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THE INFLUENCES OF GRADE AND  
PUPIL ABILITY LEVELS ON TEACHERS'  
CONCEPTIONS OF READING

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## Abstract

This study investigated whether primary grade teachers' reading beliefs differ from those they might have if they were teaching students at an upper elementary grade level and/or students with a different socioeconomic status (SES) than the ones they do teach. Nine teachers stated their beliefs for five groups of readers on eight decisional criteria. The teachers tended to equate SES levels and reading levels. Their conceptions of low-ability readers and low SES children were different from their conceptions of high-ability readers, students in the upper elementary grades, and high SES children.

THE INFLUENCE OF GRADE AND PUPIL ABILITY  
LEVELS ON TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF READING<sup>1</sup>

William Metheny<sup>2</sup>

Reading theoreticians and researchers continue to focus on the nature of teacher's thought processes for reading instruction. Some maintain that teachers have implicit reading beliefs based on reading models that guide them to instruct in particular ways (Harste & Burke, 1976). A teacher with a phonics belief system, for example, would be expected to use a phonics instructional approach with readers.

Recent classroom research suggests that teachers' reading beliefs are not based on particular reading models per se, but are contingent on such contextual variables as the pupil and his/her environment (Bawden, Buike, & Duffy, Note 1). A survey of some 200 Michigan classroom teachers indicated that teachers may shift their reading beliefs from a skills orientation in the lower elementary grades (k-3) to a more pupil-centered, interest-based reading approach in the upper elementary grades (4-6) (Metheny, Note 2).

The influence of teachers' beliefs about learners may have an impact on good and poor readers in the kinds of instruction they receive and the kinds of reading information they use (see Allington & Chura, 1979, for a discussion of good and poor readers). Given the relationships between

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was prepared for presentation at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, Texas, 1979.

<sup>2</sup>William Metheny is a research intern with IRT's Conceptions of Reading Project. He would like to thank Gerry Duffy and the Conceptions of Reading Project staff for their contributions in data collection and manuscript review.

teachers' reading beliefs and their instructional methods (Bawden, Buike, & Duffy, Note 1), and the impact of these methods on learners' reading strategies (Barr, 1975; Cohen, 1975; DeLawter, 1975), careful consideration should be given to teachers' reading beliefs for different groups of learners. For example, if some teachers believe that low-ability readers should receive a grapho-phonetic approach while the good readers need semantic-contextual experiences, these beliefs may influence their instructional methods and the learners' reading strategies accordingly.

The hypothesis generated from these studies -- that teachers' conceptions of reading vary with grade and pupil reading-ability level -- formed the basis for the present study. Teachers' conceptions of reading are defined as those principles or beliefs that govern teachers' thought processes in reading instruction. This study examines only teacher beliefs, not actual instructional methods or student reading strategies. It investigated if a group of primary teachers' reading beliefs for their current classrooms differed from those they might have if (1) they were teaching an upper-elementary grade and/or if (2) they were teaching a classroom of students from a socioeconomic background different from that of their present students. The statements each teacher made about his/her present lowest reading group were compared to those s/he made for her top reading group, for the classroom as a whole, for an upper-grade classroom, and for a different socioeconomically based classroom.

#### Methods

Nine teachers (eight first-grade, one second-grade) participating in the Conceptions of Reading Project research were interviewed in May, 1979. These teachers were known to group their students for reading instruction. Each teacher was asked to state her reading beliefs for

five groups of readers using the decision criteria taken from the Reading Propositional Inventory (Duffy & Metheny, 1979). These eight criteria, substantiated from the classroom observations as relevant to the kinds of decisions teachers make in reading instruction, are as follows: (1) criteria for judging pupil reading success, (2) criteria for selecting materials, (3) criteria for forming instructional groups, (4) time allocation to reading activities, (5) time allocation to pupils, (6) favored word recognition prompts, (7) comprehension emphasis, and (8) favored instructional role.

The interviews were structured in the sense that the teachers were given the criteria from which to generate their beliefs for each group. They were allowed to make as many statements as they wanted to convey these beliefs. First, the teacher gave statements for her lowest reading group, secondly, for a classroom of a different socioeconomic background, and thirdly, for her highest reading group. Then the teachers gave statements for an upper elementary-grade classroom (4th-5th) and finally, for their current classroom as a whole.

On the socioeconomic background conditions, the teachers were given situations to respond to in which the students' socioeconomic background levels were nearly the opposite of those of their current students. Because students in six of the nine classrooms were of a low to low-middle socioeconomic status (SES), their teachers were given a high SES situation to respond to. Three teachers received a low SES situation. The six teachers responding to the high SES situation were told to imagine they were teaching at their current grade level in a high SES classroom. They were told that their imaginary students came from affluent homes and had parents who were predominately white-collar professionals such as doctors and lawyers. The three teachers responding to the low SES situation received

similar instructions but were told that their imaginary students came from low income homes and had parents who were either unemployed or had low paying jobs. For the upper grade-level situation, the teachers were asked to imagine they were teaching a fourth- or fifth-grade classroom. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

### Analysis and Findings

The interviews were analyzed for the words, phrases, and sentences the teachers used to describe each group of readers. These descriptions provided data for analysis.

Each teacher's statements about her lowest reading groups were compared to those she made for a contrasting SES classroom situation, her top readers, an upper-grade classroom, and her present classroom as a whole on each of the eight reading criteria. A teacher's statements for a particular group were designated as "different" if the teacher did not include any of the descriptions she used in talking about her lowest reading group on a criterion. The lowest reading group served as the comparison because it provided the most contrast in the teachers' reading beliefs across the groups.

The number of teachers whose reading conceptions for any group differed from those they held for their lowest reading group was tallied for each group on each criterion. From this tally, the average percentage of teachers whose conceptions differed for each group was computed across the eight dimensions.

Some major results emerged. In descending magnitude, the statements the teachers made about the upper-grade readers, top-group readers, and high-SES readers differed the most dramatically from those beliefs they

gave about their lowest group of readers. Of the nine teachers, 83% held different reading beliefs for the upper-grade and low-group readers. Similarly, 77% of these teachers had different reading beliefs about their top readers. Also, 73% of the six teachers responding to the high SES situation held dissimilar beliefs for their low-group readers and readers from high SES backgrounds. In contrast, only 17% of the three teachers stating their beliefs about low SES readers held different beliefs for them and their low group readers. Views for their present whole classrooms that differed from their statements made about their lowest group of readers were held by 36% of the nine teachers.

This analysis lends support to the hypothesis that teachers' reading beliefs vary across particular reader subpopulations. The teachers believed that upper-grade readers were conceptually the most dissimilar to their lowest group of readers, followed closely by their top group and high-SES readers. The teachers tended to share similar reading beliefs for the low-SES pupils and the low-group readers.

Further data analysis provided information on the nature of the reading belief distinctions the teachers held for the reader subpopulations. Their beliefs on each criterion for each group were rank ordered from the most to the least repeated. These ranked statements were considered the teachers' conceptions of reading for the group on a criterion. The criteria that provided the most contrast in their reading conceptions across the groups are discussed below in order of decreasing contrast.

The kinds of comprehension the teachers believed the groups should receive varied with group reading-ability level. The teachers generally believed that their lowest group and the low-SES readers should receive simple, factual, low-level comprehension exercises, while the high-SES



top-group, and upper-grade readers should experience higher levels of comprehension and inferential, critical, and analytical thought.

This coincided with their beliefs for allocating time to reading-group activities. The teachers believed that rather than spend their time on oral reading and word-attack activities like the low-group and low-SES readers, the top-group, upper-grade, and high-SES pupils should concentrate their time on high-level comprehension activities.

Not only did the teachers believe the low-group readers and low-SES students should receive simple and controlled reading experiences, most of them believed these groups needed more direct instructional time and supervision than the other groups. For example, the teachers felt that their instructional role for the low-group and low-SES readers should be that of a controlling, step-by-step director. In contrast, this instructional role shifted from that of a controlling director to a more passive, guider-facilitator for the high-SES, top, and upper-grade readers. The teachers explained in their statements for their present classroom, that they gave direction to those who needed it most; in this case, they gave it to the low-ability readers.

The relationship between reader ability levels and exposure to progressively more complex reading experiences became more evident after looking at the criteria the teachers believed they should use in selecting materials for the groups and for helping them recognize problematic words. The teachers stated that their present highest group of readers, upper-grade readers, and, to an extent, the high-SES pupils needed a wide variety of interesting materials to challenge them and enrich their reading experiences. They believed their low-group and low-SES readers needed interesting and fun materials too, but for different reasons; these students needed the materials not as a

challenge but as a motivator for learning basic word-attack skills. Interesting materials were seen as devices to circumvent their reading frustrations.

The teachers believed that the low-group and the low-SES readers needed and should be given phonetic cues for recognizing unknown words while the high-ability, high-SES, top-group, and upper-grade students were seen as more equipped to use both phonetic and contextual cues from the teacher. Apparent in these statements is the theme that readers must acquire the basic reading skills before they can progress. These criteria are crucial for grouped reading instruction.

The teachers believed that their pupils essentially grouped themselves on the basis of their word-attack skills and on their learning styles. As mentioned earlier, the low groups and the low-SES readers were believed to have fewer of these skills and to be less independent and attentive workers than the high-SES, upper-grade, and top-group readers. They need more supervision, more direct instructional time, and more instructional group time (i.e., less individualization).

#### Discussion

Several common themes emerged from this investigation. The results supported the hypothesis that teachers' reading conceptions vary for different groups of readers. Generally, the teachers held very different conceptions of readers in low groups and low-SES situations from readers in the top reading groups, upper grades, and high-SES situations. The teachers tended to equate low-SES pupils with low-ability readers and high-SES pupils with high-ability and upper-grade readers.

The teachers tended to share a view of reading that made student acquisition of certain basic word-attack skills a prerequisite to more

complex reading and thinking experiences. Such experiences were reserved for those readers who had essentially learned to decode. This belief is further evident in that the teachers saw many similarities between their top primary-grade readers and the upper-grade readers. At some level, they apparently believe the two groups are separated only by maturity and progressively more difficult reading encounters.

This teacher view of reading and learners raises two important points.

First, it seems the teachers' beliefs are consistent with the research findings that poor readers process reading information at the phonemic level, while good readers depend more on semantic information (Mosenthal, Walmsley, & Allington, in press). This suggests that the teachers make such a distinction between their good and poor readers, and may instruct them at these levels. The degree to which a learner depends on a particular level of reading information processing may have an important bearing on his/her status as a good or poor reader in the teacher's eyes.

Secondly, this view of reading coincides with the research suggesting that lower elementary-grade teachers generally have a skills orientation toward reading, and upper elementary-grade teachers generally have a reading approach based on pupil interest (Metheny, Note 2).

Naturally, this study has limitations. A larger sample of teachers may have produced greater heterogeneity in teacher belief patterns. Since the teachers only stated their beliefs, their actual practices may differ, especially in the two hypothetical situations. No information was used concerning their past teaching experiences.

#### Implications

It appears that the reading conceptions of some teachers depend upon the group of readers being instructed. Teachers' conceptions of learners apparently interact with, and may be as important as, their conceptions of

the subject matter. The nature of the learner is a contingency not to be ignored in classroom reading research on teachers' thoughts and behaviors.

These findings have a bearing on the current research on good and poor readers. The teachers in this study provided different reading experiences for the two groups. Their assumption equating reading ability levels with students' socioeconomic backgrounds may have important implications for these readers in classroom reading instruction in such areas as grouping, direct instructional time, and exposure to high-level thinking and reading activities.

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