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How Do Children in the Elementary School View the Reading Process?

by Jerry L. Johns and Annette L. Johns

Those concerned with improving the teaching of reading may be interested in some fairly recent findings regarding the child's view of reading. In recent years, studies (Downing, 1971) have produced direct evidence that the manner in which children think about the task of learning to read has an important effect on their progress in developing reading ability. It is of little wonder that so many reading authorities have concerned themselves with a definition of the reading process. In fact, there may be no more important question to ask than, "What is reading?" In addition to most reading authorities seeing a genuine need for defining the reading process, Clymer (1968) contends that a clear concept of reading is just not an "academic" concern.

Teachers should understand the reading process too. Stauffer (1969), however, has expressed concern regarding teachers' concepts of reading. The responses of many teachers to the question, "What is reading?" prompted Stauffer to conclude that "... it is urgent that a better understanding of the concept of reading be acquired by teachers" (1969, p. 5). If teachers lack a clear idea of what the reading process entails, it is highly possible that they will not know whether or not students have attained the goals of the instructional program. While it is important that teachers understand the reading process, children need this understanding as well. A number of investigators have explored children's concepts of reading.

Related Research

In a recent investigation, Johns (1970) asked the students he taught, "What is reading?" The results of this investigation revealed that many children have little or no understanding of the reading process; moreover, perhaps one of the contributing factors to children's reading problems is a failure of some children to understand what is involved in the reading process.

Researchers Weintraub and Denny (1963, 1965, 1966) asked first-grade children three questions: Do you want to learn to read? Why? What must you do to learn how to read in first grade? One of their summaries states that:

... slightly more than a third of all the responses given offered no meaningful explanation of what one must do to learn to read. Of the remaining responses, two-fifths indicated that a passive type of obedience was required to learn to read; slightly more than a fifth conveyed the notion that the teacher or someone else would show them how to read or gave some description of what the teacher would do in teaching reading; and less than two-fifths, 37 per cent, were responses in which children saw themselves as taking some action in learning to read (Weintraub & Denny, 1966, p. 446).

Sample and Methodology

Downing (1969) reported summaries from various investigations relevant to how children think about reading. One study found that beginning readers have only a vague idea of how people read. Another study found that the child feels little need for reading and regards it as a mysterious activity.

Glaser (1969) recently reported that in a discussion of reading with sixth graders, the students believed either that reading was irrelevant to their world or, when it was relevant, it was wrong. Glaser concluded that these children missed "... the whole point of learning to read" (1969, pg. 49).

The available research evidence in the area of children's reading concepts indicates that there may be a lack of understanding on the part of many students as to what reading is and what it involves. This area, however, has not been adequately investigated, and generalizations are difficult to make. There is a need, therefore, for more complete studies which will explore the reading concepts of children in various grades, analyze these concepts, and make conclusions and recommendations to teachers and subsequent researchers.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to acquire some representative definitions and/or concepts of reading given by children in the elementary grades. In pursuing a study of this sort many questions may be generated: Do children simply acquire adequate concepts of reading in the process of being taught to read? Do children lack an adequate understanding of the reading process? Are there any differences in the definitions expressed by boys and girls? Do children acquire better concepts of reading as they progress through the grades? These questions, as well as some others, were investigated in this exploratory study.

The 168 students comprising the sample were randomly selected from two public elementary schools located in a suburb outside a large industrial area. The schools from which the students were selected received Title I funds. Informal perusal of the students' backgrounds revealed a range from upper middle class to lower class. The sample was stratified to include 24 pupils from each grade beginning with kindergarten and extending through sixth grade. Twelve of the 24 students from each grade were boys and 12 were girls.

Each child in the study was interviewed individually and his responses were recorded on tape. The investigators in this study conducted all the interviews. Normally, the investigators asked three questions of each student: 1) What is reading? 2) What do you do when you read? 3) If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him he would need to learn? The children's responses were then classified into logical categories and analyzed.

Results

The three questions used in this investigation were analyzed separately. For each question, responses were analyzed for general trends and differences in sex and grade. The results for each analysis are stated in the number of responses and in terms of percentages.

Responses to Question 1

The responses to Question 1, "What is reading?" were classified in five categories. Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response or an "I don't know" response.

Category 2: Vague, irrelevant or circular responses. This

category included responses such as "When you read," "You need it," "A bunch of words."

Category 3: Decoding. This category included responses ranging from "Saying words" to "Well, it's something when you got a couple letters and they form a word and more letters that form other words and you read them."

Category 4: Affective responses. This category included responses such as "I don't like reading," "It's education and it's fun."

Category 5: Dual definitions. This category included responses which defined reading as a dual process which involved decoding and meaning. Responses ranged from "It's words put together to make stores" to "I think reading is words that are put into sentences and then sentences are put into paragraphs and the paragraphs turn into stories which give you meaning."

Table 1 summarizes the responses to Question 1 and indicates the percentage of the total group that responded in a given category.

Summary of Responses to Question 1

The analysis of Question 1 revealed the following:

1. There was an apparent lack of understanding of the reading process as evidenced by the percentage of responses in Categories 1 and 2. Of the 168 students asked "What is reading?", 119 or over 70 per cent gave responses which were essentially meaningless.

2. A relatively high number of students (46 per cent) gave vague, irrelevant or circular replies.

3. There were apparently no sex differences in the responses included under Categories 2, 4, and 5. Some disparity existed between boys and girls in Category 1, but the largest sex difference was noted in Category 3. In Category 3, twice as many boys as girls gave decoding types of responses to the question, "What is reading?"

4. Very few children defined reading as a process involving both word recognition and meaning. None of the students in kindergarten through grade four gave a dual-type definition of reading and only seven students in grades five and six gave this type of definition.

5. The total responses for lower-grade children in Category 1 were greater than those for the upper-grade children (31 as opposed to 10).

Responses to Question 2

The responses to Question 2, "What do you do when you read?" were classified in five categories. Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response or an "I don't know" response.

Category 2: Vague irrelevant or circular responses. This category included responses such as, "Learn," "Read," "Think," "Talk."

Category 3: Decoding. This category included responses ranging from "Learn words" to "I try to if there's a word I don't understand I look in a dictionary and that way when you read you learn more about how you put words together and where things belong in words."

Category 4: Dual description. This category included responses that described the reading process as one which involved both decoding and

TABLE 1. Distribution of responses to the question, "What is reading?"

GROUPS	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Category 4		Category 5		TOTAL
	No response I don't know		Vague Irrelevant		Decoding		Affective		Dual Definition		
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Kindergarten	3	7	6	5	3	0	0	0	0	0	24
Grade 1	2	4	7	3	2	2	1	3	0	0	24
Grade 2	5	6	2	5	3	0	2	1	0	0	24
Grade 3	3	1	5	6	1	1	3	4	0	0	24
Grade 4	2	5	6	4	2	2	2	1	0	0	24
Grade 5	1	1	6	8	2	1	2	1	1	1	24
Grade 6	0	1	8	7	0	0	1	2	3	2	24
Total											
Boys & Girls	15	25	40	38	13	6	11	12	4	3	168
No. of Responses	41		78		19		23		7		
Per Cent of All Responses	25		46		11		13		4		

meaning. Responses ranged from "You look at the words for a long time and you think about stories" to "I think about what I read and if it doesn't make sense I try to think it through 'til it does."

Category 5: Classroom Procedures. This category included responses which reflect classroom procedures or activities usually associated with formal reading instruction. Some typical responses were "You read to your teacher and to the kids in your class," "Read stories and answer questions," "Like we stand up and we sit down. Whoever misses the word has to stand up." "We take turns."

Table 2 summarizes the responses to Question 2 and indicates the percentage of the total group that responded in a given category.

Summary of Responses to Question 2

The analysis of Question 2 revealed the following:

1. There was an apparent lack of understanding of the reading act reflected by the number of responses in Categories 1 and 2. Approximately 45 per cent of the responses were classified in these two categories.

2. There were no apparent sex differences in the responses to Question 2 in any of the categories.

3. There were more responses in Category 1 from children in the upper grades. The total for the primary grades was 22. For grades four through six, the total was 6.

4. More students gave decoding types of responses than any other types. The total responses to Category 3 were 55 or approximately 35 per cent of the students asked, "What do you do when you read?"

5. Very few students described reading as an experience which involved word recognition and meaning. The total number of responses in Category 4 was 11 which represented approximately 7 per cent of the students questioned. Ten of the 11 responses in Category 4 came from grades five and six.

6. There were more responses from lower-grade children in Category 5 than from upper-grade children. Eleven of the 17 responses in Category 5 were from students in kindergarten through grade three.

Responses to Question 3

The responses to Question 3, "If someone didn't know how to read what would you tell him he would need to learn?" were classified in five categories. Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response or an "I don't know" response.

Category 2: Vague, irrelevant or circular responses. This category included responses such as "Go to school," "Practice," "Read out of a book," "Vowels and continents (sic) and stuff."

Category 3: Decoding. This category included responses ranging from "Sound out the words" to "Learn to put words together and read them."

Category 4: Dual description. This category included responses which described reading as recognizing words and getting meaning from what was read. Responses placed in this category ranged from "Know what the meanings of words and how to pronounce it" to "I read a group of words and then I think what they mean and then I go on more."

TABLE 2. Distribution of responses to the question, "What do you do when you read?"

GROUPS	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Category 4		Category 5		TOTAL
	No response I don't know		Vague Irrelevant		Decoding		Dual Description		Classroom Procedures		
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Kindergarten	2	5	5	3	2	4	0	0	1	0	22
Grade 1	0	4	4	2	6	3	0	0	2	0	21
Grade 2	3	4	2	3	2	4	0	1	2	2	23
Grade 3	2	2	2	4	3	5	0	0	4	0	22
Grade 4	1	1	4	4	5	4	0	0	1	3	23
Grade 5	2	0	5	6	4	3	1	2	0	1	24
Grade 6	2	0	1	0	4	6	4	3	0	1	21
Total											
Boys & Girls	12	16	23	22	26	29	5	6	10	7	156
No. of Responses	28		45		55		11		17		
Per Cent of All Responses	17		28		35		7		12		

Category 5: Classroom procedures. This category included responses that described reading in the context of the classroom or school environment. Typical responses which were placed in this category included "Know how to work," "Try," "Go back to Kindergarten."

Table 3 summarizes the responses to Question 3 and indicates the percentage of the total group that responded in a given category.

Summary of Responses to Question 3

The analysis of Question 3 revealed the following:

1. There were no apparent sex differences of responses classified in Categories 1 and 3. More boys than girls gave vague, irrelevant or circular responses, but more boys than girls gave responses which were classified in Category 4 which described reading as involving both decoding and meaning. More girls than boys viewed reading as a classroom or school type activity.

2. Very few students described reading as an activity involving decoding and meaning. The total number of responses in Category 4 were four. None of these responses came from below the fourth grade.

3. There were more responses classified in Category 3 than any other category for Question 3. There were sixty responses or approximately 54 per cent of the total number of students which were decoding types of responses.

4. Approximately 36 per cent of the students who were asked Question 3, were unable to give meaningful responses. The combined responses from Categories 1 and 2 account for this percentage.

Major Conclusions

Based upon the findings related to each question, the following major conclusions were reached:

1. Many students have little or no understanding of the reading process.

2. There were few sex differences in the data.

3. Upper-grade children had a somewhat better understanding of the reading process than lower-grade children.

4. Most of the meaningful responses which described or defined the reading process were decoding types of responses. Very few students mentioned meaning as part of the reading process.

5. Many children had a very restricted view of reading. They described reading as an activity occurring in the classroom or school environment which utilized a textbook.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for teachers were drawn from the study's conclusions:

1. Teachers should not assume that because they are teaching children to read they are also providing a basis for understanding the reading process.

2. An effort should be made to provide an understanding of the reading process to all children.

3. There appears to be a need for additional emphasis on the role meaning plays in the reading process.

4. There may be a need for a

TABLE 3. Distribution of responses to the question, "If someone din't know how to read, what would you tell him he would need to learn?"

GROUPS	Category 1		Category 2		Category 3		Category 4		Category 5		TOTAL
	No response I don't know		Vague Irrelevant		Decoding		Dual Description		Classroom Procedures		
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Kindergarten	2	3	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	10
Grade 1	1	2	3	3	4	2	0	0	0	2	17
Grade 2	2	1	2	2	4	4	0	0	0	0	15
Grade 3	2	1	1	0	6	6	0	0	0	1	17
Grade 4	1	1	2	1	3	5	1	0	1	2	17
Grade 5	0	3	0	1	7	5	0	0	1	0	17
Grade 6	0	0	2	0	4	7	2	1	0	1	17
Total Boys & Girls	8	11	12	7	30	30	3	1	2	6	110
No. of Responses	19		19		60		4		8		
Per Cent of All Responses	17		17		54		3		7		

broader based reading experience in the schools.

5. There is a crucial need for developing an understanding of the reading process among beginning readers who have virtually no idea of what the reading process is or involves.

The following recommendations for researchers are suggested:

1. Replicate and/or expand the present investigation.

2. Give "in depth" interviews in an effort to draw-out more information from the shy or reticent child.

3. Include other questions such as "Do you like reading?" "Why?" "Why not?"

4. Obtain reading test scores and compare children's concepts about reading to their scores. Will children who are better readers give better definitions than those who are poorer readers?

5. Compare teacher's responses to the question, "What is reading?" to children asked the same question.

6. Conduct an investigation to see if efforts to "teach" children a concept of reading is successful. Compare the results of asking, "What is reading?" in a classroom where the teacher has made conscious efforts to develop this understanding to a classroom in which this has not been done.

7. Conduct an investigation in which a broader-based reading experience is compared to a textbook

only experience in an attempt to find out which children have better concepts of reading.

8. Compare inner-city and suburban children's concepts of reading.

9. Compare the results of asking children in various types of reading programs questions about the reading process.

Concluding Statement

The present investigation clearly demonstrated that children in the elementary school have greatly disparate views of the reading process. Like the research of Weintraub and Denny (1966), our study showed basic similarities. One of the most disturbing findings was that only 4 per cent of the children defined reading as a process involving both decoding and understanding. This finding, coupled with the fact that over 70 per cent of the students gave vague, irrelevant, or no response to the question, "What is reading?" further emphasizes the need to teach children that reading involves thinking and understanding as well as decoding.

Within the limitations of this study, it would appear that children's concepts of reading have not improved since Weintraub and Denny reported their findings. In order to make children more effective readers, perhaps educators should take definite strides to teach children what the reading process is all about. Specifically, if teachers are able to help their students develop meaningful definitions of reading it is possible that this knowledge may enhance their progress in reading.

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