to that of a basic reader. The researcher also believes that now more than ever before students must learn not only to decode fluently, but to think critically about what they read.

According to Gunning (1996) between the ages of 11 and 14 students entered the stage of formal operations in which they began to think abstractly. Rather than just learning systems of information by memory, they were able to grasp the underlying organizational principles (Gunning, 1996). They became capable of constructing multiple hypotheses, considering several viewpoints, and deciding upon logical alternatives. Evaluations of readings became more elaborate and lent themselves to an evolving set of standards for judging (Gunning, 1996). Based on the growing complexity of reading tasks students faced as they moved through the grades, it is the researcher's opinion that a more intense focus on strengthening reading skills should also occur. In fact, Gunning (1996) said that between ages 11 and 14, much of school learning was conveyed by texts that were longer, more complex, and more abstract.

The researcher strongly believes that as students grow they become more equipped to handle complex tasks encompassing the six traits of critical reading. Instead, the researcher was confronted with reports of declining reading achievement through the middle and high school years. In 1992, the International Reading Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement ranked reading performance of fourth-graders as second in the world (Elley, 1992). Between ages nine and fifteen, American students demonstrated substantially less reading development than did students in most other nations (Allington, 2001). Students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades demonstrated difficulty in constructing thoughtful responses to questions asking them to elaborate or defend interpretations of what they read (Foertsch, 1992). Considering that abstract reading begins from about seventh grade up (Gunning, 1996), the researcher believes students in both eighth and twelfth grades should make progress in thinking about what they read. The researcher also believes the fact that eighth and twelfth grade continued to have difficulty with tasks related to critical reading, (questions about elaboration and defense of interpretation) indicated a lack of important progress in interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation. According to Allington (2002) the fact that elementary students ranked much better than adolescents indicated that reading instruction in both middle and high school could be improved. International comparisons showed elementary schools were doing a good job teaching reading compared to elementary schools worldwide (Allington, 2002). In spite of this, reading instruction in middle and high schools needed improvement (Allington, 2002).

Blintz (1993) believed that nowhere was discontent and controversy more apparent than in secondary education. U.S. research at national and state levels also indicated that students experienced a declining interest and slowing development in reading through both junior and senior high school grades (Farr, Fay, Myers, and Ginsberg, 1987).

Except for oral reading done in “turn taking” format from a common text, reading occupied only about 6% of class time in elementary schools, 3% in junior high schools, and 2% in senior high schools (Goodlad, 1984). Broaddus and Ivey (2000) believed middle school educators recognized students’ continued need to learn about reading, but reading curriculum and instruction as it currently existed may have been ineffective. In middle schools, the mismatch between what students were able to read and what they were expected to read was further complicated by lack of reading support (Gee and Forester, 1988).

The reality was that middle school students were not likely to receive the help needed to ever become proficient readers of difficult texts. Particularly in the content area classrooms, comprehension strategy was rare (Gee and Forester, 1988).

Broaddus and Ivey (2000) challenged middle school administrators to make sound decisions about their reading curriculums. The lack of consistency was apparent in that some schools had a separate reading period, while in others reading was subsumed under the title of Language Arts block period (Broaddus and Ivey, 2000).

In addition to this, Blintz (1997) found that except for remedial reading programs, very little progress was made on extending developing reading curriculums into secondary education. In a survey of the current status of reading in middle, junior, and senior high schools Humphrey (1992) found that prior to the 1940’s most students had a reading period every day from first through eighth grades. Now, most of the older students do not participate in reading classes. If they do, they spend less time because reading has been merged with Language Arts (Humphrey, 1992). From the researcher’s review, the inability to find a place for reading in middle and secondary schools was nothing new.

More than 50 years ago Bond and Bond (1941) stated: “The fact that in secondary school the continued improvement in reading has been left to chance is a dark cloud on the reading horizon. No better results should be expected from this procedure than from leaving a vegetable garden to grow by itself without any outside care after it is once started” (p.53). In 1966 Burnett predicted: “Perhaps the teaching of reading will become accepted as an integral part of the high school curriculum before the elapse of another 25 years” (p.328). Acceptance of reading instruction in middle and secondary schools has been difficult especially within the context of content area subjects. According to McKenna, Robinson, and Romine (1996) for several decades middle and high school content area teachers needed to deal directly with reading problems facing students as they tackled daily textbook assignments and writing tasks. Even when confronted with these difficulties, content area teachers resisted the added responsibility (O’Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).

For some content area teachers dealing with struggling readers entailed referring them to special education programs where reading may not have been the focus of instruction (Broaddus and Ivey, 2000). For many of these students, referral to special education was not a workable solution (Broaddus and Ivey, 2000). Broaddus and Ivey (2000) believed many middle school students lacked experience with print, and there was no reason why regular classroom teachers could not provide it. In spite of this belief, Blintz (1997) found that many middle and secondary teachers believed the job of teaching reading was a “some body else thing”(p.21). In 1966 Burnett predicted that reading would become an integral part of the high school curriculum. Over the years, many educators challenged important assumptions about reading and reading instruction. These assumptions included: (a) Reading instruction is primarily, if not exclusively,

the role of elementary, not middle and secondary school teachers; and (b) Reading is an isolated skill; once it is mastered in the elementary grades, students require no further direct instruction in the upper grade levels (Blintz, 1997). Even with continuous calls for change in relation to middle and high school reading, Blintz (1997) reported that most pleas have gone virtually unanswered. Though it appeared that reading instruction was not always occurring in middle and high school settings, there was an increase in reading as required coursework for teachers. From 1983 to 1994, 43 states plus the District of Columbia initiated mandates for either course or competency requirements in reading. Even with an increase in the number of teachers exposed to content literacy techniques, the likelihood of translation into practice was still quite minimal (Ratekin and Alvermann, 1982). McKenna, Robinson, and Romine (1996) believed reading course requirements were a step in the right direction, but unless they were supplemented to encourage actual implementation, little positive change could be expected. Numerous content area teachers told of their “reading nightmares” in middle and secondary classrooms. Blintz (1997) compiled responses of middle and secondary teachers’ experiences with reading.

Teachers across the middle and high school curriculums spoke about reading issues: My nightmare is that students will have trouble comprehending and I won’t know how to help them, and/or students won’t be motivated to read and I’ll have to make them. (Middle School teacher) My nightmare is reading comprehension. Students don’t comprehend well because many are very behind with reading abilities to begin with, plus a majority of science textbooks are written on a level well above most high school students. (High School teacher) There are so many students in my classes who are not proficient readers. They are so far behind many of the other students that they have basically given up or have quit trying in school. (High School teacher) My nightmare is that I am insecure because as an English teacher, somehow I am expected to know about reading, but at the college level I was only trained in English content.

(High School teacher) In the researcher's opinion, "reading nightmares" will continue to live on in middle and secondary classrooms without major changes in approaches to teaching reading within core content area classes. In spite of powerful and hopeful predictions of reading instruction in secondary schools, more than 30 years later it continues to be "at best an infrequent visitor, and at worst a total stranger across the high school curriculum." (Bintz, 1997 p.15). The researcher believes a solid connection between elementary, middle, and high school reading curriculums must occur if schools are to foster not only proficient readers, but critical readers as well. How will this happen? According to Dole (2000): "Everyone must share in the responsibility, but it seems that the reading field must lead the effort to change the status quo in the U.S. and throughout the global community. Those of us in the reading field owe other people's children the right to high literacy just as we have ensured it for our own children. If we do not take this responsibility, I believe that we will pay dearly within the next century, let alone the next millennium." (p.381)

The Reading-Writing Connection

"Writing helps me understand everything I learn.....better."

5th grade student

December 2003

Reading and writing provide access to literacy (Heller, 1995). Since the turn of the century experts in the field advocated integration of reading and writing (Skeans, 2000). In fact, research showed that reading skills improve when students read and write. Writing skills improve as students write and read (Manning and Manning, 1992). According to Kantrowitz and Hammil (1990) there was a direct correlation between learning to write and learning to read. Children who were encouraged to write early, prior to formal spelling instruction learned to read more quickly (Kantrowitz and Hammil, 1990).

The separation of reading and writing goes back to colonial times (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). Though the reading and writing relationship had been advocated over the years, circumstances prevented its universal acceptance in the classroom. Historically, reading received an enormous amount of attention in isolation from the other language arts. Writing had also been looked at apart from reading (Manning and Manning, 2000). Separation was characterized by emphasis of reading over writing and the delay of writing instruction until the fundamentals of reading had been acquired. Instruction in writing followed reading because it was thought to be more difficult (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). From 1935, the National Council of Teachers of English encouraged an integrated language arts approach. In the 1950s and 1960s a focus on reading and exhibiting correct usage grew out of society's expectations of these competencies leading to social and economic success (Skeans, 2000). The post-sputnik era perpetuated disconnect with the return to a traditional curriculum of language, literature, and composition.

Reading courses became separate from English and teaching of writing as the concept of developmental reading was defined (Skeans, 2000). In 1955, reading specialists even broke away from NCTE to form the International Reading Association (Skeans, 2000). This was the time of the mid-century "great debate." Though debates had occurred before, none had witnessed participation of the American public in conjunction with educators (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). Research in reading dominated studies, while writing was viewed as merely a separate or supplemental activity (Skeans, 2000). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s a product-centered view of reading and writing prevailed. The ultimate reading product was comprehension, which occurred automatically as a result of word recognition, or decoding (Fries, 1962). In the early 1970s, researchers began to reexamine connections between reading and writing. By the mid to late 1970s a shift in the theoretical views of reading and writing began to occur (Heller, 1995).

Questions about similarities between reading and writing processes accompanied the shift (Heller, 1995). Five influential movements fostered connections between reading and writing: the comprehension-as-construction movement, the reader response movement, the process writing movement, the whole-language movement, and the discourse community movement (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). By the 1980s, advances in cognitive psychology supported the theory of constructivism. The reader and writer were viewed as active participants in the making of meaning as they interacted with text (Skeans, 2000). Schema theoretic models of reading described how prior knowledge of the world enabled readers to construct meaning from print (Anderson, 1984). According to schema theory, reading comprehension was an interactive process. The reader related their own background knowledge to the meanings in the text (Heller, 1995). Composition was also viewed as an interactive process. While writing, the ongoing activity was that of constructing meaning (Heller, 1995).

Both comprehending and composing were viewed as text production processes (Skeans, 2000). According to Squire (1983) both readers and writers were involved in similar if not identical thought processes during comprehending and composing. Writers thought about their readers as they composed. At the same time, writers read their own work (Skeans, 2000). Manning and Manning (1992) explained that as writers put their own thoughts on paper Ideas become clearer. As the days and drafts progressed writers also became more critical in the reading of their own work (Manning and Manning, 1992). James Squire's (1983) model of the reading and writing connection was based on the premise that reading and writing required similar thinking skills. According to Birnbaum (1986) reflective thought was important to both reading and writing. Reflective thinkers were more capable of articulating processes they engaged in before, during, and after reading and writing.

Thoughts of readers and writers were directly related to their prior knowledge and experience within a specific topic or genre (Birnbaum, 1986). Manning and Manning (1992) believed that students engaged in an effective writing program, had an insider's view of texts they read. This allowed them to make better evaluative judgments about what they read. As students' writing improved they also became more critical in the reading of their own work (Manning and Manning, 1992). Birnbaum (1986) found that a reciprocal influence of the processes of reading and writing appeared to exist. This explained in part the reasoning behind the better reader and better writer connection (Birnbaum, 1986). As students engage in reading and writing to learn, the processes reinforce one another (Heller, 1995). As explained by Manning and Manning (1992) "The point to keep in mind:

Children's writing reflects their reading" (p.103).

Reading Wars.....and the Pendulum Swings

"A war is on between supporters of phonics and the whole language method of learning to read; caught in the middle are the nation's school children."

(Time, 1997)

Since the 1950's, controversy has surrounded the role of phonics in reading instruction (Flesh, 1995). Heated disagreement occurred about whether a phonics or look-say approach was the best method for teaching students to read (Chall, 1967). Look-say encompassed reading instruction focused on teaching a whole or sight word approach. The look-say method held strong for about 30 years (Carbo, 1996). From 1940 to 1970 students learned to read by accumulation of a sight word base.

Rudolf Flesch's 1955 publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read* was an attack on the prevalent look-say method.

It began the push for schools to move towards adoption of phonics as the sole method of reading instruction (Coles, 1998).

In *Why Johnny Can't Read*, Flesch claimed that phonics was a critical first step in learning to read and write (Kantrowitz and Hammill, 1990). In 1967, Chall found that systematic phonetic instruction was required for children to develop word identification skills and fluency in an efficient manner. Chall (1967) concluded that beginning readers who were systematically taught phonics performed better than those who were not. Further support for Chall's findings emerged as the U.S. Office of Education released the First-Grade Studies. Results showed phonetic instruction was linked to success with decoding and fluency (Stauffer, 1967). In 1970 the pendulum was just beginning a swing towards phonics, and it would remain there for about 30 years. The direction and occurrence of these pendulum swings usually followed a consistent pattern. After a global approach enjoyed a significant stretch of popularity the focus moved to a more analytic approach such as phonics (Carbo, 1995). In the 1980's the whole-language philosophy began to permeate reading communities. After two decades of perceived "skill and drill" California and the rest of the country was more than ready to embrace this holistic approach to reading instruction. Glossy trade books with endearing illustrations and cozy reading corners were synonymous with the look and feel of whole language. The pendulum had moved again, but would not remain at rest for long. In 1993 The National Assessment of Educational Progress released for the first time state-by-state comparisons of reading proficiency. California finished fifth from bottom, even among the Deep South states that always came in last in national surveys (Lemann, 1997).

In addition to this, California's new state reading test administered in 1993 and 1994 showed disastrously low levels of reading proficiency. When scores were released, the results showed 77 percent of fourth-graders reading below grade level (Lemann, 1997).

By 1995, the California Department of Education Task Force (1995) declared a crisis in the state. A majority of children were not able to read at basic levels. Holistic literature based approaches were accused of moving too far from direct systematic phonetic instruction (California Department of Education, 1987).

For the first time in California politics, the elementary curriculum became a political issue (Lemann, 1997). In the fall of 1995, without a single dissenting vote in either house, the legislature passed two bills mandating use of instructional materials that taught reading through phonics and math through “basic computational skills” (Leeman, 1997). The California state university system, which educates teachers set up a new center, headed by a retired senator to ensure graduates would be trained to teach phonics (Leeman, 1997). These changes were not limited to California. Newsweek reported:

“Alarmed by low reading scores, state after state is trying to return to phonics”

(Hancock and Wingert, 1996 p.75).

Legislative bills and education policies in more than a dozen states mandated that phonics be part of the elementary curriculum or specific phonics materials be adopted and (Monaghan, 1997).

According to Vacca (1996) learning to read had become as much a political issue as an educational issue. Teachers and schools became the focus of unprecedented scrutiny as the reading wars played out in the media and legislatures across the country (Vacca, 1996). A bill passed in Ohio required pre-service elementary teachers to pass a course in phonics instruction. In California, the legislature passed a reading bill allocating more than 50 million to train teachers in phonics instruction (Leeman, 1997).

This new California law (California Assembly Bill 10860) even placed restrictions on people who could provide in-service instruction to teachers in the state (Flippo, 1999).

If a researcher or reading specialist had a whole-language philosophy they were not allowed “in.” Only those emphasizing phonemic awareness and decoding skills were allowed to present workshops to California teachers (Flippo, 1999).

According to Leeman (1997) whole language was made to bear a very large part of the blame—essentially all the blame for the problems of public education in California. Jerry Hayward, a veteran California educator who co-directed a policy research organization asked, “What if it wasn’t whole language?” (Leeman, 1997 p.134). Hayward explained that it was troubling to think it could have been the teachers, the textbooks, class size, or even money (Leeman, 1997). Flippo (1997) believed the education crisis existed in California because of socio cultural problems. Schools were overcrowded and a tremendous number of students’ first language was not English. Flippo (1999) also believed that whole language was the “easiest target” to assign blame for the fact that California had tied for last place.

In the midst of heated debate surrounding whole language and phonics issues, publication of Marilyn Adam’s *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* brought the concept of “phonemic awareness” to the forefront (Collins and Gwynne, 1997). Adams, a cognitive psychologist, synthesized countless, uncoordinated reading studies in *Beginning to Read* (Collins and Gwynne, 1997). Adam’s findings were similar to Challs in that a reading curriculum including systematic phonics instruction led to better readers than one without phonics. Curriculums with combined systematic phonics instruction and a meaning emphasis seemed to work best of all (Collins and Gwynne, 1997).

Throughout the 1990's further verification of the importance of phonemic awareness came from studies conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Collins and Gwynne, 1997).

Many advocates insisted that phonics was necessary but not sufficient for reading instruction. Adams and many others even rejected the “deadening ways” phonics was taught in the past (Collins and Gwynne, 1997). Adams went out of her way to praise the whole language movement for introducing literature into classrooms and fostering respect for teachers and students (Collins and Gwynne, 1997).

Was a common ground in sight? In 1998, The National Academy of Sciences asserted “it’s time end the reading wars.” A similar appeal was made in 1998 by the National Reading Council, as they urged “let the wars be over.” (Manzo, 1998). In reference to the Great Debate (Flippo, 1999) questioned whether the war was actually occurring between reading researchers or politicians and their enablers. According to Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester (1998) the Great Debate was “neither great nor a debate.” (p. 637). They went on to explain their view of the controversy as: “an unfortunate straw man that diverts our attention, energy, and resources from the real challenges and concerns elementary teachers face when providing children appropriate, thoughtful, and effective reading and language arts instruction” (p.637).

Flippo (1999) explained that nobody in the field of reading would claim there was only one way to do things, let alone one way to teach reading. The idea of a one-way-only approach did not come from the reading community, it had come from the outside (Flippo, 1999).

Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester (1998) found that teachers generally did not assume an extreme, either-or-approach to phonics and whole language practices. Instead, they provided a balanced, eclectic approach involving both reading skill instruction and immersion in enriched literacy experiences.

Dahl and Scharer's (2000) findings about phonics teaching and learning challenged debates attempting to place phonics and whole language on two opposite ends of the instructional continuum. Results of their study showed that phonics was taught and learned by children in whole language classrooms (Dahl and Scharer, 2000). Based on the findings, Dahl and Scharer (2000) believed discussions about phonics and whole language should move away from an "artificial, simplistic dichotomy" (p. 593) that does not adhere to the reality of practice in whole language classrooms. In addition to these, results from a survey of U.S. elementary classroom teachers lead to the conclusion that the majority did not assume polar positions concerning reading and language arts pedagogy. They offered a multifaceted, balanced instructional diet including phonics, a rich assortment of literature, and other reading/writing activities (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester, 1998).

In regard to common ground, none of it points to any single best way to teach reading (Flippo, 1999). All evidence supports the need of allowing teachers the flexibility to choose methods, approaches, and materials for the particular child and the particular situation (Flippo, 1999). As explained by the American Federation of Teacher's Report: "Teaching reading IS rocket science" (Willows, 2002).

Reading development and instruction is too complex and involves too many variables to simplify and prescribe it for every child in every situation (Flippo, 1999). The International Reading Association (1999) issued a new position statement:

"There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach."

According to Willows (2002) *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (1998) and the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (2000) concluded that effective literacy programs included both balanced and motivating instruction in the following components. Phonemic awareness, systematic, sequential phonics, and fluent automatic reading of text; vocabulary development; text comprehension strategies; spelling and handwriting. As well as written composition strategies. Educators should understand when and how to implement reading components to provide effective literacy instruction (Willows, 2002). According to Berry (1999) teaching reading is a complex and difficult task. Willows (2002) asserted that although most teachers have a general knowledge of the components of effective literacy instruction, many have not grasped concepts well enough to implement them effectively in their classrooms. In a large-scale survey of newly hired teachers in the U.S, more than 80 percent said they were not adequately prepared to teach reading and writing. Even teachers with many years of experience felt inadequate about reading and writing competencies when trying to meet the needs of all students (Willows, 2000). In addition to this, Shelton, Rafferty, and Rose (1990) found that even principals did not always have an adequate understanding of reading instruction. According to Barnard and Hetzel (1976) the key to overall reading improvement began with the principal.

Many principals, however, did not have necessary professional preparation to successfully take on various leadership roles in the school reading curriculum (Laffey and Kelly, 1983). McKewan (1998) placed instructional leaders first on her list for leading a school to reading excellence. Principals, though, were generally hesitant to become highly involved in leadership of the reading curriculum because they felt inadequately trained. Usually their involvement was limited to implementation of one or two strategies they felt confident about (Kurth, 1985).

Principals with training in reading were more likely to take an active leadership role in their school's reading curriculum (Kurth, 1985).

In the researcher's opinion, a ready-made "recipe type" of reading instruction focusing on phonics, whole language, or even a combination of both would never work for every student in every situation. From the review, it was apparent that both principals and teachers with expert knowledge in the field of reading could make the difference. One of the main findings of the first-grade studies was that what mattered most was the teacher, not the method he or she used (Bond and Dykstra, 1967). Rauch and Sanacore (1984) found that the quality of a principal's knowledge about reading instruction was directly linked to quality of their leadership in a school's reading curriculum. Vacca, (1996) believed every time more faith was placed in a set of curriculum materials rather than the teacher, the teachers and children would both lose.

Excellent instruction must be provided by teachers who were adequately prepared and well-versed in knowledge of the teaching of reading (Manzo, 1998). Quality teaching from trained professionals, not untrained volunteers or tutors-was the absolute best defense against reading failure (Manzo, 1998). Principals trained in reading and involved in the curriculum increased the likelihood of success for their students (Ellis, 1986). In addition to this, the researcher believes reading instruction cannot end in third grade.

According to Pikulski (1997) terms like metacognition, comprehension strategies, and study skills, created some debate but not even close to that of terms like phonics and decodable text. Pikulski (1997) believed this concern grew out of evidence that first-grade reading achievement was a very good predictor of later reading success. It also came from the belief that children who were not reading with a degree of independence by third grade were likely to have reading difficulties for the rest of their lives (Pikulski, 1997). In the researcher's opinion, reading entails much more than decoding and fluency.

Though a child should decode “on-grade-level” by the third year of school, there is certainly more to be accomplished in years to come. Allington (2002) even questioned why so much attention was paid to K-4 reading instruction while so little was given to reading instruction in grades five through ten. The researcher believes that K-3 reading instruction is extremely important to establishment of strong decoding and fluency. This is only the beginning, or basic foundation of reading to learn.

In the U.S. Department of Education News Bulletin (1993) Secretary of Education Richard Riley elevated the importance of reading instruction: “America will go from great to second rate if our children cannot read well enough. The jobs of tomorrow demand complex skills and high-level performance. The basics aren’t good enough anymore.” Vacca (1996) agreed that the focus of the reading wars should not be phonics versus whole language, but our children’s ability to read critically or to use reading to solve problems in a highly complex world. Kibby (2000) stated that increasing demands for literacy made it obvious that the present level of reading sophistication would need to be stepped up several notches for most students. Kibby (2000) believed today’s elementary schools were doing an excellent job of teaching most children how to comprehend single texts. Even so, future workplaces will require the full range of multiliteracies-most especially synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of multiple pieces and types of information (Kibby, 2000).

According to Kibby (2000) the burden for developing the multiliteracies will fall not on elementary schools, but directly on middle and high schools. Middle and high schools will no longer be able to take the stand that students be delivered to them ready to learn from reading (Kibby, 2000). The basics are not enough. (Vacca, 1996).

It is time to recognize that phonics versus whole language is a nonsense issue that diverts attention away from real issues that will definitely make a difference in the reading and writing lives of children as they experience the 21st century (Vacca, 1996).

SUMMARY

As students progressed through elementary school the back-and-forth “swing” of the pendulum became their educational experience with reading and writing. In the primary grades students may have felt the effect of a major political debate surrounding the “learning to read” stage. This may have happened in a way that directly affected the type of literacy instruction they received. In 1997 *Time* reported that the nation’s school children were indeed caught in the middle of a “war” between phonics and whole language supporters.

While moving through the intermediate grades (4-6) students experienced the shift from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn whether they were ready or not! Even as some students were still learning to read, they were expected to be fully prepared for the transition. The reading-to-learn stage entailed a much more difficult level of vocabulary and an increasingly complex conceptual load (Gunning, 1996). Even though students experienced most difficulty when faced with the concept-laden material of the reading-to-learn stage (Gunning 1996) it appears that more attention has been given to the K-3 stage of learning to read.

As students progressed and moved into their middle school years, they were expected to read purposefully in all subject areas (Blintz, 1997). Again, what happened to the students who had never successfully made the reading-to-learn transition? What about students who were in need of more scaffolding of strategies for studying, note-taking, or even critical reading? From middle school on, evaluations of reading became more elaborate and reflected an evolving set of standards for judging (Gunning, 1996). It would serve students well at this level to begin to strengthen critical reading skills such as interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation. Students had difficulty elaborating upon and defending interpretations of readings not only in fourth, but in eighth and twelfth grade as well (Foertsch, 1992).

As students finally moved into a high school setting it was necessary that they be able to understand a written text for nearly every class (International Reading Association, 1993). What became of the students who were still not completely able to learn from reading in the various subject areas? In order to succeed they might require intensive modeling of study strategies or even explicit direction for taking notes. Middle and high schools can no longer hold the belief that students should be delivered to them ready to learn from reading (Kibby, 2000).

Whether positive or negative, students have experienced the changes, additions, and modifications to the reading curriculum each year. They have experienced the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn. In middle and high school, students most likely experienced reading and writing tasks in every one of their classes. Students would be able to offer an important perspective about their own experience with reading and writing as they moved through school. It would prove beneficial to allow students to describe their feelings, attitudes, and experiences with literacy. Insight from students at different times in their K-12 educational journey might provide significant information about supporting them in achieving proficiency and possibly even a higher standard of literacy.

CHAPTER II RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this era of accountability, teachers, administrators, and even parents were in a major reform effort that involved finding ways for school systems to improve achievement in reading. As students moved into the intermediate grades (4-6) they were expected to be proficient readers. According to Gunning (1996) from grades 4 through 6 and beyond, students were required to comprehend numerous concepts, many quite abstract in various content areas (Gunning, 1996). As students progressed through the intermediate, middle, and high school grades a major transition occurred between the stages of learning to read and reading to learn (Gunning, 1996). Reading material became longer and more complex. Much greater emphasis was placed on grasping informational text. The vocabulary and conceptual load also increased significantly (Gunning, 1996).

In spite of continuous efforts to improve reading achievement, research did not show American students reading with critical intent and interest (Thompson, 1999). The mandates of No Child Left Behind raised questions about K-12 accountability. Even with expectations and requirements for reading proficiency in the intermediate, middle, and high school grades, it did not appear that older students were always given sufficient support to either achieve proficiency or advance critical reading skills. Students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades demonstrated difficulties in constructing thoughtfully planned responses elaborating upon interpretations of their reading (Foertsch, 1992). Researchers at the Northwest Regional Laboratory identified six traits. These traits or knowledge areas were identified as conventions, comprehension, context, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation (Thompson, 1999).

Each of these traits came directly from research in both assessment and educational practices. They specified the six critical reading skills needed to develop readers who could process knowledge from print, make meaning of it, and apply the meaning in other situations (Thompson, 1999).

It appeared that much of the focus on intensive reading preparation and remediation occurred in primary grades (K-3). While emphasis on early reading instruction was critical, it should not overshadow the importance of learning from reading in the intermediate, middle, and high school years. Reading to learn continued every step of the way as students move towards graduation.

Whenever teachers and administrators reviewed a district's reading program they did not go to the students to ask them how they were experiencing it. Hearing student voices in an age of accountability allowed teachers, administrators, and parents a glimpse of how students viewed reading instruction and how to better support them on their K-12 educational journey. The voice of students was underrepresented in program planning, yet provided information crucial to identifying areas that needed to be considered in improving reading performance through grade twelve. Determining student concerns about learning to read while they were being taught to read offered significant insight about the cohesiveness of the K-12 reading program. Presently, the K-12 education system appeared to be lacking a cohesive approach to reading education that addressed the shift from a learning to read to a reading to learn instructional focus for older students. Student insight about how they experienced the K-12 "journey" offered another perspective about how to better support them in becoming not only proficient readers but also critical readers in the workplace and in life.

Statement of the Problem

The knowledge explosion witnessed in the last half of the century will pale in comparison to expansion of knowledge in the next century (Kibby, 2000). Increasing demands for literacy make it obvious that the present reading sophistication will need to be stepped up several notches to meet the needs of tomorrow's workplace (Kibby, 2000). In *Preventing Reading Difficulties*, The National Research Council asserted that current reading problems grew out of rising demands as opposed to declining levels of absolute literacy (Snow, Burn, and Griffen, 1998). There is serious concern about students' reading proficiency as it relates to their ability to remain competitive in the the world today. Workers will face not only an increase in the amount of literacy tasks but, higher level literacy tasks as well (Dreher, 2000). Instead of becoming more equipped to handle these rigorous tasks, reading achievement typically declines throughout the middle and high school years (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995).

Students are both expected and required to be proficient in reading as they move through the middle and high school grades. They are also expected to read critically in most of their classes. In spite of this, it does not appear that older students are given the necessary support and instruction to either achieve proficiency or advance critical skills. Middle and high schools can no longer assume that students will be delivered to them ready to learn from reading (Kibby, 2000). In the K-12 system, it will be necessary to find innovative ways to meet increasing demands for literacy so that all students can thrive as proficient and even critical readers. Students who have experienced the reading and writing instruction in a district can offer insight valuable to explaining their needs, answering their needs, and most importantly shaping future trends.

Purposes of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was two fold. The initial objective was to gain insight from students about their K-12 reading experience. By engaging in conversations with students as they moved through the K-12 education system the goal was to capture vignettes of their experience in reading at different grade levels. From these “snapshots” taken at different times along their journey of learning to read, a K-12 combined student perspective was offered.

The second objective was to develop a process for documentation of student opinions about K-12 education programs. For this particular case study the focus of the documentation was reading and writing. The process became a framework that could be used by administrators and teachers for documentation of a school district’s program of reading in writing in all subject areas. By listening to the voices of students as they moved through the grades, a K-12 “picture” of how they learned through reading and writing emerged.

Research Design Case

A school system located in a suburb of Western Pennsylvania was the focus of this case study. The district consisted of five elementary schools, one middle school, and a senior high school. Each elementary school housed kindergarten through sixth grade. The middle school was seventh and eighth grade. The senior high school was ninth through twelfth grade.

The school district had a Title I reading program in the elementary schools (K-6). In the middle school, seventh grade had both a regular and reinforced reading class. Advanced readers had an opportunity to be placed in an honors English/reading class. In eighth grade, reading was no longer taught as a separate class.

Description of Case Study

The case study was a documentation of the school district's K-12 program that described the perspectives of students regarding learning to read. This was significant in that most school systems did not have a process in place for documentation of student opinions about their experience with K-12 education programs. For this case, the researcher talked with a group of six to nine students at each of the five elementary schools, the junior high, and the senior high school. Informal conversations with students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade were initiated in order to collect data in each of the respective schools. This case study brought together what students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade were saying about learning through reading and writing in addition to illustrating a process to document their voices.

Procedures

In order to allow students to describe their experiences of learning to read as they progressed through the intermediate, middle, and high school years, the researcher initiated a school district supported documentation of the K-12 reading program. A documenter accompanied the researcher to the focus group conversations at each of the five elementary schools, the middle school, and the senior high school. A methodology called "data through conversations" was employed to ascertain input from seven groups of students. Conversations took place in small focus groups that ranged from six to nine students. At each grade level the focus group conversation was tailored to the developmental needs of the students at that level. For example, the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade conversations were related to the kinds of literacy experiences they had.

Students in each of the focus groups were selected in an unbiased manner by identifying the first five names of those who were proficient and not proficient in reading.

Initial selection of focus groups consisted of an equal number of students identified as proficient and not proficient in reading. A consent form was distributed to the parents of each of these students. As some students were absent on the date of the scheduled conversation, they were not able to participate in the focus group. This eventually resulted in an unequal number of students who were proficient and not proficient in each of the seven focus groups.

Except for the researcher's own class, each focus group met with the researcher and documentor for about 45 minutes. The researcher's group extended to a one hour time frame.

Prior to the focus group conversations in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade, the researcher visited briefly with each focus group. The initial visits were scheduled for the purpose of explaining the study to students and responding to their questions.

In fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade the conversations followed a focus group checklist that was divided into three separate sections. The sections included *Teacher-Assigned Reading* (see Appendix A), *Read and Interact with Text* (see Appendix B), and *Content Areas* (see Appendix C). On the focus group checklist, there were two questions that accompanied each of the sections. Several categories under *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, *Read and Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas* allowed the students to comment about and elaborate upon each question. Both the researcher and documenter followed the focus group checklist throughout the 45 minute conversation. Prior to talking with the students, the researcher prepared the documenter to capture what was said by them at each grade level.

Beginning with *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, students in the focus group engaged in talk about what teachers did prior to reading assignments, and how teachers showed them ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate reading assignments. Categories adhering to the first question about what teachers did before reading assignments included building of

background with discussion or teacher “talk,” building of background with storytelling, building of background with questions, building of background with a teacher preview, building of background with pre-reading activities, vocabulary instruction, and skills instruction.

On the checklist, categories adhering to the second question about how students were taught to use critical reading skills included a think-aloud for construction of meaning from text, a think-aloud for “troubled spots” in the text, a think-aloud for “reading beyond the lines” or interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation of text.

For the second section of the checklist entitled *Read and Interact with Text*, questions included what students did when they had difficulty making meaning of text assignments, and how teachers showed them ways to respond to question and answer assignments. Categories adhering to the first question of what students did when they had difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment included rereading, “skimming over,” requesting help from the teacher, listening to the class discussion, and not reading the text at all.

On the checklist, categories adhering to the second question about how teachers showed students ways to answer questions included teacher reference to the text. Teacher modeling construction of responses using the text, teacher modeling construction of responses using the text and personal knowledge, and teacher modeling construction of responses using writing samples and other criteria.

For the last section of the checklist entitled *Content Areas*, questions included how teachers showed students ways to study and types of writing students participated in for all subject areas. Categories adhering to the first question included teacher modeling of note-taking, teacher modeling of study guides and other materials, and teacher initiated study or discussion groups.

On the checklist, categories adhering to the second question about types of writing included personal or journal responses, question and answer responses, essays, and research reports.

Schedule and Teacher Notification

For this case, the researcher and documenter met with a focus group that consisted of six to nine students at each of the five elementary schools in the district. The researcher and documenter also met with one focus group at the middle school, and one focus group at the high school.

The conversation with students in the seven focus groups occurred over the course of three days and lasted about 45 minutes. The researcher's own focus group extended to a one hour time frame.

Teachers were notified three weeks prior to the initial visit, and one week prior to the focus group conversation. A convenient time and date was arranged with each of the teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school.

Elementary School Conversations- Day 1

Elementary School Conversations (continued) – Day 2

Middle and High School Conversations- Day 2

Conversation Framework

Focus Group Conversations

Purpose

- A) Hearing student voices about K-12 reading
- B) Development of a process that will become a framework for documentation of student opinions about K-12 education programs.

Components

- Focus Group Checklist (consisting of three sections)
- Background Statements
- Framework, Focus Group Questions, and Focus Group Categories
- Individual School Profiles
- Framework Documentation (Focus Group Report)

Focus Group Checklist

In fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade conversations followed the framework of the focus group checklist. The conversations progressed as outlined by the questions and categories of *Teacher Assigned Reading*, *Read and Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas*. *Background Statements* Conversations with students opened with several examples for each of the three categories including *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, *Reading and Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas*. The examples provided a context for students to draw upon during the discussion surrounding their own experiences with reading and writing.

As students responded, they were asked to elaborate upon and clarify what they said. Probing was used during the conversations in order to gain a deeper understanding of student responses.

The following were very brief examples of how some conversations were initiated in order to build background for the focus group talks.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Fifth-grade

“In fifth grade all of you have many different subjects. You have reading, math, spelling, English, science, and social studies. Let’s talk about what is done in class before you start a brand new unit in science or social studies. For example, before we started a unit on Spanish explorers, I looked at the headings and pictures in the book with my students. We read the subtitles together and discussed the captions. We also looked at some of the new words the students had to read and understand in the section. Let’s talk about things that your teacher does with you before beginning a new chapter in social studies or science.”

Eighth and eleventh grade

“In junior high I know that you are given assignments to read for many different classes. You might be assigned to read a chapter in class or and possibly even answer some questions. I want to talk about some of those reading assignment sand discuss what your teacher does before you read. For example, in my class I lead a discussion about survival before reading a story called *Hatchet*. Let’s talk about things that your teacher does before assigning a story or even part of a selection in a textbook.

Read and Interact with Text Fifth-grade

Let’s talk about times when you have to answer questions for a reading assignment given either in or outside of class. How does the teacher show you how answer the questions? For example, I showed my class how to put their own ideas, into answers they had found in the book. We talked about how some answers are found in the book, but there are answers than can be found in other places too. My class also looked at sample writing so they could see what an excellent response looked like. Let’s talk about what your teacher does when you have to answer questions about a reading assignment.

Eighth and eleventh grade

“In high school I know that reading is required for almost every class that you take. I want to talk about what you do if you are reading something (in a class or for a class) and you do not understand the material. Maybe there are some confusing parts that you don’t understand. Maybe there are words you do not understand. Maybe you have to write something about the assignment and you don’t really understand it. For example, when I do not understand something I usually reread it several times. What do you do if you are “stuck” and need to make sense of what you are reading. Let’s talk about that.”

Content Areas

Fifth-grade

“In fifth grade you are learning a lot of new things. One way to find out how you have learned is to take a test. Sometimes you have to take the test at the end of a unit or chapter.

Let’s talk about some of the ways your teacher helps you to study and better understand what you have learned. For example, I showed my students how to take notes on all the important information in the chapter so they could learn to review and study on their own. Let’s talk about some of the things your teacher does to help you learn to study on your own.”

Eighth and eleventh grade

“I know that you are given reading assignments in almost every class. You probably do some writing too. Let’s talk about the different types of writing that you do in your classes. For example, my students wrote a diary entry from the perspective of a famous person. What are some of the different types of writing that you do in your classes? It could be any class including chemistry, American history, world cultures, or even math. Let’s talk about the different types of writing that you do in all of your classes.”

Framework Sections	Focus Group Questions and Categories	Framework Questions
<p>Teacher-Assigned Reading</p> <p>(1)</p>	<p>1) What does the teacher do before a reading assignment in any subject area?</p>	<p>1) How does instruction keep pace with the needs of the transitional “reading to learn” stage?</p>
<p>Categories for Question 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Building of background with discussion or teacher “talk” b) Building of background with storytelling c) Building of background with questions d) Building of background with a teacher preview or survey of the text e) Building of background with pre-reading activities f) Vocabulary Instruction g) Skills Instruction h) Other 	

<p>Teacher-Assigned Reading</p> <p>(1)</p>	<p>2) How does the teacher show the students ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate a text?</p>	<p>1) How are critical reading and writing traits/skills taught (developed and refined) as students move through the intermediate, middle, and high school years?</p> <p>2) How do students perceive/view teacher support in dealing with both text and writing assignments at the intermediate, middle, and high school level?</p>
<p>Categories for Question 2</p>	<p>a) Think-aloud for construction of meaning from text</p> <p>b) Think-aloud for “trouble spots” or difficult parts of the text</p> <p>c) Think-aloud for “reading beyond the lines” or interpreting, synthesizing, and evaluating text</p> <p>d) Other</p>	

**Read and Interact
Text**

(2)

**Categories
for
Question 1**

1) What do students do when they have difficulty making meaning of a text they are assigned to read?

- a) Reread
- b) "Skim over"
- c) Request help from teacher
- d) Listen to class discussion
- e) Not read at all
- f) Other

- 1) How do students perceive/view teacher support in dealing with difficulties of both text and writing assignments at the intermediate, middle, and high school level?
- 2) In what ways are students compensating for their lack of proficiency in reading and writing as they move through grades K-12?

<p>Read and Interact with Text</p> <p>(2)</p>	<p>2) How do teachers show students ways to answer questions about reading assignments?</p>	<p>1) Why do students have difficulty explaining, defending, and elaborating on questions and responses (related to various subject areas)?</p>
<p>Categories for Question 2</p>	<p>2) In what ways are students compensating for their lack of proficiency in reading and writing as they move through grades K-12?</p> <p>a) Teacher refers to the text for answering of questions</p> <p>b) Teacher models construction of responses using the text</p> <p>c) Teacher models construction of responses using text and personal knowledge</p> <p>d) Teacher models construction of responses using writing samples and other criteria (checklists and rubrics)</p> <p>e) Other</p>	

<p>Content Areas</p> <p>(3)</p>	<p>1) How does the teacher show the students ways to study in all subject areas?</p>	<p>1) How does instruction keep pace with the transitional “reading to learn” stage?</p> <p>2) In what ways are students compensating for their lack of proficiency in reading and writing as they move through grades K-12?</p>
<p>Categories for Question 1</p>	<p>a) Teacher modeling of note-taking</p> <p>b) Teacher modeling for completion of study guides or other materials</p> <p>c) Teacher initiates study or discussion groups</p> <p>d) Other</p>	

<p>Content Areas</p> <p>(3)</p>	<p>2) What types of writing do students participate in for all subject areas?</p>	<p>1) Why do students have difficulty explaining, defending, or elaborating on questions and responses (related to various subject areas)?</p> <p>2) How do students perceive/view teacher support in dealing with text and writing assignments at the intermediate, middle, and high school level?</p> <p>3) In what ways are students compensating for their lack of proficiency in reading and writing as they move through grades K-12?</p>
<p>Categories for Question 2</p>	<p>a) Personal or journal responses</p> <p>b) Question and answer responses</p> <p>c) Summaries</p> <p>d) Essays</p> <p>e) Research reports</p> <p>f) Other</p>	

Individual School Profiles

Each of the individual school profiles consisted of an introduction and summary of student voices. The introduction included background information and data about the school in relationship to other buildings in the district. The summary of student voices included the actual words of the students spoken during the elementary, middle, and high school conversations. In addition to the voices of students, details of the overall conversations were also included. The same format of an individual school profile was used for each of the five elementary schools, the middle school, and the high school.

Two of the elementary profiles were followed by a reflective summary of the voices of students and the “voices” of several experts in the field of reading research. The middle and high school profile was also followed by a reflective summary.

Organization of the Case

The case will be organized into 2 major sections in order to report on results of focus group conversations and documentation of a K-12 framework.

- Individual School Profile
- Framework Documentation (Focus Group Report)

Framework Documentation (Focus Group Report)

The story of the students’ K-12 journey of learning to read was told in the focus group report. The framework report explained what happened from the perspective of the students in regard to learning through reading and writing. The report was divided into three sections, and each one coincided with the Focus Group Checklist.

By looking across grades five, eight, and eleven in the district, student voices were summarized to provide a K-12 “picture” of their reading journey.

The voices of the students were also integrated with the “voices” of some of the experts in the field of reading. From the K-12 story told by fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade students, important implications for program evaluation were highlighted. A reflection on the process of the K-12 documentation also followed the Framework Report.

Definition of Terms

K-12 Reading Program-encompasses the reading and writing instruction, assessment, and evaluation that students have experienced in all subject areas as they move through the K-12 education system

Literacy-ability to employ self-evaluative, monitoring, and critical analysis of one’s own reading and writing

Reading-construction of meaning from text that involves more than literal decoding of print on a page

Basic Reader-a reader who is able to decode but not necessarily make meaning from text

Proficient Reader-a reader who is able to decode and make meaning from text on both a literal and inferential level

Advanced Reader-a reader who is able to decode and make meaning from text on a literal, inferential, and critical level

Critical Reading Skills/Traits-knowledge areas that include conventions, comprehension, context, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation

Multiliteracies-ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate multiple forms and types of information

comprehension- a critical skill that involves processes of retaining and making meaning of text

interpretation- a critical skill that involves processes of extending one’s own understanding of text to arrive at a more thorough and complex meaning

synthesis- a critical skill that involves processes of comparing, extending, and combining meaning from multiple texts or sources of information

evaluation- a critical skill that involves processes of making judgments about text

“reading between the lines”- reading of the text beyond a literal level, that entails inferring or making inferences

“reading beyond the lines”- reading of the text beyond a literal level, that entails utilization of critical reading and writing skills including comprehension, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation

prior knowledge- knowledge base that comes from previous experiences building of background- providing background in a variety of ways that allows students to make personal connections with new concepts in a text

modeling- the demonstration of a skill provided by a teacher to support students in their efforts to eventually use them successfully and on their own

think-aloud- a process where teachers verbalize their thoughts in order to support students with construction of meaning from text and use of specific skills

“reading to learn”- the transitional stage from grades 4 to 6 and beyond that requires students to deal with expository material that includes a variety of technical vocabulary and an increased conceptual load

classroom practices- practices used in the classroom to help facilitate and support

classroom procedures- sequencing or the order of use of classroom practices

CHAPTER III INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL PROFILES

In chapter three, students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade told a story about their journey of learning to read. The researcher and documentary heard student's voices, as they participated in a focus group conversation. The framework of the checklist was followed, when talking with students in the focus groups, at each grade level. The first section of the three-part checklist was entitled *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, and encompassed what teachers did prior to reading assignments in all subject areas. *Teacher-Assigned Reading* also focused on how teachers modeled and supported students with tasks of critical reading and writing. *Read and Interact with Text* was the second section of the checklist. This part focused on how students made meaning of difficult text assignments and how teachers showed them ways to answer questions. For the last section, *Content Areas*, the questions on the checklist encompassed how teachers showed students ways study, and types of writing they participated in. Students' voices were presented in individual school profiles, for a fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade "snapshot" of their reading journey. In addition to the middle and high school, this chapter included five elementary profiles. As there were five elementary schools in the district, an individual profile was created for each one. The profile for each school consisted of an introduction, and a summary of students' voices. A brief background was provided for each school in the introductory statement. The summary of students' voices followed the outline of the focus group checklist, so that students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade were able to offer a response to all six of the questions. Two of the elementary school profiles were followed by a reflection of how students' voices were supported, or needed to be supported based on findings of reading research. The middle and high school profiles were also followed with a reflection. The elementary, middle and high school reflection provided a detailed summary of students' voices in regard to their perceptions of learning through reading and writing. This reflection also included a summary of how learning through reading and writing was described by some of the experts in the field. Some of these were cited in the reflection, based on what students did or did not say about classroom practices. The organization of chapter three included the five elementary school profiles, and each was a fifth grade focus group. A profile of middle school students followed, and this was a focus group of eighth graders. The last profile of the reading journey was the high school, a focus group of eleventh grade students.

Along their K-12 journey, these students had much to say. It was the individual school profiles that offered each of the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade students an opportunity to do that.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROFILES

Elementary School Profile A

Fifth grade focus group

Introduction

“If you don’t speak up your voice won’t be heard.” These were the words of a grade five student in the focus group as our conversation came to a close. Without hesitation others echoed her sentiment about the discussion they just had. “I have a lot to say, but I never told anybody. Nobody has ever asked.” Even though we had finished all the focus group questions the students continued to talk about their conversation. “I like having a say in my education and how I am learning.” The students responded to each other’s comments, as the researcher became a mere observer of their interactions. “Yea, now you feel proud that somebody else knows.”

From the beginning of our conversation these students expressed their thoughts and opinions with minimal encouragement. There was hardly a moment of silence within the one hour time frame as the students elaborated on every question and even added some of their own. Students in this fifth-grade focus group attended a K-6 elementary school with a total of 460 students. It is the third largest in a suburban district comprised of five elementary schools, a junior high, and a senior high school. The district is made up of several small communities that are both suburban and rural. Over 400 faculty and staff members, are employed by the district. They serve about 4,250 students each year.

In this building, the fifth grade consists of two classrooms with 30 students in each. Fifth grade is self-contained for all subjects except reading and math. As both fifth grade teachers possess an expertise in the respective subject areas, they are departmental for reading and math teaching, both sections of their “strongest” subject. The Title I program is pull-out for both the primary and intermediate grades.

Students work with the Title I teacher in a separate classroom for a portion of their regular reading class. There is strong parental involvement in the school. The school's Parent and Teacher Association participates in almost every aspect of the educational process though much of their emphasis is on social, rather than academic endeavors.

Focus Group Conversations

The focus group checklist was organized according to the research questions (see Appendix A, B, and C). Conversations followed the format of three sections including *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, *Read and Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas*. The questions and categories adhering to each of the three sections were followed in order as the conversation progressed.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

The first part of the focus group conversation was entitled Teacher-Assigned Reading. There were two questions and several categories adhering to this section on the focus group checklist (see Appendix A). Teacher-Assigned Reading encompassed what teachers did prior to reading assignments in all subject areas. It also included how teachers modeled comprehension during and after reading assignments.

Fifth-graders in this group were also the researcher's students at the time of the conversation. Familiarity and rapport with this focus group should be noted as a possible bias that did not exist with the others.

Before we began, students in the focus group assembled desks into a table so we could face each other while talking. The four girls and two boys gathered around as we started discussing what their teachers do prior to a reading assignment in any class. The students commented on several categories related to each question as we talked.

The first was building background by discussion or "talk" about what was going to be read.

Students expressed that their teachers usually “talked” beforehand and that it helped them to become more interested and want to read the assignment. One student stated:

“An example is before reading *Rip Van Winkle*. The teacher said the story was about a man who slept for 20 years. I wondered did that really happen? How could that happen? Makes you wonder and wondering is good.”

(Focus group, May 2004).

Students said the difference between having a discussion and not having a discussion was that talking helped. If the teacher required that the students read without talking about it, they did not always follow what happened. A student commented:

“It wakes you up. If it’s just an assignment and the teacher says to read it, you really don’t want to read it. The more discussion about it the better. When you really want to read it, you want to understand it too.”

(Focus group, May 2004).

Even more than just discussing beforehand, the students liked when the teacher provided choices about what they could read. A girl in the focus group spoke up:

“Talking is great but book talks are awesome. We could choose a book out of seven different books to read. Also, the teacher told us about each one. It really made me want to read it. I had so many to pick from and could pick the one I thought I would really like.” (Focus group, May 2004).

Students went on to say that book talks were enjoyable because they were able to hear what other people in the (book talk) group thought about the reading too. Talking about every chapter after reading allowed them to be creative and use their own ideas to share the book. They enjoyed being able to describe their thoughts about a book with the same people who were a part of their book talk group. They could say more in this group:

“You feel like you can talk about more in this group than you could say in class. You talk with these people almost every day so it’s not embarrassing to say what you really think. We do not always get to do that.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Talking with their book talk group and teacher also helped students understand the meaning of events in the story. A student explained: “The teacher and your group talk before and after reading the chapters. You talk all along and each day with your group about things you do not understand like the messages in *Walk Two Moons*. We all talked about what we thought they meant.”

Another category of the first question, building background through storytelling, was looked upon by this focus group as connecting them to what they read. One student talked about stories his teacher told before reading in almost all subjects: “I sometimes say, Oh, that happened to me. I like it when I can relate to a story they tell. These stories get your attention. It makes what you are going to learn about real.” (Focus group, 2004)

Telling of stories or relating new information to what the students already knew happened often. These students benefited from the “stories” because of the sense of reality it brought to their experience, when reading. This was especially true for content areas such as social studies and science.

The asking of questions to answer while reading did not happen nearly as often, as teachers asking the students, if they had any questions about the reading. A boy in the focus group spoke up: “Most of the time, the teacher just asks us if we have any questions after we read. We never really ask before. The teacher wants to know if we have any questions.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students said that teachers asked if the class had any questions almost everyday. This was usually done following the reading of a chapter or story. It was not common for students to generate their own questions about the reading either before, during, or after.

Students agreed that there was usually no response from the class when teachers asked for questions due to the ridicule it might bring. Even if they really had a legitimate question, students usually avoided raising their hand because they did not want to appear unknowledgeable about what they just read. There was also concern that classmates would think they were not “following along” or paying attention. The students pointed to an opportunity to ask questions beforehand by constructing them within a group, as an activity they would prefer doing more often. A student explained her views on questioning to us:

“I think if you ask questions you learn more. We did something called, K-W-L. I liked that because each group could think of their own questions. When you ask questions you can learn more and not just what is in the book. K-W-L helps you think that I know this, but I want to know this. Questions are the key to learning.” (Focus group, May 2004)

According to the students, teacher lead preview of pictures, captions, subtitles, and vocabulary was done regularly before a reading assignment. The students could not recall doing this in previous grades and thought it had only started in their fifth grade year. Previewing was beneficial as it provided a background to draw upon when reading and learning new information in the chapter. One student explained: “In social studies before we read about the French and Indian War, the teacher pointed out subtitles and talked about each one. It makes it easier to read because now you have an idea about it. Before that you had no clue,”

(Focus group, May 2004).

Introduction of vocabulary gave students the advantage of not only hearing the words, but becoming familiar with possible meanings. Another student explained:

“Looking at the ‘big words’ before reading in science helps because you will look closely at them and listen to how the teacher says them. If you know the words when you read to yourself you feel like you are actually reading it.

You have more of an idea about what is going on. The words help it all make more sense.”
(Focus group, May 2004).

Direct teaching of specific skills was not looked upon as helpful with the “everyday reading” tasks students engaged in on a regular basis. The students viewed skill lessons as a mere necessity for passing the test given at the end of each unit. One girl offered her view on skill lessons:

“They help only because it might be in the story we read in class. We will probably have to do something with it in class. Also, we know for sure we will have to take a test on it.” (Focus group, May 2004). As the school year progressed students became overly familiar with the reading skills taught prior to class assignments. For the students, skills were not particularly applicable to “real world” reading they were required to do each day. Focus group participants were in agreement that skills were definitely thought of as separate from the reading processes they often employed independently: “Reading skills are not really helpful with everyday reading. We don’t really use it for reading we do on our own. In the lower grades we did. It helps in a different way though. Things like problem/solution and fact/opinion help with the test because you have to know how to do these things to pass it.” (Focus group, May 2004).

Student’s, as pre-reading activities cited brainstorming, K-W-L charts, graphic organizers, and anticipation guides, their class had engaged in before assignments.

Teacher scaffolding was consistent enough to allow for student adoption and independent use. A girl in the focus group told of her experience with K-W-L: “K-W-L helps. After using it with the class I can use it on my own. The teacher shows us how to use it then you can use it in all different subjects for reading and studying.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Modeling of pre-reading activities was significant in that student's learned to apply them in ways that were beneficial for both monitoring and increasing of comprehension.

The student continued telling of her experience with K-W-L: "We did K-W-L in reading and social studies. Then I used it when I studied for my social studies test. I used to just read the chapter. Now it's easier to remember things that are important in the chapter. I can use it to study. It's easy for me and it really helps me study." (Focus group, May 2004) As our attention moved to vocabulary instruction one girl spoke up excitedly: "Just because you know the definition doesn't mean you know how to use it." (Focus group, May 2004).

We continued to talk about introduction of new words prior to reading and all of the students' were eager to provide their input. Another student stated:

"If you just memorize the words you won't really learn them. In our class we get to use them in conversations and listen to other people use them. I use the words almost everyday. I use these words in my life." (Focus group May 2004)

Students in the focus group spoke of "artifact words" and explained that all vocabulary learned both in and out of class was referred to in this way. "Artifact words" were only one part of an overall theme that encompassed both vocabulary acquisition and an independent reading incentive. Vocabulary words were recorded in each student's "Artifact Notebook" over the course of the school year. In addition to word meanings, a thesaurus was utilized to include synonyms and antonyms for each. Instead of memorizing the words for a test, students were required to use them in conversations. A minimum of seven words was applied within the context of a conversational format. Students were to synthesize correct usage of words in order to engage in a cohesive conversation with one or more of their peers. One student explained the process:

“Usually before this year we would just be given words and then look up definitions for them. We were never able to do conversations with the words before this year. We were never able to really use the words. We just wrote definitions. Conversations gave us a chance to find out if we were using the words correctly. Before I would forget what they meant because I never had to use them. Maybe just in a sentence then never again.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The focus group even indicated an increased awareness of words outside of school in their everyday lives. “Personal Artifact Words” encouraged a heightened interest for noticing unfamiliar words. Students told of a personalized section in their “Artifact Notebook” where a record of new meanings accompanied a collection of their own words. One boy talked of his experience with learning new words this year: “Now I notice more words than I ever have before. I see a lot of words in books. I read them on my own. I hear them on television and even when people are talking. I am starting to realize there are so many words that people don’t even know about. There are so many words I never even knew about.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to tell how their knowledge of new words was used to improve both written and verbal communication. One boy explained: “It feels good to use eighth grade vocabulary. These words help you sound smart and successful. Using new words even helps with boring sentences. Words are overused and we will know a synonym or can even look back in our Artifact Notebook to put new words in.” (Focus group, May 2004).

Teacher modeling of comprehension processes became our focus as we moved to the second part of teacher-assigned reading: “When we read, the teacher will usually say what do you think is going on here? Tell the class in your own words.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students in the group commented on several categories adhering to the question of how teachers modeled comprehension or showed them ways to better understand ideas in a story or chapter.

Students explained that when teachers initiated discussion as the class read, their “talk” usually encompassed a reiteration of the story or chapter. A “check” on understanding occurred more often than an explanation or think-aloud. One student complained:

“Teachers ask us to tell them about what we read. We have to give a summary when we stop. Sometimes it’s really hard because you don’t know what is going on. Teachers think you should know. They check to see if you do.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students also reported that teacher think-alouds or explanation of difficult concepts in a story or chapter occurred periodically though not often enough. A boy told the group:

“In Science, sometimes the teacher stops and tells us this is a difficult part. Then they reread it and explain it in a different way. Explaining it in a different way than the book. This helps me to understand new things that are confusing when we read. Sometimes the teacher does that. But not a lot.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl responded: “What really helps is when the teacher uses the big words. When the teacher talks about those the rest becomes clearer.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As soon as we began talking about integration of personal and story ideas a student in the focus group spoke up: “In other grades they taught us to read, but not beyond the lines. Last year we did mostly inferring. The teacher told us to infer but I never really knew what it was.

They never told us the difference between “reading the lines,” “reading between the lines,” and “reading beyond the lines.” Didn’t know about that and that is important to know.” (Focus group May, 2004)

Inferring and making inferences was a term student’s heard repeatedly from teachers over the years. They were aware of its significance but did not have a clear understanding of the meaning or how they actually engaged in the process.

Students may have inferred as they read, but could not explain it. One student said: “I never knew what it mean to infer, not until this year. I heard the teacher say it so many times but I didn’t really know what it meant.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to explain how their fifth grade teacher also gave instruction for “reading beyond the lines.” They described the process as generating of their own thoughts and ideas connected to what they had read. The focus group was articulate in their explanation of how they had learned to “read beyond the lines” of the text this year:

“In class the teacher always shows the difference between personal ideas and story ideas. We use examples of writing to decide on what came from the story and what were the person’s own ideas. We do a chart with the teacher in class. On one side we write story ideas. On the other side we write personal ideas. These are the ideas the person came up with on their own. Then after we read something we can make sure we put both in our writing.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Learning to engage in critical reading and writing was related to the scaffolding done by the teacher when distinguishing between author ideas and personal connections. Students also mentioned creating cohesive connections of their own based on the reading they had done.

Read and Interact with Text

The second part of the focus group conversation was entitled Read/Interact with Text.

There were two questions and several categories adhering to this section on the focus group checklist (see Appendix B) *Read and Interact with Text* encompassed what students did when they had difficulty comprehending reading assignments. It also included how teachers modeled answering of questions during or after reading assignments. Even as our conversation continued, the enthusiasm of the focus group never waned. Each student remained eager to share their thoughts as we began discussing how they responded when confronted with the difficulty of understanding a text.

After hearing all categories related to the question every student agreed that they usually reread the chapter or section that was unclear. If they were still unable to make meaning from the text they would enlist help from the teacher. These students were adamant about wanting to ensure that nothing of importance was missed while reading. They also explained that rereading and asking for help was something they did on their own. It was uncommon for teachers to provide any guidance or encouragement in this area.

When the conversation turned to teacher instruction for question and answer relationships, students became even more vocal. As we talked of ways that instruction could occur one girl spoke up: “I just answer questions. Nobody has ever taught me. I taught myself.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Students were told how to answer questions but were not shown. They explained how the teacher often told them to reread in order to locate an answer. If students inquired further by approaching the teacher they were sometimes even told exactly where the answer was. One boy spoke fervently about this: “The teacher always tells you to go back in the book to find the answer. The main thing is to go back and reread. If you go up and ask, the teacher will usually just tell you. So then you don’t even have to find the answer.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Overall there was no mention of instruction on how to answer questions. Aside from teachers directing students to reread or actually pointing out where answers might be found, nothing was done.

Content Areas

The third part of the focus group conversation was entitled *Content Areas*. There were two questions and several categories adhering to this section of the focus group checklist (see Appendix C) Content Areas encompassed how teachers modeled ways to study in all subject areas. It also included how students were taught to write in different subject areas. The first question focused on teacher scaffolding of procedures for note-taking and studying. Students began describing their view of how learning and assessment worked at each grade level:

“We never even took a test until about third grade. We had study guides in third and fourth grade. We never took notes. The study guide had everything that was on the test.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Study guides were usually completed independently in class. Afterwards, the class reviewed together to ensure correct information for studying. According to the students, taking of notes never occurred until fifth grade. This was the first year teacher scaffolding and eventually independent note taking and studying was required. One girl elaborated:

“This year we learned how to take notes. I have never done notes until this year. The teacher goes through the chapter and talks about what is important and why we should have it in our notes. By the end of the year you can do this by yourself.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In addition to taking notes for the first time, students also mentioned involvement in a science inquiry team. The inquiry team consisted of changeable groups of students. They met for different purposes throughout the school year including the completion of labs, questions and even collaborating on note taking for the chapter. A student explained his experience with inquiry teams: “Inquiry teams help with studying. We do labs and questions together. We can take notes together and find out how we are doing.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Writing in the content areas was the final focus of our conversation. Students were asked to comment on the various types of writing they took part in for each subject. Journals were mentioned, by the student's, as writing that was not graded. In reading, the teacher would allow them to write about their thoughts on events and characters. Personal response journals were remembered only in the primary grades. One student recalled: "We used to have journals. I think it was second or third grade. We could write about whatever we wanted and sometimes, even draw pictures. They were fun. You knew you could just write and not worry about mistakes." (Focus group, May 2004)

For question and answer responses students mentioned Best Q & A. Students collaborated with each other in order to respond to questions related to key ideas in the chapter: "For Best Q & A (that stands for best question and answer) you work with other students who are part of your inquiry team. You put your answer in and their answer in. Everybody has their input and it makes a stronger answer." (Focus group May, 2004)

They continued to explain Best Q & A as a collaborative effort of combining everyone's knowledge on the subject. Presented with several questions to choose from inquiry team members, often picked those best suited to their strengths. A variety of sources were often consulted to create the "best" response for the groups' questions.

A student talked about how her inquiry team wrote for Best Q & A: "We used notes, the book, and even encyclopedias. We wanted to add extra information to go beyond what we learned in the book. You have to do that to have the best response." (Focus group May 2004)

For Best Q&A, students also listened to a written response of the questions chosen by each inquiry team. The class decided on the "best" response based on the group's ability to include accurate information and extend ideas in the text.

Another student continued to detail how Best Q & A worked: “For Best Q & A you can hear other responses to the same question. We all have a different way of answering the questions. They are all right but different.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Essays were required of the students in social studies and science. As they progressed through the unit or chapter the teacher provided sample essays based on concepts learned: “The teacher showed us different essays that students wrote. You can see what a 4, 3, 2, and 1 are like. If you want to be advanced or proficient you need to know.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students evaluated reasons for each score-point. They offered their own suggestions for improvement. For the essay part of the test, students were permitted to use their own notes. Three different essay questions were randomly distributed to the class. A boy in the focus group talked about his experience with essay questions in fifth grade: “We use our notes to help. We never know what the essay will be about but it will always have something to do with the chapter we are learning about. You need style and vocabulary words and also your own ideas. You have to have everything in your answer to get a 4.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When students were asked about writing of research reports, they reported doing these only in library. A different type of research report was required for their library grade each year.

The performance task was mentioned by students, in the focus group as part of the “other” category for types of writing. Students said that they wrote performance tasks through the school year and it should have a place among the categories of writing. The students went on to explain the performance task as a type of writing they did after reading stories or articles in class: “From the beginning of the year the teacher shows us how to do performance tasks. After we read there is a chart that she shows you. You pick out ideas or information from the story. For each one you pick you also have to put in your own ideas.

You need both when you write about it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Writing of performance tasks was modeled for students over the course of the school year. They also told of looking at several samples of performance tasks representing advanced, proficient, basic and below basic responses. A student went on to say: “I never heard of advanced, proficient, basic and below until this year. Never knew there was such a thing. The teacher writes some performance task examples and some are from students. She passed those out to us.

We picked out the author’s ideas and our own ideas. Doing that together and talking about it in class really helped when I wrote. Now I know what I need to do to write a ‘4’ paper.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Students explained that looking at performance task examples allowed them to produce quality work. Another student offered her view on performance tasks to the group: “Performance tasks aren’t easy. My writing improved from the beginning of the year. You have to work at it. They challenge your mind because you can’t just say what happened in the story. You have to put your own ideas in too. (Focus group, May 2004)

When students were informed that our conversation was coming to a close all were disappointed: “Can we do this again? We never have a chance to talk about this. We have to keep in all in.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another student responded to her: “It is great to be able to say what you think about what you do in school. Usually people just say ‘Oh, you’re just a kid. Who cares what you think.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Elementary Profile: A reflective summary

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Hartman (1994) stated that student interest in the text played a powerful role in the web of linkages they constructed. When the teacher engaged the class in “talk” prior to reading, students said it not only ignited enthusiasm but also made it easier to “follow.” Also, when the teacher provided choices for reading instead of simply assigning, students became more engaged. Students said that when they really wanted to read the book, they wanted to understand it too.

Gunning (1996) reported that from grade 4 through 6 and beyond, students were required to comprehend numerous concepts, many quite abstract, in social studies and science. Students in the focus group referred to teacher preview of subtitles, captions, pictures, and vocabulary words before reading as “helpful”. They said teachers frequently engaged in this prior to reading in social studies and science. This introduction provided students with a purpose for reading allowing easier integration of new ideas. Gunning (1996) also found that surveying could function as a kind of blueprint for activation of a reader’s schemata. Students stated that the preview supported them as they attempted to make meaning from a brand new chapter. In addition to this, students also told of teachers introducing unfamiliar vocabulary as part of the preview. They visually identified the word, presented a pronunciation, and even presented a key concept from the chapter associated with the word meaning. Students said that even just observing and hearing the “big words” before reading gave them an advantage. Familiarizing themselves with a meaning related to the content allowed students to make more sense of new material.

Vacca (1996) stated that teachers were able to guide reader-text interactions through scaffolding. The instructional framework allowed for modeling of the learning conversations that occurred between the reader and the text (Vacca, 1996).

When teachers regularly modeled strategies such as K-W-L for students, they were better prepared to incorporate them into the learning and studying they did on their own. Students said that using K-W-L and brainstorming with teachers provided them with ways to improve reading and comprehension. This was especially true when K-W-L was used as a study technique. Students also mentioned brainstorming as aiding in the development of ideas for writing.

Gunning (1996) stated that understanding one's world means knowing more words than ever before. The abundance of new words posed a challenge to students who must acquire a larger vocabulary than any preceding generation to be considered fully literate (Gunning, 1996). When teachers provided students with opportunities to use the words they gained a deeper understanding for the array of meanings. Students in the focus group told of using vocabulary words in simulated "conversations." They said that the process allowed them to find out if they were using the words correctly. It also allowed them to listen to their classmates as they applied word meanings in a variety of contexts. Students even claimed that frequent use of words provided for carry over in their everyday lives.

According to Gunning (1996) generating an interest in words could also have a significant impact on students' vocabulary development. When the teacher challenged students to record "Personal Artifact Words" they became more alert to the importance of words in their daily lives. Many students even took it upon themselves to begin self-teaching of the unfamiliar words they identified.

Read and Interact with text

Problems that may interfere with smooth reading included concepts that were too difficult to grasp and inability to identify important ideas in the text (Vacca, 1996).

When teachers asked students to retell information from a chapter they sometimes had difficulty "following along" and were unable to do so.

When teachers supported students by talking through difficult or unfamiliar areas in the text, it increased their understanding. Students referred several times to think-alouds as explaining in a “different way” than the book. When teachers participated in think-alouds with difficult parts of the text, students benefited from the additional explanation. Though students in the focus group reported that think-alouds did not occur regularly, when it did it helped to make “new things” less confusing.

Content Areas

Vacca (1996) suggested that teachers walk through the process of note-taking by showing their thought processes. He also suggested that they practice writing notes individually and in small peer groups of two or three (Vacca, 1996).

When teachers provided instruction on how to take notes in class, not only did it build students’ confidence to engage in the process, but it also facilitated it. Students in the focus group said that they would not have even taken notes without instruction and encouragement from their teacher. Until fifth grade, they had never been shown or required to take notes for studying.

Students also said that it was beneficial to take notes in their inquiry team. Collaborating with other students provided them with a support group to monitor their progress and understanding of the material. This eventually allowed them to become confident enough to engage in note taking on their own.

Heller (1995) explained that as students moved into the intermediate grades (4-6) there was an increased need to comprehend and compose more complex forms of discourse in the content areas. Students benefited from teacher scaffolding of exemplary writing.

When students looked at advanced, proficient, and basic models it provided a structured format that students could refer to and incorporate into their own writing.

When teachers completed a chart of text and personal ideas with the class, students said it helped them to become clear on what they needed to include. Students also thought that their writing improved as they continued to work towards an advanced piece.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROFILE B

Fifth Grade Focus Group

Introduction

As we walked the school's narrow hallway, the five boys and three girls in this fifth grade focus group were anxious to begin. When we were unable to locate a room for the conversation it was the students themselves who finally lead us to an empty kindergarten classroom. As we settled into the tiny chairs one of the students had already started talking. "Can we say what we really think? I just wanted to know because when we tell teachers the truth they just say, 'quit complaining'-so I thought I should check."

Students in this focus group attended the smallest elementary school in the district. Each grade level had only two classrooms with a total of 277 students in the building. About half of the students walked each day, so it was often referred to as a "neighborhood school." There were two fifth-grade classrooms with 23 students in each. Fifth-grade students "changed" classes throughout the day as flexible grouping was in place for both reading and math. One fifth-grade teacher had a group of "high-average" students for reading or math. The other fifth-grade teacher had a group of "average-low" students for reading or math. The school, based on their performance in class and test scores for both reading and math identified the students.

The teachers were departmentalized for science and social studies, but self-contained for all other subjects. The Title I program in this building used both "pull-out" and inclusion, depending on the needs of the student and recommendation of the classroom teacher.

The Parent and Teacher Association was described as "highly involved" and participatory in school activities.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Students were vocal as we began discussing what teachers do before reading assignments in different subject areas. Upon hearing each category, students responded with their thoughts. The first was building background by engaging the class in discussion or “talk” about the reading. Within minutes, every student in the focus group was communicating the fact that not only did the “talk” inspire interest but it also aided in construction of meaning from the text. One girl was able to articulate the thoughts of the group on benefits of “talk” before reading:

“When the teacher talks about it in a way that makes it more interesting I always understand it better. It helps you to be so much more interested and understand it better than when you just read it out of the book.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another student added to her response:

“If the teacher makes you read it without knowing anything about it, it doesn’t make as much sense. If the teacher talks about it and says something that catches your attention it gives you an idea about what is going on as you read. You want to try harder to figure it out.

(Focus group, May 2004)

Building background through storytelling or sharing of personal experiences was the next category of discussion. Students in this focus group said “stories” of relevancy were shared mostly in reading class. It was not a regular occurrence in social studies, science, or any other subject area. Students thought it should happen more often, especially in the content areas. Just as “talk” about the reading created more interest, students said the “stories” provided a connection to the text making what they learned seem more “real” to them.

One student elaborated:

“The stories teachers tell about things we are going to read make it seem more real.

When I hear a story that is about something that happened in Real life it definitely makes the reading seem more real too.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another student added:

“Yes, but we should do this in more classes. In science and social studies the teacher usually shows a movie. That can get boring.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As we moved to the next category, students offered their input about the questioning done before a reading assignment. The students said that neither the teacher nor the class asked questions prior to reading. Questioning always occurred afterwards. Even when the teacher asked for questions from the class, there was a limited response. Students told of not volunteering for fear of looking “stupid.” A boy explained:

“After we read the teacher asks us if we have questions. Maybe one or two people will ask questions. You feel stupid if you ask, so you don’t. The teacher lets the same people ask.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Teacher preview of chapters and stories happened regularly in all subject areas. Students told of teachers pointing out important parts of the chapter before reading. They also told of teachers saying and showing them “hard words.” Students thought this preview helped them with the reading because they knew what it was going to be about. Seeing and hearing a pronunciation for the “hard words” made students think they had already started learning something new. Also, learning “some things” about the words made the reading seem easier for them. If the teacher required students to read a chapter without introduction of content vocabulary some felt “lost.” When the talk turned to skills instruction students became extremely vocal. They began reciting a list of skills including problem and solution, compare and contrast, fact and opinion, and sequence of events. Students said they were so familiar with the names because the skills were taught repeatedly throughout the week. In addition to instruction

of specific skills, students told of countless workbook pages they were assigned to complete. One boy complained:

“We do the same skills over and over again. We do these skills in reading and the same ones in social studies. I am starting to be annoyed because we’ve done problem and solution like 20 times.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl responded with an additional complaint about skills:

“It’s not just that we do workbook pages. We do about 15 workbook pages for each story. It’s just so many pages. It doesn’t even help.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In addition to the repetitiveness of skills, students were also adamant about the fact that skills seemed disjointed in relation to the assigned reading. They spoke of not being able to realize a connection between learning of skills and application to the reading. One girl spoke up:

“Most of the time it seems like the skills we learn have nothing to do with the story we read or anything else. We will learn things like how to use a library card, then never use it at all.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy responded to her comment:

“I know. We usually don’t use the skills that we learn, or it doesn’t seem like we ever use them.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students then explained how their reading classes progressed throughout the week:

“We always read one story a week. On Monday we read the story. Then Tuesday through Thursday we do workbook pages and skills. We do too many workbook pages during the week. It gets so boring and we already know it. There are so many pages of that skill for just one story. We keep doing these same two skills the whole week through.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When pre-reading activities such as K-W-L, brainstorming, anticipation guide, and graphic organizer were explained to students they said they never heard of them. Even

as examples of classroom usage were presented to students, it was still unfamiliar.

Students in this focus group did not recall ever having participated in any pre-reading activities.

Our conversation eventually turned to vocabulary instruction. Students told of a specific procedure that was followed when they were learning vocabulary words. The teacher displayed the words on an overhead projector for them to copy into a notebook. Students were then assigned to “look up” a definition of each word for homework. A sentence usually accompanied each word as an example. At the end of the week students were given a quiz on all of the words they had defined. One student talked about learning words in this way:

“We do the same thing every week. Most of the words that we write down are not that new to us. Most of them I already know. I don’t even really need to write the definition because basically I know them most of the time.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl responded to the comments:

“Yea, there aren’t a lot of brand new words. If they are new I usually forget them after the quiz.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students also talked of the meanings recorded in their notebooks not matching with the meaning they encountered in the text. This was confusing to them. One boy explained:

“It seems to me that the meanings we write down and the meanings in the book are always different. I don’t understand because it’s never the same. Our own meaning and what the word means in the book are totally different. That is confusing.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to say that their use of the words usually ended after taking the weekly quiz:

“If they are new words I memorize the definition for the quiz. After that I usually forget the word if it’s new.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Our discussion of how teachers modeled comprehension began with the category of teacher lead “talk.” Students said that the teachers sometimes explained “confusing parts” while reading a chapter or story. Though this happened periodically, brief “summaries” given by students were more of a regular occurrence. One girl shared her thoughts with the focus group:

“Usually teachers just repeat what we read so everybody is paying attention. This is for the people who aren’t listening-so they will hear it again. They know people aren’t listening so they repeat it or ask us to give a summary of what we just read.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

It was more common for teachers to ask students to “summarize” rather than engage the class in a think-aloud of “confusing parts.”

As we started discussion surrounding the next category “reading beyond the lines” students said that teachers often told them to “read between the lines.” Some of the students were aware that this meant to infer, but none of them were clear about how it was done. After hearing examples of both, students thought that a recent assignment fit the criteria of having to “reading beyond the lines.” One girl told us about the assignment:

“We do something in the reading workbook where you have to put things from the story together with what you know. This is so difficult. Story and your own life-that is what the teacher calls it-is impossible to figure out.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl responded to her:

“Uh-huh. If you don’t know what it means the teacher will just say, ‘use something from your life’-and that’s it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Both students went on to explain that the teacher expected them to be able to read the directions on the workbook page and “figure it out.” One girl elaborated:

“At the top of the workbook page there are directions that tell you how to do the skill.

The teacher will tell you to read that again. Read the Skill and figure it out. It usually doesn't help. I still don't get it." (Focus group, May 2004)

Another student shared an example of a time when many students in the class struggled with this type of assignment:

"We had to do that just one week ago. Most people did not do well. Story and your own life. Only three people had above a D. The teacher was mad." (Focus group, May 2004)

Read and Interact with Text

After much discussion about vocabulary instruction, our focus shifted to what students do when they have difficulty comprehending a text. Initially, most of the students said that if they encountered a problem area they would usually reread. Some students added that they needed to reread in order to complete the assignments. One boy explained: "I usually reread because there is always a paper (worksheet) that you have to do. If you don't understand it you can't complete the paper." (Focus group May, 2004)

Students also said they sometimes asked the teacher for help if they did not "get it" when they reread. Asking for help usually occurred when there was a written assignment accompanying the reading. As we continued to talk about rereading for understanding one boy spoke up:

"There are a lot of times when I don't reread it. I don't always have to, especially in science. The teacher knows that we don't read it so she will read it again in class with us. The teacher always does this." (Focus group, May 2004)

After one student in the focus group admitted to relying on class discussion for review of reading assignments, others followed. Students said they did this "once in awhile." If the teacher provided a "review" or rereading of the material, students were apt to depend on that rather than themselves. According to students, instruction on how to answer questions never occurred.

Instead, they detailed instances of teachers telling them where to find answers to questions. A boy told of the usual process: “If you ask where the answer is in the book, the teacher will give you a page number. Then, you just have to reread that page to find it. Teachers do this a lot. One teacher even gives us the paragraph where the answer is.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students in this focus group were quick to conclude that they were told where to find answers as opposed to being shown. One boy told of his experience when attempting to write a response to a question for class: “One time I had a question about a question. When I asked about it the teacher told me where the answer could be found in the book. He didn’t answer my question, but showed me where I could find the answer.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl in the focus group responded to his comment: “When you ask about questions teachers make it really easy. They tell you which parts you need to look at to find the answer in the book.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Content Areas

“You always do the same types of writing. You never get to pick. It’s always the same kinds.” (Focus group, May 2004)

This comment from a boy in the focus group initiated talk about the types of writing students participated in during the school year. When personal or journal responses were mentioned, students said they “never wrote those.” Question and answer responses were referred to as “always” being assigned for “almost every class.” The students were assigned to answer questions after reading a story or chapter. The questions either came directly from the text or were written on the board by the teacher. Students reiterated the fact that questions were usually “easy” as teachers often told them where the answers could be found. When they asked, the teacher would point out the page number and sometimes even the exact paragraph. Summaries were done mostly in reading.

One student gave us his definition of a summary based on his experience of writing them in class: “It is telling back what happened. Just a shorter version of the story.

(Focus group, May 2004)

Book reports were also classified as a type of “summary.” The students in this focus group said they were basically the same but “longer.” A girl described the basic guidelines for a report:

“For book reports we have to retell what happened. You just talk about the main events of the book and what the characters did in the story.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As we continued to talk about criteria for the book report, students were asked if they were required to include their own thoughts and opinions. Students said they were not required to include these and thought it was “easier” not to put them in the report. Students also added that they would receive the same grade whether or not personal thoughts and opinions were part of the report. Again, they mentioned that it was “easier” not to include them because their grade would “stay the same either way.” When the category of essay writing was identified as the next focus of conversation, one student immediately complained: “That is the worst of all the writing. It is so boring.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to explain the procedure of essay writing for various classes. They told of requirements for essays in social studies and science that were usually given as essay “test questions.” The essay “test questions” were only allowed to be one paragraph in length. Key terms from the chapter had to be spelled correctly as the writing was also given a score based on mechanics. While in the midst of discussion surrounding essay questions, students suddenly erupted into a chorus of simultaneous voices that sounded like a chant at a sporting event. Students were asked to repeat their “chant” as the words were unclear at first. Without hesitation, the students in the focus group repeated the “chant” enthusiastically. All of them joined together as they tapped their index finger on the table repeatedly in a combined chant:

“This is the answer to the essay question. This-and don’t forget-is the answer to the essay question.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students went on to explain that they engaged in this procedure almost every day for a week leading to the test date. At the beginning of the week the teacher usually told students to locate the page number and paragraph containing the information that would answer their essay “test question.” Following this, students were told to “repeat after me,” as they were instructed to point at the paragraph in the book and recite the “chant.” One boy elaborated on scoring of the essay “test questions:” “If you put down what it said in the book you will get a good grade. It’s all in the book. It’s where the teacher shows you.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl in the focus group responded to his comment about scoring:

“We take our essays to the teacher so he can check them. Each person goes to his desk. People still get a two out of five on it. Even with all the practice people still end up getting a low score.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Despite the efforts of the teacher to provide a procedure that would ensure a “correct” response, students did not perform well on the essay. Another girl spoke up: “It doesn’t even help. Most of us still only get a two out of five points on the essay part.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When research reports were mentioned as the next category of writing, students indicated that they had never heard of them. After a brief explanation, students still maintained that they could not recall writing a research report for any class.

The students identified performance tasks in the “other” category for writing. They called them “open-ended questions” and went on to say that they were done for the PSSA test.

In preparation for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Test (PSSA) students “practiced” by writing responses to different prompts.

According to the students, this occurred about two weeks before the state test. The “practice” consisted of writing in response to prompts, but did not entail any additional instruction. Students did mention introduction and instruction of the PSSA rubric. This also occurred about two weeks before the state test. One girl explained her introduction to the rubric:

“In reading, for about 2 weeks before the PSSA we looked at the rubric. We had a contest to write the rubric in our own words.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When our conversation finally moved to studying, students spoke of something called “skeleton notes.” This was an outline taken from their chapter of study in science.

Students were assigned to use the book to complete the “skeleton” outline. The outline was always completed independently. In science, students also told of copying notes from the board. One girl explained:

“When we take notes in science the teacher usually writes them on the board. All you have to do is copy the notes down and you will get points. They are graded.” (Focus group, May 2004)

One boy shared an example with the focus group when asked if the teacher ever showed the class how to take notes:

“Sometimes we take notes with the teacher. If he is writing the notes up on the board, even if we find something they never write it. We will look it up and try to find the notes on our own. When we say it to the class the teacher writes what they want anyway.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

Most students agreed that they were seldom able to contribute to the class notes, even if the teacher asked for their input.

In social studies the important content was always included on a “review worksheet.” For the test, students were usually assigned to study the worksheet and even the essay “test question” was given to them.

During the week of the test, the teacher instructed the students to “repeat after me” as they pointed at the answer to the essay on a specific page in the book. Students echoed the teacher as they tapped on the book saying “This is the answer to the essay question.” They always knew the essay question and the answer ahead of time. In spite of this, the students reported that they often performed poorly.

Vocabulary and key terms were identified for the students to define. Students were assigned to define them by writing meanings found in the “back of the book.” This was usually done as a homework assignment. Students commented that they usually forgot both the words and the meanings after the test.

“Review games”, were mentioned by the students when asked if they ever participated in study discussion groups. Every student in the focus group spoke of taking part in “review” games on a regular basis. “Review basketball” was always played during the week of a test. Students went on to indicate that most questions used in the “review game” were taken “word for word” from the test. One boy spoke up about the test review:

“When we play review basketball you will get the exact questions. The teacher reads it right off the test. Sometimes the teacher even tells you ‘this is exactly the test question, right from the test-so listen!’” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students said that this procedure was a pattern repeated for almost every chapter covered in class.

Elementary Profile: A reflective summary

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Bomer (1995) stated: “Reading is transaction between reader and text, and all we really know about a text is what we make of it, and that what we make of it depends on what we bring to it.” (p.99)

Students in this focus group indicated that teacher “talk” prior to a reading assignment “catches your attention.” In addition to that, it provided “a better idea about what is going on” while reading. Students said that building of background through storytelling happened often in reading class. They all agreed that it should occur more in content areas such as science and social studies. According to Bomer (1995) with a frame in place to construct reading, readers could more easily interact with and understand the subject matter. Just as storytelling became a “frame” for increasing comprehension in reading class, it could also aid in the more difficult expository text of the content areas.

Thompson (1999) suggested two aspects of informational text that provided intermediate readers with some problems: text organizational features and content-focused vocabulary. He described text-organizational features as all the ways that information is organized on a page (Thompson, 1999). Thompson (1999) described informational text vocabulary as being much different from narrative vocabulary. He explained that narrative vocabulary could be taught in isolation because the context of the story helped to fill the gaps (Thompson, 1999). In contrast, informational text vocabulary needed to be taught conceptually for students to develop “ownership” of new terms (Thompson, 1999). In summation of the importance for introduction and teaching of content-specific vocabulary Thompson stated:

“New subject or content area equals new vocabulary” (p.88) According to the students, when the teacher engaged them in a guided survey of the chapter it helped them to know what was “going on” when they read. Content-specific words were referred to, by the students as “hard words.” In addition to seeing and hearing the words, students indicated that learning about “hard words” beforehand made reading seem “easier.” Some students even reported that when the teacher did not introduce the “hard words” they sometimes felt “lost.”

Thompson (1999) identified three reading activities designed to assess a students level of knowledge with content material. The anticipation guide, the K-W-L chart, and the vocabulary elaboration strategy indicated levels of teacher intervention necessary for pre-reading, during reading, and even post-reading comprehension(Thompson, 1999).

All three of these pre-reading activities were designed to help students construct meaningful comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation of texts (Thompson, 1999). In addition to these, many other pre-reading activities could also be used to assess and build background for both narrative and informational texts. In this focus group, students said that they had no recollection of ever participating in pre-reading activities. Knowing the importance of these activities, some students may be at a disadvantage when interacting with certain texts without them. Difficulty may even be more pronounced with expository text.

Gunning (1996) reported that students experienced most difficulty when faced with concept-laden expository text. Gunning (1996) suggested that reading skills or strategies should be practiced under teacher guidance. Afterwards, student should apply it to whatever they are reading(Gunning, 1996). Ways of applying the new skill to the reading should be discussed.

Students should even have the opportunity to indicate how they used the skill and any problems they may have had with it (Gunning, 1996).

Students in this focus group said that teachers provided instruction of the same reading skills “over and over again.” Students said that not only were skills taught repetitively, but they were usually accompanied by a requirement of several workbook pages. Students also reported not realizing how skills were applicable to their reading. They did not view the skills as helpful with independent reading, but as a necessity to passing the unit test.

According to Nagy (1988) definitions may provide only a superficial level of knowledge.

Even so, Gunning (1996) stated that the most frequent method of teaching new words is to define them. Gunning (1996) also stated:

“Developing vocabulary is not simply a matter of listing ten or twenty words and their definitions on the board each Monday morning and administering a vocabulary quiz every Friday.” (p. 165)

In spite of this, students in the focus group were required to follow a similar procedure each week. Students said that the teacher followed a regular routine for vocabulary instruction. At the beginning of the week, they were assigned to write a definition for each word. By the end of that same week they were given a quiz that required matching of the word to a meaning. According to the students, learning of vocabulary was repetitive. Teachers required them to complete a written definition of words that were already familiar to them.

Students said that they did not learn many “new” words during the year. The “new” words that they did learn were usually forgotten soon after the vocabulary quiz.

Students also spoke of “confusion” when the meaning they encountered in the text did not match the meaning they recorded as a definition. When the teacher did not place the word in a context consistent with the text, students were confused.

According to Gunning (1996) it was important to ensure that both definition and context reflected the way the word was used in the text students were about to read.

Davey (1983) explained modeling of comprehension through think-alouds. He stated that the process helped readers clarify their understanding of reading and how to use strategies (Davey, 1983).

According to Vacca (1996) think alouds were instructional alternatives that extended beyond telling by modeling comprehension. When teachers assigned reading of narrative or informational texts, students said that they sometimes explained “confusing parts.”

The students described this as “teachers explaining it in a different way.” It was more common though for teachers to ask students to repeat or “summarize” what they read. Students thought this was done to ensure that everybody was “paying attention.” People who were not listening would be sure to “hear it again.”

When students completed assignments requiring combining of concepts learned with personal knowledge, they often struggled. When the teacher gave these assignments, students said teachers offered minimal explanation. The explanation usually consisted of “use something from your life.” Teachers often told students that they should be able to “figure it out” by reading the directions. Students said that after reading the directions again they still did not “get it.”

Thompson (1999) stated that through the process of assessing a reading trait in students’ responses, he learned how invaluable it was to model the process of a particular reading behavior. He went on to explain that students wanted to structure their responses effectively, but in order to interpret, they needed to see what interpretation looked like (Thompson, 1999).

Content Areas

Vacca (1996) stated: “A teacher has the right to expect students to study a subject-and a responsibility to show them how to do it.” (page 332)

In this focus group, when the teacher provided notes, students were assigned to copy them. Students said that their input for the notes was not usually included. The teacher also provided “skeleton” or “review worksheets” for studying. Students explained that all of the important content for the test was already included on these. In addition to this, when teacher initiated “review games” students said that most of the game questions were taken directly from the test. As the students participated in the “review game” students admitted paying close attention so they could hear test questions and answers.

Writing

Zinsser (1988), a professional writer and teacher of writing stated:

“We write to find out what we know and want to say. I thought of how often as a writer I had made clear to myself some subject I had previously known nothing about by just putting one sentence after another-by reasoning my way in sequential steps to its meaning.” (pp. viii-ix)

When teachers required writing, students in this focus group said most assignments were retellings of what they had read. Most writing assignments given by teachers including book reports, essays, and question and answer responses required incorporation of personal connections. When teachers gave these writing assignments, students told of either being guided towards or even given the “correct” response. Students said that this was most common with question and answer responses and essay “test questions.”

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROFILE C

Fifth grade Focus Group

Introduction

The six females and three males in this focus group waited anxiously outside of their fifth grade classroom. Their teachers reported that each one of them had been anticipating the focus group conversation since the initial visit.

With an enrollment of 513, these students attended the largest elementary school in the district. Over the past seven years controversy surrounded the school due to implementation of a direct instruction program. When direct instruction was finally phased out during the previous school year, teachers had some difficulty “letting go.”

Though the teachers in the building embraced direct instruction, the community had never been completely supportive.

There were four fifth grade teachers in the building with 25 students in each class. Fifth grade was departmentalized for math, science, social studies, and English. Reading and spelling were self-contained.

The Title I teacher was designated to work with students in grades K-3. In grades 4-6 the School Based Intervention Teacher worked with students who were identified as “at risk.” This included students who were at a basic or below basic as indicated by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Test (PSSA), or other formal and informal assessments.

The Parent and Teacher’s Organization (PTA) was considered active, though there was a stronger emphasis on the social functioning of the school.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Fifth grade students in this focus group said that building of background with discussion or teacher “talk” happened often in all subject areas. One girl told the focus group:

“Whenever we read, the teacher usually talks about it at the beginning of the story or the beginning of each section. Science, social studies, and reading-they always do.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

A boy responded to her comment about teacher-lead discussion before reading:

“It really helps because the teacher explains it before you read and that gives you an idea of what it’s going to be about.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When our conversation moved to building of background with storytelling, the fifth graders immediately started offering comments all at once. They were anxious to share examples. In order to hear everyone’s thoughts, we moved from one end of the table to the other. The following statements were made by each of the students as they had their turn to speak about the stories told in class:

“This does happen a lot. It helps because it makes you more interested in what you read.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

“Yea, without it I would probably be bored.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“When they tell stories before you read it makes a lot more sense.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“Not just that. It makes us more interested to pay attention or even want to read at all.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“When teachers just say ‘Read this chapter’ you get really bored and don’t really follow it.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

“I think it makes it more clear.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“That reminds me of the time our teacher brought in a beaver skin and told a story about it. We were able to touch it and the story she told made me want to read our story in class.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

“I remember that. Those kind of stories make it more real to us.” (Focus group, May 2004)

According to this focus group, asking of questions before reading did not happen often. They said that teachers asked them questions afterwards. A teacher preview or survey of the text did happen often though. These students said that their teachers always previewed chapters in social studies and science. One boy opened his social studies book and proceeded to show us how the preview worked:

“In social studies there is a page with a timeline. Here it is. This timeline, at the beginning of the unit. We read that, go through it, and then locate places on the globe. We talk about the pictures and the different headings like this one.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl added to his comment about the preview:

“It really does help because they explain it before you read and that gives you an idea of what it’s going to be about. Most of these things in social studies I have never even head about. It’s all new.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As we moved to pre-reading activities, students were familiar with them but said they were not used very often. One girl explained:

“Teachers do these things once in awhile to make life more fun for us. If teachers do K-W-L or brainstorming it’s a treat.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In this focus group, talk of skill instruction met with a flood of fervent responses. The students named specific skills including compare and contrast, sequence of events, and fact and opinion.

Each student in the focus group offered their thoughts on the teaching of skills before reading. The following statements, were made by students in the focus group, as they discussed skills instruction in their class:

“Before every reading story, we always do lessons on skills and workbook pages.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

“I know. I think it’s too much. It wastes class time when we learn the skills twice in one week.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“They really overdo it sometimes. We did sequence of events about four times in one week before reading the story on Thursday. I didn’t even know what it had to do with the story.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

“I know what you mean. I don’t think they do help with our reading at all. Mostly they help with the test.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“After we have the lesson on the skill we do too many workbook pages. For each skill we do about two pages. We do this all week.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I really don’t know what these skills or workbook pages have to do with the reading.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Every student in this fifth grade focus group thought that skills instruction was not connected with independent reading. Combined with the requirement of workbook pages, students thought skills instruction was “overdone” and not relevant or applicable to their “everyday” reading. At least they did not realize the connection.

Our conversation about vocabulary instruction began with students in the focus group questioning whether or not they were even learning new words. The students told of writing definitions “just because they were on the quiz.”

They also told of recording definitions and sentences that were easy and already familiar to them. One girl was eager to share her thoughts on learning of vocabulary words:

“I think we are pushed into writing the words down just because they are on the quiz. Even if the words are really easy we still have to write it down just because it’s on there.

Most of the words we already know any ways.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As we continued, students talked about “looking up” words in the back of the book, then writing a meaning and sentence for each. For the content areas, vocabulary was not required. In social studies and science, students were given the option to complete the vocabulary words as an extra credit assignment.

Teacher think-alouds or modeling for construction of meaning was the next focus of our conversation. Instead of modeling comprehension, students explained that teachers usually asked them “what was going on” when they read aloud in class. One boy offered an example of how this occurred:

“When we read together in science class, if it’s a really long paragraph, the teacher stops and says, ‘Ok, tell the class what is going on in your own words.’” (Focus group, May 2004)

There were no examples of teachers showing students how to comprehend text, or even ways to work through difficult parts of the text. Instead, students were responsible for paraphrasing the text in order to demonstrate comprehension.

When we talked about “reading beyond the lines,” or teacher instruction for critical reading and writing, two students who were currently enrolled in the gifted support program spoke up:

“Our GATE projects for the school year are all about the higher level thinking skills. That is what we call them. We do a project for each one.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As examples of critical reading and writing were offered from both the researcher and the students enrolled in GATE, talk continued:

“In reading, we have workbook pages that we have to do after a story. You have to put things from the story with your own opinions. We have so many lessons on skills, but we never have lessons on that.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl responded to her: “I know. We have to do that on the reading unit test too. There is always a writing part at the end of the test. You have to write about one of the stories, but you have to put in things from your life. That is the only place I miss points. I don’t know how to do that.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Read and Interact with Text

The next section of the focus group checklist was entitled *Read and Interact with Text*.

Our conversation shifted to discussion about what students did when they had difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment. Students in this fifth grade focus group were consistent when referring to the impact of rereading. If they failed to understand, these students said they would “usually reread it.” Even after rereading, many told of “asking the teacher if I still don’t get it.”

This focus group communicated the importance of not “missing” information. In spite of this, some students were beginning to realize that teachers would often do work for them, and rereading was not necessary. A boy in the focus group offered his thoughts:

“If it’s something really hard in science and I get confused while reading it, I usually don’t worry much about it. Our science teacher knows it’s hard so if you pay attention to class when the teacher talks, they will talk about it. I don’t really have to worry if I reread, and still don’t get it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The second section of *Read and Interact with Text* lead to discussion of how teachers showed students ways to answer questions about reading assignments. In this focus group, some of the students said that their English teacher provided instruction for answering of questions at the beginning of the school year. Even so, many of the students believed that the amount of time spent on the instruction was not sufficient for independent use.

A girl in the focus group elaborated:

“In English, at the beginning of the year, the teacher showed us how to find answers. She showed us how to look in the book and then add to that answer. That only lasted maybe for about two weeks. Then, we never really talked about it again.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Most of the students recalled the instruction, but said they either forgot how to use it, or lacked the confidence to use it when answering questions independently. A boy offered his opinion about the aborted instruction for answering of questions:

“I guess, if they think that you really know it then they won’t go back to it. I know we did that a lot at the beginning of the year, but I can’t really remember now.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl responded to him:

“You know what I think? The teacher thought at the very beginning of school that they taught us enough about it. So they never went back to it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students explained how answering of questions worked in class now, since the instruction had faded. The students said that they eventually reverted back to finding the answers in the text. A boy told us about one way this was done in class:

“Sometimes questions from the book tell you where the answer is. It will tell you to go to page E-56. You know the answer is in that section. It’s so easy to find the answer.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Without hesitation another boy was anxious to add:

“Sometimes it’s even easier than that. What about when the teacher shows you where the answer is? When I couldn’t find this one answer, I told the teacher. We looked through the book together and she showed me where it was. She showed me the paragraph and the page.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl immediately spoke up: “Yea, I know. It’s not really helping, they find it for us. I think

it's easier for them. It doesn't take as long." (Focus group, May 2004)

Aside from the instruction at the very beginning of the year, students were on their own to answer questions. Most of them relied on page numbers in the book that directed them to an answer, or even the teachers themselves. According to the students, they were not given sufficient time to retain or use the instruction offered on question and answer responses at the beginning of the year. As the students continued talking fervently about how they answered questions, a comment, from one girl called for reflection on the K-12 journey:

"When we get to high school, we won't have someone showing us where the answer is like we do now. We will have to do an excellent job on our own. It gets harder so your answers have to get better. There won't always be someone telling us exactly where the answer is. We'll have to find a better one by ourselves. Won't we?" (Focus group, May 2004)

Content Areas

"The teacher gives us notes and they are already typed. The notes are done for you and that is what's on the test." (Focus group, May 2004)

A student in this focus group told of classroom procedures related to studying and preparing for tests. When students were asked to talk about teacher modeling of note-taking procedures, they all agreed that it never occurred.

Most of the fifth grader were aware that the notes and study guides closely mirrored content and even exact wording on the test.

One boy explained:

"In science we usually copy down notes from the board. They are just worded a little different, but it is almost the test." (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl offered her opinion about note-taking in her classroom:

“They don’t show us how to do the Roman numeral set up that they have on the board or on the study guides.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Teacher-created notes and ready-made study guides were the only materials used in the classroom. They did not participate in study or discussion groups, but they did participate in “review games” on a regular basis. The students viewed the review game as an opportunity to “pay close attention so you will know what is on the test.”

Review games were played in the content areas of social studies and science. There were many different games, and students were familiar with the names and rules for playing them. A boy provided some details:

“In science and social studies we play basketball. Sometimes we play silent ball. We get a point for every question answered correctly.”(Focus group, May 2004)

Another boy talked about questions for the review games:

“The questions come right from the test. You pay close attention so you know what is on the test. Some people try to write down questions from the game so you have the test questions. If you memorize that, it’s exactly the same.” (Focus group, May 2004)

These fifth graders were not very concerned about the test, as they were usually provided with materials for memorization of test content. Some of the students said that they did not even bother to “study” the notes or guides due to the fact that they were overly familiar with the material from hearing it in class.

“In fourth grade we used to do free-writes for homework. It seems like we do not have a chance to pick what we want to write anymore.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Time was limited as we moved to the last section of *Content Areas* as well as the last part on the focus group checklist.

When journal or personal responses were mentioned, students immediately began conversing with each other. The following statements, were made by the fifth graders as we moved to ‘types of writing’ on the focus group checklist:

“In fifth grade, they give us a topic or a prompt and we write about it.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

“I would probably want to read more if I had a chance to pick what I wanted to write. Then I could write about something I like and know a lot about.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“Why do we never have a choice about what we write about?” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students were clear about wanting more opportunities to write without limits. If they were not served with a prompt, students said they were usually engaged in the writing of a summary. Students said they wrote summaries in almost every class. Summary writing was described as “boring.” Book reports were equated with summary writing as students explained that requirements consisted of “naming the characters, setting, and telling about the events of the story.”

Question and answer responses were completed in most subject areas. Though one teacher initiated instruction for answering of questions, a lack of continued scaffolding resulted in limited, if any use by the students. Even in content areas, responses were limited to answers found in the text. Either the book or the teacher referred the students to a correct “answer.”

“We have essay questions on tests. The essay comes from the book. We always know the essay beforehand. It’s written right on the study guide. You know it before the test.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

When the conversation turned to essay writing, one boy gladly offered the above response to the group. The other students chimed in without additional encouragement:

“People come prepared for the essay. You just memorize it, and then write it for the test.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

As the conversation continued, one boy offered some suggestions for essay writing in the classroom:

“Teachers should just give us the topic instead of the exact question. For example, they should just say ‘It’s about the animal kingdom’ instead of giving us the very exact question.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

This boy’s opinion inspired a girl to speak up:

“I know. I mean then we would have to think more. I had 100% on all the essays this year. I only had to memorize a few facts.” (Focus group, May 2004)

While research reports were not done in fifth grade, “PSSA writing” emerged in the “other” category for types of writing. Students told of practicing open-ended questions throughout the year. In order to prepare for the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Test (PSSA), teachers showed students how to find and highlight important ideas in the story. Students practiced putting identified information together with their own opinions. In addition to this, students were presented with a four, three, two, and one score-point sample for writing. The teachers talked extensively about the PSSA rubric, offering an explanation of advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic scores. Even with all of this preparation, the students seemed to view this information in a limited way. It seemed to be looked upon as applicable only when writing for PSSA open-ended responses:

“The only time we have to do an open-ended question like that is for PSSA practice and the PSSA test. That is really the only time.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In this focus group, students also mentioned writing in different modes including narrative, persuasive, and informational.

They said that they did this in English class. Just as they had viewed the PSSA writing, students seemed to view instruction for this writing as preparation for district writing tests. In reference to this writing, one boy said:

“The teacher shows us how to do persuasive and informational writing in English class, so we are prepared for those writing assessments that pop up out of nowhere.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROFILE D

Fifth Grade Focus Group

Introduction

“Being a fifth grader, people, even teachers, don’t want to listen to our opinions. They should though, because we are the only kids who have to learn what they want to teach us.” (Focus group, May, 2004)

One of the four girls in this fifth grade focus group expressed her thoughts after the conversation ended. The four females and three males were articulate when talking about the importance of voicing their opinions about K-12 learning.

With an enrollment of 485, these students attended the second largest elementary school in the district. There were three fifth grade classrooms in the building with about 22 students in each. Teachers were departmentalized for reading, math, and science. Flexible grouping occurred as needed for those three classes.

The Title I reading teacher worked with grades 4-6 in the regular classroom setting.

Students were rarely “pulled out” for instruction in the remedial reading room.

Teachers in the building initiated several workshops and reading-related programs over the course of the school year. The Title I teacher even collaborated with other staff members in the building to present workshops of their own. Parents, teachers, administrators, and the faculty of other school districts were invited to attend.

The Parent and Teacher Association held a strong influence in this school. Parents were both active and supportive, but this was especially true of the social functions and activities planned for each school year.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

“If we don’t talk about it before we read I usually get lost. The discussion clears you up and it helps you to follow what is going on.” (Focus group, May 2004)

All students in this fifth grade focus group agreed that they did not “follow” reading assignments “as well” without discussion. Every student, offered an opinion about how discussion or “teacher” talk prior to an assignment supported them with the reading.

Here are their comments:

“Talking about the reading is as important as the reading because the teacher is filling us in on what we will learn about.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“It really helps because the teacher is telling us ahead of time and we know what to expect.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“This year we do discuss in almost all subjects.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“We read a story about a man who stole something. Before we read it, we talked about our definition of a thief.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“If the teacher doesn’t start a discussion the reading is a surprise and sometimes really tricky to follow.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I like to know what goes on before I start to read.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Building of background with storytelling was another category of *Teacher-Assigned Reading* that fifth grade students benefited from. They said that the storytelling was especially helpful in the content areas of social studies and science. One girl explained:

“This helps so much in social studies and science because it makes new things clear. You are able to understand them better when you finally read about it. I really liked it in those classes.”(Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl expressed her opinion about storytelling prior to content area reading:

“It is so cool to hear a teacher’s experience with the topic you are learning about. When it’s social studies or science it can get boring, so that makes it a lot more interesting to me.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy responded to her:

“I like when they tell you facts about the topic that aren’t even in the book. Then when you read, you can add that to what you are learning about.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students in this focus group thought that storytelling in the content areas offered a significant advantage for understanding of new material. In spite of this, the students said that it did not occur on a regular basis. They also added that they “would like it to be done more often.”

According to this focus group, teachers did not question them prior to reading. The questions were usually asked after the reading was completed. Following the assignment, the teacher regularly asked the class if they had any questions. It was “hard” for them to initiate questions, so these students avoided asking even when they really wanted to ask. One girl shared her thoughts:

“It’s hard to ask, especially if everyone else seems like they know about it. I wait until someone ‘brave’ asks a question. I just hope someone will ask so that I can ask after them.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Some students even commented that it would prove helpful if the teacher would ask some questions that the students might have:

“If the teacher would start out by asking some questions we could have, it would help us to feel better about asking questions on our own.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Teacher initiated previews or surveys happened regularly for this fifth grade focus group. They were used with expository texts in the content areas.

The students mentioned an introduction of vocabulary or “hard words” as a major benefit of the preview. One girl told us:

“I like when we look at the ‘hard words’ because you will know how to read them. If you know the vocabulary words and look at them, then you have an idea about what they mean. It makes it unclear if you don’t know these words.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another student commented on previews:

“Before we start a new chapter we look through everything. The teacher had us look through all the captions and pictures. It helps you know what might be fun about it.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Pre-reading activities were done, but not on a regular basis. Students were aware of the named pre-reading activities and told of teachers using them “once in awhile, but not that much.:

“We did K-W-L once this year. When we did K-W-L we never filled in the learned part. I thought it helped though. I thought it helped me to remember what I was reading for.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl added:

“If we could use them more we would probably know how to do them by ourselves.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

For this focus group, the most important aspect of skills instruction was the fact that it would “show up” on the unit test. Other than that, these fifth graders did not view skills instruction and practice as particularly beneficial to their “everyday” reading.

Some of the students’ comments included:

“This does not help us with the actual reading. It really doesn’t. It is important to us because of the unit test. It is a part of our grade.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I just think it’s way too much. We do the same skills over and over. Then, we do so many worksheets on these skills. They are too easy and boring. It’s just overboard. If the teacher does a lesson, that’s enough.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I mean, I have no idea how some of the workbook pages even have anything to do with what I am reading. I think it’s just to keep us busy.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students indicated that skills instruction seemed to be a “waste of time” because it consisted of an overabundance of lessons and worksheets. Most of these students failed to realize a relevant connection of targeted skills to independent reading tasks. They seemed to view skills as a necessity for “passing the unit test.”

When speaking about vocabulary, students said that instruction usually consisted of definitional methods. These students failed to realize a relevant connection of targeted skills and independent reading tasks. Definitions were written both before and after the reading of assignments. Students thought that learning of word meanings prior to reading was more helpful than waiting until afterwards. Even so, they said that it usually happened after reading in most of their classes.

Learning of words that were already familiar and forgetting new words was mentioned several times in the focus group. One girl stated:

“Most of the time though it seems like the words we learn I already know about. It’s not a lot of new words. (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy added:

“Writing the definition doesn’t always help a lot because you just forget it after the test. I usually forget them after the test if they are words I never heard before.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Instead of teachers showing students how to construct meaning from text, the teachers “quizzed” them on it while reading. A student offered an example of this:

“When we read together in class the teacher stops to ask us questions about what is happening in the story. The teacher doesn’t answer the questions, we answer the questions. I know the teacher does this to see if we are understanding the story.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Though students were aware that their teachers were “checking” for understanding, they did not refer to any clarifying, explaining, or modeling of “troubled spots.”

After explaining “reading beyond the lines” students said that they had to do this “for things in reading” and “for book reports.” One girl elaborated:

“I know that we have to do this, but I don’t think our teacher has ever taught us. For book reports we have to say what the characters will do after the story is over. We have to make that up from what we read.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl offered her thoughts:

“They think we should already know how. I’m sure I could figure it out when I had to-no problem. I have never heard a teacher really explain it. But I can usually do stuff on my own when I have to.

Read and Interact with Text

As our conversation focused on *Read and Interact with Text*, we talked about what students did when they had difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment.

Every student in this focus group said that they always reread when they were having difficulty. They were clear about not wanting “to skip it because then you are missing information.”

In this focus group, instruction for answering of questions consisted of the teacher telling students to “look back in the story and highlight the answer.” Students said that from the beginning of the school year they were taught to answer questions with the use of a highlighter:

“As soon as we started school we were using highlighters for questions. The teacher said to make sure we go back, find the answer, then highlight it. Answers to questions are usually in the story. You just highlight it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

According to the students, they did not receive instruction for the finding of answers other than being told to do so. The “highlight and find” technique occurred from the beginning of the school year, and was used in many different classes. A girl in the focus group offered her opinion:

“After awhile you get used to it. We have to use this in most of our classes, so you have to teach yourself. The more practice you have the easier it is.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Content Areas

“If there are notes they are on the board to copy. If we copy them down in our notebook we get 10 points. Just for copying, we get points. I think it’s because some people don’t even bother to write it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In this focus group, note-taking usually consisted of copying information from the board. The students did indicate that they were sometimes assigned to write the main idea for each subtitle in social studies and science. Even so, many of the students said the teacher “never went over it” either before or after. One boy expressed his concern:

“You pick out the main idea on your own. Nobody does this with you. After, we never went over it so you don’t know if you did it right or not. In ever found out.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In addition to the notes, study guides were used on a regular basis. Two students commented:

“The teacher passes out a study guide worksheet and we fill it out on our own.

You fill in the blanks. You use the book to fill in the right answers.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“The study guide is very close to and sometimes the same as the questions on the test.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Study and discussion groups were not used, but the “review game” was identified as a regular preparatory procedure during the week of a test. The students looked upon the review game as an “easy” way to determine test content. A boy was eager to elaborate:

“It’s an easy way to know what’s on there. The teacher says, ‘This is going to be on the test and make sure you know this.’” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl added:

“We usually play a Jeopardy review game. We do get the exact questions from the test while playing the game, it’s true.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl confirmed her response:

“We always know what will be on the test, exactly, after the game.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Moving to the last part of content areas, our conversation focused on writing. Personal or journal responses were not written by the students in this fifth grade focus group.

According to the students, their writing consisted of mostly “summaries for every class.” The following comments, were made by the students as the discussion progressed:

“We do so many summaries. It seems like we do them for every class.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

“It’s just a shorter version of the story or chapter.” (Focus group, May 2004) “You tell back what you read. I guess it’s good practice. The teacher says it is.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“We do a lot of worksheets on summarizing too.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students in this focus group defined a summary as “the main idea and details of what the reading was about.”

When asked about the necessity of adding thoughts and opinions, students said they “never really had to do that for a summary or any writing” in class. Their summaries were supposed to be retellings or “telling back” of what was read.

Question and answer responses were completed in every subject area. Students used highlighters for identification of answers. When students were assigned to answer questions, they were provided with a copied portion of the textbook so that highlighting was possible.

Answers were “found” and then highlighted in the reading material. Students were provided with instruction for these procedures from the start of the school year.

For these students, essays were done on science and social studies tests. They described essays as “the question at the end of the science or social studies test.”

Occasionally, the students were provided with the essay question prior to the test “in order to prepare.” One girl offered an explanation:

“If a lot of people fail the essay part of the test then the teacher will give us the question for the next one. I think they do that so everybody doesn’t fail it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

If they were not provided with the essay question beforehand, students described the criteria for success as “making sure the answer was in paragraph form and it’s always about something that happened in the chapter. If you remember facts from the chapter you will usually get a good score.” When asked if they were required to put their own ideas and opinions into the essay, students said, “sometimes.” One girl made sure to clarify this statement with an explanation:

“Sometimes it will ask you to put your own ideas or opinions in the essay. It’s hard to do that. Even when you don’t put them in, the teacher doesn’t notice though. You don’t need to put in our own opinions. You will still get a really good grade.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl responded to her:

“Yea, I know. If it’s a really hard topic sometimes I get worried that I don’t know how to put opinions in. I still get a great score and am surprised about it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

For the “other” category in types of writing, these fifth graders mentioned writing for the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Test (PSSA). They said that writing for the PSSA was practiced from the first month of school until the test was taken in March. They used highlighters to help them “pick out” information from the story for inclusion in their open-ended response. The open-ended questions, were scored by the teacher, and other students in the class. Students indicated that this was the only time they “had to put in their own opinions.” If they were not included, the teacher returned the writing for further revision.

Poetry was also mentioned in the “other” category. Student said that they were currently engaged in a poetry unit that began several weeks ago. A girl spoke enthusiastically about the poetry unit:

“In English class we are learn to write all different kinds of poems. We have to do one of each type for our portfolio. It’s so fun cause we get to write about anything we want and nobody tries to change it or give it a score.” (Focus group, May 2004)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROFILE E

Fifth Grade Focus Group

Introduction

Fifth graders in this focus group attended an elementary school with an enrollment of 445 students. There were three fifth grade classrooms with a total of 21 or 22 students in each. The fifth grade was departmentalized for math, social studies, and science. Each of the teachers provided instruction in their area of “expertise.” For reading, English, and spelling the three teachers were self-contained. Flexible grouping occurred as needed in both reading and math.

A school-wide literacy initiative was launched last year, and students in grades K-6 were involved in an effort to record time spent reading each day. Students at each grade level were recognized for their dedication and achievement of highest “reading times” for the month. The school’s Title I teacher used both “pull-out” and inclusion based on individual needs of the students.

In this building, the Parent and Teacher’s Association held a strong influence on almost every aspect of the school. Involvement ranged from parental volunteers in the classroom to support of school activities.

The five males and four females in this group were the last to meet for a focus group conversation. They were also the only group scheduled near the end of the school day. As we walked to the library, one student commented on this, “We have been waiting all day. I thought we’d never have a chance to talk about our classes. I even had time to write some things down so I do not forget what I want to say. I want to make sure I don’t forget.”

Teacher-Assigned Reading

For this fifth grade focus group, building of background with discussion or teacher “talk” usually included an additional focus on new vocabulary words.

The students said that it was routine for their teacher to provide facts about the reading material and to talk about meanings of words:

“Our teachers give us some facts before we read and they will go over new words.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Teachers spent a considerable amount of time offering background information and word meanings in almost every subject area.

Building of background through storytelling happened regularly as well. The students were eager to share examples of how these stories helped them learn:

“The teacher tells stories a lot before we read. She will tell a story about how something we are learning about happened to her.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“Her stories make it more interesting to read because then you have something to compare it with.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I think it makes you think that it actually happened and you’re not just reading about it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Questioning occurred after reading assignments, but students said teachers “sometimes” encouraged this beforehand. Students recalled the times when questioning took place before the reading assignment:

“Sometimes in social studies the teacher gives us questions to think about before we read.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“We did this a couple of times this school year. When we started a new unit in social studies we had to look at questions.

We had to read over them and write an answer before we read. We looked at our answers and what the answers really were.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“Yea, I remember that. She wrote our answers on one side of the board and the real answers on the other side.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Though it did not occur often, students said that thinking about the questions helped when reading something new in the content areas.

In this focus group, the students said that not only did they preview texts before reading, but their teachers offered lessons on how to preview independently. One girl explained:

“The teacher showed us how to go through the captions and read them. She showed us how to go through all the subtitles and use them to help us when we read.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The teacher provided support and instruction, but eventually required the students to engage in an independent preview:

“We know that when we start our new chapter the teacher reminds us to go through all of that. It makes it easier to read and understand when you actually do read it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I think it helps me get a better grade.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When the pre-reading activities were named and explained, the students said that they sounded familiar. Some recalled using K-W-L and the anticipation guide in fourth grade.

The students said that they were not used at all in fifth grade.

In addition to the absence of pre-reading activities, the students also told of not receiving skills instruction. They were able to name specific skills including problem and solution and sequencing of events, but said “we don’t do that now in fifth grade.”

One girl provided more detail:

“We did those a lot in fourth grade. We don’t do that now in fifth grade. I guess we learned enough about them in fourth.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Instead of instruction for specific skills, students said that they were now required to know the answers to the questions at the end of each story. The fifth graders talked about this procedure:

“This year we read stories in the reading book. We have to know the answers that go along with the story. They come after it at the end. There are about four or five after the story in the book.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“We don’t have to write the answer down, we just have to know the answers. We tell the teacher when we are ready to answer the questions.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“When we are ready, we have to tell the teacher all the answers to the questions. Then we have to take a paper quiz and an AR test.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“We have to pass all three. We can’t move on until we get 100% on all of these. If you don’t pass, you have to tell her when you’re ready to try again.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students thought that these procedures were done in place of skills instruction due to the fact that they were “older,” and now in fifth grade.

In addition to this, workbooks were not utilized at all. Students reported not even having them in fifth grade:

“No, we do not do workbook pages this year. We did those in fourth grade all the time, but not this year.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“We didn’t even get a workbook this year. We don’t have one.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“I just realized that we don’t have a reading workbook this year. You are right.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

In this focus group, students learned vocabulary through the use of definitions and sentences. The students were not required to record any of them. One girl explained:

“The teacher always gives us a sentence with the vocabulary word in it.

She does this with each of the words. We have to try to guess the definition. If we are right she gives us the book definition.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy continued the explanation:

“If we are not right she will ask us to guess again. Then she says, close, that’s close, closer’. She will tell us if we are close to being right. We do this until someone gets it. Then the teacher will give us the definition in the book.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The students were not required to write definitions, but said that they had to know them for tests and quizzes.

As our conversation focused on teacher think-alouds for critical skills, students explained that they never read aloud “with the teacher” in any class. One girl told the focus group:

“We just read it on our own. We do not read anything with the class together. It’s always silently or on our own. So we don’t talk about it while we read or after we read.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

A boy commented:

“We read it to ourselves. Nobody ever tells us how to read it. The teacher doesn’t even know if we are really reading it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Talk and detailed explanation of “reading beyond the lines” lead students to detail practice they had done for the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Test (PSSA).

In their classroom, “practice” entailed teacher instruction for combining personal experiences with information from the story. One boy was eager to share:

“When we practiced for the PSSA we had packets. It told us how to use things from our own life in the writing, not just what’s in the story. It was hard. We worked on a chart and used a highlighter to find things in the story.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students said that this was the only time the teacher read with them in class and provided instruction for writing. According to the students, the practice sessions happened every Friday morning in fifth grade. PSSA practice was initiated during the first month of school and continued until the test was given in the spring.

Read and Interact With Text

“If I get lost, I just reread that part. If the teacher tells you about it before, you usually want to read it more, and won’t get lost while reading it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As our conversation moved to the second part of the checklist, students vocalized rereading as the most common way that they made meaning of a difficult text assignment. Students indicated that building of background prior to reading enhanced their interest, and helped them to stay focused. “Skimming over” text material was not done by these students because “they would not know what they needed to know for the test.”

Even though some of the fifth graders said they did not request help from the teacher because it was “embarrassing,” they did request help at home. One boy stated:

“I usually ask someone at home to explain it to me if I don’t get it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl added a comment:

“I don’t want the teacher or anybody in my class to know that I don’t understand, cause it would be embarrassing.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Listening to the class discussion instead of rereading was not an option, since it only occurred beforehand.

In this focus group, students said that teachers did not show them ways to answer questions about reading assignments. The answers to questions in reading class were not even recorded, but verbalized for their teachers. This was done as a check for “understanding.”

In order to “move on” in reading, students were required to recite all answers to questions at the end of each reading story.

For content area writing, “Think It Write It” (TIWI) responses were considered “easy” because each question listed an accompanying page number where the answer could be found. In social studies, students said they were required to answer the “review” questions at the end of each section. Even though it was a homework assignment, many students completed the questions at school. One girl explained her reasoning:

“I do my questions in school because if you ask the teacher se will show you where the answer is found and what to do. Why not get the help because at home I might get stuck and not finish them.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Content Areas

“We have study guides for each test. We have to fill in the blanks. It’s a sentence and a blank. They are pretty easy because the sentences are the same as the ones in our book.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

A boy in the focus group explained the use of study guides in his fifth grade classroom. They were “fill-in-the-blank” and students completed them independently prior to each test. According to the students, note-taking was not done in fifth grade. They were not required to take notes or copy notes from the board. All of the important information was contained on the study guides.

Though study or discussion groups were not used, the students mentioned the “review game” and “study secrets” for the “other” category. For the games, students were encouraged to use their text in order to locate correct answers:

“Probably a day or two before the test we play Jeopardy. The teacher will say ‘Ok, go to page 212. When did the Pilgrims first arrive?’ She will tell us the page and we find it. Then we earn a point if it’s correct.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In this focus group, “study secrets”, were described by the students as, “ways to help us remember things for the test”. Their teachers provided “secrets” so that students could “remember things longer,” and “not get confused.” One girl told us how it worked:

“The teacher gives you secrets on how to memorize. She calls it study secrets. She will tell you little secrets so you know the difference between two things we’ve learned or two words we’ve learned.” (Focus group, May 2004)

For the final question on the checklist, our conversation began with comments about personal or journal writing. Students said, “we never do that, not anymore.” They recalled writing and drawing in response to stories when they were younger. Some students said they currently wrote in journals at home. One boy added:

“We have to do writing that is boring most of the time. Now that we are in fifth grade.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

Question and answer responses were given as homework assignments in social studies and science. In reading, the students were required to “know” answers to questions at the end of each story. They were not required to write the answers, but they were required to verbalize them for teachers in order to “move on.”

For content areas, question and answer assignments were given at the end of each chapter. The questions were called “Think It Write It” and each one listed a page number where the answer was found.

Summaries for reading assignments were written in almost every class. Students said that they were required to summarize independently and collaboratively with a group:

“After we read the story, we pick a group to write with. We have to tell the characters, setting, plot, and resolution in our summary. Then we present it to the class for a final grade.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

When writing the a test essay, students said that their teacher provided support and direction. These students were not allowed to turn in a final essay until they received a 'C' from their teacher. Several students talked about essay writing in their classroom:

“When we write essays for the test the teacher says, ‘Add more, or you are way off the question.’ She might say, ‘Add another vocabulary word.’ We have to use about eight words in our answer.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“When you think you have it right, the teacher will look at your answer. She let’s us know how we are doing. The teacher will put a ‘C’ on it if we are correct.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“She usually goes around about three times to check essay questions and to see if we have it done right. We have to get a ‘C,’ and that means it’s correct to turn it in.”
(Focus group, May 2004)

As students had mentioned earlier when discussing critical reading and writing, PSSA “practice” became another category for types of writing. Students continued to elaborate on specific procedures for writing in this way. PSSA packets offered information about how to perform successfully on open-ended questions. The packets were used every Friday morning in preparation for the test. Though students were reluctant to bring the conversation to a close, the following comments were made as our talk about PSSA preparatory writing ended:

“In class we read all different writing and scored it as 4, 3, 2, or 1. The best is a 4. I really want mine to be a 4.” (Focus group, May 2004)

“Our whole class worked on this together every Friday in the morning. The teacher reads the stories with us and we have to write what we need to get from the story at the top of the paper.

Then as we read, we write things that match it.” (Focus group, May 2004) “We spent so much time on this, we better all get a 4, or our teacher will be really mad.” (Focus group, May 2004)

MIDDLE SCHOOL PROFILE

Middle School Profile F

Eighth Grade Focus Group

Introduction

As soon as we settled into our chairs, one of the boys in this middle school focus group spoke up, “Are we going to get in trouble if our teachers don’t like something we say? I don’t know if it’s a good idea for them to know what I really think.” Upon reassurance of the purpose for the focus group conversation, the students were anxious to begin. While we were discussing the first part of the checklist one girl said, “I feel really important that I was picked for this- to talk about eighth grade.”

The students in this focus group attended a junior high school comprised of seventh and eighth grade. The total population was 720, with 340 of those students in the eighth grade class. There were five males, and four females in this eighth grade focus group. Three of the females were currently enrolled in advanced classes. There was also one male student who was currently taking a remedial reading class as a part of the special education program.

In seventh grade, students were placed in four different reading classes. These included accelerated reading, developmental reading, reinforced reading, and remedial reading. The remedial reading was a part of the special education class. In eighth grade, developmental reading was no longer offered. Placement in reading classes, for seventh and eighth grade were based on teacher recommendation and standardized test scores.

As the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Test (PSSA) was given in eighth grade, students with a basic or below basic score in reading or math were automatically enrolled in a PSSA preparatory class.

The class was scheduled for the fall of their freshman year. The Parent, Teacher, and Student Association (PTSA) was described as “very involved” at the middle school. Even so, the involvement consisted of mostly social activities.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

“This is really what happens- the teacher gives an assignment, nobody reads it, and then you just get the work.” (Focus group, May 2004)

An eighth grade boy in the focus group responded without hesitation when asked what teachers did before reading assignments in all subject areas. Immediately after him another boy spoke up about *Teacher-Assigned Reading*:

“People just kind of skim over it for the work. Teachers never know if you read it or not, so it really doesn’t matter.” (Focus group, May 2004) When the students were asked to elaborate on discussion or teacher “talk” before reading, one girl explained:

“There isn’t any. They just give the assignment with no discussion. We don’t even know what it’s about. I never have any idea.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy quickly added to her comments:

“You find out what it’s about when the teacher talks about it the next day. I never know until then. You don’t really have to know.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Eighth graders went on to explain their own “procedures” for teacher-assigned reading. The pattern of “giving an assignment, nobody reads it, and then you just get the work” was accomplished in a number of ways. Students told of listening to class discussions the next day in order to hear “the entire thing.” They also told of adding to and correcting written work that accompanied reading assignments during class discussion “as you go along.” Some even mentioned copying the work from the “same couple of people in the class.”

According to the eighth graders in this focus group, the “procedures” were especially true for regular and remedial classes. One boy who was currently enrolled in a remedial reading class told of his experience:

“I’m in slow reading class. In my class, the teacher will tell you the entire thing the next day. They will tell you the entire chapter. You don’t really have to read anything. They know you don’t read it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another boy went on to explain the usual “procedure” for completing written work that was given with a reading assignment. Other students in the focus group smiled as he told of doing the work in class:

“So many people will just add to or correct questions, or whatever we had to do while the teacher goes over them in class. I don’t think they notice or maybe they just don’t care. You just add and correct as you go along. You write it in as the teacher talks about the reading assignment in class before turning it in.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Though reluctant at first, another boy went on to explain an “easy way” of getting the work done without even needing to hear the class discussion. He told the focus group:

“People copy answers down from the same couple of people in the class. This happens a lot. If you aren’t in the class for some reason, you just have to make sure it’s not in the same exact wording. If you change it your ok.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As we moved to background building with storytelling, eighth graders confirmed that teachers often told stories, but they were not relatable in terms of their learning. They were definitely not connected to reading assignments given in class. One boy was quick to explain:

“They tell personal stories about themselves. Nothing we are learning about. They don’t really relate to us at all. So, when they talk too much like that you just tune it out.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Students said that teachers never asked them questions about the assignments beforehand because discussion only occurred afterwards. If there were questions, they were part of the written work that accompanied the reading. One girl commented:

“We always have to answer questions about the assignments and turn them in. If teachers ask questions it is usually for the class discussion. Nobody answers them anyways, so the teacher answers them for us.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When asked about a teacher-lead preview or survey of the text in any subject area, students clearly communicated that it never happened. One boy stated:

“What? Are you kidding? That never happens. We never do that.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The same was true for pre-reading activities. When the activities were named and explained, students in this focus group were not familiar with any of them. One boy responded:

“K-W- what? I had no idea what any of those were. We never do anything like that.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

In eighth grade vocabulary instruction consisted of writing definitions and sentences for specific words. Though students told of following the “definition-sentence” routine on a regular basis, it was not limited to English class. Students told of following the “definition-sentence” routine in several different classes, including science and math.

One girl explained how most teachers incorporated the learning of new words into eighth grade classes: “They usually give us a packet of vocabulary words. We have to know the definitions for the test. We usually have to write a sentence for each one too. We do this on our own for homework.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Even though definitions and sentences were done in many different classes, the “instruction” seemed to end there. One girl explained: “After the test we never talk about the words again.

You just forget them right away because you don't need to know them for anything else."

(Focus group, May 2004)

When our conversation focused on ways that teachers showed students how to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate texts, the eighth graders had two separate "stories" to tell.

One dealt with the instruction provided in the advanced classes, and the other about instruction in regular or remedial classes.

The three girls who were enrolled in advanced classes told of teachers who showed them how to read and eventually produce a quality paragraph about it. One of them went on to say:

"What we have to read isn't easy, but our teacher gives us really helpful ways for knowing what it's all about. They help us to find out what the author is trying to say."

(Focus group, May 2004)

In the focus group, the regular and remedial students had a completely different "story" to tell about support with text material.

A boy in a regular English class responded: "We never even read anything in class together so how could they show us how to understand it?" (Focus group, May 2004)

The boy enrolled in remedial reading added to his response: "They don't show us how, they just tell us everything about it. Then we don't even have to know how."

(Focus group, May 2004)

Teacher think-alouds for helping them to work through "troubled spots" or "difficult parts" of the text never occurred in eighth grade. According to the students, this was true for advanced, regular, and remedial classes. Since most reading assignments were done outside of class, use of think-alouds as "fix-up" strategies were practically nonexistent in eighth grade. If they encountered confusing parts of the text, students said teachers would definitely explain.

Even so, most students admitted that they would avoid asking.

One boy elaborated: “People don’t really ask. Even if they bothered to read it, I don’t think anybody would ask.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As our conversation focused on “reading beyond the lines” or teachers showing eighth grade students how to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate texts, the advanced students once again became extremely vocal: “In accelerated English class, our teacher is always saying that we have to read to interpret. We are never allowed to give just a summary.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl in the same class responded to her comment: “At the beginning of the school year they show us how do interpretation. Sometimes they read with us and tell us how to answer the question in that way. Summaries are never allowed in accelerated classes.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

As these three girls talked easily about teachers providing instruction for use of critical skills, the others did not: “In my English class, I have a regular English class, they do not show you how to write anything. We are on our own to try to figure out our opinions from the reading. We don’t really have to do that kind of stuff though. Sometimes for written tests, but that’s all.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Without a moment of silence one advanced student spoke up: “Oh, we do that type of stuff everyday. Every time we read something and had to write a paragraph, they showed us how to do it and what was expected. Our teachers have certain formats and guidelines we have to go by for homework or projects we do in class.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The two “stories” of instruction for critical reading and writing ended with a response from one boy who was currently taking a remedial reading class: “That’s only for the smart people.

We don’t ever have to worry about anything like that.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Read and Interact with Text

“Reread? If you don’t have to don’t any work to turn in then you don’t have to read it at all.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

These were the words of an eighth grade boy in response to the first part of *Read and Interact with Text*. The students in the focus group were asked to comment on what they did when they had difficulty making meaning of an assignment. Most of the eighth graders referred again to not reading many of the assignments they were given in class. Except for the students enrolled in advanced classes, the others told of minimal expectations for the reading and completion of assignments. One girl explained how her expectations played a major role in the need for rereading of an assignment: “We have to reread, especially the hard stuff. They always give us essay-type questions about the reading. They do that even more when they think it’s something we won’t read.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Expectations clearly determined if these eighth grade students even realized a need to reread when they encountered difficult text. Students in advanced classes were expected to read and prepare for “essay-type questions,” so an understanding of the reading assignment became a priority for them. In contrast, students in regular or remedial classes were not very concerned about reading, let alone rereading of difficult text material. According to these students, there appeared to be minimal expectations for completion of reading assignments. They were decidedly aware that their teachers were not expecting much in regard to completion of assignments. One eighth grade boy in remedial reading told of his reliance on class discussion for making meaning of difficult text assignments: “If you look like you are paying attention they will tell you everything. The teacher will tell you every part of the story. You have to look interested and you can’t fall asleep. That’s how I find out everything I need to know, even the hard parts.” (Focus group, May 2004)

For the second section entitled *Read and Interact with Text*, the focus of the conversation was teacher modeling of question and answer responses. Students commented on how teachers showed them ways to answer questions about reading assignments. Again, students in eighth grade revealed a distinctive difference between the instruction for question and answer responses in advanced and regular classes. One girl in a regular English class shared her experience:

“We are told to answer questions. It’s usually for homework. They don’t show you or help you. I don’t even know if they check it. As long as you turn it in you get points.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

As we reviewed each category on the checklist, one of the girls spoke up about teachers showing the class ways to construct responses using the text and personal knowledge: “In accelerated classes you have to do this. They will show you and go over it a lot from the beginning of the school year, so you know about what to expect.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl quickly added: “We did a multi-paragraph essay to answer questions. The teacher showed us what we needed to do. We did that for about two weeks before using it.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

In the focus group, the six who were enrolled in regular classes reported no instruction or support for question and answer assignments. Use of writing samples and other criteria were also not a part of classroom instruction. One girl stated: “The teacher doesn’t say that they answer has to be a certain way.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another boy was quick to add: “It doesn’t even matter if the answer is correct, as long as it comes from the book. Just write stuff in from the book to make it look like you did the work.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

It was clear that students in this eighth grade focus group viewed textbook information as the valued “answer” to most questions.

Except for students enrolled in advanced classes, answers to questions consisted of no more than literal information taken directly from the text. These were the expected “answers” and students had no problem providing them.

Content Areas

“The teacher puts notes on the overhead and you copy it from there. They don’t show you, you just copy it down.” (Focus group, May 2004)

These were the words of an eighth grade student responding to the question of how teachers showed them ways to study. The students in this focus group said that teachers never showed them how to take notes in class. In contrast to modeling of note-taking procedures, students were only required to transcribe what the teachers had written. The notes were done for them. It was unnecessary for students to learn how to take notes or to engage in independent practice. A girl in the focus group added to the response: “Showing you how, that never happened. You copy it down so you know what will be on the test.” (Focus group, May 2004)

For teacher modeling for completion of study guides or other study materials, students told of review sheets that encompassed “all you needed to know” for the test. One girl explained review sheets that were used in her Civics class: “We have a review sheet at the end of each chapter. It is already completed for you. If you know what is on there you will usually pass the multiple-choice part for the test. It has all you need to know.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The review sheet and teacher-created notes were the only study materials these eighth grade students used. Review sheets were not used in advanced classes. Students explained that review sheets were “easier” because they were closer to the exact content of the text.

According to the students, the wording of the review sheet was a closer match to the wording of the actual test questions. Study and discussion groups never happened in eighth grade, but students told of regular participation in “review games.”

One girl explained: “We play review games before a test. We play Jeopardy and we also play golf. You have to put your hand up first and if you get it right, you will get a point.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

A boy in the focus group elaborated on her explanation: “Most of the time, the teacher gets the test and looks right at the test questions. We know they come from the test because they take it out.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Without hesitation, another girl quickly added: “Yea, the notes aren’t that important. If you pay attention during the review game you could hear the whole test. Sometimes people will write down the questions the teacher says for the review game.”

The three girls who were currently taking advanced classes said that they did not play “review games” on a regular basis. Even though they played, the girls said it happened less often because “they didn’t always have time” in the advanced classes.

The second part of content areas focused on types of writing students participated in for all subject areas. The conversation began with talk about personal or journal responses. One girl spoke up: “We don’t do journals. I don’t think I have written a journal since third grade.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

A boy in the focus group was quick to add: “It’s not like we write about what we want. We get assignments to write. It’s not a choice.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl enrolled in advanced classes spoke up in disagreement: “No, sometimes we have a chance to pick. Usually when we do projects we have to come up with topics to write about. As long as they have something to do with the novel we are reading.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Writing of question and answer responses was done in almost every class. The eighth graders said that they were usually given as a homework assignment. One boy explained procedures for question and answer responses in his science class:

“The teacher writes questions on the board or we answer the questions in the book.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Again, advanced students told of different instruction, support, and expectations for their question and answer assignments. They were offered specific examples and even criteria for completion of question and answer homework. Summaries were only done in regular English classes. It was rare in any other eighth grade class. The advanced students said that they were “not allowed” to write summaries.

When our conversation turned to essays, it was only the advanced students who told of writing them. One girl spoke up: “We always do essays in English class. We do them almost every week. We have been working on multi-paragraph essays for answering questions.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

The three girls who were advanced said that their teachers spent a significant amount of time in class showing them how to write. One of them said: “They give us samples and showed us each step of the writing.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Even as the advanced students wrote essays often, the others told of never having to write them: “The teachers cross essays out on tests. On every test we take we never have to do them. They are either crossed out or they tell you that you don’t do them for the test.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Research reports were not done for any class. Even so, PSSA writing emerged in the “other” category on the checklist. These eighth graders were very familiar with writing they had to do in preparation for the PSSA test. One girl explained: “Teachers give us booklets with practice tests and writing for PSSA. We write about the stories. The teacher will tell you what you had for a score and you try to improve on the next one.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to explain that “PSSA writing” occurred for about two to three weeks before the test: “We don’t have to do this the whole year, but we do have to everyday for about two or three weeks until we take the test. The teachers make a big deal about how we really have to get ready.” (Focus group, May 2004)

In that two to three week time period, most of the eighth graders said that they learned specific strategies to help with their writing. They were viewed by the students as specific to writing on the PSSA test and seemed to lack transfer. One girl’s comments reflected this: “They give you a piece of paper each day and you go over how to get a high score on the writing. We only use it for the PSSA test and hope to get a higher score. After that we don’t really worry about it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Middle School Profile: A reflective summary

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Eighth graders were candid about creation of their own “procedures” for Teacher-Assigned Reading. With the exception of the three students enrolled in advanced classes, they explained how it was possible to succeed in their classes with minimal, if any, reading of text assignments. A pattern of “the teacher gives an assignment, nobody reads it, and then you just get the work” seemed to prevail.

Class discussion regularly followed the assignments given by teachers in almost all subject areas, and students were able to ascertain most, if not all, of the necessary information. Some students were even blunt about teacher awareness and indirect support of the “procedures.” Many of the eighth graders believed that teachers knew that students neglected to read the assignment, and thought it was necessary to provide a summary for them. This was evidenced by the words of an eighth grade boy, “I am in the slow reading class. In my class, the teacher will tell you the entire thing the next day.

They will tell you the entire chapter. You don't really have to read anything. They know you don't read it." According to Broaddus and Ivey (2000), students in middle school were given limited ownership of texts they were required to read and class discussions about those assignments. In the researcher's opinion, middle school students were not always invested in assignments or class discussions as they place little, if any, value on the material. If student's read at all, it was only to fulfill the minimal requirements of classroom tasks.

Blintz (1993) found that many of the students who were perceived as reluctant readers by their teachers actually perceived themselves as good readers, and expected teacher-assigned reading to be boring. Without opportunities to realize personal connections with text, the researcher believed that most middle school students would not attempt to read in a meaningful way. Blintz (1993) also found that even passive readers dealt with texts in more complex ways when readings were based on their own interests and questions. Background building encompassed middle school teachers in the role of finding ways to connect classroom texts with students' personal interests, and helping them to find ways to connect on their own.

When speaking of how teachers showed them ways to read and write critically in the content areas, these eighth grade students were quite aware of differences in expectations and instruction.

Higher-level thinking and assignments that accompanied reading and writing in that way, were reserved for the advanced students. These eighth graders perceived the regular classes they were enrolled in as exempt from "anything like that." One boy explained, "That's only for the smart people. We don't ever have to worry about anything like that."

Smith and Feathers (1983) asserted that instructional assignments needed to encompass more than just acquisition of information. Based on the voices of these middle school students, in order to do that they needed the exposure and expectation of instruction that encouraged all of them, not just the advanced students, to engage in meaningful and critical learning from texts.

Read and Interact with Text

Middle school students viewed most assignments, including question and answer assignments as no more than the literal information taken directly from the text. Except for advanced students, most told of a lack of concern as to whether or not their “answers” were correct “as long as it comes from the book.”

With task requirements that were limited to identification of literal information, these middle school students were neither expected, nor shown how to answer questions in a critical way.

Peterson and Johnson (1987) asserted that teachers needed to help students become aware of likely sources of information when responding to questions. In the researcher’s opinion, the instruction and expectations for question and answer assignments communicated that there was only one “likely source” of information, and that was the location of literal “answers” in the text.

Content Areas

Another reinforcement for not “doing something” with text content stemmed from distribution of teacher-created study materials. Eighth graders were not required, or taught how to deal with text concepts on a higher-cognitive level. With ready-made notes, study guides, and even “review games,” students were told what was important instead of having the opportunity to learn how to determine that on their own.

A content area study conducted by Smith and Feathers (1983) reported that a student commented about how listening and taking notes during class discussions was sufficient for learning of important information. More than 20 years later, students were not even required to take notes on their own. This was not attributed to any sort of “technological advancement,” as one might think, rather the fact that most teachers provided ready-made notes or study guides for them.

With the “review game” occurring in many middle school classes as well, some students even neglected to utilize those study materials.

In regard to strategic learning and studying, Brown and Palincsar (1982) asserted that explicit instruction helped students to know about, utilize, and monitor learning strategies. Based on eighth grade comments about studying in the content areas, before that can happen teachers needed to refrain from “doing something” with the texts for them, and provide instruction for them to learn how to study on their own.

HIGH SCHOOL PROFILE

High School Profile G

Eleventh Grade Focus Group

Introduction

When our conversation ended, the junior-high school students in this focus group prepared for their next class. With time available before the bell, students continued talking with each other for several minutes. “Maybe it will help. We need stuff like this. I hope it will improve things.”

The exchange between students went on as they offered their thoughts about the value of a K-12 framework for student opinions. “This is definitely a good idea. We are never asked to say what we think –we just have to put up with it.” Before gathering her belongings to leave the conference table, one girl said, “Thanks. Maybe this will do some good. I would definitely do this again.”

Eleventh graders in this focus group attended a senior high school with a total of 1452 students. There were 359 students in the junior class. The senior high recently underwent a major renovation for the first time since the school was built in 1961.

Five females and three males participated in the focus group conversation. Three females in the group were currently enrolled in advanced English. Two of these girls were also in an advanced history class. The eleventh graders who qualified for “honors” courses were given the option to schedule for advanced placement English, biology, chemistry, and American History. They were also eligible for pre-calculus/trigonometry and advanced placement statistics and physics. Students who had difficulty in reading were usually placed in the Track III English class.

There were about 12 student in the English and math class designated as special education. Inclusion happened “periodically” based on teacher referral.

As the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Test (PSSA) was given in eleventh grade, students with a basic or below basic score were expected to achieve proficiency prior to graduation. These students were “strongly encouraged” to take the PSSA preparatory classes given in October of their senior year. The PSSA make-up test was also offered in November of their senior year. If students chose not to take the PSSA make-up test, they were required to pass their senior English or math class with a grade of C or higher.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

“Reading assignments are usually not done in class. It is very rare that we read aloud or silently in any class. Teachers give homework assignments to read. It’s always an assignment outside of class though.” (Focus group, May 2004)

These were the words of a junior-high schoolgirl in the focus group responding to what teachers do before a reading assignment in any subject area. When the first category of teacher “talk” or discussion before reading was mentioned, another boy was quick to say: “They never give reading assignments in class, so we never talk about it before. Discussions always happens after a homework assignment, the next day.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl in the focus group responded to him almost simultaneously: “Yes. We always have discussion about the assignment, but it’s never before. It’s always after we read it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

All of the students were in agreement that teacher discussion prior to reading never happened. Since teacher-assigned reading was done outside of class, discussion always followed.

Students said that almost every reading assignment was sure to follow with a class period of teacher-lead discussion. A girl in the focus group explained: “Usually three to four people will do the talking and all you have to do is listen to them. You listen and when somebody says an answer all you have to do is say it in a different way.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl continued telling of her experience with class discussion: “It’s not difficult to make it seem like you have a good answer or to participate without having read the assignment. Everybody does that.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Without further probing, the students continued to respond to each other’s comments. Another girl spoke up about class discussion: “This year I read only 1/3 of what I was supposed to read and I still had all A’s and B’s.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl responded to her: “Well, I only read the first chapter of *Huck Finn* and still had an A on the test. There was so much discussion on the book that all I needed to do was listen. You can find out everything- It’s so easy.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Without hesitation a boy in the focus group spoke up: “Yea, I know. I read one chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and had an A on the test. If you listen, those two or three people and the teacher will do all the work for you.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Some students went on to talk briefly about how the written assignments that accompanied the reading were just as “easy” to complete: “If it’s some type of written assignment on the reading, you just put something down that has something to do with what you were supposed to read. Then you just make up more about it. The teacher will just look to see if something- anything is written down.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As our conversation continued, students in the focus group began talking of the comparison between teacher-assigned reading in a regular English class versus an advanced English class. Several students spoke of their “surprise” upon hearing the details:

“From what I am hearing that they do in advanced classes, we do not do any of that. I am so surprised at the difference. I never knew it was that much.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Three students who were currently taking advanced English continued telling of regular procedures for the class. One girl explained: “In advanced English we usually have quizzes every day, so you have to read if you want to pass. We almost always have quizzes on what we read and the teacher checks them too.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students said that quizzes on teacher-assigned reading in regular English classes did not happen very often. When quizzes were given they were not returned, so students were never informed of the grade.

In summarization of students’ comments about teacher “talk” before reading, they clearly communicated that it never happened. Teacher-assigned reading was done outside of school, usually for homework. It was always followed by a class discussion of the material. Students said that they did not have to read the assignments due to the fact that the teacher “almost always summarized what you needed to know.” They also spoke of listening to only two or three students who usually carried the class discussion. They could easily participate by listening to what these students said. All they needed to do was “say it in a different way and the teacher accepted the answer.”

Some students even talked of never having to use books for certain subjects. As we ended our conversation about teacher “talk” before reading assignments, one boy told the group: “In many classes we don’t even use a book. In my chemistry class I haven’t even opened the book all year. I couldn’t even tell you what it looks like.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Building of background through storytelling was the next category related to what teachers did before reading assignments. Students reiterated the fact that discussion only happened after teacher-assigned reading.

One boy offered his view of storytelling in class discussion: “Teachers tell stories, but do not talk about things we want to hear about or things that we can relate to. I can’t remember a story told during a class discussion that really had an impact on what I was learning about.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Another boy responded: “It seems like the stories are always about them. They might be personal stories, but nothing we could even relate to.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Most of the students in the focus group were in agreement that storytelling would definitely seem more significant if they realized a connection. Stories would be viewed as beneficial if students were able to relate to them and realize a direct connection to their own learning.

When asked if teachers ever posed questions prior to reading assignments, students offered a definitive, “No.” Students even reported that teachers rarely asked if they had any questions after a reading assignment. One boy explained: “Teachers don’t usually say ‘do you have any questions?’ They hardly ever do that. If you ask a question about an assignment or ask for help, they will give it to you. But you need to ask in order to get it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to say that even though teachers answered questions and provided help when asked, most students never asked. One girl spoke of her reluctance to ask questions during class: “If someone else doesn’t ask the question, I will usually avoid asking it. I just sit there and hope that somebody else does it so I don’t have to.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Our discussion eventually moved to teacher preview of assigned reading materials. Students said that a teacher preview or survey, of chapter subtitles, pictures, captions, and vocabulary never occurred. The eleventh graders said that it never happened because the assignments were never read in class.

The teacher always gave the assignment for homework, and they never looked at any part of the reading material with the class.

Pre-reading activities were explained to students, as were examples of their use.

Students said that “they never did those in high school.” Some students had never even heard of the named strategies including, K-W-L, graphic organizer, or anticipation guide. There were a few students who recalled using them in lower grades, but never in high school.

According to the students, teaching of vocabulary or new word meanings was only done in English class. One boy elaborated: “We do this in English class. The teacher will have us look up words in the dictionary if we don’t know them. Sometimes we have to define them. This year we haven’t done that as much as in past grades.”(Focus group, May 2004)

As they moved through high school, students reported a decrease in the number of new words they were required to learn. Teacher instruction for the learning of new words was not done in any other class except English. This was the only class where students indicated a requirement for defining of new words. They said it sometimes occurred before reading a selection in English. It also occurred during the reading of novels and sometimes even after the completion of an assignment.

The second part of teacher assigned reading encompassed how teachers modeled the critical reading skills of comprehension, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation. All students agreed that high school teachers did not engage in modeling of comprehension or any other critical skill. Students said they were expected to know how to read critically, but not taught how to read critically. One boy told the group: “Teachers just assume that you should ‘get’ (understand) anything you have to read for an assignment. They will help you to understand something but you have to ask first. If you don’t ask they won’t explain it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

When provided with examples of what it meant to read critically, students were adamant about the fact that they were required to read and write in this way. Students said that it usually ended up being required for an assessment and not as a homework or class assignment.

Our next category of teacher modeling for understanding was the think-aloud. An example and explanation of a think-aloud was given to students in the focus group. Students were quick to say that teachers never engaged in a think-aloud because reading was never done in class.

As we finally moved to the category of “reading beyond the lines,” students said that they were expected to know how to do this in high school. Teachers did not show them how to apply or combine ideas in a chapter with their own personal knowledge.

Three students who were currently taking advanced classes said that their English teacher provided them with a “step-by-step” process for writing in this way. According to this eleventh grade focus group, those three girls were the only students who were provided with instruction for reading and responding to texts in this way. Students continued to offer their comments:

“Teachers assume that you should know how to do this by high school. If you can’t do this by now then- oh well.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy added to the statement: “If we have to read and do an essay then you are expected to be able to do this by eleventh grade. They don’t show you at all. You are on your own and you are out of luck if you don’t write well.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Read/Interact with Text

“A lot of the time I just don’t read it at all, and then I listen to the class discussion.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

A boy in the focus group spoke candidly about what he did when having difficulty comprehending a reading assignment. Following his comments, many other students joined the conversation offering their input about confronting difficulties when reading: “Sometimes I will reread. Usually I will do this if I know the teacher is going to have a quiz. In AP (advanced placement) English we always have quizzes, and they are hard. You have to write about what you read. Sometimes I will ask the teacher about it if I know there is going to be a quiz.

That is the only time I will ask for help.” (Focus group, May 2004)

It was only the three students in advanced classes who talked of rereading or seeking help from the teacher. They cited frequent quizzes that were “hard” as the reason for both rereading and asking for help.

The next section of *Read/Interact with Text* encompassed how the teacher showed the students ways to answer questions about assigned reading. Many students in the focus group spoke up without hesitation. They told of frequent assignments consisting of question and answer responses. In fact, students said that reading in almost every subject area, was usually accompanied by a question and answer assignment. Though these were required often, teachers offered minimal criteria about how to complete the assignment. One boy explained: “Teachers usually say things like ‘the answer has to be in complete sentences, no fragments, or it should be a certain length.’ If they say anything, this is usually it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A girl in the focus group responded to his comment about requirements for answering questions: “They don’t show you how to answer questions for the assignment. They write it on the board, you copy the questions, and answer it.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As we talked about question and answer responses, students went on to say, that they did not think teachers ever checked for correctness. Students said it was acceptable to “just write anything.” One girl shared her thoughts: “I really don’t think they even read it. They just walk around and see if you have it done.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Most students in the focus group admitted that they had developed a “technique” for completing question and answer responses. Without any additional encouragement students went on to explain their “technique.” One girl initiated the explanation: “We have to read and answer questions for homework all the time. You just go to the questions first, then skim the chapter to give some kind of answer to them.

Just skim and look for something that will answer the question. Always go to the question first. Never read the whole thing. Just look at the questions then go back into the chapter.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Another girl added to her explanation: “Nobody reads the whole section. Most classes you can just skim over and find what is required to look like you answered the question. Basically, you only read what is required for the question. You never have to worry about knowing the rest of what you were supposed to read.” (Focus group, May 2004)

As soon as she finished another girl in the focus group was quick to add: “I only put a partial answer and then just make up the rest to make it look like you read it.” (Focus group, May 2004) Three students who were sitting quietly during this entire exchange suddenly spoke up: “In AP (Advanced Placement) English, you are taught how to answer questions. They show you how from the beginning of the year. They give you examples and checklists so you know exactly what is required and how to complete the assignment.” (Focus group, May 2004)

After she finished speaking another girl responded in a disheartened tone: “There is such a big difference between honors English and regular English. We never do that. I never knew how much different it was.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Many of the students were vocal about their “surprising” realization of the difference between advanced and regular English. The three students who were currently taking advanced classes said that English was the only class where they were offered instruction about writing of responses. In other advanced classes, they were not given such explicit criteria or detail about how to answer questions. These students also made it known that they were aware that their question and answer responses were often collected, checked, and returned. In an advanced class, they knew that they would receive a grade based on the quality of their work.

As our talk on answering of questions for reading assignments came to a close, several students responded to comments about advanced classes. One girl said: “It would help if the teacher would say ‘This is the way I would like to see a response written.’ If they would be more clear and show us what they wanted, and if we knew they even bothered to really check it- that would make a difference.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Content Areas

The initial focus of *Content Areas* encompassed how teachers showed students ways to study. Teacher modeling of note-taking was the first category for discussion. As soon as students were asked to comment on teachers’ instruction for note-taking, the focus group spoke up in an almost simultaneous response, “They don’t!” Afterwards, others were quick to elaborate: “Teachers give you a study guide and say ‘Just fill it out.’ Sometimes they will put notes on the board and you copy them down. Usually it’s exactly what is on the test. They either write it down or tell you word for word what to write down.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Responses flowed from students without a moment of hesitation. Another girl added: “They usually put an asterisk beside things in notes. All of these are on the test. A lot of the time they even give the class a review sheet that has everything that will be on the test.” (Focus group, May 2004)

The consensus in the focus group was that teachers probably never showed students how to take notes because they were never required to complete them on their own. Almost every teacher offered a ready-made study guide, review sheet, or written outline of material from the text. One boy went on to explain: “Well, we do not study or take notes on our own because we don’t have to. We never have to. Everything they want you to know they will write. They will almost always give you, or point out what you need to know. We never have to do it on our own because they tell you up front.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students went on to say that most classes followed the same pattern for test-taking procedures. They were never shown how to study or take notes. However, they were either provided with a written summarization of material on the test or just told “what you needed to know.”

Students did mention one teacher who never provided notes. They said that she lectured and engaged them in a variety of activities for the class. They also said “you were forced to learn how to take notes on your own” in the class. She never gave notes nor did she provide instruction for the taking of notes.

When the category of class study or discussion groups was mentioned, students said they never participated in these during their high school years. Most of the students made it clear that they might enjoy taking part in these, but “things like that” were never done in high school.

Before we concluded our discussion on studying, several students went on to make additional comments. Although they were “glad” to avoid independent study, some expressed concern that they “wouldn’t know how to study in college” if they needed to. A boy was very direct about his situation: “Man, I am in big trouble if I have to figure this out on my own.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

When the focus of our conversation moved to writing, students started offering their input about essays. Prior to that, they said that personal journal’s response and summaries were rarely done. As we had already discussed question and answer responses, we went on to the category of essay writing. One boy immediately spoke up: “We have to do essays for tests and for homework. They usually grade the test essays, but not the homework ones.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

A girl in the focus group offered another quick response: “For homework they only grade the essays if you ask them to. Have to ask. If you ask, they will critique it with you so they don’t have to grade it.

That is the only time you ever get a homework essay back. When you ask ‘How did I do?’ the next day they will let you go through it with them and find things that are wrong. The problem is, I don’t know what is wrong.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Within minutes, a boy responded to her: “You can basically write anything down for homework essays and they never read it. The only ones that really matters are test essays and we don’t have those as much.” (Focus group, May 2004)

These eleventh graders said that they usually wrote essays for English and American History. They went on to explain that they were expected to be able to write “advanced” essays on tests, especially for English. One student also indicated that “you were out of luck” if you didn’t know how to write well by eleventh grade.

All students, except for those in the advance English class, agreed that no instruction was offered for essays or other writing assignments. They said teachers offered, “no detail about how to write an advanced essay.” One girl elaborated on the lack of instruction provided for essay writing: “Teachers are not specific at all about what they want. They give no detail about how to write an advanced essay. When I get my paper back it says, ‘You are not telling me enough.’ You are only giving a summary. You are not telling me enough.’ I think, ‘What aren’t I telling you? I don’t know.’ I don’t know and you don’t tell me. Basically, we have to figure it out and hope it’s ok.” (Focus group, May 2004)

There were only three students in the focus group that thought that they were capable of producing quality written work. These were the students who were currently taking an advanced English class. One of the students explained: “In AP (Advanced Placement) English, the teachers do go through and tell you what an advanced paper should look like. They show you and are specific about how to write the essay. We sometimes look at sample papers.”

(Focus group, May 2004)

Students who were not enrolled in AP English were quick to offer a response. One girl commented: “That never happens in my class. We know we can’t really write well. We know it would never be good enough for college.”(Focus group, May 2004)

Overall, students thought teachers expected them to know how to write well by high school. Many students in the focus group were adamant about the fact that teachers should “tell us what they want and what they are looking for” in essays. One girl said: “It’s such a mystery, at least to me.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Other students were in agreement as they went on to say that it would be helpful if teachers would be “very, very, specific” about how the essay should be done. They also wanted to be told, “what was missing.” Much concern was expressed in regard to the possible consequences of their poor writing skills at the college level.

When research reports were finally mentioned, students in this focus group said they had not been required to complete one “so far.” They thought it was required for their senior year.

For the “other” category in types of writing, students named the PSSA. They told of writing “prompts” for a week or two before the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Test (PSSA). The writing was only done in English class. One girl told us her thoughts on PSSA writing: “For PSSA, the English teacher will give us huge packets because so many people fail. The teacher was practically begging us to do well. They were trying to make you care.” (Focus group, May 2004)

A boy spoke up right after here: “If you don’t do well on the test you just need a C. You take the PSSA reading or math class. Nobody really worries because you just take the class and you’re ok.” (Focus group, May 2004)

Students in this focus group indicated that preparation for the test only occurred about “one or two weeks before.” During that two week period they used “packets” to prepare.

Students also said that they did not take the PSSA test very seriously.

One boy concluded our conversation about the PSSA with a very candid statement: “It’s like it comes out of nowhere. We don’t do anything like that until about two weeks before- by then it’s too late.” (Focus group, May 2004)

High School Profile: A reflective summary

“When I read a text, the text means something because it connects to what I’ve encountered in the past and in subtle, sometimes invisible ways, modifies what I’ve known before. While I’m changing my mind as I read, I’m doing so in anticipation of new experiences still to come. I’m getting an answer ready for my life. Then the next time I read and make connections similar to those, they’ll be a little richer and more complicated for my having read what I had before.” (Bomer, 1995)

In *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*, Bomer (1995) told of the importance of making personal connections to new ideas in a text. Based on the voices of students in this eleventh grade focus group, building of background was not a common occurrence in any of their high school classes.

According to Vacca (1996) when a match occurred between students’ prior knowledge and the text material, schema functioned in at least three ways. First, it provided a framework for learning that allowed readers to select information relevant to their purpose for reading (Vacca, 1996). Second, it helped them to organize text information. And third, it helped them to elaborate information (Vacca, 1996). Vacca (1996) also stated that activation of prior knowledge, and arousing of curiosity were closely related activities.

In the researcher’s opinion, not only were connections beneficial to reader and text interaction, but they even helped to create interest in the text. Even prior to “opening the book,” the researcher believed it was necessary to help students make connections and “read.”

Bomer (1995) stated that reading was not a static artifact but instead a dynamic event in time. Reading occurred from before the text was chosen, to beyond the echoes of the last discussion about it (Bomer, 1995). Since “reading” started even before the opening of the text, the researcher believed that it was important that students were provided with several opportunities to make those connections. When high school teachers assigned reading in any subject area, students in this focus group said it was done outside of class. Students said that they never read in class because all reading assignments were done for homework. The eleventh graders indicated that discussion or teacher “talk” never occurred prior to any reading assignment. Teachers always initiated discussion afterwards.

When homework assignments were given, students said that they did not have to read them. They were able to hear a summary of the important information by listening to the class discussion. When the teacher attempted to engage the class in a discussion of the assigned reading, typically two or three students carried the conversation. Interjecting of comments happened easily as students simply listened to others while the conversation progressed.

As the high school students in this focus group explained, they never engaged in any type of background building prior to reading. Since discussion only occurred after assigned reading, there was no opportunity for activation of prior knowledge. In the researcher’s opinion, absence of schema building may have also resulted in an absence of interest for reading the assignment.

Gunning (1996) stated that previewing, also known as surveying, oriented students to the reading material so they would have some sense of what it would be about. When teachers assigned reading to high school students in this focus group, it was never completed in class.

The reading was always given as a homework assignment. Students indicated that they never engaged in a preview of the material, even when it was a new unit of study.

In the researcher's opinion, surveying a reading selection in class would allow teachers an opportunity to create interest and activate prior knowledge. The method of previewing or the type of background building could easily be modified to support high school students in any subject area. This might even inspire students to actually read the assignment.

Except for English, eleventh graders told of limited interaction with vocabulary words. According to Thompson (1999) in an informational text, the meaning of an entire passage may rest on the meaning of a single term or cluster of closely related terms. A content area is distinguishable by its language, in particular the special and technical vocabulary terms that provided labels for concepts related to the subject matter (Vacca, 1996).

Vacca (1996) argued that key concept words in text needed to be taught directly and taught well. Vacca (1996) also stated: "Students shouldn't be left to their own devices or subjected to the vagaries of a look-up-and-define strategy as their only access to the long-term acquisition of the language of an academic discipline." (p.136)

In this focus group, students said that teachers of English sometimes required them to "look up" words in the dictionary and record a definition. They were directed to do this before, during, and even after reading. It depended on the reading assignment. Understanding the world meant having knowledge of more words than ever before (Gunning, 1996). Even so, eleventh graders said that as they moved through high school, there was a decrease in the number of new words they were required to learn. Students in this eleventh grade focus group also said that when teachers assigned reading it was given as homework. Teachers required the reading to be done outside of class. According to Goodlad (1984) except for oral reading done in "turn taking" format from a common text, reading occurred only about 2% in senior high schools.

Eleventh graders in this focus group said that their teachers required them to read assignments outside of class, then provide critical analysis on essay tests. This was especially true for English class. Students indicated that there was no modeling of comprehension, let alone other critical skills such as interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation. When teachers gave assignments, the students said they were expected to “know how to do that by high school.” Many students in this eleventh grade focus group thought they were “getting by,” but not “doing very well.” Surprisingly, some even commented that they did not think they were “really learning to do anything new.” Some worried that their writing would not be “good enough for staying in college.”

According to Thompson (1999) if reading is looked upon as an intellectual act encompassing more than just decoding of print on a page, research does not support a picture of American students reading with critical intent and interest. In this focus group, it was clear that many students were not reading when assignments were given in various classes. In the researcher’s opinion, if students were not reading at school or at home, they were certainly not learning to read critically. Thompson (1999) stated that the large gap between literal comprehension and reading as a component of critical thinking had U.S. educators concerned. Based on the voices of this eleventh grade focus group, it was clear that they were concerned as well.

Read and Interact with Text

Developing interpretations of specific texts required the reader to go beyond the initial impression to develop a more complete and complex understanding (Thompson, 1999). Good readers synthesized information and ideas from written texts to complete and extend meaning from multiple sources (Thompson, 1999). Readers evaluated texts at the highest level of critical thinking (Thompson, 1999). Students in this focus group said that they were required to answer questions for most reading assignments.

When teachers assigned question and answer responses, if student seven completed them, answers were usually found in the book. Students detailed a “technique” that entailed reading questions first, then skimming to locate information in the text that would “answer” the question. Students even mentioned writing partial responses and then making up the rest “to make it look like you read.” It was “surprising” to the focus group when they heard the advanced students speak of the major differences in regard to how they were taught to respond to questions.

Advanced students told of teacher instruction, criteria, and even models of exemplary work. The three advanced students also indicated that teachers checked their work and even provided them with helpful feedback. This was a major contrast to the procedures encountered by the other students. They made it clear that teachers did not provide instruction or specific criteria for answering of questions. They also did not think the work was checked as they indicated that many teachers “just walked around to see if you had it done.”

In the researcher’s opinion, students were aware of low expectations in regard to the question and answer assignments. They were not offered instruction or specific guidelines for responding to the questions.

If students were only “skimming” and writing answers directly from the text, they were certainly not reading or writing critically. The students who were probably more equipped to skillfully respond to questions were receiving additional instruction. The advanced students spoke of teachers who modeled the process while sometimes providing checklists and examples.

In the researcher’s opinion, students who were in dire need of scaffolding for question and answer responses were not receiving the support. Most of the students spoke of writing only “book” responses or not completing the assignment at all. In spite of this, many of the students expressed an interest in wanting to be shown how to write well. They said it would make a difference if teachers “showed them what they wanted and bothered to check it.”

Content Areas

According to Vacca (1996) teachers must scaffold instruction in ways that show students how to use strategies independently as they interact and study with texts. Students who knew how to study also know how to “do something” with texts in order to think more deeply about the ideas they encountered (Vacca, 1996). In contrast, ineffective readers often lacked knowledge and control of the strategies necessary to learn and study with texts (Vacca, 1996).

Students in this eleventh grade focus group said that they were never required to “study” independently. Prior to a test, the teacher provided a ready-made study guide, review sheet, or written outline in the form of notes. When teachers distributed these study materials, students said that they often contained “word for word” content of the test. Students also said they never really needed to study or take notes on their own, but expressed concern that they would not be capable of it, when required. Some students were concerned that they might not be able to study independently while at college. In the researcher’s opinion, as some high school students may not be capable of studying independently, they definitely needed to be taught.

Scaffolding of study strategies would allow students to learn independently. Whether they were strong or weak readers, all students could benefit from either learning to study or strengthening their skills. Instead of receiving the “test” in the form of a study guide, review sheet, or teacher-made notes, students needed to be supported in learning to study and “do something” with the text on their own.

Writing

According to Foertsch (1992) even twelfth grade students demonstrated difficulty in constructing thoughtful responses to questions asking them to elaborate and defend interpretations of what they read. Most of the students in the focus group said that they knew they could not write well.

They also knew that something was “missing” from their writing, but said that teachers never told them what it was. One student even described essay writing as being a “a mystery.” Students definitely expressed concern and thought that their writing was not “good enough for college.” The three students who thought they were capable of producing quality writing were in an advanced English class.

Eleventh grade students in this focus group said that writing assignments usually accompanied the reading that was required to be done. Question and answer responses and essays were the most frequently assigned “type of writing” for this focus group. When teachers gave writing assignments with the reading, they offered minimal criteria and no instruction for completion. Students were usually just given a reading assignment and some questions from the book or the board to answer.

Vacca (1996) told of an instructional blueprint that some teachers had followed. These consisted of assign-and-tell routines. The teacher “assigned” a text to read, usually accompanied by questions to be answered for homework. In the following days, teachers would “tell” students what the material was about through class discussion and question and answer routines (Vacca, 1996). Eleventh graders in this focus group said that their question and answer responses only required a retelling of the reading. Questions were answered by simply “going to the question first, then skimming the chapter to give some kind of answer.” From talking to the students in this focus group, it was clear that literal responses consisting of “book answers” were more than sufficient to satisfy the assignment. Most writing assignments resulted in “telling” of answers during the class discussions that predictably followed. Except for test essays, writing was basically assign-and-tell as it was always followed by class discussion of “correct” responses. This included homework essays as they were also summarized or “told about” during class talks.

Goodlad (1984) found that the prevalence of assign-and-tell practices increased steadily from the primary through high school years. Students only mentioned a requirement of having to integrate new material with their own thoughts and ideas on essay tests. These essays were only required for tests and were the only writing assignments students described as being “difficult.” In regard to test essays, students also said that they were “out of luck if they didn’t know how to write well.” Students said that teachers usually graded test essays, and expected them to “write well.” Many of the students in this focus group did not feel confident as critical writers. In spite of this, students said that it would help if teachers would be “very, very, specific” and “show them how the essay should be done.”

CHAPTER IV FRAMEWORK REPORT

In the previous chapter, each school profile provided a forum for student voices to be heard, detailing how they learned to read as they moved through grades K-12.

A “snapshot” of the fifth grade reading journey was captured at five different elementary schools in one district. An eighth grade “picture” of the reading journey was “developed” by the voices of the middle school students. Eleventh grade students provided a final “view” of their reading journey by elaborating on the high school years in the district.

In chapter 4, the story of the students’ K-12 journey of learning to read was told. The framework report explained what happened from the perspective of the students in regard to learning through reading and writing. By looking across grades five, eight, and eleven in the district, student voices were summarized to provide a K-12 “picture” of their reading journey. The voices of the students were also integrated with the “voices” of several experts in the field of reading. From the K-12 story told by fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade students, important implications for program evaluation and classroom practice were highlighted, as the researcher reflected on the voices of the students and the “voices” of experts in the field of content area reading.

The *Framework Report* was divided into three sections, and each one coincided with the checklist used during focus group conversations. Sections were organized as: 1) *Teacher Assigned Reading*; 2) *Read/Interact with Text*; and 3) *Content Areas*.

A reflection on the K-12 documentation process also followed the Framework Report.

I. Framework Report on Teacher-Assigned Reading

Reflection on fifth grade comments across the district began with the first section of the checklist entitled *Teacher-Assigned Reading* (see Appendix A).

The first question encompassed what teachers did before reading assignments in all subject areas. As the questions were comprised of several categories, the framework report followed each one while looking across grades five, eight, and eleven. In addition to the named categories on the checklist, there was also one designated as “other.” This allowed students to add their own category if it was not there already. For the first question in *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, the category of skills instruction applied only to the fifth grade students.

The eight categories adhering to the first question on the focus group checklist included: a) building of background with discussion or teacher “talk” b) building of background with storytelling c) building of background with questions d) building of background with a teacher preview or survey of the text e) building of background with pre-reading activities f) vocabulary instruction g) skills instruction and h) other.

Across the district, fifth graders said that teachers regularly engaged in discussion prior to reading. The discussion or “talk” that preceded the reading in all subject areas was described by fifth graders as “waking you up” and “making you wonder.” Creating an interest in the text gave students the incentives to not only want to read, but to “want to understand it too.”

In addition to arousing curiosity, discussion before reading enhanced student understanding of material. Fifth graders repeatedly told of selections being easier to follow after engaging in, or listening to a class discussion. Teacher “storytelling” that connected to new concepts in the reading was especially helpful in content areas, though students said it was infrequent.

Building of background through preview of text was another commonality that fifth graders said teachers engaged in prior to reading assignments. They told of teachers who routinely guided them in a survey of chapter subtitles, captions, pictures, and even key vocabulary words. This was done most often with expository text. Students described the preview as preparing them to “read better” because they “knew what was coming up.”

Introduction of key words during the teacher preview was cited as helping to make the reading seem “easier.” Fifth grade students seemed to label new content-specific words that were difficult to pronounce as “hard” or “big” words. Verbalizing a pronunciation and learning to associate a meaning with a new word helped students to feel more confident when reading.

The majority of fifth graders across the district were aware of the named pre-reading activities. Though there was a variance in reported use, many of the students said K-W-L, anticipation guide, and graphic organizer sounded familiar. While the K-W-L Chart was the most recognized, some students gave examples of how they had benefited from independent use of the strategies.

In fifth grade, skills that accompanied each selection were taught prior to the reading of assignment in class. Across the district, fifth graders consistently communicated a disconnect between skills taught in class and their applicability to other reading tasks. The learning of specified reading skills were viewed only as a necessity for successful performance on the assessments given in class. Fifth graders searched for ways to connect these skills, but were often faced with repetitive drill and practice activities instead. As the reading skills were regularly taught in isolation, students were not able to realize the relevance of their use and applicability at school or home.

Reflection of eighth grade comments also began with the first section of *Teacher-Assigned Reading*. Eighth grade students said that building of background through discussion or teacher “talk” never happened. Instead, eighth graders described the procedure as teachers “giving an assignment, nobody reads it, and then you just get the work.” Discussion never occurred beforehand as students were usually expected to complete assignments outside of class. A class discussion almost always followed the reading assignments.

Eighth graders also indicated that building of background through storytelling never happened prior to reading, but occurred afterwards as part of class discussions.

Stories that teachers told were described as “personal stories about themselves that had nothing to do with what we are learning about.” As students did not realize a relevant connection, they said stories were usually “tuned out.”

Teacher-lead preview or survey of texts, prior to reading did not happen in eighth grade. Students said, “It never happens, we never do that,” when asked to describe the process. It was not common for them to read or even look through texts together in class.

When asked if they recalled engaging in pre-reading activities such as K-W-L Charts, anticipation guides or graphic organizers students said they had “no ideas about what they were.” The eighth graders were not familiar with any of the named strategies. Just as eighth graders reported on absence of background building, classroom procedures in eleventh grade did not support utilization of students’ prior knowledge. Reading assignments were given for homework and teacher-lead discussion always followed. Other background building activities were also noticeably absent as many students reported that they never even looked at the text in class.

According to Vacca (1996) it was through teacher guidance that students were encouraged to make connections and relate personal knowledge to the text assignment. Arousing curiosity helped students generate questions that could only be answered by giving thought to what they read (Vacca, 1996).

Fifth graders across the district spoke of the tremendous impact discussion or teacher “talk” had on their desire to engage in reading. When teachers were able to encourage wonder and curiosity through discussion, students became eager to read. Fifth grade students said that discussion before reading enabled them to “follow what was going on.” They thought it gave them the advantage of knowing what to expect, and therefore an overall increase in comprehension.

In contrast to fifth grade voices, middle and high school students told of a complete absence of background building in all subject areas. Since Vacca (1996) stated that arousing curiosity and activating prior knowledge were closely related, students who were not exposed to background building may have also lacked a motivation and interest in the text.

Within three years, as students transitioned from elementary to middle school, classroom procedures appeared to change. Both middle and high school students told of a pattern in classroom procedures that included teacher-assigned reading followed by discussion. As students progressed on their K-12 journey there was a definite decrease in the practice of background building.

When students moved into middle and high school, the idea of activating prior knowledge appeared to lose its significance. In addition to this, the diminishing of background building appeared to coincide with a change in some students' habits and attitudes towards reading assignments. Whether or not one was related to the other, the fact that many students were not reading called for a serious examination of middle and high school practices in the area of prior knowledge.

Students gained more experiences and had a greater pool of knowledge to draw upon as they moved through middle and high school. In spite of this, there was a diminishing in the practice of activating students' prior knowledge for establishment of personal connections with the text. In the researcher's opinion, as students were gaining more experience on their reading journey, classroom practices should also utilize their increased knowledge to help create interest in and make connections with the texts they were assigned to read.

Except for introduction of key vocabulary during teacher previews, fifth graders told of "unexciting" procedures for learning of words.

In almost every focus group, fifth graders described vocabulary instruction as the writing of definitions, sentences, and then memorization of a meaning for each. Students told of recording definitions and sentences for quizzes, then “forgetting” the words afterwards. When asked about presentation or teaching of vocabulary words before reading, fifth grade students were surprisingly consistent in their statements. They said that the words were not necessarily new to them. Fifth graders across the district repeatedly said that many of the definitions they were required to record and learn were words already familiar to them. The students thought that defining words they already knew was a “waste of time.”

Though students told to “learn” words they already knew, they also said that unfamiliar words were quickly forgotten due to the fact that they never used them again after the test. Across the district, four out of the five focus groups were consistent in saying that nothing was done with the words besides the writing of a definition and possibly a sentence.

Eighth graders told of writing definitions for homework and having to know the meanings for a test. They said that defining of vocabulary words usually happened after the reading of a selection, or at the end of a chapter. In some classes, students were also required to use the words in sentences. Besides the sentences, eighth graders told of limited application for their vocabulary words. One eighth grader said, “After the test we never talked about them again.”

In middle school, the students talked about writing definitions in several classes. By eleventh grade, students said they were only required to write definitions in English class. Though the researcher questions the practice of writing definitions as an effective way to learn words, at least there appeared to be more attention on words in middle school. Based on students’ discussions, they did not appear to be receiving vocabulary instruction. As most of the students spoke of defining words and then “forgetting,” or defining words that were already familiar, it basically consisted of memorization.

According to Nagey (1988) definitions provided only a superficial level of knowledge. In the researcher's opinion, students needed to learn words and needed to learn them well. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) found that methods that provided only definitional information did not have a significant effect on comprehension. Instead of developing depth of meaning, these students appeared to either memorize new words or just relearn those already familiar to them.

Teaching of multiple meanings and extending contexts did not appear to take place, even in the elementary school setting. Based on student voices, teachers were not always enriching their knowledge of words, or encouraging an interest in them. As students moved through middle and high school, they indicated a decrease in the number of words they were required to learn.

Gunning (1996) stated that the abundance of new words posed a challenge for students, who, to be fully literate, must acquire a larger vocabulary than any preceding generation. Listening to the voices of the students, current classroom practices along their K-12 journey were not supporting or enabling them to meet that challenge. At the intermediate, middle, and high school level, it was uncommon for teachers to use questioning as a background building activity. Questions usually followed the reading assignment as a part of the class discussion. Students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade expressed a reluctance to verbalize the asking or answering of questions in class. Eighth graders said that teachers answered questions for them, and eleventh graders said that they avoided asking in the hope that somebody else would.

In *Adult Memories of Early Reading Experiences*, Biggs and Bruder (1987) suggested that teachers re-evaluate the classroom practice of requiring student engagement in oral reading of unfamiliar materials that incite giggles and laughter. Though questioning and reading aloud are quite different, fifth graders across the district clearly communicated the fact that many questions were avoided due to a concern about possible ridicule from classmates. Fifth graders said, "Maybe one or two people will ask questions."

You feel stupid if you ask, so you don't," and "I wait until someone brave asks a question." Even eleventh graders spoke of their hope that "somebody else asks so I don't have to."

In the researcher's opinion, teachers also needed to rethink classroom practices related to questioning. When teachers asked questions after reading assignments, students admitted that they were reluctant to answer, or even generate their own questions, so they might avoid "looking stupid," or "looking like you're not following along." A rethinking of how and when to utilize questions might prove beneficial for background building, in addition to eliminating students' concerns of being uncomfortable in class. The students themselves even thought that pre-questioning might prove helpful to them. One fifth grader said, "If the teacher would start out by asking some questions we could have, it would help us feel better about asking questions on our own."

Other suggestions from students included use of a K-W-L Chart and collective questioning both before and after the reading of an assignment. Reflection on fifth grade comments across the district continued with the second part of *Teacher-Assigned Reading*. On the checklist, this question encompassed how teachers showed students ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate ideas or concepts in a text. The four categories adhering to the second question on the focus group checklist included: a) think-aloud for constructing of meaning from text b) think-aloud for "troubled spots" or "difficult parts" of the text c) think-aloud for "reading beyond the lines" or interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation of text and d) other Across the district, fifth graders said teachers regularly asked them to reiterate or summarize material either during or after reading. Teachers would frequently "check" for understanding by asking students to retell parts of the story or chapter. If retelling or summarization, was not done by students, the teachers would engage the class instead.

When reading both narrative and expository texts, fifth graders said that a teacher think-aloud was not very common. Instead of teachers “thinking-aloud” and working through difficult material, the students were typically asked to restate it for the class. The fifth graders said that teachers were more likely to ask them to retell and explain difficult parts of the text rather than engage in a think-aloud.

When speaking about instruction for “reading beyond the lines” the overall consensus of fifth graders across the district was that they were expected to know how to do this, or they had to “figure it out.” Initially, most students were not clear about the phrase “reading beyond the lines” until it was explained. After hearing an explanation, many of the fifth graders were even offering examples of how and when they were required to “read beyond the lines” for class assignments. Students were immediately familiar with the phrase “reading between the lines” as they had often heard teachers reference it in reading class. Even so, they were not completely aware of what it meant or how it was done.

Based on fifth grade voices, though most said they had never been taught how to “read beyond the lines” or read critically, they knew that teachers thought “we should already know how to do this because we do have to do this for things in class.”

Reflection on eighth grade comments also began with the second part of *Teacher-Assigned Reading*. On the checklist, this question again encompassed how teachers showed students to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, or evaluate ideas or concepts in a text. Both eighth and eleventh grade students referred to the reading-writing connection when discussing critical reading skills. For both the middle and high school students, a teacher think-aloud for critical reading entailed modeling or use of critical writing skills as well.

In eighth grade, students told of either receiving detailed instruction for critical reading and writing, or none at all.

There were basically two “stories” that came from the voices of eighth graders and they were based on the differences in the classes they took. Eighth graders who were enrolled in “regular” classes said that teachers did not show them how to engage in critical reading and writing. When students had an assignment requiring this, they were on their own to try to “figure out their opinions from the reading.” In contrast to the “regular” classes, eighth graders in “advanced” classes were shown how to engage in critical reading and writing from “the beginning of the school year.” These students told of teachers who engaged them in detailed modeling of “reading and putting an answer together.” Teachers showed them how to both read and then write a quality paragraph. Students in advanced classes consistently said “they showed us how it was done and what was expected.”

A think-aloud was never done in regular or advanced classes. Eighth graders said this was mostly due to the fact that reading assignments were done outside of class. If students asked questions about a part of the reading, teachers would definitely offer an explanation. Even so, eighth graders were consistent in saying “people don’t really ask.”

According to Thompson (1999) comprehension was more than just a literal retelling of texts. Even so, fifth graders across the district continually told of having to “summarize” or “retell” either during or after reading assignments. Based on student voices, a teacher “check for understanding” was often reduced to a mere reiteration from either the students themselves or the teachers. The fifth graders told of similar classroom procedures, even when dealing with complex concepts in text.

Thompson (1999) stated that interpretation of a given text required the reader to go beyond the first impression and develop a more complete and complex understanding. Fifth grade students across the district told of class assignments where they were sometimes required to put “things from the story together with what you know.”

They also told of having a difficult time with this, but thought they should “already know how to do it.” Every fifth grade focus group, except one, was adamant about the fact that they “had never been taught how to do this.” “This” referred to critical reading and writing, and some students said they had to just “figure it out.” In the researcher’s opinion, fifth graders “never heard a teacher explain it” because it was never taught. As one girl commented, “I’m sure I could figure it out when I had to-no problem,” the researcher began to wonder about the students who were not able to “figure it out.”

Both eighth and eleventh grade students offered parallel responses in regard to teacher modeling of critical reading and writing. Students enrolled in regular English classes were offered no instruction or support, while advanced students often received “step-by-step” procedures for working in this way.

Voices of fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders communicated an overall absence of the teaching of critical reading skills, including even comprehension. From the students’ perspective, the advanced classes were the only place where in-depth critical reading and writing instruction actually occurred. In both eighth and eleventh grade, students in advanced English had opportunities to enhance critical reading-writing skills. They were provided with instruction and support from teachers that included modeling, samples, and detailed explanation of processes.

While these “advanced” middle and high school students told of continued support from teachers that helped to enhance their reading, the others told of working “on their own” to complete assignments.

When speaking about teaching students to read critically, Thompson (1999) said that he learned how invaluable it was to model the process of a specific reading behavior. Except for middle and high school students who were enrolled in advanced classes, most others told of never being directly taught to read, write, or think in a critical way.

When working with his students, Thompson (1999) said that they wanted to know how to structure their responses effectively in order to make interpretations from reading they had done. For them to be able to do that, they had to first see what interpretation looked like. Reflecting across grade levels on the students K-12 reading journey, the researcher also believed that students needed to see what critical reading “looked like.” According to the voices of the students, this was just not happening for all of them.

II. Framework Report on Read/Interact with Text

The second section of the focus group checklist was entitled *Read/Interact with Text* (see Appendix B). Reflection on fifth grade comments began with the first question that encompassed what students did when they had difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment. The six categories adhering to the first question included: a) reread: b) “skim over” c) request help from the teacher d) listen to class discussion e) not read at all and f) other. Across the district, most of the fifth graders talked about rereading when they encountered a difficult part of the text. If they continued to struggle, some students requested help from the teacher.

Many fifth graders communicated the importance of ensuring that they did not “miss” any important information. Even so, one of the fifth grade focus groups indicated that their teachers often summarized the material in class, and rereading was not necessary.

Some of the fifth graders were beginning to realize that if the text was difficult, teachers would often do the work of rereading and clarifying for them. One fifth grade boy said, “I don’t always have to (reread), especially in science. The teacher knows that we don’t read it so she will read it again in class with us. The teacher always does this.”

In eighth grade many of the students said that they did not even read the text, let alone reread.

According to the eighth graders, they were aware of teacher expectations for reading assignments. One boy explained, “You really only need to skim parts of it for the work.” Expectations seemed to determine student effort in regard to working through the reading material. The students described teacher expectations as “extremely high” or “none at all.” Students who were currently enrolled in remedial reading said, “You don’t really have to read anything. They know you don’t read it.”

Students in advanced classes told of different expectations and reasons for rereading. One girl explained, “We have to reread, especially the hard stuff. They (teachers) always give us essay type questions about the reading. They do that even more when it’s something they think we won’t read.” In the researcher’s opinion, students learned that teachers would often do the “reading” and work through the difficult material for them. Even as early as fifth grade, some students were beginning to realize that they would not necessarily be held accountable for reading, especially if the material was difficult.

Most fifth graders reread and requested help to ensure that important information was not “missed.” By eleventh grade, students were not concerned about “missing” anything of importance. It appeared that only the advanced students engaged in consistent reading of assignments for class. In addition to this, it was only the advanced students who said they reread or worked through difficult material when necessary. In the researcher’s opinion, it was only the advanced students who were given the expectation to do so. The difference in teacher expectation seemed to become more pronounced in middle and high school as these students neared the end of their reading journey.

Reflection on fifth grade comments across the district continued with the second part of *Read/Interact with Text*.

On the checklist, this question encompassed how teachers showed students ways to answer questions about reading assignments that were given either in class or outside of class. The five categories adhering to the second question included: a) teacher references the text for answering of questions b) teacher models construction of responses using the text c) teacher models construction of responses using the text and personal knowledge d) teacher models construction of responses using writing samples and other criteria, such as checklists and rubrics and e) other.

Fifth grade voices across the district were surprisingly consistent as they told of classroom procedures surrounding question and answer responses. In fifth grade, students were not receiving instruction for the answering of questions that accompanied reading assignments. Students often reported, “Nobody has ever taught me. I taught myself.” The consensus across five elementary schools was that answering of questions for reading assignments had always been done independently. Even so, fifth grade students reported that they regularly enlisted help of teachers when they were “stuck.” Students said they often did this because questions were “hard” and “they did not understand them.”

Across the district, fifth grade students repeatedly told of identical responses from teachers when seeking help. When help was requested, students were often told to either “look in the book” or “reread.” Students also reported “support” that consisted of teachers actually showing them where the “answer” was located in the text. Fifth graders said that when they approached teachers with the question itself, the teacher usually looked through the book with them to point out the paragraph and page number containing the “answer.” Many fifth graders were aware that teachers showed them exactly what to write as an answer upon their request for help. Students also indicated that answers to questions were not required to include their own thoughts, opinions, or ideas. Most fifth grade focus groups viewed an “answer” as information found only in an isolated portion of the textbook.

The concept of putting two different parts of the text together for an answer was definitely not familiar to fifth graders. Across the district fifth grade students were not receiving instruction for question and answer responses that accompanied their reading assignments. Instead, they were often shown exactly where the answers were located. Even if students refrained from requesting support, it was clear that many students viewed the text as the only place where an “answer” could be found.

Reflection on the voices of eighth grade students continued with the second part of *Read/Interact with Text*. Concerning teacher modeling for question and answer responses, students continually told of receiving no specific instruction or criteria from teachers.

Eighth graders said that they usually read the question, then “wrote stuff in, something from the book to make it look like you did the work.” According to the students the “answer” did not have to be correct, “as long as it came from the book.” Even though students reported that teachers were no longer showing them exactly where to find responses in the text, they were still very aware of the types of answers teachers expected. Those expected “answers” consisted of literal information taken directly from the text.

The procedures for question and answer responses were very different for the students who were enrolled in advanced classes. Eighth graders reported that only those taking “advanced” classes received detailed instruction and criteria for the writing of responses.

By eleventh grade, students continued to tell of advanced classes that included instruction and criteria for the writing of question and answer responses. Voices of eleventh graders concerning question and answer responses, told of students in (AP) Advanced Placement English receiving instruction “from the beginning of the year.” While students in regular English received no instruction or formal criteria, they told of a “technique” that was sufficient for their question and answer homework assignments.

Eleventh graders skimmed the reading to find “something that would answer the question.” Without instruction and support, eleventh graders continued to engage in writing of only literal responses.

Based on student voices, they were not shown ways to answer questions. Instead, it was limited to finding the “answer” somewhere in the book. Vacca (1996) stated that some questions had answers that could be found in the text, while others required students to search the text and then put ideas together. There were also questions that required students to use their own experiences (Vacca, 1996).

In the researcher’s opinion, most of the students in the focus groups utilized only one way to answer questions, and that was finding of responses in a specified place in the text. In fifth grade teachers often told students to “reread” or “look back in the text.” Teachers even showed them the “answer” in the book. By middle and high school, students thought that any “answer” from the book would suffice as they were convinced that teachers “didn’t bother to read them.”

Along the K-12 journey of learning to read, it appeared that these students were never taught or shown different ways to answer questions. According to Thompson (1999) interpretations of particular texts required the reader to go beyond the initial impression to arrive at a more complete and complex understanding. Synthesis included utilization of information and ideas from text to compare and extend meaning from multiple sources (Arrasmith, 1996). Evaluation of texts was the highest level of critical thinking (Thompson, 1999). In the researcher’s opinion, except for advanced classes, students were never given the opportunity to learn about or develop thought processes for question and answer responses past the literal level.

A voice of a fifth grade student comes to mind upon reflection of the students’ K-12 journey in relation to answering of questions.

When talking about question and answer responses, one fifth grade girl said, “When we get to high school we won’t have someone showing us where the answer is like we do now. We will have to do an excellent job on our own. It gets harder so your answers have to get better. There won’t always be someone telling us exactly where the answer is. We’ll have to find a better one by ourselves. Won’t we?”

III. Framework Report on Content Areas

Reflection on fifth grade voices across the district continued, with the third and last section of the checklist entitled *Content Areas* (see Appendix C). The first question in *Content Areas* encompassed how teachers showed students ways to study in all subject areas. The four categories included: a) teacher models note taking: b) teacher models completion of study guides or other study materials: c) teacher initiates study or discussion groups and d) other.

With the exception of one focus group, students in fifth grade reported that they were not taught how to engage in note-taking for any subject. Instead, fifth graders across the district told of either, copying teacher-generated notes from the board, receiving a study guide, or receiving a review sheet to study from. “Usually we just copy from the board. Mostly we just write what the teacher tells us.” These words of a girl in one of the focus groups were a familiar sentiment across fifth grades in the district. Many of the focus groups reported that note-taking or other types of study materials were done for them. If students were required to complete study guides or review sheets, they usually consisted of “fill-in-the-blanks” and closely mirrored the exact wording of the text.

Only one focus group told of participation in study or discussion groups as a way to prepare them for a test. Overall, fifth graders were not learning to study in this way. Though students were not engaged in discussion groups, one category that emerged as an “other” on the focus group checklist for studying, was the review game.

Fifth graders in almost every focus group told of specific class procedures and even names for these review games. Teacher initiated review games usually occurred during the week of a test. Fifth grade voices were consistent in saying that questions used for the “review game” were often taken directly from the test itself. “The teacher says, ‘This is going to be on the test and make sure you know this.’” Fifth graders were aware that the “review game” was essentially the test.

Reflection on eighth grade voices across the district continued with the last section of the checklist entitled *Content Areas*. As the first question encompassed how teachers showed students ways to study, eighth graders were candid in saying, “They don’t show you, you just copy it down.” The students were not shown how to take notes in any subject area. Instead, they regularly copied notes from the board or overhead “so that you know what will be on the test.” Review sheets and study guides were sometimes distributed in “regular” classes, but “advanced” students said they never received them.

Though eighth graders did not take part in study groups, the “review game” again emerged as an “other” category for ways of studying. The students detailed various “review games” that were often played during the week of a test. “Most of the time, the teacher gets the test and looks right at the test for the questions. We know they come from the test because they take it out.” Eighth grade students spoke in a matter-of-fact manner about “review game” questions coming directly from the test. Class notes were unimportant, as the “review game” covered everything students needed to know for the test.

Along their K-12 journey, students had not engaged in independent note-taking or self-initiated study.

In the researcher's opinion, as teachers were providing students with test content in the form of ready-made notes and review sheets, students were not required to engage in self-initiated study that might encourage them to deal with the text at a higher-cognitive level.

Smith (1959) explained studying as strategies that were used when the purpose was to do something with the content that was read (Smith, 1959). As opposed to memorization of notes or review sheets, Vacca (1996) stated that "doing something" with the text meant putting strategies to good use by applying them towards purposeful ends. These students were not required to "do something" with the text content, they only had to memorize teacher-created notes that were prepared and given to them. Even in fifth grade, the study material was often produced for students so they were not required to create it on their own.

Studying is a reflective and unhurried process (Vacca, 1996). Vacca (1996) stated that lack of discipline and patience with print was probably one reason so few adolescents and young adults studied effectively on their own in secondary schools and colleges. Based on the voices of students, the researchers believed that one reason these students failed to engage in self-initiated, independent study was simply that it was unnecessary. Even as early as fifth grade, students were supplied with ready-made study materials and teachers engaged them in "review games" encompassing most, if not all of the test content. As these students moved through grades five, eight, and eleven, they were not shown how to study, but they were also not required to study. They were able to perform relatively well on tests that were structured to fit the study materials teachers distributed in class. Aside from the students who took the initiative to study on their own, many of these students never really leaned to study or "do something" with text content.

If these students needed to study or "do something" with text on their own, would they prove successful? In the researcher's opinion, as students progressed along their K-12 journey, studying should become more than just memorization of teacher-created materials.

Based on student voices, classroom practices for studying included providing them with ready-made materials that were basically “carbon copies” of the test. In the researcher’s opinion, students could not be expected to want to study, or learn strategies for studying, under current classroom practices. As students were only expected to know specific information, there was no reason to extend concepts or understanding in a critical way.

Vacca (1996) stated that teachers had a right to expect students to study a subject, and a responsibility to show them how to do it. In the researcher’s opinion, not only did the teacher have a responsibility to show students how to study, but also to engage in classroom practices that supported giving them a reason to do so. Reflection on the voices of fifth grade students across the district continued with the last section entitled *Content Areas*. For this section, the second question encompassed types of writing students participated in for all subject areas. The six categories included: a) personal or journal responses: b) question and answer responses c) summaries d) essays e) research reports and f) other.

Across the district, fifth graders reported that they never wrote journal or personal response entries. They were consistent in saying that journal writing was done in the “lower grades” but “not anymore.” Students equated journal or personal responses with “fun writing.” They said they never wrote in that way “anymore because they were older now.”

Fifth grade focus groups across the district reported writing question and answer responses for many different subject areas. Reading, science, and social studies were mentioned most frequently.

No matter the subject area, question and answer responses were often looked upon by teachers as homework or “busy work”, rather than an opportunity to develop critical skills.

Even question and answer responses in content areas were mechanical as students explained that teachers often told them to “reread” or “look back in the book” to find the “answer.” Expectations for question and answer assignments also were limited as teachers sometimes even told students the exact paragraph or page number where the “answer” could be found. Fifth graders were not taught or required to produce elaborate responses for question and answer assignments in any subject area. These students viewed literal information taken directly from the text as a sufficient “answer.”

Every fifth grade focus group spoke of writing essays for class. Whether it was in reading, science or social studies, the students were familiar with teachers’ procedures for “the worst writing of all”-essays. Instead of the essay acting as a vehicle for students to make sense of their own learning, students described the essay as simply “the question at the end of the science or social studies test.” Most of the fifth graders spoke about essay writing on content area tests, like any other matching or multiple-choice item. The fifth-graders often knew both the essay question and answer ahead of time. It was common for teacher to tell the students prior to the test. “You just memorize it and then write it for the test.” These words were surprisingly familiar across fifth grades in the district.

Only one focus group spoke of specific criteria and models that were used in class when writing essays. The other focus groups seemed to view the essay as merely another test question to be memorized, rather than a writing experience. Most fifth graders were also clear about the fact that including one’s own thoughts, opinions, or ideas within the essay was unimportant.

“You do not need to put in your own opinions. You will still get a really good grade.”

Several focus groups mentioned writing of summaries in response to narratives read in class. “We do a lot of summaries.” Students described summaries as “a shorter version of the story,” and said they were usually written right after the reading of the selection in class.

In contrast to summaries, research reports were uncommon in fifth grade. Only one focus group told of completing research as a requirement for a library project in the class. Fifth graders in every focus group mentioned writing for the category of “other” on the checklist. The students used different terms such as “performance task,” “open-ended questions,” and “prompts” when they referred to PSSA writing. Every focus group talked of “practicing” for the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Test (PSSA) by responding to writing prompts in class. Some students even articulated detailed strategies they had learned to help them produce quality writing.. They all seemed to have a different procedure or “strategy” for putting text and personal ideas together in response to prompts. Even so, it appeared that the students viewed PSSA writing as an isolated activity and they did not apply this knowledge when writing in other situations. One fifth grade girl said, “We only use this for PSSA writing. This is really the only time we need it.”

Only two of the focus groups mentioned narrative, persuasive, and informational writing for the “other” category on the checklist. These fifth graders said that they wrote this way in English, but seemed to only view the instruction as preparation for the district writing test. One boy said, “The teacher shows us how to do persuasive and information writing in English class so we are prepared for those writing assessments that pop up out of nowhere.”

Langer and Applebee (1987) stated: “Put simply, in the whole range of academic course work, American children do not write frequently enough, and the reading and writing tasks that are given do not require them to think deeply enough. (p. 4)

Along their K-12 reading journey, many of the students told of limited expectations for writing assignments. Instead of writing to understand what they were learning in the content areas, students in fifth and eighth, and grade were often writing memorized or prepared responses taken directly from the text.

As early as fifth grade, students said they were no longer writing journals or personal responses. The fifth grade students told of summary writing that happened regularly following narrative selections in reading class. As they were no longer creating personal responses, it seemed that fifth graders were now engaged in more summaries, or as one student explained, “telling back what you read.”

Murray (1980) explained that writers engaged in a process of exploration and clarification when they approached the task of meaning making. Even so, fifth graders told of classroom practices where answers to content area essay questions were “chanted” or memorized. In the researcher’s opinion, students were not encouraged to make meaning from text content when writing, because it was already done for them. Vacca (1996) stated that when students were writing to learn in content area classrooms they were involved in a process of manipulating, clarifying, finding, and synthesizing ideas. In eighth grade, the students in the focus group said they were no longer even writing essays in the content areas. While fifth graders told of prepared class responses, eighth grade students said, “The teachers cross essays out on tests. On every test we take we never have to do them. They are either crossed out or they tell you that you don’t do them for the test.” According to the students, only those in advanced classes received instruction, and produced extensive pieces of writing.

In eleventh grade, advanced students continued to receive instruction and write extensively. Those not enrolled in advanced classes tended to hold a negative view of themselves in regard writing. One boy said, “We know we can’t really write well. We know it would never be good enough for college.” Even so, by high school the “advanced” and “regular” students were adamant about the fact that they were both expected to perform well on formal writing assignments, such as essay tests in English and History class.

The eleventh graders in regular classes talked of not performing well on essay tests and writing assignments. Many of these students were unsure of exactly how to make improvements. The students thought that a lack of specific criteria, and feedback on their writing might have contributed to their difficulties. One girl said, “When I get my paper back it says, ‘You are not telling me enough. You are only giving me a summary. You are not telling me enough.’ I think, what aren’t I telling you? I don’t know. I don’t know and you don’t tell me. Basically, we have to figure it out and hope it’s ok.”

As early as fifth grade, the focus of content area writing appeared to become a product of the text itself rather than a creation of students’ understanding of the text. When speaking about her teacher’s coaching for memorization of the essay one girl in the focus group said, “People still get a two of five on it. Even with all the practice people still end up getting a low score.” Many high school students were still struggling in their attempts to write in this way. As they continued to write for the “correct” response and not to communicate their own understanding, these high school students “still end up getting a low score” as well. ***K-12 Framework for Documentation of Student Opinions Reflection on the Process The Initial Visits: “You Want to Talk to Us?”***

The process of documenting the voices of fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders began with an initial visit, several weeks prior to the conversations with focus groups at each school. The original purpose of the first visit was to explain the study to the students, and distribute the school district permission form stating the time and date of the conversation. A briefing on the Pittsburgh Pirates Reading Partnership, was also part of the plan. Establishment of an innovative classroom partnership had allowed for every focus group participant to receive two tickets for attendance at a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball game during the summer of 2004 (See Appendix E). All of these details were explained to students during the course of the brief introductory visit.

To the researcher's surprise, the initial meeting proved just as important, if not as important as the focus group conversation itself. First, the initial visit was an opportunity for the researcher to observe the students' reaction and provide a forum to allow for questioning. Students were serious about wanting to understand and participate in the conversation. At the initial visit, students listened intently, and displayed a maturity beyond their years. Even the fifth graders were focused throughout the duration of the entire meeting.

Observing student reaction allowed for an additional opportunity of confirming a genuine interest in their opinions. The visit became a time to confirm that as the facilitator of the focus group, the researcher was genuinely interested in what the students had to say. It was crucial that the students realize that the researcher really wanted to hear from them, and provide an accurate representation of their voice. The initial visit became significant in that the researcher was able to witness enthusiasm, but also a sense of uncertainty. There were definite traces of doubt in the voices of these students as they spoke of their role in the focus group conversation. The students were surprised that an educator wanted to listen to their opinions about learning. This became even more obvious when one boy spoke up during an initial meeting. He said, "You mean you want to talk to us? Just talk to us about learning? Are you sure it's not a test that is graded or anything?"

This sentiment was a common theme throughout all of the initial visits. Students were excited, but they needed reassurance about the value, the educator would place on their opinions. The rapport that the researcher established with the students was crucial in convincing them of that the importance of talking openly about K-12 learning. Providing the opportunity for students to ask questions at the initial visit allowed them to take ownership of the process. Even though some of these issues were reviewed briefly at the start of the focus group conversation, the initial visit clarified and reinforced the importance of their opinions.

It reinforced the value of their opinions to the most important people of all, the students themselves. *Focus Group Conversations: “I have a lot to say, but I never told anybody. Nobody has ever asked.”*

The “initial visits” with each focus group were now viewed as a necessary step in the documentation process. In fact, it was not until afterwards that the significance of the introductory meetings were fully realized. Not only did they provide an opportunity to establish a rapport, but also allowed for more time in the focus group conversation. Without the need for extensive introductions, students were comfortable interacting right away. Conversations in all the focus groups began almost immediately as students were ready and eager to share their thoughts about learning through reading and writing. The checklist provided an impetus for initiating conversation in each focus group. Most of the conversations began with comments from the two to three students sitting in closest proximity to the researcher. The initial response from the “closest” students usually lead to a reaction or comment from the others. The questions and categories on the checklist were effective in that students responded easily. At times, the researcher used background statements for the student draw upon, in order to encourage a more specific response. If students were reserved or reluctant to offer input, the researcher probed with additional statements. These statements included, “What do you think about that?” Do you have an opinion to share?” or “What is your view about that?” The students who were somewhat reserved in comparison to the others usually offered thoughtful and insightful responses when they finally spoke.

In most of the focus groups, the concern was not how to encourage student responses, but how to ensure inclusion of every response. In order to hear every comment, it became necessary to circulate the focus group. Each student was given an opportunity to offer a comment before any other response was made. The circulation ensured that every student’s voice was heard.

It also prevented two or three students from dominating the conversation. When student opinions sounded similar the researcher probed further. Even though most of the students offered similar opinions, they were always able to back them up with specific examples or an additional explanation. A further probe requesting, that students, “back up” their opinions, worked to reduce bias. A simple “yes” or “no” was not sufficient, and students were always able to provide “back up” for their comments. In fact, the students usually volunteered to “back up” their statements without any additional probing.

Focus Group Checklist: “Are We Done Already?”

Initial visits with each focus group allowed the researcher and documenter to move through the checklist in a 45 minute time frame. The focus group checklist provided guidelines for the amount of time allotted to *Teacher-Assigned Reading* (see Appendix A), *Read and Interact with Text* (see Appendix B), and *Content Areas* (see Appendix C). All three sections were limited to a 15 minute time frame. The categories adhering to each question acted as a springboard for the conversation. Time constraints were necessary for completion of the focus group checklist. Students commented on, and provided elaborate responses to each question. Adhering to the framework of the checklist ensured that each focus group had an opportunity to offer input about *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, *Read and Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas*. Many of the students needed encouragement in order to move to the next category, question, or section. In every focus group, students were reluctant to end the conversation. When the 45 minute time frame had expired one girl was disappointed. She said, “Are we done already?” The students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade had much to say, and they clearly enjoyed having the opportunity to do so.

K-12 Framework: Process for Documentation of Student Opinions

The following stages illustrate a summarized process for documentation of student opinions in any subject area. The K-12 framework can be utilized for district-wide, school-wide, or even specific content areas at the elementary, middle, or high school level. The framework of the focus group checklist can be modified slightly in order to fit a documentation process for mathematics as well.

Stage one: Initial Visits

The first stage of documentation begins with an initial visit or brief introductory meeting that include the students who will participate in the focus group, a facilitator, and a documenter. This five to ten minute “visit” with the students provides a forum for introduction, an explanation of the conversation, and an opportunity for students to pose questions. Providing students with a short period of time to learn about the purpose and procedures of the conversation allow them to take ownership of the process from the beginning. This is also an important time for establishment of rapport with students in each of the focus groups. Refer to pages 221 and 222 for a reflection on the initial visits of this study.

Stage two: Focus Groups

The second stage of documentation includes meetings with the focus groups at the students’ respective schools. The initial visits prove to be “time savers” in that an introduction and explanation of the procedures take place beforehand. The facilitator and documenter can then follow the outline of the three sections on the focus group checklist within a 45 minute time frame. Refer to page 73 for further explanation of the checklist. Without referencing names, the documenter and facilitator record the exact words of students as they respond to and comment on questions during the course of the conversation.

Stage three: Review and Reflection of the Focus Group Checklist

The third stage of documentation encompasses a review of student comments for each section of the checklist. A reflection on *Teacher-Assigned Reading, Read and Interact with Text, and Content Areas* includes notes from both the documenter and the facilitator's focus group checklist. This can occur immediately after each focus group conversation, or at a specific time scheduled later in the week. It is important that the facilitator and documenter meet together in order to review reflect, upon, and combine notes from the conversation soon after each meeting.

Stage four: Instructional and Curriculum Recommendations

The fourth stage of documentation entails instructional and curriculum recommendations based on student voices. From the review in stage three, specific suggestions will be offered to highlight modifications and additions for program and classroom practice.

CHAPTER V SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Listening to the voices of students along their K-12 journey allowed the researcher valuable insight for gaining an understanding of their reading and writing experiences. Talking with students at different “stops” along their reading journey provided an in depth “picture” of how teachers supported them in achievement of proficiency and advancement of critical skills.

At fifth, eighth, and even eleventh grade students were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about participating in focus group conversations. Each grade level offered significant input about how students learned through reading and writing in all subject areas. The “snapshot” of intermediate, middle, and high school focus groups enabled the researcher to reflect on the K-12 “picture” of learning through reading and writing in the district.

As the researcher and documenter conducted the focus groups, students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade were engaged in conversations about how they learned through reading and writing. Prior to the conversations, the researcher visited each focus group in order to explain the study and distribute school district permission forms (see Appendix D). The total number of participants in each focus group ranged from 6 to 9. Conversations lasted approximately 45 minutes, except for the researcher’s own class, that extended to a one hour time frame.

Fifth grade students at each of the five elementary schools in the district took part in focus group conversations. In addition to this, eighth grade students at the middle school, and eleventh grade students at the high school participated in a focus group conversation. Conversations at each grade level followed an outline of the focus group checklist that was comprised of three sections. Framework questions coincided with each of the sections that included *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, *Read/Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas*.

Beginning with *Teacher-Assigned Reading* (see Appendix A), students in the focus groups engaged in talk about what teachers did prior to reading assignments, and how teachers showed them ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate text. The next section entitled *Read/Interact with Text* (see Appendix B) initiated conversation about what students did when they had difficulty making meaning of text assignments and how teachers showed them ways to respond to question and answer assignments.

The final section of the checklist, *Content Areas*, (see Appendix C) encouraged talk about how teachers showed students ways to study, and the different types of writing they did in all of their classes. There were several categories connected to the three sections of the focus group checklist. Each category became a vehicle for students' voices to be heard, and each of these allowed the story of their K-12 journey to be told. Focus group conversations at the elementary, middle and high school were organized as individual profiles. The Framework Report provided a "picture" of the K-12 journey by looking across grade levels to highlight important implications for program evaluation and classroom practice.

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

Following an outline of the focus group checklist, the researcher reported on conclusions of both the individual school profiles and the Framework Report. Listening to the voices of students at fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade enabled the researcher to reflect across grade levels in the district. The K-12 reflection allowed for determination of significant trends and patterns of the students' reading journey as they moved through the intermediate, middle, and high school grades.

Teacher-Assigned Reading

Beginning with *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, classroom practices consisted of regular background building for fifth grade students.

Activation of prior knowledge was done in a variety of ways including discussion or teacher “talk,” storytelling, text preview, and pre-reading activities. In the middle and high school grades there was a distinctive difference in the classroom procedures for *Teacher-Assigned Reading*.

As reported by the eighth and eleventh grade students, building of background no longer occurred for any subject area. There was no discussion or any other activation of students’ prior knowledge before reading. Classroom procedures for teacher-assigned reading consisted of giving a reading assignment and then discussing the material afterwards. Within the transition from intermediate to middle school, classroom practices and procedures changed significantly. While the fifth graders were exposed to a multitude of background building activities, middle and high school students reported none.

As these students progressed on their K-12 journey there was a definite decrease in the practice of background building. The idea of activating prior knowledge appeared to lose its significance when the students entered middle and high school. Whether this was a result of teachers believing that practices for building of background were not particularly useful for that age group, or simply a lack of awareness, the absence was apparent.

As the students progressed through middle and high school they gained more experiences and had a greater pool of knowledge to draw upon. Even so, there was a diminishing in the practice of activating students’ prior knowledge for establishment of personal connections with the text.

It also appeared that student’s attitudes and habits towards reading assignments changed drastically during the middle and high school years. Many of the students reported only “skimming” reading material for completion of assignments. As students in middle and high school lacked the background necessary to form strong personal connections with text, this may have also contributed to their lack of interest in the text.

Knowing that prior knowledge and curiosity were closely linked, the absence of background building activities could have definitely impacted their level of interest in the reading assignment. Students were definitely gaining more experiences on their reading journey as they “traveled” the intermediate, middle, and high school years. In spite of this, classroom practices were not always utilizing students’ background knowledge. As many students reported not reading the assignments given in middle and high school, classroom practices that made use of prior knowledge might support students by helping to create interest in and make strong personal connections with texts they were assigned to read.

The change in classroom procedures that included a decrease in background building, may have contributed to the compensating behaviors of these students. In fact, classroom procedures in both middle and high school may have even allowed for an overall increase in compensating behaviors.

Middle and high school students performed successfully in many classes without even reading the assignments. As classroom discussion typically proceeded most homework assignments, students were able to ascertain important information by simply listening to a few classmates and their teacher summarizes the reading material for them. Whereas the fifth graders were given support to help them establish personal connections and become interested in text assignments, eighth and eleventh graders were not.

Continuing with *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, classroom practices for teaching of vocabulary consisted of definitional methods for fifth grade students. Instead of developing depth of meaning, students either memorized new words or simply relearned words already familiar to them. Even in the elementary setting, teaching of multiple meanings and enriching the use of context for words, did not occur. Students failed to acquire many of the new or unfamiliar word meanings, as they were never provided with opportunities to use and apply them.

Teaching of vocabulary in the middle school was also limited to definitional methods. Except for sentences, there were limited opportunities for application of the content-specific words learned in class. As students progressed on their K-12 journey, there was a decrease in the amount of attention given to learning of new words. In middle school, students reported writing definitions in several classes. By eleventh grade, students were only required to write definitions for English class. As students moved through middle and high school students indicated a decrease in the overall number of words they were required to learn.

In addition to this, students' voices indicated that teachers were not always enriching their knowledge of words or encouraging an interest in them. Even as students were expected to acquire a larger vocabulary than any preceding generation, attention to the learning of words decreased in every class, except English, as they progressed on their K-12 journey.

Skills instruction was provided in isolation, and was not connected with the reading and writing tasks that fifth grade students encountered each day. Without realizing an application to reading tasks, students viewed skilled instruction as repetitive and unnecessary. Instead of just teaching the skills, classroom practices needed to offer the support of showing students how to apply them. A connection between the instruction and the use of reading skills would allow teachers to more closely monitor students' progress and success.

Teaching of comprehension strategies through think-alouds did not occur in fifth grade. Instead of teachers modeling for construction of meaning, the students were often required to provide summaries or retellings of material read in class. Based on student voices, teachers checked for comprehension, but did not provide instruction for comprehension.

Teacher think-alouds for modeling of "fix-up" strategies were rare in fifth grade. Instead of teachers showing them how to work through difficult parts of the text, the students themselves were made to be responsible for the task.

Instruction for “reading beyond the lines” or critical reading, was nonexistent in fifth grade as well. Teacher think-alouds for the modeling of critical skills including comprehension, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation never occurred. Based on student voices, teachers did not provide instruction for “reading beyond the lines” but they were required to perform tasks that encompassed an application of those skills.

Along their K-12 journey, it did not appear that these students were taught to develop or use critical skills. They were not even provided with instruction for “fix-up” strategies. As early as fifth grade students were expected to “figure it out” when faced with tasks that required utilization of critical reading and writing skills. Except for instruction in advanced classes, teachers did not model use of critical skills or show them how to read and write in this way. The teaching of comprehension and other critical skills appeared to change as students entered middle and high school. Students enrolled in “advanced” classes received detailed instruction for development and use of the critical skills, while those in “regular” classes received none. Students in “regular” classes were basically on their own when faced with critical reading and writing tasks.

When students moved into middle and high school, the teaching of critical reading and writing occurred regularly in the Advanced Placement classes. Though not all, many of the students who had managed to “figure it out” were in these classes already. In addition to this, many of these students were already skilled at comprehending, interpreting, synthesizing, and evaluating text. While the advanced students enriched their critical skills with instruction and support, the students in “regular” classes who needed to develop and use these skills received none.

Read/Interact with Text

As students moved along their K-12 journey, classroom practices did not always support a need for them to reread, or even to read difficult text assignments. Across the district, most of the fifth graders reread and requested support so as not to “fall behind” or “miss” important information. A realization that teachers ensured communication of important information accounted for a major change in the middle and high school years.

When faced with a difficult text, most fifth graders across the district reread in order to construct meaning. Rereading and requesting of help from the teacher was done often as fifth grade students wanted to ensure that important text information was not “missed.” Though most of the fifth graders made efforts to construct meaning when faced with difficult text, a few were beginning to compensate. As early as fifth grade, some of these students indicated a reliance on teachers to do the “rereading” for them. Especially with difficult content assignments, teachers provided a “review” in class or even reread the text with the class. In fifth grade, the “review” consisted of a rereading or summarization of the expository material. When teachers reread or summarized expository text immediately after the assignment, students learned to depend on them for construction of meaning. This happened most often with content-area texts in social studies and science.

As students progressed along their K-12 journey, there was a gradual realization that most reading assignments would end up “summarized” in class discussion. In both middle and high school, if the text assignments were perceived as “difficult,” the teacher could be counted on to work through the material and “reread” for them. The rereading and even the reading of assignments became a function of teacher expectation. Advanced students were held accountable for reading assignments with frequent quizzes and open-ended assessments.

Students in regular and remedial classes were provided with class discussions that usually entailed teachers identifying, summarizing, and even telling of important text information. As these students learned to rely on class discussion and teachers' summaries of text assignments, they were no longer concerned with the difficulty of the reading material. With the exception of students enrolled in advanced classes, it was not necessary or expected that students read class assignments. It appeared that the students were no longer held accountable for even comprehending the material on their own.

Classroom practices for teacher modeling of question and answer responses consisted of information found in the text. As early as fifth grade, these students were taught that answers to questions were found primarily in the text. They were not taught to utilize other sources of information or draw upon and incorporate personal experiences. Instead, most of these fifth grade students relied on the text for identification of correct answers. Even as students reported an absence of scaffolding or modeling for construction of question and answer responses, they enlisted support from teachers in other ways. Students requested help and direction from their teachers when questions were difficult, or when they failed to understand them. Based on student voices, instead of offering guidance, teachers often told them to "reread" or "look back in the book" for an answer.

If further support was requested, sometimes teachers even directed students to an exact place in the text where the "answer" was found. In fifth grade, classroom practices for question and answer responses reinforced the idea that answers to questions were primarily based on information found in the text. With teacher support consisting of references to answers contained in the text, these students were taught to view the textbook as the most important, and the only viable source for location of a correct response.

When students entered middle and high school, again there was a change in the practice of teacher modeling for question and answer responses. Eighth and eleventh grade students in advanced English and History received detailed modeling for construction and elaboration of their responses.

As students in regular classes were not offered specific criteria or support, they relied on skimming of material and writing of answers based on information taken directly from the text. In addition to the difference in instruction, the expectations for question and answer responses were remarkably different for both “advanced” and “regular” students. Advanced classes offered instruction from the beginning of the year for the writing of exemplary responses. Students were given models of “advanced” responses and even checklists to guide them when writing. With no formal instruction or criteria about how to complete question and answer responses, students in regular classes offered minimal text information, if any, to fulfill their assignments. The idea of a “correct” answer in the text may have also contributed to some of the compensating behaviors of middle and high school students when dealing with question and answer responses.

Along their K-12 reading journey, most students were not provided with instruction for learning of the thought processes necessary for construction of question and answer responses past the literal level. Except for the advanced students, who may have already possessed the required skills, instruction was limited to location of “answers” in the text.

From elementary school on, students needed both instruction and support for learning of different ways to answer questions. Classroom practices of teachers in grades K-12 also needed to provide instruction for responses that supported more than just literal information taken directly from the text. By eleventh grade the responses of all students needed to become more elaborate instead of becoming compensatory behaviors that fulfilled minimal requirements of the assignment.

As students moved through grades K-12, classroom practices needed to support not only the advanced students, but students enrolled in regular classes as well. In addition to this, specific instruction and criteria needed to reach a multitude of subjects in middle and high school, instead of being limited to only classes of advanced English and History.

Content Areas

Beginning with Content Areas, classroom practices for studying consisted of memorization of teacher-created materials. In fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade teachers did not engage in scaffolding of study or note-taking strategies. Even as early as fifth grade, students were provided with ready-made study guides, review sheets, and notes for tests. Instead of learning to take notes or to create study materials on their own, fifth grade students relied on the teacher for determination of important information in the text. Students were not taught to deal with the text in an in-depth, or critical way, they were simply told what was important. Even the “review games” that both fifth and eighth graders engaged in consisted of similar, if not the exact questions from the test.

Along their K-12 journey, these students never learned to “do something” with text content. Unless they wanted to, they were not required to do anything with text content in regard to self-initiated study. Through grades five, eight, and eleven, students were not provided with scaffolding for note taking or other study materials, but they were also not required to produce them. Aside from the students who took the initiative to create notes or study materials on their own, these students relied on teachers for determination of important information. This reinforced the expectation for learning only literal or specific information from the text. From elementary school on, students needed support for learning how to study independently. This was not limited to memorization of teacher-made study materials, but required that students “doing something” with the text content on their own.

Along their K-12 journey, classroom practices needed to support students in learning how to study rather than simply telling them what to study. Continuing with *Content Areas*, classroom practices consisted of limited expectations for most writing assignments. As these students progressed on their K-12 reading journey, the focus of writing moved away from personal responses that encouraged expression of students' thoughts, views, and opinions. Instead of personal response pieces, students in fifth grade were writing more summaries or retellings of text.

For question and answer assignments fifth graders were not taught or required to produce elaborate responses. Guidance and support was limited to reinforcement, of the text as the primary source of information for answers. Especially in content areas, students were often writing a prepared or memorized response, rather than writing to understand what they had learned. Students were not always encouraged to make meaning from text, as it was often done for them.

Classroom practices for content area essays consisted of teachers providing the question prior to the test, or even rehearsing a prepared response. Students were often directed to a specific place in the text for identification of an "answer." Instead of the essay acting as a vehicle for the understanding of text content, it became another place for reciting a memorized or partially prepared response. Except for the advanced classes, students in middle school said that essays were not required and they were directed by teachers to "cross them out." Even so, eighth graders who were enrolled in advanced classes received instruction and produced extensive pieces for essays in English and History. In eleventh grade, the advanced students continued to refine their essay writing with detailed instruction and guidance from their teachers.

In spite of this difference in instruction, the eleventh graders in both the regular and advanced classes were expected to perform well on formal writing assignments such as essay tests and reports. Most of these students were aware that their writing skills were lacking, though they were not aware of specific deficiencies. A lack of feedback on formal writing assignments may have contributed in some ways to their cycle of poor performance. In middle and high school, writing instruction needed to extend to all subject areas so that every student, not only those in advanced classes, received the necessary guidance and support.

On the K-12 journey, writing in the content areas became more of a product of the text itself rather than a creation of students' understanding of it. Over the years, as journal and personal response writing decreased students were never shown how to integrate their own ideas with content knowledge. For some of these students, writing along the K-12 journey became a continuous struggle for the "answer in the book" or the "memorized response" as opposed to their own understanding of what they had learned.

Classroom practices needed to support students as they learned to construct an understanding of the text through their own writing. Along the K-12 journey, content area writing needed to consist of much more than regurgitation of information from the text. Students in all classes, not just advanced English, needed to have the opportunity of instruction and support for producing pieces of writing that allowed them to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate their own learning.

For this case, a brief review of additional recommendations focused on the two purposes of the study. The first was a recommendation for utilization of the K-12 framework for documentation of students' opinions. Second, some recommendations and procedures based on K-12 voices of the students in this particular school district were offered.

Since one purpose was to document the K-12 reading journey, recommendations and procedures for the second part were based on the voices of the students as opposed to the framework itself.

Framework for Documentation of Student Opinions

For this case study, the K-12 documentation of reading and writing allowed students to voice opinions about their education. According to the students, their voice were never valued or even listened to by educators or parents alike. The students who participated in this K-12 documentation were enthusiastic, articulate, and very serious about communicating their experiences of learning to read and write in all subject areas.

As professors of teacher preparation programs, public school teachers, administrators, school officials, and even parents continuously searched for ways to improve education for all students, they had overlooked the most important and the most valuable source of all- the students themselves. In this era of accountability educators are faced with expectations and requirements of K-12 proficiency for each and every student. Since the reality is that every district and school is not created equal, establishment of a K-12 documentation framework was one way to begin evaluating how students in a particular school district were taught to read and write as they moved through grades K-12.

Utilization of the K-12 framework as one method of program evaluation would produce data specific to that particular school district so that the students themselves could help to improve classroom practices and ultimately raise achievement. Raising achievement for all students called for innovative ways of looking at the issues “from the inside out.” Students had that capability whereas educators were not capable of offering an “inside” perspective. As “customers” of the school district, the students deserved to have a place where their voices could be heard.

Implementation of a K-12 framework for documentation of students' opinions would provide a place where students' voices could be heard, valued, and most importantly used to help them all achieve proficiency. In contrast to traditional forms of assessment that were regularly used to determine student progress, the K-12 documentation determined the "progress" of the educational programs and practices attempting to instruct and support students on the most important journey of their lives. A journey that needed to be continuously improved, in order to match a higher standard of literacy in the world now, and in the years to come. Students' experiences of success on that journey would play a major role in determining the rest of their lives.

Framework Report of Student Voices

In order to provide opportunities for students to connect with text assignments in every subject area, a modification of classroom practices and procedures in both middle and high school would need to occur. Middle and high school teachers needed to utilize a variety of background building practices before reading assignments instead of just discussing them afterwards. It was not even enough for middle and high school teachers to have knowledge of the reading process, they needed to know how to use that knowledge to help maximize student's learning through reading and writing in every subject area.

Minimal requirements of only one or two reading courses may not be sufficient for middle and high school teachers to successfully apply specific reading practices in their particular content area. With support and direction from a literacy coach, middle and high school teachers would have opportunity to observe firsthand how to initiate practices and possibly even realize how they might enhance learning in their content area. If students had a desire to read the assignments, learning in that content area might also increase.

Successful implementation of practices would not only enhance reading and writing, but also the learning of content in every class from home economics to physics. The importance of providing opportunities for older students to make personal connections to text assignments and allowing the teacher to assess prior knowledge was highlighted with a statement made by an eleventh grade boy. He spoke enthusiastically about a background building activity that allowed him to analyze the lyrics of his favorite song. This was done in order to activate prior knowledge, before his class engaged in a week of reading, writing, and analyzing of poems. The high school student spoke of the background building activity with much enthusiasm, “If we had the chance to do stuff like that all the time, stuff we could really get into, that would be awesome. Analyzing the lyrics of my favorite songs gave me a whole new understanding of it. It made it easier when I had to do this with poems, and it even made me like some of them. I think it’s because I actually read them-really read them.”

Implications for Policy

For this case, students were able to tell their story of learning through reading and writing on their “journey” of a K-12 education system. Looking across grade levels for *Teacher-Assigned Reading*, *Read and Interact with Text*, and *Content Areas*, the voices of the students told of a reading “journey” that was very different from one that offered opportunities for proficiency and advancement of critical skills for all students.

If educators viewed students as the “customers” of the school district, their voices reflected what they believed they were experiencing on their K-12 journey. If educators valued students’ voices and believed in their perceptions, the old adage “the customer is always right” definitely applied. An issue that needed to be considered was how the school district intended to handle the dichotomy between what the students were saying about K-12 reading and writing, and the

Standards of reading and writing that all students were supposed to have an opportunity to achieve. K-12 programs in every school district were required to align curriculum to state standards. If standards were aligned with a district's curriculum, the instruction for enabling students to meet them was intended to be delivered through each school's K-12 education system. Addressing the difference between what students said happened on their K-12 journey, and what was supposed to happen needed to be dealt with by school officials, administrators, and teachers in the district.

In addition to this, it was necessary to consider how the significance of reading and writing was communicated, especially for middle and high school students. According to the students who participated in the focus groups, they found many ways to succeed, and sometimes quite well, while only having to deal with text content, and assignments on a literal level.

Classroom practices often supported students' compensatory behaviors in that summative discussions, homework assignments, and even ready-made study materials allowed them to work in this way. When faced with essay tests or other critical tasks of reading and writing, students often struggled to perform successfully. Instruction and expectations for classroom tasks did not always match these higher-level assessments. Even though they had never been taught to read and write in a critical way, students in "regular" classes were expected to do so on essay tests and other writing assignments.

Establishment of clear expectations for the teaching of reading and writing also needed to be considered. As most of the advanced students told of receiving detailed instruction and support for tasks of reading and writing, the others did not. This raised an issue of how to ensure that students in regular and remedial classes received instruction for reading and writing tasks that were similar to those provided to advanced students.

Another policy issue encompassed how to use feedback from the students to determine exactly where they were not provided with opportunities for learning to do the things they were expected to be able to do, in regard to reading and writing.

In this case, K-12 instruction was not keeping pace with the transitional “reading to learn” stage. Reading and writing instruction for question and answer responses, studying, and even writing did not always support intermediate, middle, and high school students as they transitioned into that crucial stage of reading to learn. Except for the advance middle and high school students, the others were basically on their own in regard to learning through reading and writing. A K-12 system where the learning of content in a particular subject area was done in the context of teaching critical reading and writing skills was long overdue.

If students are to remain competitive in the changing world and workplace, school districts needed to consider establishment of high performance K-12 systems of reading and writing, tailored to the needs of all their students, not just those fortunate enough to enjoy an “advanced” education.

APPENDIX A

TEACHER-ASSIGNED READING

Focus Group Checklist

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

**A) Building of background with discussion
or teacher “talk”**

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

B) Building of background with storytelling

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

C) Building of background with questions

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

**D) Building of background with a teacher preview
or survey of the text**

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

E) Building of background with pre-reading activities

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

F) Vocabulary instruction _____

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading/ 5th grade

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

G) Skills instruction

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

**Question 1: What does the teacher do before
a reading assignment in any subject area?**

H) Other _____

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show the students ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate ideas or concepts in a text?

A) Think-aloud for construction of meaning from text

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show you ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate ideas or concepts in a text?

B) Think-aloud for “trouble spots” or difficult parts of the text

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show you ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, or evaluate ideas or concepts in a text?

C) Think-aloud for “reading beyond the lines” or interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation of text

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

I. Teacher-Assigned Reading

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show you ways to comprehend, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate a text?

D) Other _____

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

APPENDIX B

READ AND INTERACT WITH TEXT

Focus Group Checklist

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 1: What do you do when you have difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment?

A) Reread the assignment

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

**Question 1: What do you do when you have
difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment?**

B) “Skim over” the assignment

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

**Question 1: What do you do when you have
difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment?**

C) Request help from the teacher

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 1: What do you do when you have difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment?

D) Listen to the class discussion.

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 1: What do you do when you have difficulty making meaning of a reading assignment?

E) Not read at all

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

**Question 2: How does the teacher show the class
ways to answer questions about a reading assignment?**

F) Other _____

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show the class ways to answer questions about a reading assignment?

A) Teacher refers students to the text for answering of the questions

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show the class ways to answer questions about a reading assignment?

B) Teacher models construction of response using text(s)

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show the class ways to answer questions about a reading assignment?

C) Teacher models construction of a response using both the text and personal knowledge _____

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

Question 2: How does the teacher show the class ways to answer questions about reading assignments?

D) Teacher models construction of responses using writing samples and other criteria (checklists and rubrics)

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you to become more interested and want to read the assignment?

II. Read/Interact with Text

School _____

**Question 2: How does the teacher show the class
ways to answer questions about a reading assignment?**

E) Other

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you better understand what you read?

How does this/would this help you become more interested and want to read the assignment?

APPENDIX C

CONTENT AREAS

Focus Group Checklist

III. Content Areas/ 5th grade

School _____

Question 1: How does the teacher show the class ways to study?

A) Teacher models note-taking procedures

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas/ 5th grade

School _____

Question 1: How does the teacher show the class ways to study?

B) Teacher models completion of study guides or other materials

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas/ 5th grade

School _____

Question 1: How does the teacher show the class ways to study?

C) Teacher initiates study or discussion groups

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas/ 5th grade

School _____

**Question 1: How does the teacher show the class
ways to study?**

D) Other

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas

School _____

Question 2: What types of writing does the class participate in?

A) Personal or journal responses

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas

School _____

Question 2: What types of writing does the class participate in?

B) Question/answer responses

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas

School _____

Question 2: What types of writing does the class participate in?

C) Summaries

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas

School _____

Question 2: What types of writing does the class participate in?

D) Essays-response to essay questions

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas

School _____

Question 2: What types of writing does the class participate in?

E) Research Reports-about a specific topic or idea

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

III. Content Areas

School _____

Question 2: What types of writing does the class participate in?

F) Other _____

Student Comments:

How does this/would this help you to better understand or know the material you are learning about?

APPENDIX D

SCHOOL DISTRICT PERMISSION FORM



Plum Borough School District

**Dr. Theodore Peshkopia, Principal
Holiday Park Elementary School
4795 Havana Drive
Pittsburgh, PA 15239
412- 795-4430**

Dear Parent,

Your child has been asked to participate in an informal educational conversation to discuss their experience of learning to read in the Plum Borough School District. The purpose of the conversation is to gain insight from students by listening to their comments about reading. It is important to hear from the students themselves in order to continue providing *them with* exceptional literacy experiences. This is a part of my doctoral program at the University of Pittsburgh. No students or teachers will be identified by name as the content of the conversation will be summarized based on overall group input.

On _____ six students will meet with me for about 45 minutes during the school day to talk about reading. As part of the Pittsburgh Pirates Reading Partnership the students participating in the reading conversation will receive two tickets to a baseball game during the summer of 2004.

There are only six openings for participation at each school in the district.

Confirmation for students to be part of the reading discussion will be given in the order that permission forms are returned to me. If you allow your child to participate please sign the attached form and return to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. You can also return the form to your child's classroom teacher in the self addressed envelope. If you have any questions please call me at (412) 795-4430 (Holiday Park School) or (724) 733-1416 (Home). Thank you for making reading an important part of your child's life.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Clinton

Holiday Park School Teacher

*If your child would like to participate in Conversations about Reading please return both the letter and the form below in the enclosed self addressed stamped envelope by mail or to your classroom teacher no later than _____

My child _____ has permission to take part in the reading conversation.

Signature of Parent

APPENDIX E

INCENTIVE LETTER



PNC Park at North Shore • 115 Federal Street •

Pittsburgh PA 15212 • 412.323.5000

www.pittsburghpirates.com

Dear Pirates Fan,

CONGRATULATIONS! Courtesy of the Pittsburgh Pirates, you have won **two (2) Grandstand seat:** tickets to any mutually agreed upon 2004 regular season Pirates game at PNC Park. You may select any Monday through Thursday game, with the exclusion of interleague games.

Mailing address: _____

Prize Winner Tickets

Pirates Ticket Office

PNC Park

115 Federal Street

Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Email address:

Phone number (day):

(evening)

Date of the selected game:

First Choice:

Second Choice:

Third Choice:

If you would like to purchase additional seats, please let us know how many tickets you want to purchase and include the appropriate credit card information requested below:

Number of additional tickets (each ticket is \$16.00):

Credit card information:

(Type of credit card)

(credit card number) .

(exp. date)

(name on credit card)

Check number:

please make check payable to the Pittsburgh

Pirates

Once your order is filled, we will mail your tickets directly to the address you provided. If we receive this form within ten days of your selected game, your tickets will be left at the PNC Park Will Call Window. We will contact you via phone with. Confirmation of your game and instructions on how to pick up your tickets.

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