Using the Reading Maturity Survey in Teacher Education Program Evaluation

Deb Theiss: Univeristy of Central Missouri
Anita Philbrick: Univeristy of Central Missouri
Georgia Jarman: Univeristy of Central Missouri

This study surveyed pre-service teachers to determine their reading maturity using The Reading Maturity Survey (Thomas, 2001). Results indicate that pre-service teachers self-report high levels of confidence in their reading maturity with the exception of two areas that may relate to developing skills in critical reflection and transformational thinking. A continuing study of reading maturity in pre-service teachers focuses on correlating reading maturity with other measurements to predict teacher readiness as part of program evaluation for elementary licensure majors.

Universities systematically use assessments to evaluate programs of teacher education. Consequently, universities across the state and nation have developed multiple systems of viable evaluations. Would an assessment tool measuring reading maturity provide additional insight into the developing skills of pre-service teachers? University reading professors explore this possibility in a study conducted to determine the reading maturity of university students. An analysis of data reveals the strengths and weaknesses self-reported by the students. Future considerations propose correlating reading maturity scores to other measures of teacher readiness. Finally, the researchers discuss implications for teacher education programs and suggest that *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001) may be a viable assessment tool for program evaluation.

What is Reading Maturity?

Reading maturity is defined as "the attainment of those interests, attitudes and skills which enable young people and adults to participate eagerly, independently, and effectively in all the reading activities essential to a full, rich, and productive life" (Gray & Rogers, 1956, p.56). Additionally, mature readers have genuine enthusiasm with a tendency to read widely and intensively (Manzo, A. V., Manzo, U., Barnhill, & Thomas, 2000; Gray & Rogers, 1956). They have ability to comprehend words, mood and feelings with a capacity for making use of ideas gained in reading. They have ability to read critically in both the emotional and the intellectual senses and are able to fuse ideas gained through reading with previous experience. Lastly, they have a capacity to adjust pace to the occasion and the demands of adequate interpretation. These skills are not easy to achieve (Chall, 1983). Thomas (2008) concurs and notes "…reading maturity should be treated deliberately, not left to chance as a hoped-for by-product of schooling that some students acquire but others apparently do not. To do this it seems that we should move next to issues of measurement or monitoring" (p. 12).

The Reading Maturity Survey

The survey used in the study was adapted from *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001) to fit an online format. It includes six measurement areas: Reading Attitudes and Interests, Reading Purpose, Reading Ability,

Reaction to and Use of Ideas Apprehended, Kinds of Material Read, and Personal Adjustment to Reading-Transformational Reading (Thomas, 2007a, 2007b; Thomas, 2008). Each question is answered on a four-point scale (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4=strongly disagree).

Section 1: Reading Attitudes and Interest

This section measures the interest in reading and its importance in the life of the individual, capturing the breadth and depth of reading interests and topics. An item that might occur in this section would be "I enjoy reading" (Thomas, 2001).

Section 2: Reading Purposes

A mature reader in this category has purpose for reading, choosing materials that interest him or her, and adjusts their reading to the type of reading materials chosen. A type of statement that might be included here is, "One of the reasons I read is to understand myself better" (Thomas, 2001).

Section 3: Reading Ability

This section measures the student's perception of his or her proficiency as a reader, including comprehension skills. An example from Section 3 is, "I am comfortable with my reading ability" (Thomas, 2001).

Section 4: Reaction to and Use of Ideas Apprehended

In this section, the survey asks about the reader's ability to use previous and personal experiences to connect to, and form new understanding of materials read. Statements include, "When I am reading, I often recognize ideas that may have personal or societal value" (Thomas, 2001).

Section 5: Kinds of Reading Material

Readers respond to questions in this section that help to determine if challenging material is read that helps to create meaningful and insightful understandings applied to their own lives. Statements that might appear in this section include, "I like to read things that make me think" (Thomas, 2001).

Section 6: Personal Adjustment to Reading/ Transformational Reading

Finally, this section deals with the transforming power of reading. Thomas (Thomas, 2007a, 2007b; Thomas, 2008) maintains that a maturing reader changes his or her perspective about the things he is reading and makes personal changes in his or her life as a result. In addition, the survey asks the reader to consider if he or she is personally reflective in his or her reading, i.e. does reading help shape character. An item in this section asks students to infer if reading can transform their thinking.

Findings

The study was conducted in the fall of 2007 by three reading professors, teaching consecutive courses in the teacher education program. The researchers surveyed 156 pre-service teachers in the three consecutive literacy courses required by students majoring in early childhood education, elementary education, special education, and middle school education.

A simple on-line survey (Kraus, 2008) was used, adapted from *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001). A five-point Likert scale was changed to a four-point scale to accommodate the on-line self-reporting format.

What is the reading maturity of pre-service teachers?

Overall, the self-reporting perceptions of the reading maturity level of the pre-services teachers were high for the three consecutive courses. The average for all students enrolled in each of the courses ranged from 3.06 to 3.166 on a 4-point scale. (See Table 1)

These data provide a baseline for comparative purposes to future data collections and correla-

Table 1

Course and Title	Average Score
EdCI 3210 Reading Methods (initial course)	3.1429 (required for all pre-service teachers)
EdCI 3215 Content Area Literacy (mid-level course)	3.060466 (required of elementary, double, and middle school)

tions with other evaluative measures that determine pre-service teacher skills and attitudes such as scores on the College Basic Academic Subjects Examination (CBASE), Praxis II, and required dispositions.

What are the strengths and identified areas of needed improvement?

Strengths were identified from the different sections of the *Reading Maturity Survey* for the pre-service teachers throughout the three consecutive courses. The pre-service teachers have high perceptions of their reading maturity in sections one through four (Reading Attitudes and Interests, Reading Purposes, Reading Ability, and Reaction to and use of Ideas Apprehended). This provides a starting point in understanding where the students at the university see their strengths concerning reading maturity, as well as an opportunity for university instructors to capitalize on this strength in their coursework.

Identifying areas of needed improvement was also a consideration of the study. Section 5 (Kinds of Materials Read, 43%) and Section 6 (Personal Adjustment to Reading/ Transformational Reading, 27%) were two areas of needed improvement that could be considered for an instructional focus at the university level. Can university instructors influence the reading maturity of pre-service teachers at the university level? By focusing on areas to be improved and making changes to the curriculum to accommodate those areas, university instruction may help the university student to grow in the areas of reading maturity and in turn, increase their ability to think critically, reflect on learning, and transform their teaching practices.

Future Considerations

Currently, a follow-up study involves surveyig pre-service teachers three times during their university coursework to evaluate their reading maturity. The researchers are focusing on one population of students in the teacher education program, the elementary education majors and the double majors (elementary and early childhood). These students are required to take the same three literacy courses and can be tracked through their coursework to see differences, if any, in their developing reading maturity. As part of the data collection for program evaluation, the student will complete the on-line survey adapted from *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001). The results of this survey will become part of the database that informs faculty of the strengths and weaknesses of the program, as well as, the needs of individual students and groups of students.

Reading maturity data will be correlated with other measures collected for program evaluation including CBASE, Praxis II, and dispositions. The correlation of the data will provide an opportunity to monitor the progress of our students. This information will be used as an ongoing means of evaluating university instruction and the impact it has on student learning, as well as serving as a catalyst for increasing the skills of pre-service teachers. The researchers are investigating the following questions in the continuing study of Reading Maturity:

Is there a relationship between the pre-service teacher's reading maturity and other measures of pre-service teacher's competencies including CBASE, Praxis II, and dispositions?

Does the instruction in literacy at the university affect the reading maturity of pre-service teachers? If not, can instruction be modified to do so?

How does the knowledge of the students' reading maturity gained from the results of the survey inform instruction at the university level?

Conclusion

A new conceptual framework recently adopted by the university's College of Education encourages reflective practice through thinking creatively, analytically and practically about teaching and learning. The teacher education program is also steeped in the tradition of exploring theoretical and researched practice through course readings. In light of this renewed and more defined focus on critical thinking and reflection, a look at the reading maturity of university students could give insight into how and if they read critically in order to integrate ideas with prior experiences and transform their thinking and actions. Can an assessment tool to measure the reading maturity of university students provide an insight into their developing skills as readers and thinkers? Are there correlations between reading maturity of pre-service teachers and other measures of teacher readiness?

An overriding question guiding the work in this study is whether increasing the pre-service teacher's reading maturity will increase their readiness for teaching. *The Reading Maturity Survey* (Thomas, 2001) used as an assessment tool may provide support to the systematic evaluation of the teacher education program. Correlations between reading maturity and other measurements of teacher proficiency could provide additional data to inform program effectiveness. Learning about strengths and needed areas of improvement in reading maturity may be the impetus for change in university instruction in order to affect the critical thinking and personal transformation of university students.

References

Chall, J. (1983). *Stages of reading development.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Gray, W.S., & Rogers, B. (1956). *Maturity in reading: Its nature and appraisal.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kraus, R. (2008). *Simple Survey.* Retrieved December 10, 2008, from http://www.ucmo.edu/surveys/survey_doc.cfm.

Manzo, A. V., Manzo, U., Barnhill, A., & Thomas, M. (2000). Proficient reader subtypes: Implications for literacy theory, assessment, and practice. *Reading Psychology, 21*(3), 217-232.

Thomas, M. (2001). *The reading maturity survey.* Retrieved December 10, 2008, from www.ucmo.edu/readingmaturity.

Thomas, M. (2007a, November). *Starting at the source: A conversation about long-range plans to assess and promote reading maturity in pre-service teachers to improve k-12 student literacy development.* Paper presented at the 54th annual conference of the Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators, St. Louis, MO.

Thomas, M. (2007b, November). *To what end? Promoting reading maturity for adolescent readers.* Paper presented at the 34th Plains Regional Conference of the International Reading Association, Overland Park, KS.

Thomas, M. (2008). *Reading maturity: Reviving the construct as social science for adolescent and adult readers.* Unpublished manuscript, University of Central Missouri at Warrensburg.

Author's Note

Dr. Theiss is an assistant professor at the University of Central Missouri where she teaches undergraduate and graduate level courses in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Dr. Philbrick teaches in the Educational Foundations and Literacy Department at the University of Central Missouri. As an assistant professor, she teaches literacy courses at the undergraduate level and the capstone course for the MSE in Curriculum and Instruction.

Mrs. Jarman is an instructor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Central Missouri. She teaches undergraduate level courses and is currently completing her doctorate at Saint Louis University.