Perceptions About Learning to Read in 2nd-5th Graders

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Abstract

Perceptions about learning to read were studied in 474 second through fifth graders in three elementary schools. The children were asked to respond in writing to a question about what they would say if they were asked to help someone learn to read. Initially, the responses were analyzed qualitatively by identifying themes and categories; further analyses involved numerical comparisons between themes. The most common responses were about sounding words out, affirmative offers to provide help and recommendations for learning to read, and text choices; few answers reflected the importance of meaning or the role of comprehension in reading.

Teaching...can be likened to a conversation in which you listen to the speaker carefully before you reply. ~Marie Clay, 1985

Since the 1990s, so much has been revealed about how to teach reading. We know that proficient readers have strong decoding/word identification/vocabulary skills and are able to flexibly use comprehension monitoring and regulating strategies to make sense of text (Baker & Brown, 1984; Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005; Pressley & Allington, 1999; Raphael, 2000). We know that early intervention with struggling readers can counteract a downward trajectory (Cox & Hopkins, 2006; Glasswell & Ford, 2010; Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). Yet with all that we know, we sometimes forget to *listen*, as Clay reminds us. We forget to find out what our students are really learning as we teach them to read. We forget to examine how our language, instruction, and actions across years are all transmitting a hidden curriculum of sorts and that in learning to read, students are acquiring much more than the explicit content that we are teaching.

The purpose of this study was to engage in a focused investigation of students' perceptions about what it means to learn to read, after they themselves had become readers. A perception is the result of using one's mind and senses to understand and is a formed understanding of about something in the world. There are a number of lines of

research focusing on students' perceptions and our study is located within this body of literature.

A rich line of research describes students' self- perceptions as readers or their beliefs about their reading abilities (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996; Henk & Melnick, 1995; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). These studies indicate that self-perceptions can have a powerful impact on literacy development because beliefs tend to guide practices (Good & Brophy, 2003). Students' competence in learning to read is dependent upon both their developing skills and their beliefs of self-efficacy that make possible the effectual use of skills (Bandura, 1993; Chapman & Tunmer, 2003). Students' understandings of reading and their sense of efficacy as readers can influence stance about the reading process, choices of literacy activities, level of effort and persistence in establishing comprehension, and achievement (Henk & Melnick, 1995; Keer & Verhaghe, 2005).

Students' Perceptions of Reading

 The focus of our study was not on students' perceptions of themselves as readers but instead on their understandings of learning how to read. The study centers on listening to what students perceived about the learning to read process and, in particular, the actions that they believed children must engage in to read, the skills needed for reading, the tools required, and the attitudes or motivations readers must possess. It fits into a line of work begun as early as the 1960s and stretching into the current era. A set of studies focusing on student's perceptions of reading involved interviewing mostly pre-readers or beginners to understand what researchers called, readers' *definitions of reading, concepts of reading,* or *perceptions of reading.* Reid's 1966 landmark study introduced what appeared to be a prototype for the line of research. Reid interviewed 12 non-reading five-year olds asking them three questions, "What is in books? How do grown-ups read? What is writing?" The results indicated that these young emerging readers had very limited understandings of the mechanisms of written language and little understanding of the overall purposes of reading. In 1969 Downing replicated and extended Reids' work by interviewing 12 five-year old children and experimentally testing their abilities to discriminate sounds and words auditorily. When asked, "What is in books?" children usually provided the following responses, "pictures," "writing," or "stories." Some would recall verbatim sections of text (e.g. Mary had a little lamb.) One clever fellow actually explained that stories could be found "on the floor, near the piano" where his teacher gathered the children to for read alouds. Children rarely used terms like "words" in their descriptions and never identified that information was the content of books. When asked, "How do grown-ups read?" children gave responses like "looking," "by sitting down," "by looking at the writing," or "by looking at the numbers." Downing concluded that both his study and the Reid's suggested that children had serious (and potentially crippling) understandings about the purposes of reading – to understand the meaning. He

also concluded that they had limited insight about the abstract linguistic terminology used in the teaching of reading. It was upon the basis of the Reid (1966) and Downing (1969) studies that Clay's landmark Concepts of Print test was based (Clay, 1989). Clay's assessment focused primarily on the mechanics of reading and evaluating the degree of knowledge a child possessed along a continuum of understandings about print. Her approach was more behavioral in nature. Instead of asking children what was in books or how grown-ups read, itself a rather abstract task, she simply organized a set of tasks through which children could demonstrate their understandings of reading mechanics.

Interestingly, a 2010 study of first graders' concepts of reading matches many of the findings in the earlier studies. Kiiveri, Maatta, & Uuiautti (2012) conducted a study in Finland with six-year olds, most of whom were non-readers, at the point of school entry. The phenomenographic study used an interview to investigate the perceptions of readers in four areas: a) their assessment of their own skills (self-concept as a reader); b) their perceptions about the ease (or difficulty) of learning to read; c) their opinions about how interesting reading might be; and d) their perceptions of the usefulness of literacy. The main finding of the study was that children concentrated mostly on the concrete elements of reading as described in the following quote:

Reading was something where one uses eyes and light if needed, sometimes one uses one's mouth and voice but mostly one uses a book or something else that can be read – according to some children, pictures can be read perfectly well, too. . . . reading appears in children's opinions as observing, recognizing words, and understanding them, it is a meaningful interpretation of written symbols. (Kiiveri et al., p. 35, 2012).

The Kiiveri et al., (2012) study sheds light upon the messages that pre readers have received about the act of reading and what they believe it to involve, but their perceptions are naïve.

In the 1970s Johns extended the early concepts of reading work with studies that included older and more experienced readers and related children's conceptions of reading to their relative achievement levels (Johns, 1971; 1974; Johns & Ellis, 1976). In all of these studies, Reid's original focus, What is reading?, appeared to be the thrust but Johns investigated the responses of older students. In a very simple 1971 study he asked 53 fifth graders the "What is reading?" question and ranked their responses using a five-level system (i.e. 1= don't know what reading is, 2= reading is a set of classroom procedures-workbooks, 3=reading is decoding, 4=reading is about meaning, 5= reading is both meaning and decoding.) Using the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test, he found a modest correlation between test results and concepts of reading (r_s= .31, .33). A 1976 study of over 1,600 children in grades one through eight obtained answers to the following three questions: 1) What is reading?, 2) What do you do when you read?, 3) If someone didn't know how to read, what would tell him/her that he/she would need to learn? Many

readers described reading as a set of classroom-based activities such as reading textbooks, workbooks, and meeting in reading groups. Additional responses focused on the decoding elements of reading and there appeared to be a trend with older readers having better understandings of the reading process than younger students.

Influences on Students' Perceptions of Reading

Many factors, including home, community, peers, and teachers have an impact on children's understandings about reading (Almasi, 1996; Johnson-Glenberg, 2000; Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005; Mathes, Torgesen & Allor, 2001; Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2007). Specifically, the practices and perspectives of classroom teachers can have a great influence upon students' conceptions of reading, motivation to read, attitudes about reading, and self-efficacy related to reading (Acikgöz, 2005; Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; Grossman, 1991; Richards, 2001; Zancanella, 1991). For instance, in classrooms where reading instruction is highly balanced, supporting motivation and enthusiasm and including focal areas in phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, story structure, metacognition, and comprehension, we would expect that student perspectives of reading would be similarly balanced and reflective of those elements of reading. On the other hand, in classrooms in which there is a strong instructional focus on specific skills such as phonics, we would expect that children would view reading as being about knowing and utilizing letter/sound knowledge. We would also expect that as students move into the upper elementary grades, their emergent literacy skills such as phonemic awareness would be well developed and integrated, and their perceptions would more heavily reflect that reading is about comprehending and learning from text (Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005; Pressley & Allington, 1999; Raphael, 2000).

In fact, empirical work supports these assumptions. A set of very targeted studies in the late 1980s and 1990s similar to the earlier Reid and Downing research, contrasted children's' concepts of reading based upon different skill levels and experiencing different instructional approaches (Bondy, 1990; Dahlgren & Olsson, 1986; Freppon, 1991; Rasinski & DeFord,1988). Bondy conducted a four-month naturalistic study in a first-grade classroom and found that students' concepts of reading differed based on their reading groups. Higher ability reading groups held more meaning-centered concepts about reading while students in lower level reading groups held views more centered on the surface level elements of reading. Rasinski and DeFord (1988) contrasted first graders' concepts of reading based on the instructional styles of their teachers (i.e. Mastery Learning, Traditional, Literature-based). Students were asked, "What is reading? What is writing? What do you do when you read and write?" Researchers rated answers on a seven-point scale with a score of seven matching the most meaning-based answers. Students in Mastery Learning or Traditional classrooms viewed reading as something to get done in the classroom or as a set of tasks to be completed, while students in the Literature-based classrooms viewed the purposes of reading and writing as

communicating and accessing stories. In a similar 1991 study, Freppon investigated first graders' concepts of reading in skill-based and literature-based classrooms. In addition to using a number of achievement measures, Freppon also used running records and passages that were altered to identify readers' strategies. A 17-item interview provided data about learners' perceptions about reading. They were asked a forced choice question about what is more important in reading: (a) getting the words right or understanding the story, or (b) thinking about the story in your mind or saying all the words right. Both groups actually possessed similar concepts of reading but the literature-based group used more reading strategies and viewed reading as a meaning making process. This group also rejected the altered passages as incomprehensible. In sum, this set of studies indicated that first graders' practices in approaching and making sense of text are guided by their perceptions about reading, which are influenced by their schooling experiences.

We were interested in the how instructional approaches and teachers influenced the perceptions of older readers, however. Moore, Alvermann and Hinchman's (2007) findings indicated that teachers influenced the literacy practices of adolescents and significant others in their lives, and some connected reading experiences in school and out of school. Students who enjoy and are enthusiastic about reading appreciate that reading is a necessary life skill that allows them to understand people, life, and themselves. Yet, we were unable to find studies investigating the influences of instruction on the perceptions of readers in second through fifth grade.

Rationale for the Study

Despite the rich base of research investigating students' concepts of reading, our analysis of the literature suggested that gaps existed. We conducted this study for three reasons. First, we noted that the preponderance of the evidence related to students' perceptions of reading focus on first graders or emergent readers. In fact, the most recent study investigating the perceptions of readers above grade one was conducted in 1976 (Johns & Ellis, 1976). We wanted to understand the perceptions that readers at higher levels possessed to see if trends in findings shifted as students developed. Second, we wanted a study that reflected students in grades two through five who were attending school in a more recent era. Reading instruction in the 1970s is quite different from reading instruction today. Third, we wanted to use a written question to gather students' perceptions. In considering the oral interview methodology we noted the pressure in asking students to produce an oral response with an adult. Although this methodology connects with emerging readers who likely have very limited writing skills, we believed that we would get richer answers without the pressure of adult "face time." Furthermore, many of the previous studies did not gather students' natural responses to questions about reading but instead offered up to five forced choice answer options, thus limiting the data.

Understanding children's perceptions provides a lens into what they are experiencing and how they are making sense of it. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of 2nd-5th graders about learning to read. Upper elementary students in grades 2-5 were selected for this study because these grades encompass a range of students including those who are at or beyond the emergent reading level through those who have reached a level at which they are expected to have the capacity to engage in reading to learn. We expected that children's mature perceptions of reading would be reflected in their suggestions for emergent readers. The research question was: What recommendations do 2nd-5th graders have for beginning readers?

Methods

Participants

A total of 474 2nd -5th graders participated in the study. Data were collected from students in three different elementary school settings in a mid-Atlantic state. Each school was in a different school district. Mountain Elementary had 45 teachers, served 553 PK-5 students and was located in a university town of 39,000 residents. Creek Elementary had 35 teachers, served 416 K-5 students, and was located in a town of 25,000 residents. Harvest Elementary had 25 teachers and served 228 PK-5 students in an urban town with 91,000 residents. All three schools, referred to by pseudonyms, qualified for Title I federal assistance. Table 1 includes information on the schools. The proportions of students across the four grade levels were evenly distributed, with the majority of students in each grade level ranging from 22 to 27% within school. At Mountain Elementary, 24% of the population was identified as culturally diverse. Creek Elementary included 19% and Harvest Elementary had 97% culturally diverse students. The objective in selecting these three schools was to include a representative population of schools in the state/region.

Survey and Procedure

A survey was developed that included demographic questions (grade level, gender) and one question about children's' perceptions about learning to read. The focus question was an open-ended short answer question - "If you were going to tell someone how to read, what would you say?" Children's understandings of reading and the process of learning to read were reflected in their suggestions about how others could go about learning to read. Responses to the short-answer question varied from no response, to a few words, to 2-3 sentences or phrases.

The survey was administered to the students in their classroom settings during a 30-minute time frame. To assure consistency in survey administration across schools and classrooms, a script directing teachers to read the items was provided for the teachers. To counteract inherent social desirability bias in self-report measures, the surveys were completed anonymously.

Analysis

Initial data analyses were qualitative, with the open-ended response data categorized to identify student perceptions about learning to read. The open-ended responses were read repeatedly for the purpose of initial identification of recurring themes. After prevalent themes were noted, constant comparative analysis was utilized to inductively code each of the responses, using a successive process of examining, comparing, and categorizing the data. Constant comparative methods of analysis utilize inductive reasoning, add rigor, and provide a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The data were double coded to maintain the contexts in which information was provided. First, the data were coded as a whole, then they were segmented by grade levels and by schools for the purpose of considering possible differences in the perceptions of students at different elementary levels and in differing school contexts.

Because of the large number of participants and coded responses for each theme, counts were made of the numbers of written comments recorded for differing themes by grade level and school. Percentages of coded responses were calculated as a means of comparison. These numeric perspectives on the data allow for a comparison across the grade levels and schools; however, because of the qualitative nature of the data and the use of double coding where individual data items reflected more than one theme, these counts and percentages can only be considered illustrative of the data.

Results

The results are reported by: (a) themes across the entire data set, (b) comparisons of themes across 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, and (c) comparisons of the themes across the three school contexts. The numbers of items for each theme identified in the data were counted to provide perspective on the incidence of data related to specific themes. Because some responses were double-coded, there are greater numbers of total coded responses than actual responses. Table 2 identifies the percentages of total coded responses in the identified themes. About 12% of respondents did not provide an answer to the question.

Sound it out or pronounce it

The most common response, subsuming 33% of all coded responses, was the advice to "sound it out." When asked what they would tell someone if who needed help learning to read, many respondents advised readers to sound out words. In this same category were included a handful of directives to pronounce the words. A sampling of the writings included:

Wut is this werd soud it out. (2nd)

You haft to sound it out and you can mack it into littl words and sond it out all tugr. (3rd)

Know every letter + the sound of it. Know the sound of combinations of letters. (4th)

You pronounce the letters in each word then read the words. (5th)

The recommendation that someone learning how to read should make use of grapheme/phoneme relationships in pronouncing words was consistent across all three schools, and all four grade levels.

A review of responses showed that a number included invented spellings. Many of the participants did not know how to spell the word "sound," so they produced versions including sand, sod, sond, sown, soud, sowd, sud, sawd, sowed, sownd, saw, soned, soand, shound. We were interested in whether or not misspellings were more frequent in the "sound it out" theme and so we identified the proportion of responses within top six themes with misspellings along with the numbers of words misspelled. Proportionally, 19% of the 225 coded responses in the "sound it out" theme possessed 42 misspelled words. This proportion of misspelled words was surpassed only by the "try and practice" theme in which 22% of the 51 coded responses possessed misspellings. By contrast, in the next largest response category -"give help," only 4% or seven of coded responses possessed spelling errors. Thus, respondents who suggested, "sound it out," appeared to be more likely to have misspelled words.

Willingness to Give Help and Recommendations

The second most common response to the question was a response about willingness (or unwillingness) to provide help (28%). Many respondents gave a basic response indicating their willingness to help (e.g. "Yes," "Sure I would," "I would teach you how to read," "no,"). In this theme, the majority of children stated that they would help someone learn to read with responses such as, "yes." There were also numerous cases in which students implied willingness to help with comments like, "if you can't sound it out ask me and ill tell you," and "do you have trouble with reading cause I can help you."

Thirteen students had negative responses indicating that they would not help someone learn to read. Some just said, "no," and others made comments such as, "I'm to busy to teach you," and "I can't teach you how to read because I don't know how to teach someone how to read." Several children indicated uncertainties such as "if I wolud help you, what if I miss a word," and "I need help reading so you could help me."

There were also numerous recommendations about what beginning readers should do. These suggestions included using suggestions like using a finger to point to words, reading from left to right, enjoying reading, choosing interesting texts, having courage,

and not stressing out. There were fifteen students who stated that readers should get help from adults. They suggested getting assistance from teachers, reading teachers, librarians, parents, and adults in general.

 Some representative comments included:

"if you cannot read the book or it is boring do not try to. theres no poit is read a stoy that's not fun their ment for fun" (3rd)

 "take your time! and enjoy the book." (4th)

 "It takes courage and imagination to read a book. Believe that you can do it." (5th)

The most striking aspect of this theme was the willingness of the participants to help others learn to read. Their written comments about learning to read appeared to be genuine, as though they perceived that the survey request was likely to lead to a request for their help.

Reader-Text Matching

About 11% of all responses reflected participants' attention to text-reader matching - finding books that were at the appropriate difficulty or interest levels. Many of the participants made recommendations about text difficulty with attention given to the unique needs of beginning readers. A common suggestion was that readers should begin by reading easy books then move on to more difficult texts. For example, a 4th grader wrote, "get a esy book like a adb. Look, red it and that's what made me read," and a 5th grader wrote, "I would say to start off on easy books with easy words, and a lot of pictures in it." Several participants made references to leveled books and picture books. "Get 1st leveled books." (2nd) "I would say start off on a 1 level book and keep going up until you start to read." Other students identified specific titles or authors, as in, "Hatching magic. The hungry caterpillar. treehouse," (2nd) "read Dr. sues books," (4th) and "I would tell them that they should start learning words with the cliford's phonics" (5th). These responses suggested an awareness of text leveling systems and/or an understanding of text features available in texts that might make them easier or harder (e.g. pictures, phonics support, high frequency words in Dr. Seuss).

A second feature of this text-reader matching theme was attention to interest and motivation. The following responses exemplified this idea, "to make the first book they read about there favorite topic," (4th) and "Read something you like and another way is to ask your friends if they know any good books" (5th). Similarly, a number of students pointed out the importance of enjoying books, as in, "Be able to enjoy the book don't read books you don't love" (4th). A few students noted that books should be obtained

outside of school. A third grader wrote, "Don't like school books. Good books at home," and a fifth grader commented, "go to a bookstore to get books about real people and different kinds of people." The participants in this study demonstrated in their comments that they found the reading of easy, leveled, interesting books to be important in learning to read. Interestingly, there were no references to learning materials such as workbooks, workbook pages, or skill-building materials and activities that some children encounter in school reading instruction. As discussed further in the article, the text-reader matching theme was much more prevalent in fourth and fifth grades (See Figure 1).

Read, learn, or memorize words

A total of sixty responses or 9% of all coded responses, centered on word-level reading. The following responses exemplified this theme, "Read a word then another word than you will read;" (2nd) "It's easy. All you have to do is read words;" (3rd) and "You have to try to figer out want the words are and the after that you are reading" (4th). There were also several suggestions that readers must learn or memorize words. For instance, from a second grader came the comment, "learn some words." One third grader wrote, "When you see it again, memorize it," and a fourth grader provided the advice, "Memorize the words. May memory be with you." In a few cases, there were suggestions that knowing words was connected with sounding words out, as in "Sound out the words. help them learn what word it is" (3rd). However, the data related in this theme were primarily about saying, learning, or memorizing words and the responses often contrasted with "sound it out" approach.

Try or practice

Over fifty of the participants (7%) acknowledged the importance of practicing for people learning to read. Most commonly, they wrote, "try your best," "try again," or "try hard." Some students connected trying or practice with improvements, as in "If you can't read just keep trying and you will get it" (2nd) and "If your not very good at reading try try again." (5th). In other words, when asked to explain how they would tell someone to read, these participants offered encouragement and suggested practice.

Spelling

A small set of participants (3%) identified a connection between reading and spelling. For example, a second grader wrote, "Start to spell so you know the words and can read," and a fifth grader commented, "If you want to read you need to learn to spell." Other participants more generally suggested that spelling is helpful in learning to read, as in, "Start to spell so you know the words and can read," (2nd) and "First I would help them by spelling out words little by little" (5th).

Letters/alphabet/syllables

Another topic of focus for a few participants was that of learning letters or the alphabet, or syllables. Comments included: "I would teach them the alfabet," (3rd), "If you know the alphabet, look at the letters and sound out the word with the letters of the alphabet, (5th), "I would tell them about all the sounds A-Z. I would explain how to read letters together" (5th), and "Figure out how to say the syllables: (4th).

Meaning/understanding

Fifteen participants wrote responses that contained the word "mean" or reflected that understanding or connecting with a story is important in reading. In more than half of these cases, meaning was indicated at the word level. For example, a second grader wrote "I wude say that word means ____," and a fourth grader commented, "I'd tell them what the words mean."

There were six recommendations that indicated understandings beyond knowing meanings of words. A second grader wrote one of these and fifth graders submitted the others. The six suggestions related to meaning were:

"Try to say it with your imagination." (2nd)

 "Try to picture the scene." (5th)

"Feel like you are inside the book." (5th)

The low number of written comments related to this theme demonstrated that these participants did not believe that meanings or understandings are significant in learning to read.

Read to them or reread

Eight students specified that they would help another person learn to read by reading to them and/or recommending that they reread. Responses in this category included, "Listin to me read this book then you repeet after me" (2nd), and "I would read the book to him then see if he can read it" (4th).

Talk or writing

Five participants indicated either that reading was related to talking, or that writing is helpful in learning to read. Regarding talk, a third grader wrote, "I would say first you wold need to know how to talk and how to prone different words. If they can talk and say different words I would tell them to start with easy books then get harder." Suggesting that writing is helpful, a fourth grader responded with, "You should write a small story to get to know what words look like."

Use illustrations

In three responses, participants indicated that illustrations could be helpful to readers. For example, a fourth grader wrote, "First look at the words and sound them out, and look at the picts, they help you."

Comparisons across 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades

To compare the proportion of coded responses by grade level, we identified the percentages of coded responses within each grade level for all of the themes (See Figure 1). Keep in mind that the responses were doubled coded, so response levels within categories were not mutually exclusive. A respondent could have expressed "willingness to help" and a reference to "spelling," for example. The percentages of response coded to different categories   within grade levels, do, however, reflect potential trends. These analyses revealed the following four patterns: a) the consistency across grade level of the "sound it out theme;" b) the prevalence of attention to text-reader matching in grades four and five; c) a greater percentage of second and third graders responding in the *give help* theme, and d) a higher incidence of no responses in second and third grade.

The advice to "sound out" words was uniformly the most common response to the question about telling another person how to learn to read. Participants in all grades consistently suggested this idea at rates at or above 25%.

Fourth and fifth graders more frequently identified text-reader matching as an important reading suggestion (14-17%) than second and third graders (4-5%). This suggested that developmentally upper elementary students were more aware of text-reader matching as an important variable than lower elementary students. Importantly, fourth and fifth graders gave attention to both difficulty and interest, suggesting that they believed both to be important.

Second and third graders were more likely to respond with an offer of help. Over 28% of second and third grade respondents expressed some level of willingness to help in response to the question whereas a little over 20% of fourth and fifth graders showed this same interest. In all grades, the *sound it out* and the *willingness to help* themes, subsumed over 50% of responses. In second grade, non-responses were equivalent to those in the *sound it out* theme (25%). The older students had a greater variety of responses, and appeared to show more diversity in their recommendations.

Comparisons across the three school contexts

To examine possible differences across the three school contexts, counts were made for each theme by school. This yielded the percentage of respondents within a school who provided responses within a given theme (See Figure 2).

Within each school between 45 and 73% of responses were coded in the "sound it out" or "give help" theme. Nonetheless there were differences in the degree to which participants in different schools supplied certain types of responses. For instance, students from Mountain Elementary identified "sound it out" responses at higher levels (36%) than the other two schools (25-26%). In addition, students at Harvest were more likely to express willingness to give help to beginners (37%) than students at the other schools (Creek-26% Mountain-20%). Text-reader matching was about twice as likely to be a suggestion of Creek students (14%) than Harvest (5%) or Mountain (8%). The Harvest students wrote shorter responses to the question posed and their comments were more evenly divided across all themes.

Discussion

In 1969 Downing wrote, "It is a serious error to assume that children always learn only what the teacher thinks she is teaching. This is why teaching methods are extremely important. They are important not for the usual reasons which people give, but because of the concealed lessons which are unintentionally taught by different methods" (p. 226). As literacy teachers we are so often in the position of guiding reading instruction and supporting high quality instruction. While teaching a child to read is a highly responsive and interactive endeavor, we rarely stop to ask children what they believe about learning how to read. By asking students in 2nd-5th grades what they would tell a student learning how to read, we were able to get some small indication of the messages that they received and had perhaps internalized. The study produced some interesting patterns that we believe have implications for beginning reading instruction. Below we describe four patterns that emerged from the findings: a) the degree to which meaning-making is married with perceptions of learning to read; b) the preponderance of *sound it out*; c) a willingness to give help; and d) developmental trends in the awareness of reader-text matching.

Second-Fifth Graders Do Not Perceive Learning How to Read as Involving Meaning-Making

As discussed further in the paper, most participants, regardless of grade or school responded to the survey question with suggestions to sound out words or with an indication of willingness to help. While this reflects what was on their minds, it is also remarkable because it shows what was *not* on their minds - meaning. Three types of recommendations for beginning readers related to meaning or comprehension. These themes were (a) getting the meaning or understanding the story, (b) talking or writing

about stories, and (c) using illustrations. Taken together, there were 23 student responses that corresponded with these three categories (less than 4% of all coded responses).

We make several observations about this trend in the findings. The first is that the responses could be both a reflection of the question asked and the hurdle that word recognition developmentally poses for the beginning reader. In considering the low number of responses related to finding meaning, it is important to recall that the participants were asked a question about what they would say if they were going to tell someone how to read. This question clearly focuses on process - how to read - and likely sent participants to the mechanics of reading. It is certainly not surprising that participants described elements of word recognition (e.g. letters, sounds, memory) in responding to the question, as it is one of the most concrete, tangible, and prominent behaviors of the learning-to-read process. The children's responses reflect the perspective that being able to identify words is a precursor to comprehension; the goal is to figure out the words, and once that happens, getting the meaning will be possible. Yet, we found it noteworthy that meaning-checking was not described as at least some part of the process of learning to read.

Second, participants may intuitively understand that the kinds of stories read by beginning readers are typically short (often less than 100 words) and not rich with meaning or fodder for comprehension. They may correctly understand that the most difficult challenge for most beginning readers is recognizing words. It is the behavior that holds students back initially.

Lastly, it might be that the respondents did not mention meaning as a strategy for telling someone how to read because, in their minds, it was the goal and so very obvious that it did require explicit attention. Nonetheless, an orientation in the early grades that does not include some mention of comprehension as part of the learning-to-read process may be contributing to a pervasive mindset that is carried into the intermediate grades - reading is about word recognition solely. [Note. As described below, older participants did show attention to interest as a variable in text-reader matching and this appeared to reflect some attention to the influence of content in the learning-to-read process, but is a separate type of response.]

Sound it Out: Children Echoing an Oft-Misguided Prompt

The results showed that, across grades and schools, at least 25% of responses included the suggestion that sounding out words would help someone learning how to read. This perspective is in keeping with both the alphabetic nature of English as well as the literacy research that reflects the essential nature of phoneme/grapheme knowledge in emergent literacy (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996; Ehri, 1998). English *is* a morphophonemic language - learning and automatizing phoneme/grapheme relationships and morphemes

significantly influences word recognition and thereby comprehension. Because the participants were asked to make recommendations for emergent readers, we can presume that they had instruction in using phoneme/grapheme relationships to identify words. It is logical and reasonable that they felt it was important for children to sound out and pronounce words.

We did find it striking that there was one school in which a greater proportion of responses included the *sound it out* recommendation. Thirty-six percent of responses from Mountain Elementary suggested sounding out words, which was about 10% more than the other schools. We are not sure how to explain these differences, but beginning reading instruction at Mountain Elementary may have placed slightly heavier emphasis on explicit phonics instruction and this might have influenced respondents' perceptions about how to help beginners. We did review the demographics of the three schools but we did not identify any characteristics to which we might attribute the trend at Mountain Elementary. Mountain and Creek represented higher numbers of Caucasian students and lower levels of poverty, while Harvest served a culturally diverse population in a high poverty neighborhood.

What was most ironic and revealing about respondents' suggestions to sound out words was that for 19% of them, the *sound it out* response was coupled with misspellings, on average about two spelling errors. So while they recommended making use of phoneme/grapheme relationships, it appeared that they did not have a complete command of these relationships themselves. We interpret this finding in three ways. First, although the script that guided the administration of the survey did not contain specific directions about spelling, respondents were told that the survey would not be graded and that the focus of it was on understanding their perspectives. So, correct spelling was not emphasized and respondents might have correctly assumed that getting their ideas down was more important than spelling correctly. Second, we note that spelling and word recognition are separate but related processes. Usually, children can recognize words before they can accurately spell them. Word recognition is an analytic process in which children begin with a printed stimulus on a page whereas spelling is a synthetic process in which children must integrate their knowledge and produce the likeness of a word on a blank page. It is not unusual for children's spelling to lag slightly behind what they can read. However, responses in the *sound it out* theme were more likely to possess misspellings even when compared to another large theme (*e.g. willingness to give help*) with a similar number of coded responses (n=191). Only 4% of responses in the *willingness to give help* category possessed misspellings. This led us to our third interpretation. For many children (19% in this study) the directive to *sound out* words may be repeated by parents and teachers so much that it becomes a part of advice that they pass on but they may not fully understand this advice within the context of the words they are asked to sound out. For them it is just what you tell someone to do if they cannot

read a word - but "sound it out" works only if you have knowledge of the letter/sounds and/or morphemes in the word that you are trying to recognize. It is totally useless if there are patterns that you do not know. For instance, directing a second grader to "sound out" the word *enough* does not make sense unless the student has command of the *–ough* pattern. Without this knowledge, sounding out will not lead to an accurate oral pronunciation of the word. As asserted by Brown (2003), teachers and parents should align word prompts with student development and only use the *sound it out* prompt for words that contain patterns that a child can honestly sound out.

Willingness to Give Help

The second most common response that participants provided was an indication of their willingness to help. The theme of giving help and making recommendations can be viewed as closely related to the theme of suggesting that beginning readers try hard and practice. It was heartening that the participating children in all three schools were apt to respond to the survey item with willing offers to help others learn how to read. There was great sincerity in children's comments like, "Yes, I will help them." The overall response to the survey was positive in nature, with many indications that the children took on the task of survey completion seriously and authentically. Some children indicated worries about their inability to help others learn to read; others recommended getting help from adults including parents, teachers, and librarians. We are reminded of the classic study of very young children, whose insight that they did not know how to read, signified some understanding of the complexities of the process (Clay, 1977). We also found it interesting that at Harvest Elementary School, there was a greater percentage of students who made a response about their willingness to help (37% vs. 20-26%). Again this suggested that some school-level feature might influence students. It could be that that culture at Harvest particularly emphasizes cooperation amongst students. There was also the belief that learning to read requires effort and practice.

The responses in this category also led us to the possibility that our question was a bit misconstrued. The intent of the question was to capture perceptions about the process of learning to read, how students learn to read. However, responses describing willingness to help did not focus on the process but instead addressed the question of *whether* or not the respondent was willing to help. We wondered if there might be a developmental trend in this response, perhaps suggesting that younger responders were more likely to provide this response because they did not understand the question in the same way as the older readers. We did not clearly find such a trend in the data.

We did find however, that second graders showed of highest proportion of non-responses than students in other grades (25% in 2nd vs. 7% in 3rd, 11% in 4th, 10% in 5th). This

suggested that indeed it was possible that second graders may have been more likely than responders in other grades to misunderstand the question.

Child Awareness of Reader-Text Matching May Have a Developmental Component

Participants did give attention to the importance of reader-text matching as something that they would tell someone learning how to read. We found four trends in these data.

First, respondents addressed both text difficulty and interest as components of reader-text matching. They frequently suggested finding easy or leveled books. Indeed, inappropriate books can derail the learning-to-read process (Author, 2007). They also used the term "leveled" to describe text difficulty, which suggested a language that may be in place in some schools. However, respondents also advised beginning readers to find books that they liked or that were interesting, noting that unmotivating, uninteresting books should not be the diet of beginning readers. Interestingly, respondents did not make reference to any other types of materials related to school literacy instructional practices such as workbooks, worksheets, or basal readers. They did not say, "Get a workbook and start on p. 1" or "Do your workbook pages the best you can." This suggested that these types of materials may not have been used in the participating schools and/or were not perceived to be an essential part of beginning reading instruction.

Third, we noticed that Creek Elementary students were more likely to address reader-text matching and this suggested that their school might have given more attention to this element of reading. Lastly, and perhaps most interestingly, we found evidence for a developmental trend in awareness of reader-text matching. Fourth- and fifth-grade readers provided more responses in the reader-text matching theme than younger readers, suggesting that they may have been had more cognizance of this feature of reading instruction. This would fit with a developmental trend that usually shows older students to be more metacognitive about literacy processes.

Connections to Previous Studies

When we related the findings in this study to the literature we found interesting intersections between our findings and those of others, as well as discrepancies. The focus of our respondents on the most concrete and tangible elements of reading, the words, letters, and sounds connected exactly with the earliest studies showing that young emerging readers formed perceptions of reading around the imageable elements of the act (e.g. books, looking, sitting, words) (Downing, 1969; Kiiveri, et al., 2010; Reid, 1966). In our study, however, respondents were more specific in their understandings, referring predominantly to using letter sounds to sound words out. Our participants seemed to possess the explicitly linguistic terminology that the emergent readers in the earlier studies did not. However, the participants in our study did not appear to have moved beyond those explicit terms, as the series of studies by Johns showed (Johns, 1971; 1974;

Johns & Ellis, 1976). Unlike the older readers in the Johns studies, our participants did not appear to hold more meaning-centered views of reading. The older readers in our study did appear to naturally mention text-reader matching and motivation more than the younger participants but did not explicitly identify comprehension or meaning. Thus, when not provided with a forced-choice option (as in the Johns' and Bondy studies) our participants did not mention meaning more frequently. Lastly, we can make some hypotheses about the influence of instruction on our respondents based on the literature. Although we did not identify the instructional approaches taken by teachers or the groups within which students were taught, as in Freepon (1991) and Rasinski and DeFord (1988), we can surmise that their classrooms likely had a big emphasis on decoding. Both the Freepon and Rasinki and DeFord (1988) studies made this connect and we surmise that these students, who likely experience instruction impacted by Reading First initiatives, were influenced by the instructional approaches in their classrooms.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions that students had about learning to read - what they believed about how to help other children in the process of learning to read. Although we do not have conclusive explanations about exactly why students responded in the ways that they did, we do have several theories and believe that this work has some implications. When reflecting on the results of this study we are reminded of the importance of the language that we use with young readers, the influence of school culture in shaping perceptions about reading, and the need to integrate the very important code-level focus in primary grades with the equally important meaning-making focus.

In several instances this survey functioned as a mirror, with respondents reflecting back to us the messages and language that we as teachers use with them. The prevalence of the advice to "sound out" words in all situations and with all words connects with our experiences that reflect both the pervasive and often mindless use of this word prompt. In our opinion, many teachers and student teachers give this advice almost automatically without any analysis of the word that the student is to sound out. We feel strongly about ending this pattern in beginning reading instruction. First we must give careful attention to the books that we ask children to read. If sound it out is a frequent mantra during the reading process, the reader-text match might not be right. We also believe strongly in Brown's (2003) advice on this issue, which emphasizes the alignment of teacher prompts with student development. Brown (2003) suggested that advice to sound out words should come after a wait period and a generic, follow-up prompt. Only after these two actions and, only if the word contains patterns that the child knows, should "sound it out" be used. "Sound it out" must cease to be the mindless mantra repeated for every word with which a child struggles.

Intersecting with our reflection about the significance of language is the significance of school cultures and environments for influencing students' perceptions about read. In three cases we found slightly higher levels of students providing advice in particular categories. Reading programs, as designed and carried out at the school-level, do influence students and we can be mindful about whether or not the messages that we are sending connect with our intentions.

Lastly, both the language that we use and the school reading program has the power to create perceptions about what children should do when they are reading that could influence them for years to come. Beginning reading instruction will always be heavily focused on word recognition; reading is about words, but not words alone. We believe that primary reading instruction that does not include attention to meaning as part of the message creates a habit-of-mind that may be contributing to the many intermediate readers who experience the infamous fourth-grade slump. If readers perceive reading to be solely about word recognition, they may experience a struggle when they encounter lengthier, information-dense passages in the upper grades. This study reminds us how very perceptive and intuitive children really are and how much we have to learn from them if we will only ask and listen.

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Table 1. *Cultural and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Student Populations at Mountain, Creek, and Harvest Elementary Schools*

Cultural/ Socioeconomic Characteristics	Mountain	Creek	Harvest
Caucasian	76	81	3
African American	7	16	90
Hispanic	4	2	4
Asian	10	1	0
Native American	1	0	2
Free and Reduced Price Lunch	29	33	99

Table 2. *Percentages of Total Coded Responses for Each Theme*

| Theme	Number Responses in Category	Percentage of Total Coded Responses
Sound it out or pronounce it	225	33.43
Giving help and recommendations	191	28.38
Text choice	77	11.44
Read, learn, or memorize words	60	8.92
Try or practice	51	7.58
Spelling	22	3.27
Letters/alphabet/syllables	16	2.38
Meaning/understanding	15	2.23
Read to them or reread	8	1.19
Talk or writing	5	0.74
Use illustrations	3	0.45
	673	100.00
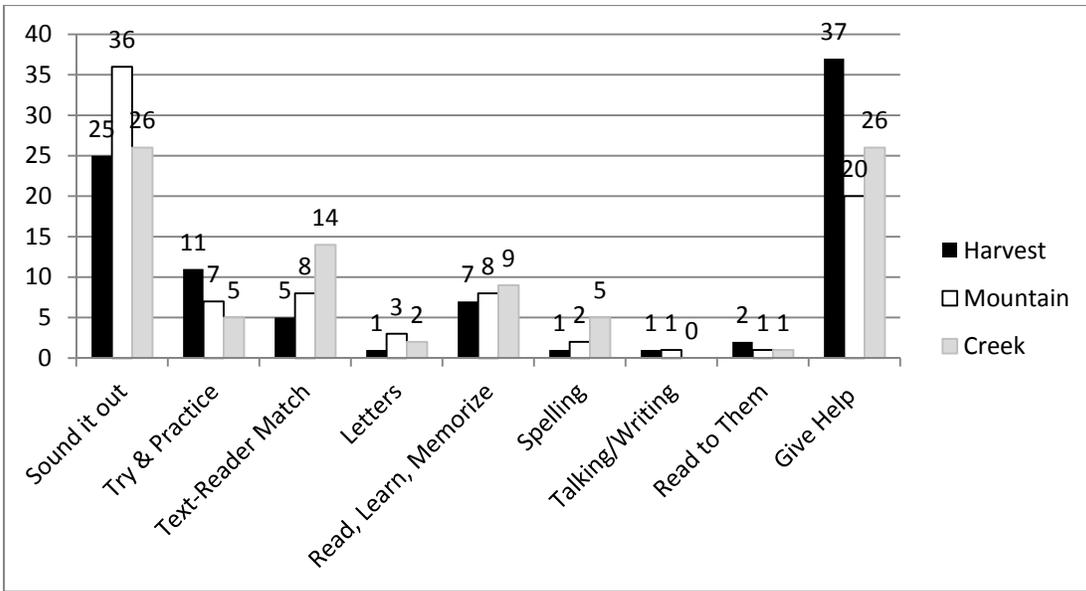
Figure 1

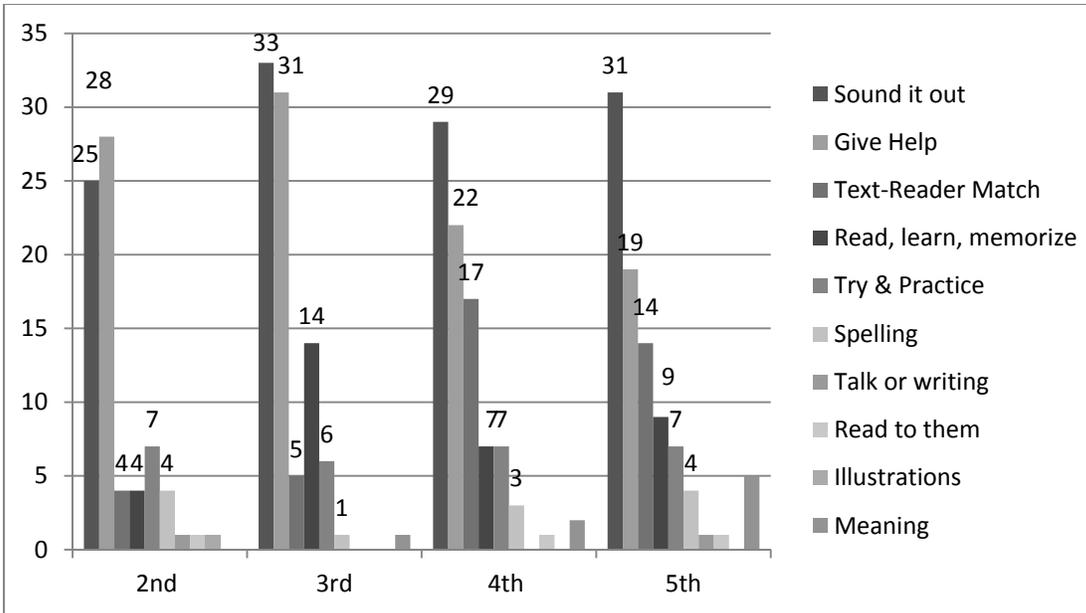*Percentage of responses within grade level and by school in top nine themes*

Figure 2

Percentage of Responses in Themes by Grade Level