The Role of Reading Identities and Reading Abilities in Students’ Discussions about Texts and Comprehension Strategies
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Middle school students’ abilities to comprehend texts are critical to their academic success (Fordham, 2006). However, for over 34 years the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading assessments (2004; 2005; 2007) have consistently shown that most middle school students have regular difficulties comprehending texts. Although students with reading difficulties may make up the majority of middle school classrooms, they sit alongside students who meet or exceed grade-level expectations in reading. All middle school students, regardless of their reading abilities, need continued reading instruction in order to meet the growing and complex reading demands that are placed upon them both in and outside of school (Caldwell & Leslie, 2004; Moje, 2007). Therefore, addressing the reading comprehension needs of middle school students is about providing instruction and experiences for students with diverse reading abilities (Dennis, 2008).

To help all students improve their reading comprehension abilities, researchers have advocated that subject-matter teachers provide explicit instruction on comprehension strategies and how to use them with a variety of texts (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007; Graves & Aimonette, 2008). Comprehension strategies are defined as “…deliberate, goal-oriented attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text,” (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; pg. 368) and include making/checking predictions, rereading, and activating prior knowledge. As students internalize and apply strategies on their own, they can increase their comprehension of texts, become more responsive to any comprehension difficulties that arise, and better apply what they read to their lives (Pressley & Hilden, 2006).

Despite the promise that strategy instruction holds, researchers know very little about how to teach them in ways that will be meaningful to all students and that attend to the needs of adolescents specifically (Conley, 2008). Developing strategy instruction that responds solely to middle school students’ cognitive needs and, by extension, their current grade-level reading abilities is likely to have a limited impact (Hall, in press). Students who are considered to be good and poor readers may choose not to apply strategies during reading even when they understand how to do so and want to improve their reading comprehension abilities (Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Hall, 2007).

One reason why students may choose not to apply strategies is due to how they identify themselves as readers or how they want to be identified by their peers or teachers (Hall, 2009; Moje & Lewis, 2007). Students who self-identify as poor readers often choose to disengage from reading rather than publicly reveal their perceived weaknesses as readers and may make such decisions with the full knowledge that their abilities to comprehend texts and learn content will be compromised (Hall, in press). Students who self-identify as good readers may still have difficulty comprehending texts beyond a factual level but, because they associate themselves with a positive reading identity, may
not believe they need to engage differently with texts or would benefit from further strategy instruction (Caldwell & Leslie, 2004).

However, little is known about the relationship between students’ reading abilities and their reading identities. The present study sought to better understand how middle school students’ reading identities as well as their current grade-level reading abilities influenced the ways they discussed comprehension strategies and texts in small group settings. In doing so, this study provides an in-depth analysis of how identities were enacted in social settings around texts and strategies and how identities both constrained and supported students’ development as readers. The research question was:

1. How do students’ discussions about texts and comprehension strategies look similar and/or different based on their identities as readers and their reading abilities?

Theoretical Framework

Students’ conceptualizations of what it means to be a reader are constructed at an early age. Through their interactions with their teachers, peers, and family members, students learn what it means to be identified as a certain type of reader and the positive and negative consequences associated with each (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006). The norms connected with a particular reading identity, such as good or poor reader, are deeply entrenched and have long-standing cultural and historical roots making them difficult to change (Wortham, 2006).

In school, reading identities are often constructed in terms of skills, what one can or cannot do, with little attention to the social and cultural factors that can influence individuals’ reading development (O’Brien, 2006; Street, 2005). Often the reading identities made available to students are narrow with students being expected to acquire their teachers’ conceptualizations of a “good” reader or risk being marginalized by their teachers or peers (Hall, in press; Moje & Dillon, 2006). As students learn what it means to be a certain type of reader, and learn how they are positioned as readers within their classrooms, they may begin to adopt the language associated with their particular identity and use it to frame their interactions with texts and reading instruction (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Rogers, 2002).

However, students’ identities as readers within school may not accurately reflect what they know and are capable of doing. Students who see themselves or get identified by their teachers as poor readers in school have been shown to have a complex and rich set of reading practices in their community (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006). Outside of school, they read traditional print texts, popular culture texts, and the internet for pleasure, to gain specific information to their questions, and to better understand their world (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Therefore, students who are identified as poor readers may possess but fail to exhibit the characteristics connected to good readers during school-based reading activities.

While the different reading identities that exist in school may not hold up under scrutiny, they do have very real consequences for how students engage with texts and reading instruction (Richardson & Eccles, 2007). Students’ understandings of who they are as readers, and how their reading identities position them within their classrooms, contribute to the decisions they make about reading (Luttrell & Parker, 2001). When expected to read and discuss texts in small group or whole class settings, students who
identify as poor readers may withdraw or limit their involvement in an effort to avoid being publicly identified as a poor reader. Students who identify as good or above average readers may be more likely to participate publicly since they are more likely to have experienced success with reading in school, believe they can accomplish the task at hand, and feel they have something to contribute. Therefore, students’ interactions with texts and instruction are not necessarily mediated by their cognitive reading abilities but rather their interpretation of what it means to be a certain type of reader and how they understand themselves in relation to those norms.

Methods

This study took place at two middle schools, Mill Creek and Oak Grove, located in the rural South over a period of three months in the spring. Both schools had failed to make adequate yearly progress in reading in the last four years. Two teachers from Mill Creek, Ms. Anderson and Ms. West, participated. One teacher from Oak Grove, Mr. Cook, participated. The teachers were asked to nominate one class to participate in the study that they believed needed the most help in reading. A total of 52 students participated, about 17 students per class.

The Gates-MacGinitie (2000) was used to determine students’ reading levels at the start of the study. The results of the pre-assessment showed that 21 students, 40%, read below grade-level, 10 students, 20%, read on grade-level, and 21 students, 40%, read above grade-level. The Reader Self-Perception Scale, RSPS, (Henk & Melnick, 1995) was used to determine how students identified themselves as readers at the beginning of the study. Nine students, 17%, believed they were low-performing readers, 27 students, 52%, identified themselves as average-performing readers and 16 students, 31%, identified themselves as high-performing readers. Table one shows the percentage of students who read below, on, or above grade-level and how they identified themselves as readers at the start of the study.

Classroom Procedures

Students first received instruction on a comprehension strategy. Next, they read a piece of text on their own and documented their strategy use. They then engaged in a small group discussion about the text and their strategy use. Students then read a second text, documented their strategy use, and engaged in a second discussion. Finally, students reflected on what they had learned from reading the texts and about comprehension strategies and discussed their understandings with their group. This cycle was completed four times with each cycle taking approximately two weeks to complete. When not engaged in the procedures described here, students were involved in their regular classroom activities.

Strategy instruction lasted approximately 30 minutes and was taught using the model developed by Duffy and colleagues (1986). Teachers first named and defined the strategy being taught, modeled how to use it, and then engaged students in guided practice. Strategies were taught in the following order: (a) becoming metacognitive, (b) making and checking predictions, (c) activating prior knowledge, and (d) asking, revising, and answering questions before, during, and after reading. The first strategy, becoming metacognitive, was chosen to make students more aware of their strategy use, teach them how to document their strategy use, and prepare them for their small group discussions. The remaining three strategies were jointly agreed upon by me and the
teachers based on the needs of the students and reading strategies that were a part of the
sixth-grade curriculum.

Readings were selected that were written on a sixth-grade reading level and
matched the topics teachers wanted students to learn about. Discussion groups consisted
of four-five students who shared similar beliefs about themselves as readers, either
identifying themselves as high performing, average-performing, or low-performing
readers based on results from the RSPS and remained consistent throughout the study.
Given that students’ identities as readers can mediate their interactions with texts, and
that students’ who self-identify as poor readers may withdraw from reading activities to
hide their perceived weaknesses, forming groups based on similar identities was seen as a
way to help all students feel more comfortable participating. Students were not told that
they were grouped together based on their reading identities. However, in their first group
meeting, students were told that they shared commonalities about themselves as readers
and were given time to identify those as a group.

Students’ reading comprehension abilities were not a factor in forming the groups.
Therefore, within each group there was a mix of students who read on, above, or below
grade-level. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show how many students were in each group, how they
identified themselves as readers, and the varying reading abilities which were present as

Data Sources

The Gates-MacGinitie (2000) test of reading comprehension and the RSPS (Henk
& Melnick, 1995) was administered to all students at the beginning of the study. Students
completed the Level Six comprehension assessment of the Gates-MacGinitie which was
the appropriate level for sixth-graders. The RSPS measured how students perceived their
reading abilities.

Observations were conducted in each classroom twice a week. Strategy
instruction was always observed in order to ensure that the Duffy et al (1986) model of
was followed. Research assistants alternated between observing a session where students
read and wrote about their strategy use and a session where students participated in small
group discussions.

Students documented their strategy use a total of eight times during the study
resulting in a total of 416 documentation sheets. They participated in three small group
discussions in each cycle, two focusing on texts they had read and one where they
reflected on what they had learned about texts and comprehension strategies, for a total of
12 discussions per group. Each discussion lasted an average of 10 minutes, and all were
audio-taped and transcribed. A total of 144 discussions were documented.

Data Analysis

I first analyzed each group within each class individually. Then, I analyzed groups
who shared the same reading identities within each class. Next, I analyzed all groups
within a class. Finally, I analyzed across classes. In looking across classes I first analyzed
the discussions of groups who shared the same reading identities. I then analyzed across
all groups and classes.

I first identified places in the transcripts where students explained the strategies
they did/did not use. I next reviewed the transcripts and the descriptive codes to identify
patterns that existed. I created pattern codes to determine if there was a connection
between how students discussed comprehension strategies and how they identified
themselves as readers. Descriptive pattern codes that were related were collapsed together under a single code.

Then, I created a matrix displaying the pattern codes at each of analysis level. I looked across pattern codes at each level to determine the assertions that could be made. Once I had identified assertions, I reread the pattern codes and determined which assertion, if any, they served as evidence for. I next reread the pattern codes and transcripts to confirm the evidence that supported them as well as to locate any disconfirming evidence. I then regrouped pattern codes under the appropriate assertion.

Findings

Discussions showed that students who saw themselves as high-performing readers (HPR), regardless of their reading abilities, had discussions that were markedly different than students who identified themselves as average (APR) or low-performing (LPR) readers. First, in HPR groups, students discussed using comprehension strategies as a way to clarify or deepen their knowledge of content and to support their interpretations of text. In APR and LPR groups, students separated their talk about strategies from their talk about the texts. Second, students in HPR groups selected strategies based on what they believed would best help them address their specific comprehension problems. Students in APR and LPR groups tended to have one or two favorite strategies that they repeatedly used regardless of their success. The findings suggest that students will attempt to enact the identity they connect themselves with regardless of their current grade-level reading abilities.
References


Table 1

*Students’ Reading Abilities and Identities as Readers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Identified As Low Performing Reader</th>
<th>Identified As Average Performing Reader</th>
<th>Identified As High Performing Reader</th>
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<td>Read Below Grade-Level</td>
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<td>Read On Grade-Level</td>
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<td>10%</td>
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<td>Read Above Grade-Level</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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Table 2

*Groups Who Identified Themselves as Low-Performing Readers*

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<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of Members</th>
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Table 3

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Table 4

*Groups Who Identified Themselves as High-Performing Readers*

<table>
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