# CHANGES IN PRESERVICE TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF THE READING PROCESS: A FOCUS ON COMPREHENSION

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## Introduction

For a variety of reasons, the general public, numerous national commissions, many teacher educators, and in Ohio, the State Department of Education are considering a reconceptualization of teacher education programs. This restructuring is being done in response to the belief that the quality of American education has been declining.

Perhaps in some instances we, as teacher educators, have not appropriately prepared preservice teachers. We have sometimes placed the cart before the horse. Preservice teachers may be asked, for instance, to memorize reading terminology before they understand what the reading process is. They may be asked to examine materials before they know the purposes for which the materials were designed. These activities may result in facts appearing to be detached and unrelated to what the learner already knows. When this type of instruction occurs, it is not surprising that some teachers are not adequately prepared to take on the responsibilities for educating elementary or high school students.

In order to gain a new perspective on the preparation of inservice teachers for the teaching of reading, studies have been done in which the conceptions of comprehension for elementary preservice teachers have been examined. Duffy and Metheny (1979) have measured elementary teachers' beliefs about reading, and Bawden, Buike, and Duffy (1978) have examined elementary teachers' conceptions of reading and the influence those conceptions have on instruction. Michelsen, Duffy, and LaSovage (1984) have examined how preservice elementary teachers conceptualize their knowledge of reading instruction. However, similar studies have not examined the conceptions of prospective secondary teachers who will be involved in the teaching of reading. The study reported in this paper investigates two preservice secondary English teachers' conceptions of reading, the nature of those conceptions and how conceptions change over the course of a ten week quarter. It is hoped that, by studying what happened with two students, insights can be gained so that future investigations can be planned that will have generalizability to the population of preservice English teachers.

## Background

The goals of our instruction of secondary preservice teachers are to provide opportunities for them to gain a theoretical understanding of the teaching/learning process, a grasp of current research on reading and reading instruction, to gain knowledge of the content to be taught, and to have experiences applying the theory and content in a variety of field experiences.

In planning a course of instruction, we, as instructors have examined research findings, talked with public school person-

nel, reviewed current materials and have reconstructed what we believe is important based on our own teaching experience and our educational philosophies. Our hope is that our preservice teachers will be influenced by what we have taught and that they will be competent teachers.

Recent research on teacher planning suggests that teachers do not focus their planning energy on writing objectives. Instead, teachers tend to focus on the content to be taught (Taylor, 1970; Zahorik, 1975; Peterson, Marx, and Clark, 1978). Based on the content, teachers plan activities and strategies taking into account students' interests and attitudes.

Additional research suggests that effective teachers are decision makers who engage in information processing (Shulman, 1975; Shulman & Elstein, 1975) and that there is a crucial link between teacher thought and teacher action. Teacher thought can exert a profound influence on what is taught, how it is taught, and ultimately on what is learned in schools (Clark & Yinger, 1977; Shavelson & Stern, 1981.)

The belief that a reading teacher's view of the reading process has an impact on instruction has long been a position of reading educators (McKee, 1967, Carroll and Chall, 1975; Cunningham, 1977). An individual's view of the reading process can influence all of the variables described above.

Tying together this recent research with our goal of providing quality instruction for preservice teachers leads to some interesting speculations, especially as one considers a course such as "Improving Reading in the Secondary School." First, are students learning to see the "big picture," the overarching concepts necessary in dealing with complex classroom problems? In other words, do they develop their own model of what reading is? Have we as instructors provided the setting in which this can occur? Second, are students able to integrate new knowledge into their model of reading based on the variety of experiences which they have? To what extent do preservice teachers apply in their field practicums what they have been taught in their reading methods courses? Have we encouraged them to be flexible enough to be open to new theoretical and practical suggestions for change? Third, and perhaps most basic, do differences in the models of reading result in different activities and interactions? Do models have an influence on what content is chosen thus having an effect on what is taught in secondary classrooms?

## Models of the Reading Process

The concept of a model of the reading/comprehending process is an intriguing one. It is a concept we believe needs to be investigated to ascertain what the power of models might be and whether models have an influence on what and how a teacher teaches.

The Nature of Models: Years ago, Singer (1970) suggested that models be organized into three categories. The first category would describe theories or procedures for teaching; the second would describe the processes used as one reads; the third would describe the skills and activities required for reading. These categories make the task of looking at reading more manageable: guidelines are provided as the reader compares and contrasts the components of different models. As individuals produce models in any one of the three categories, they are influenced by their differing backgrounds, experiences, education and personal beliefs. Due to these in-

fluences ". . . there is no single reading process . . . there can be no single model for reading" (Levin and Gibson, 1975, p. 438).

The Power of Models: Kenneth Goodman, in writing about the reading process states that there should be no dichotomy between theory and practice. "Theory must become practical; and practice must achieve theoretical validity" (Goodman, 1972, p. 143). His theory of reading instruction is based on an understanding of the reading process as it interacts with the content of what is taught. "This instructional theory can, in turn spawn sound methods and materials which weave the wisdom gleaned by educators from years of teaching children to read into a theoretically sound, articulate instructional program" (P. 143). Goodman's model is congruent with the paradigm proposed by Singer, including processes, abilities, and procedures for teaching.

Samuels is in agreement in relation to the importance of theory. He argues that " . . . there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (1977, p. 15). "Theoretical models," he continues, are "capable of summarizing the past, elucidating the present, and predicting the future" in that well constructed models (1) summarize, in simplified form, many findings and facts in a few principles or generalizations, (2) help us to understand current and on going happenings, events, and processes, and (3) enable us to generate predictions and hypotheses about future events. "A model of the reading process should be able to mirror or represent to some degree what goes on when we read" (1977, 15).

## Method

Two undergraduate preservice English teachers were randomly selected from a secondary reading methods course. Each pre-service teacher had completed a course in content area reading and was enrolled in a secondary developmental reading methods course and a 60 hour practicum in a reading and study skills setting. The instructor of the course, the cooperating teacher and the supervisor of the preservice teachers during the practicum were all unaware of those students selected for the study.

Using *Secondary School Reading: What Research Reveals for Classroom Practice* (Berger & Robinson, 1982), the methods course was designed to help preservice teachers translate current research into classroom practice. The practicum setting, a college developmental reading program, provided an opportunity to experiment with these techniques in an environment where a cooperating teacher and university supervisor could give immediate feedback.

During the first week of the course, each of the subjects was asked to draw a diagram to reveal her understanding of the reading process. These "concept maps" forced the subjects to organize their ideas and to show relationships among the elements included. They developed their concept maps by organizing 97 terms related to reading and could include other additional terms as needed. Both subjects' explanations of their concept maps were tape recorded.

During the ten-week practicum experience, each subject was observed and debriefing conferences were held. A final concept map was developed by each subject in the final week of the course. The same procedures were followed and each subject's explanation was recorded.

## Description of the Maps

Mary's original concept map displayed a dozen separate clusters of terms. While she used the words "reading" and "cognitive" as a superordinate heading for her concept map and explained on the tape that "reading is cognitive," there were no visible connections among the twelve differentiated categories. As she explained each cluster of words, Mary made no attempt to establish connections.

For example, Mary discussed the cluster labeled "recreational reading" (including such terms as "enjoyment," "enrichment," and "sustained silent reading") and immediately discussed the terms listed under "language experience" (including terms such as "study guides," "content," "vocabulary," and "inquiry"). Following the course and the practicum experience, Mary retained the "reading is cognitive" focus in her second map and continued to categorize terms in isolated groups; however, the categories were more clearly delineated and some categories received greater or lesser emphasis. For example, "grammar," the category having the greatest number of subordinate terms in the first map, assumes a minor role under "reading" in her second map. While specific teaching techniques appeared under many headings in the first map, Mary created a new category, "instructional methods," in her second map. Words such as "phonics," "digraph," and "sound it out" were grouped with terms like "composition," "clarity," and "antonym" under "grammar" in her first map. They were placed under "decoding" in the second map along with "antonym" which appeared under "grammar" in her first map.

While Mary clearly had a conception of the reading processes and consistently saw comprehension as the key, her maps do not reveal a great deal of change. Carol's maps on the other hand, revealed a more dramatic shift. An initial map hierarchically arranged along a continuum from decoding to encoding, evolved into a dynamic pattern of four interlocking circles in her second map.

Carol's tape revealed considerable frustration as she attempted the initial mapping task. Finally completing the task, she signed, "This is hard!" and "If someone were to come into this room and spill these all over the floor, I might put them back in a different order." This frustration and uncertainty was mirrored in her initial map. Carol's initial map displayed four main categories ("reading," "listening," "speaking," and "writing") along a continuum as mentioned above. While this continuum, labeled "language experience," served as a central organizer in her first map, Carol found she had to resort to delegating some terms to isolated little pockets and even labeled eight especially troublesome words "don't fit anywhere." While Carol's initial focus on the four language arts was retained in the second map, she saw the whole reading process as "a lot more cyclical." "Testing" was the only area that maintained the hierarchical structure in Carol's second map and she commented that this area of her map depicted "a calculated and more delineated process that is not easily integrated." While the four language arts, arranged on a continuum in the initial map, remained a central focus in the second map, Carol now forms them into four intertwined circles. Each circle is filled with words that relate to that particular mode of communication and other words are used to bridge the interlocking areas. For example, "subvocalization" joins

"reading" and "speaking" and "sounds" and "inflections" joins listening and "speaking." Carol circumscribed the total map in a larger circle which she indicated encompassed "the entire language experience."

Comprehension held a much more important place in Carol's second map and was accompanied by appropriate concepts such as "cognitive," "expectations," "purpose," "understanding," and "psycholinguistic theory." In her initial map "comprehension" was lost among terms such as "competency," "grade level," and "weaknesses" and the term "pyscholinguistic theory" was relegated to what she called her "psychology corner."

Carol attributed the "study skills" area in her second map to her practicum experience in the developmental reading setting. She also separated what she called "the specific skills taught in class" ("outlining," "study guides," "directions," etc.) from more abstract metacognitive terms such as "inference," "inquiry," "insight," and "implied." She pointed out that "study skill need to be moved from long term memory to short term memory."

Carol's maps not only revealed a conception of the reading process and the role of comprehension in that process, but they also revealed a change in those conceptions over the ten-week course and practicum. While it is impossible to make explicit connections between her methods course or her practicum experience and the changes that occurred in her conception of the reading process, the maps and accompanying tapes provided some insight into Carol's thinking about reading and the teaching of reading.

## Summary of the Study

No firm conclusions or generalization can be based on a descriptive study of just two preservice teachers. Nevertheless, the concept maps of the two preservice English teachers reveal conceptions of the reading process and reveal that these conceptions changed during the duration of a methods course and developmental reading practicum experience.

While the practicum setting and student-teacher interactions seem to have had an influence on these preservice teachers' conceptions of the reading process, additional quantitative and qualitative assessments need to occur. Methodology used with elementary teachers (Bawden, Buike, and Duffy, 1979) needs to be adapted for use with secondary teachers responsible for developmental reading instruction. The use of videotapes to stimulate recall of the teaching situation, teachers' self-reports, formal classroom observations, surveys such as the Propositional Inventory (Duffy & Metheny, 1979), teacher interviews, and the stimulation and gathering of teachers' reflections seem to be especially fruitful avenues for future investigations.

Finally, teacher educators must understand the crucial importance of teachers' own conscious awareness of the processes utilized or mobilized in the act of comprehension. This is distinct from teacher knowledge of procedures of teaching and skills and abilities required for reading attainment. This aspect of teachers' conceptions of comprehension appears to be most crucial to translating research into practice. Teachers need to be able to engage in reflective teaching to (1) become aware of their espoused theory of comprehension, (2) examine their teaching practices, and (3) bring their theory-in-use into congruence with their espoused theory.

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