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October 2000

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### Recommended Citation

Douglas, Nancy L. (2000) "Instructional Implications for the Michigan Educational Assessment Profile," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol33/iss1/5>

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# Instructional Implications for the Michigan Educational Assessment Profile

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## Abstract

Elementary and secondary teachers were surveyed to determine their use and knowledge of the eight implications for teaching language arts endorsed by the Michigan Department of Education (MDOE). Results indicated that all of the teachers were using most of the teaching strategies endorsed by the MDOE to some degree, but that their use was more common at the elementary level. However, very few of the teachers had been informed about these strategies. The survey results are discussed in light of the problematic nature of preparing students for the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Language Arts assessment.

MEAP scores have always served as a measure of accountability for Michigan schools, but now more than ever, a lot is riding on the MEAP. Parents want their children to perform well on this test so that their children may qualify for state funding for college tuition. Parents' expectations and the public's increasing interest in MEAP scores have influenced school administrators to place even more importance on MEAP scores. Naturally, principals want their schools to fare well in comparison to other schools, and this expectation is passed along to teachers. While most teachers accept this form of high-stakes testing as a way of life and most reading experts agree that tests such as the MEAP are more valid than the multiple choice language arts and reading tests of the past, many are worried about the growing importance of the MEAP due to the fact that an individual student's proficiency in the language arts cannot be fairly assessed by a single instrument, despite its validity (Allington & Cunningham, 1996 Radne).

Teachers also voice concern over the

effects that pressure to perform well on the MEAP has on students. Among teachers' complaints are that some students get so nervous on test day their performance is hindered. At the other extreme, some students become "desensitized" to the MEAP due to the days and sometimes weeks of MEAP practice sessions carried out in the classroom. Teachers report that some students actually put forth minimal effort on the "real" test because they are weary of the MEAP simulations that they have been subject to in the previous weeks.

In an investigation regarding students' perceptions of standardized tests, Paris, Lawton, and Turner (1992) found the following trends among students in grades 2 through 11 as they get older: (a) a growing skepticism about the validity of test scores, (b) a growing realization that they are not well informed about the purposes and uses of achievement tests, (c) increasing apprehension that test scores may become the basis for comparative social judgment, (d) decreasing motivation to excel on standardized tests, and (e) the admission among older students

that they felt less well prepared to take the tests. While the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship Act which rewards high achieving students with funding for college tuition may indeed, serve as a remedy for lack of motivation to excel on the MEAP.

*Isn't there a better way to prepare students for this test?*

Ironically, schools that make it a number one priority to raise MEAP scores may be working against themselves. A recent MEAP update concerning declining scores on the writing test since 1997 pointed to the number of deficient papers that appeared to be written to a formula. Scorers found that an inordinate number of papers followed a five paragraph format and contained identical transitions (i.e., "First," "Second," "To conclude") with little or no development. Some of the schools with declining scores had spent a great deal of time and effort using special materials specifically designed to improve MEAP scores or had paid for special MEAP workshops (Faulds, 2000).

It is obvious that in most schools, teachers at the targeted grade levels are made familiar with the format of the MEAP test and are given materials to give students practice taking the test in the classroom. But how familiar are teachers with the MDOE sanctioned implications for the MEAP, and to what extent are these being implemented in the classroom?

The MDOE disseminates information about the MEAP test and sample test materials to concerned parties (i.e., public schools, teacher preparation institutions, and intermediate school district offices). Principals are quick to provide these materials for teachers to conduct MEAP practice sessions in the classroom. Naturally, teachers want their students to perform well on the MEAP. But many teachers at the target levels resent the mandating of MEAP practice sessions by administrators and the resultant loss of regular instructional time. Isn't there a better way

to prepare students for this test? Shouldn't students do well on the test if they have received quality standards-based classroom instruction in the language arts starting in the primary grades? The MEAP, after all, is not a test of what students learn in reading and writing only in the targeted grades, but in all the grades. In other words, students start "preparing" for the MEAP upon entering first grade.

Interestingly, the MDOE has written a document that could alleviate some of the frustration and panic that sets in when "MEAP season" approaches. It is included in materials about the MEAP disseminated by the MDOE. Unlike the language arts standards and benchmarks, this document is short and succinct. It is a simple one-page list of eight instructional implications for the MEAP, language arts. These implications are as follows:

1. Provide direct instruction and modeling in literacy processes and strategies.
2. Provide opportunities for students to read silently and listen for extended periods of time.
3. Allow students to read, listen to, and create texts in a variety of genre (short stories, essays, drama, speeches, newspaper articles, biographies, graphs, technical writing, etc.) in all content areas.
4. Provide daily opportunities for writing done in support of reading, i.e., literature response logs and writing in which students reflect on and evaluate their personal growth as authors.
5. Encourage students to read, listen to and discuss a variety of selections that present different perspectives on the same theme, issue, question, or problem.
6. Invite students to connect, synthesize, compare, and summarize ideas and information from more than one text.
7. Help students to generate focus questions based on a theme studies in class, and provide many opportunities for them to discuss and write about the focus questions.
8. Ask students to take a stand on issues related to the focus questions and to artic-

ulate their position in a written or oral presentation. (Michigan Department of Education, 1999)

This document implies that if teachers at all grade levels implement these instructional practices in their classrooms, they will be providing standards based literacy instruction of exceptional quality; the result should be student success on the MEAP.

Teachers at the targeted grade levels are made familiar with the format of the MEAP test and are given materials to give students practice taking the test in the classroom. But how familiar are teachers with the MDOE sanctioned implications for the MEAP, and to what extent are these being implemented in the classroom?

What follows are the results of a survey

## Appendix

### Teacher Survey

Please indicate the degree to which you engage in the following classroom practices by circling the appropriate response.

Grade level \_\_\_\_\_

In my classroom, I:

1. Provide direct instruction and modeling in literacy processes and strategies  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4
2. Provide opportunities for students to read silently and listen for extended periods of time.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4
3. Allow students to read, listen to, and create texts in a variety of genre (short stories, essays, drama, speeches, newspaper articles, biographies, graphs, technical writing, etc.) in all content areas.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4
4. Provided daily opportunities for writing done in support of reading, i.e., literature response logs and writing in which students reflect on and evaluate their personal growth as authors.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4
5. Encourage students to read, listen to and discuss a variety of selections that present different perspectives on the same theme, issue, question, or problem.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4
6. Invite students to connect, synthesize, compare, and summarize ideas and information from more than one text.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4

7. Help students to generate focus questions based on a theme studied in class, and provide many opportunities for them to discuss and write about the focus questions.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4

8. Ask student to take a stand on issue related to the focus questions and to articulate their position in a written or oral presentation.  

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1	2	3	4

Never Rarely Sometimes Often  
1 2 3 4

Have you ever received a single document (hand-out) at your school describing and listing the eight classroom practices as they are described and listed above?

(Circle one)

YES NO

If you have any comments, please feel free to write them below:

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conducted to determine whether teachers grades 1-12 were familiar with the MDOE sanctioned instructional implications for the MEAP and the extent to which teachers were implementing these instructional procedures in their classrooms.

### Procedure

*Interestingly, the MDOE has written a document that could alleviate some of the frustration and panic that sets in when "MEAP season" approaches.*

Teachers from two elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools were asked to voluntarily complete a survey taken directly from the document written by the MDOE (see

Appendix). The survey was accompanied by a cover letter explaining that the teacher distributing the survey was a graduate student specializing in reading at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and that the survey was part of a research project undertaken as part of a course in the administration of reading programs. Anonymity was assured, as the teachers were not required to give their names, only their grade levels.

Across schools, completed surveys were returned by a total of 22 elementary teachers, 7 teachers of language arts at the middle school level, and 8 teachers of language arts at the high school level.

### Results

As indicated in Table 1, all the teachers reported that they provided direct instruction and modeling in literacy processes and strategies (item number 1). However, elementary teachers reported "sometimes" or "often" to more of the items than middle or secondary teachers. The practice elementary teachers reported doing least was number 8: "Ask students to take a stand on issues related to the focus questions and to articulate their position in a written or oral presentation."

Middle and high school language arts teachers' responses were quite similar, not varying by more than 9 percentage points.

All the secondary teachers reported that they invited students to connect, synthesize, compare, and summarize ideas from more than one text (item number 6). Most of the secondary teachers also reported that they had students read and listen silently for extended periods of time (item number 2). The lowest percentages from secondary teachers had to do with allowing students to write text in a variety of genres in all of the content areas.

### Discussion

The results of this survey indicate that these elementary teachers are making great strides in having students write in response to reading and focusing on themes to help students create intertextual links. The only item that less than 82% of elementary teachers reported doing "sometime" or "often" was item number 8, which asked students to take a stand on an issue. Perhaps teachers at the lower grades do not feel that their students are able to think the abstract level that this type of argumentative writing requires.

At the middle school level, the lowest percentages had to do with thematic instruction (see item number 7). While clearly middle school and high school students are ready for this type of activity, teachers of the language arts have their own language arts standards and benchmarks to address. A great deal of time and collaboration among teachers from different disciplines is necessary to design meaningful thematic units. In addition, teachers often bear the burden of finding and purchasing the necessary materials and resources to plan and implement thematic units. This tends to become even more difficult at the secondary levels, at which many teachers are uncomfortable crossing subject level boundaries. Middle and secondary teachers also reported relatively low responses to item 8, which involved having students listen to and create texts in a variety of genre in all content areas. It is perhaps the last phrase of the statement, "in all content areas" that teachers felt they were not addressing.

The most surprising finding of the survey had to do with the last question, in which

teachers were asked if they had ever seen a document like this before. It would seem that the document would be an important component of discussions about the MEAP at faculty meetings. Many schools get teachers together to write a few language arts or reading improvement goals for the upcoming school year. When these goals are clear and agreed upon by all faculty, schools become more effective (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). This list, published by the MDOE, could serve as a list of goals for a school or a place to start discussing school goals. Disseminating this document to teachers to

discuss at all grade levels at the beginning of the year might be an excellent way to prepare students for the MEAP tests each and every day simply by delivering the curriculum in a thoughtful and effective way.

### Conclusion

There is nothing wrong with a school wanting to improve MEAP scores, but educators need to realize that tests such as the MEAP are indicators of reading and writing skills that develop slowly over the course of students' educational careers. "MEAP preparation" is something that happens daily in

**Table 1**  
Percentage of Teachers Reporting "Sometimes" or "Often" to Survey Items (N=37)

Survey Item	Grade Level		
	Elementary	Middle	High
1. Provide direct instruction and modeling in literacy processes and strategies	100%	100%	100%
2. Provide opportunities for students to read silently and listen for extended periods of time.	95%	86%	88%
3. Allow students to read, listen to, and create texts in a variety of genre (short stories, essays, drama, speeches, newspaper articles, biographies, graphs, technical writing, etc.) in all content areas.	100%	57%	50%
4. Provided daily opportunities for writing done in support of reading, i.e., literature response logs and writing in which students reflect on and evaluate their personal growth as authors.	90%	71%	75%
5. Encourage students to read, listen to and discuss a variety of selections that present different perspectives on the same theme, issue, question, or problem.	100%	71%	75%
6. Invite students to connect, synthesize, compare, and summarize ideas and information from more than one text.	82%	100%	100%
7. Help students to generate focus questions based on a theme studied in class, and provide many opportunities for them to discuss and write about the focus questions.	90%	43%	50%
8. Ask student to take a stand on issue related to the focus questions and to articulate their position in a written or oral presentation.	59%	86%	75%

classrooms where students are engaged in meaningful reading and writing practices and take ownership of their work.

Ironically, schools that make it a number one priority to raise MEAP scores may be working against themselves. A recent MEAP update concerning declining scores on the writing test since 1997 pointed to the number of deficient

*The MEAP reading and writing tests are designed to measure students' proficiency in reading and writing . . .*

papers that appeared to be written to comply to a formula. Scorers found that an inordinate number of papers followed a five paragraph format and contained identical transitions (i.e., "First," "Second," "To conclude") with little or no development. Some of the schools with declining scores had spent a great deal of time and effort using MEAP preparation materials or had paid for special MEAP workshops (Faulds, 2000).

Whether or not one wants to consider the unethical nature of teaching to the test, the futility of superficial MEAP practice can teach administrators, teachers, curriculum directors, parents, and students a valuable lesson. The MEAP reading and writing tests are designed to measure students' proficiency in reading and writing; these tests are valid enough to make it impossible to prepare for them in a workshop or series of practice sessions. If educators want to prepare students for the MEAP, the focus should be taken off of the tests themselves and placed on the curriculum that will help students become proficient readers and writers at every grade level.

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