In the Middle: Language Arts Teachers' Negotiation of Beliefs and Practices

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The authors analyze the data gathered through their survey and compare it to observations of the teachers participating in the survey. Their findings support that these observed teachers of language arts in the middle grades, due to the lack of better preparation, are positioned midway between their ideal teaching strategy and what they perceive is expected of them.

In my perfect world, the curriculum is child-centered. Unfortunately, you mention child-centered curriculum around some people, and they get really nervous. Right now, my little aim is to provide reading and language arts that kids can enjoy and be connected and interested in. That's a little step toward what I really want - child-centered curriculum. Because I think that children - even eighth graders - are more willing to learn if it's within their interest level, if it means something to them, and they're interested, they'll buy into it, and they'll let you take them anywhere you want to go. If it's not child-centered, if it's not interesting…it's gonna be a long day. (Ann)

Ann's oral reflections certainly captures the disparity between textbook theories of learning and actual classroom practices. Are visions of a perfect curriculum truly representative of the beliefs of other middle-level teachers? Do teachers negotiate between what they believe *should be* and what they believe *could be* in a classroom?

In this article we will examine the reflections and practices of twelve middle-level language arts teachers. Turning Points (1989) indicates that universities have not

provided much training designed specifically for middle-level (grades 6-8) teachers and have, therefore, produced a population of teachers whose theory of teaching does not encompass developmentally responsive practices and compatible middle-level instruction. O'Donnell (1991) confirms that too many middle-level teachers only rely on their personal experiences as learners and their perceptions of commendable practices, or they react to their colleagues' pressure.

The good news is that many states are either reforming or establishing middle-level teacher programs that meet the needs of middle-level students. As teacher educators, we set out to investigate the congruencies and incongruencies of middle level instructors' reading theories and practices. Harste and Burke (1977) believe that examining reading instruction in terms of theoretical orientation is more insightful and accurate than simply investigating reading instruction in terms of reading approaches. Moreover, Morinne-Dershimer (1987) views the relationship between theory and practice as interdependent: "Our theory must be constantly tested and reshaped by our practice and our practice must be constantly tested and reshaped by our theory" (p 65).

What Do Teachers Believe About Reading?

Teachers' theoretical orientations towards the methods readers use can be represented by three models of the reading process (Leu & Kinzer, 1995): the psycholinguistic-transactional model, a reader-based view in which the reader brings meaning to the text (Goodman, 1985); an interactive model in which comprehension is achieved by translating the text and also bringing meaning to the text (Rummelhart, 1985); and a linear sequence model, a text-based view in which comprehension is text-driven (Gough, 1985). These views can be placed on a continuum in which the reader-based and the text-based models are placed at the extremes, while the interactive, a combination of both, is placed in the center. Certain instructional practices (Leu & Kinzer, 1995) are consistent with these models.

1. If teachers believe in the reader-based explanation, they focus on the development of the components of background knowledge because these allow the reader to predict meaning and word pronunciation. Specific background knowledge components targeted will be

metacognitive (comprehension monitoring, reader's meaning and author's intended meaning), discourse (knowledge of different types of literature/writing), syntactic (sentence order, word order), and vocabulary (word meaning, contextual clues).

2. If teachers believe in the interactive explanation, then they simultaneously develop all components of the reading process: affective, metacognitive, discourse, syntactic, vocabulary, decoding, and automaticity.

3. If teachers believe in the text-based explanation, then they focus a preponderance of class instruction upon the development of decoding knowledge - the author's intended message is most important - and a large amount of oral reading activities. Other knowledge sources are applied sequentially.

Teachers' theoretical orientations in reference to how children learn to read - the ultimate determinant of how they teach (Harste & Burke, 1977) - can also be placed on a continuum for analytical purposes. One set of experts believes that the students best learn to read holistically as they engage in meaningful and functional reading tasks (Goodman, 1985), while others believe that learn to read best by acquiring specific reading skills which are taught by the teacher (Flesch, 1955, 1981; Chall, 1983). Caught in the middle are those who believe that students learn best through a combination of student-directed and teacher-directed instruction (Rummelhart, 1985). Certain instructional practices (Leu & Kinzer, 1995) are consistent with these models.

1. If teachers believe in holistic language learning, they use journal writing, "think alouds", cooperative learning groups, writing/reading workshop, reading experiences within authentic social contexts, self-directed creative writing experiences, informal assessment, individualized reading, writing/reading workshop, and inductive instruction. They do not typically use published reading programs.

2. If teachers believe in integrated language learning, they incorporate such activities as response journal activities, "think alouds", cooperative learning groups, writing/ reading workshop, skill instruction as needed, formal and informal assessment, individualized reading, and

inductive and deductive learning activities. They may use a published reading program, but not exclusively.

3. If teachers believe in specific skills language learning, then they include directed reading activities, deductive instruction that targets specific skills, a scope and sequence of instruction, exclusive use of a published reading program, vocabulary exercises, traditional spelling instruction, and literal comprehension reading exercises. Evaluation tends to be formal; if informal evaluation is used,the focus is specific skills.

Categories at opposite points of the continuum demonstrate disparity; those at the same points on the continuum demonstrate congruency. Categories which demonstrate congruency are text-based/specific skills, interactive/integrated, and reader-based/holistic. Categories which demonstrate disparity of beliefs and practices are text-based/holistic and reader-based/specific skills. However, participants within the interactive or integrated category borrow characteristics of all extremes. (See Table 1)

Knowing the possibility of congruency and disparity, we set out to discover possible messages from the categorical placement of each teacher. These messages for teachers and teacher educators could possibly identify areas in which teachers require either baseline or additional training. In turn, we discovered two specific pedagogical issues. One issue is the congruency and disparity within literacy framework categories themselves. The other issue is the congruency and disparity between the teachers' self assessments and their reflections and practices. Each of these congruency and disparity issues is discussed through the words of the teachers themselves.

Our Process

Twelve middle-level language arts teachers agreed to participate in an analysis of the congruency of their teaching beliefs and practices. Six teachers (two sixth grade, two seventh grade and two eighth grade) teach in Maricopa County, Arizona; the other six all teach in either Monongalia County or Preston County, West Virginia. The demographics of the teachers' schools range from large suburban to urban to small rural. Some of the schools are K-8; some are 7-8. As frequently occurs in middle-level programs, seven of the teachers earned secondary

education degrees, and five earned elementary education degrees. Four of the teachers have masters' degrees; three are currently enrolled in masters' programs. The teachers' years of experience range from two years to twenty-three years. All but one of the teachers are female. To determine the teachers' predominant theoretical orientations concerning how people learn to read and potential literacy instruction, we administered a two-part beliefs survey (Leu & Kinzer, 1995, p. 30), and then we interviewed participants, asking various open-ended questions about their method for determining what they teach and the materials they use, the structure of their usual classroom lessons, the activities in which the students engage, their methods of student evaluation, and their role in the students' development of reading skills. We also conducted classroom observations to note similarities and differences in the teachers' beliefs and practices. Finally, to determine the stability of the teachers' beliefs, we asked them to complete a post-survey and to comment on each item.

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Since teacher beliefs about reading influence their instructional practices (Rupley & Logan, 1984; Leu & Kinzer, 1988, 1995; Harste & Burke, 1977), we used the quantitative information we obtained from the initial survey to categorize the teachers' belief systems (See Table 1.) and then hypothesize what instructional practices should be evident in the teachers' classrooms. After completing our interviews and observations, we again used survey information to determine if the teachers' beliefs had changed or remained constant from the pre- to post-surveys.

Pre- to Post-Survey Constants

The literacy framework categories of six teachers remained constant on the pre- and postsurveys. One teacher's responses placed her in the disparate text-based/holistic learning category, while the responses of the other teachers included a middle category (interactive and/or integrated).

Text-based/Holistic Learning Category.

Lauren expressed beliefs that are consistent with all components of the text-based/holistic learning category: "I think there should be a general interpretation of what the reader should get from what the writer has said, but, of course, the reader brings his own interpretation to some extent.... The reader is an important part of the process, not just the author." However, regardless of her professed beliefs in holistic language learning, Lauren's classroom practices are typical of the text-based framework. She uses the basal text, directs the lesson and all activities from the front of the classroom, follows the story by a writing assignment in which students answer literal questions about the events in the story and the discussion, then tests literary terms, definitions, analyses, and vocabulary. The comprehension questions she asks are usually literal, following the "What is ...? No, that's not it...." construction. Although Lauren discusses the language the author used to evoke fear just before she plays a recording of Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, she distributes a worksheet with ten multiple-choice questions immediately following the recording. At other times she administers grammar, vocabulary and comprehension exercises and short objective tests.

Interactive/Holistic Language Category.

Many of the practices of the four teachers appearing in the interactive/holistic language category are consistent with their placement. They indicated that they believe reading is learned "by reading." As Shirley and Sally respectively said, "I think the more you read, the better reader you will become," and "I want them to learn to think.... It is more important to learn to ask questions than to give answers." Similarly, Sharon commented to one group of students who were brainstorming research questions, "Don't use only recall questions; try to do some higherlevel thinking."

Sharon, Shirley, and Sally all use cooperative learning groups. Sally serves as facilitator as her students work in groups for most of the class period. She encourages student-directed, inductive learning, saying, "Skills are not as important as rich literacy experiences." During a mini-lesson her students use the Internet to search for famous mathematicians and then develop plans for a play-writing activity which will serve as a final evaluation of the project.

Sharon, Shirley, and Peggy directed their students'

lessons, using the overhead or followalong reading to focus students' attention and maintaining the center of control by following a teacher-student and student-teacher pattern during class discussions. Peggy said, "I like to use it [the overhead] because then everyone is on the same page at the same time."

Each year Peggy's students complete a career unit in which they focus on jobs which were identified for them on their personal interest inventories. "This year I had the research in the classroom because we couldn't get into the library. I set up centers around the room. There were four centers where there was information and four where there was just kind of busywork because I didn't have enough material to have all of them researching at the same time." Students travel through the centers, writing down their information and constructing a career report. "They said, 'Why do we have to do this?' I said, 'You know, a lot of the choices you're going to be making over the next few years really tie right into this, and it's really important that you look at it even if you change your mind.' I'm always hopeful they'll learn something... ." At the end of the unit, students write business letters to Peggy in which they reflect on the unit and provide recommendations for improvement.

Compatible with an interactive explanation, all four place an emphasis on teaching vocabulary, spelling, and various literary genres. They generally choose the vocabulary words and reading/writing topics for the students. Peggy explained, "I gave four weeks at twenty words a week, and I could have easily done twice that." Shirley sometimes allows the students to pick out troublesome vocabulary words or use the vocabulary words provided in "the novel unit I bought that goes along with the novels we use." Without exception, though, the procedure for teaching these words is to have students write the definitions of the vocabulary words and then as Sharon directs, "use them in original sentences."

Peggy and Sally also appeared to place an emphasis on the students' discourse knowledge, with Sally reporting that her students read a variety of trade books (fables, novel, mysteries, short stories, poetry, tall tales, autobiographies, biographies) during the year. Sharon reported that her students used literature texts containing a variety of genres (although some were abridged versions or excerpts) while Shirley used core books - classroom sets of tradebooks - as well. Peggy indicated that "The district wants us to stay in the textbook, but I read out of the textbook all the time. I don't like all the stories, and if I don't

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like them, I won't read them." Sharon also emphasizes the teaching and testing of grammar, but the emphasis appears to be on teaching students to identify the parts of speech.

Interactive/Integrated Category.

The responses on both the pre-survey and the post-survey place Beth in the interactive/ integrated category, and her practices are consistent with this placement. Indicating that she believes the county dictates her use of the contents and methods in the adopted literature series and the grammar book, Beth also incorporates activities which she has found to be successful during her twenty years of experience. "If there are things I can add to my class by bringing in my own materials and labor, I do." She presents the rearranged contents of the literature series in thematic units and includes such activities as "round robin" oral reading and creative writing, experiences she says are more relevant to her students' lives.

Beth directs the lessons, selecting activities from the literature series and focusing discussion of the literature on "knowing what the author is trying to say," but instructing students to "come up with your own analysis." Beth presents specific skills in reading and language arts to the whole group as they are encountered in the adopted series, but she also uses mini lessons to teach specific skills when they are needed.

Pre- to Post-Survey Changes

Six of the teachers changed literacy framework categories from the pre- to post-surveys. Still, in the pre-survey categories, four of the six included interactive and/or integrated explanations, and in the post-survey the responses of all six included interactive and/or integrated explanations. (See Table 1.) . Since middle categories are a mix of all beliefs, these teachers unsurprisingly express beliefs and demonstrate behaviors drawn from all categories.

Reader-Based Holistic to Interactive/ Integrated Category.

Although Ann begins each class period with a grammar-punctuation-spelling skills review consistent with a specific skills classification, she also makes extensive use of literature response journals and cooperative learning groups, both congruent with

holistic language learning.

> I tend to start out with a sort of settling down activity -
> something to remind them they're at school rather than
> chatting about the latest social activity. Then usually we'll
> review what they read yesterday, and then talk about
> expectations - about what we'd like to accomplish today. I
> may do direct instruction regarding a skill we need to learn,
> and then we'll go ahead and either read or do a group
> activity. Towards the end of the period, I'll gather them all
> back up again, and we'll discuss 'What did you find out?' or
> they'll say, 'Let me read my poem.' Then we'll just talk, '
> 'What did you learn?' They want to share, want to discuss.
> I'm a big believer that   with this age group you've got to
> change gears. They love group activities and cooperative
> learning, the more the better it is. They also like direct
> instruction because they want the teacher's approval.

During a single class, Ann's students focus on the
overhead to complete a punctuationparts of speech-sentence
combining exercise, discuss the previous day's act of *Romeo and
Juliet*, select and read aloud another scene from the play, work in
small groups to complete their literature response logs, work
individually to draft or revise their poems or their fractured fairy
tales, work in pairs to edit their writing pieces, participate in a
whole-group discussion about the day's learnings, and listen to
classmates read their poetry (then clap at the conclusion of the
reading.) In her interactions with the students, Ann questions
students, ("What......Why did Romeo kill Tybalt? Was
Mercutio.... Why.... How did Lady Capulet...?), emphasizes
predictions ("Anyone have any idea what will happen in ...?"),
and builds literary skills into the context of the lesson.

Interactive/Integrated to Interactive/Holistic Language Category.

Both Ellie's and Karen's oral reflections and their
classroom practices confirm the polarity of their beliefs. Ellie
commented: "I think that a reading assessment can resemble the
skills that have been developed in class.... And that assessment
can be designed so that it causes them to stretch and think while
they're being assessed rather than just regurgitate facts." During
the two years Ellie teaches her students, they keep literature logs

in which they "learn to break the habits of book reports and instead interact with the authors," but they also take weekly spelling tests in which they receive points for each letter correct, then compute their percentages.

Karen commented: "...the author has a particular message he is trying to get across, and it's not that kids can't have their own interpretations...they can have their own interpretations based on their own experiences, but I do believe that there is one major answer, one thing the author is trying to say." However, Karen continued: " There are kids you don't need to have as much structure with as other kids. So I think that the teacher needs to get a handle on those people that need to be guided more, and then others you can just kind of leave alone. Guide them gently, and they pick it up very quickly." When Karen's students prepare to work together to revise their persuasive essays on topics they have chosen individually, she reads a sample aloud to them, then directs their attention to the requirements on the board. However, when students are studying literary elements in various novels, Karen generally reads the novels aloud to them or uses roundrobin reading.

Interactive/Holistic Language to Reader-Based/Integrated Category.

Drawing upon her own experiences of learning to read as a child, Terri uses a basal reader and supports the teaching of specific skills, commenting "I'm a strong phonics person." On the other hand, she demonstrates a minimum of teacher direction, reminding students that they had voted on what they would do during class that period.

> The way I determine what to teach is that, typically, I do an inventory with my students.... As a matter of fact, we just finished a unit on learning styles, and they were surveyed as to their learning style and time-of-day preferences. They have a learning strategies class they take here... , and we've taken those learning strategies and their information about themselves as learners.... They are in the process of implementing a five-week plan utilizing some strategies to help them be successful in two of their classes, and they are going to be journaling about that. All of this information is being sent home, and we're getting parents involved.... . So I base all my materials on that information, and I also take into

consideration my special needs students. Because we practice almost full inclusion, I typically modify all of my lessons so that I don't have to make any major modifications for my special needs kids. So I look at learning styles, ability, levels, and student interest, of course. They got to vote on which theme of he reading series they wanted to do. I told all three classes, and we are starting that theme today."

She admitted, "My teaching is a mix-match of things - a result of my experiences and university education.... I look at learning styles, ability levels, and student interest."

Reader-Based/Integrated to Interactive/Holistic Language Category.

Paula supported Terri's mix-match sentiment when she said, "I don't do anything the same because I'm not sure what works...so I figure if I do enough different things, I'll hit what is right." Paula's students read selections from the basal text and from literature.

I use it [the basal] because there are some good stories and sometimes I just need to fall back on something structured.... I do teach skills...every now and then we'll just stop and kind of sneak in a skill. I don't know whether I do it because it's good or whether I'm just supposed to do it.... Sometimes we just read and kind of chit-chat about a story.... there's a part of me that says they're learning from each other, and I'm not going to ruin it.... I feel like we've had a good lesson when we go off on one question...and spend maybe fifteen-twenty minutes. I'll do a writing thing because it's just not settled at the end of the discussion. They need to tell their sides one more time.

Still, Paula's class is consistently organized around topics which integrate science, social studies, mathematics, and language arts. As she pointed out, "We just integrate it however it naturally falls." Students work cooperatively to investigate areas such as oceans, biomes, the Renaissance, Egypt, and biographies. Their Renaissance unit culminated in the construction of an art gallery which had several wings depicting various aspects (explorers, churches, government, clothing, art,

etc.) of the Renaissance.

Reader-Based/Holistic Language to Reader-Based/ Integrated Category.

In contrast with his responses on the beliefs survey, the practices of the sixth teacher, Dan, tend toward specific skills. As are all the reading classes in his school, Dan's reading class is organized around the Accelerated Reader program, a program in which the students' reading levels are assessed, students individually choose library books within their designated reading level range, read the books independently, and then take a computerized multiple-choice test on each book they read.

Dan's language arts classes are organized around a specific skills pattern: He chooses vocabulary from the reading selection; the students write the word's dictionary definition and either a sentence from the book using the vocabulary word or their own sentence. Using round-robin reading, the class reads the chapter together, and as Dan said, "...I will break in whenever I feel it is important to sum up or discuss." Following the reading, Dan leads a discussion of important events in the chapter, and then students summarize the major event. "They can write down their own [sentence] or use the one we did as a class. We will draw pictures for my creative types so they can express themselves."

Dan talked about why he teaches what he does to his students:

> Obviously I teach what the district requires me to teach. We have a beginning-of-the-year test and an end-of-the-year test. They give you all these books and ideas and want you to work on all these projects and super ideas, but the bottom line is that they don't test you on that. They test you on [items from]...comprehension to parts of speech to writing like a reader. I guess the end-of-year assessment doesn't tell me I have to teach it; I just feel I'm not doing my job if they do not do well on the test. So what I teach is a lot of what I feel I need to teach. I don't think you can get fired for not supplying these kids with information.... I still struggle with my singular possessives, and I don't feel it's really important for them even though it is in the end-of-the year assessment. Being able to write a paragraph is important. Being able to read a passage and understand it is important. And knowing

what the main parts are. In the end-of-the-year assessment they had using a thesaurus. How many times in life - if you're not a teacher - do you use a thesaurus? Obviously it's giving you skills for your further studies, but none of it's real world. It's just surviving in school.

The Results of the Teachers' Negotiations

If teachers' survey responses place them within a naturally disparate category containing extremes in beliefs (e.g., text-based/holistic language), their beliefs will necessarily be conflicting. Further, because their practices are also drawn from these extreme beliefs, their classroom activities will often be in juxtaposition with their survey responses and their oral reflections. For example, Lauren talked about the importance of phonics and administered literal comprehension exercises, yet she loves literature and loves to read "naturally."

In contrast, teachers whose beliefs place them in a congruent category (e.g., readerbased/holistic language) will generally select activities within the practices of that category; they generally demonstrated harmony in their survey responses, interviews, and classroom observations. One exception: Dan continually vacillated in his beliefs and in his practices.

Ann's and Paula's reflections at the beginning of this article depict their struggle to negotiate the disparities between their beliefs and their actual classroom practices. What appears to be true for all of the teachers - regardless of the constancy or flux of their literacy frameworks - they all use practices that are a result of negotiation between their beliefs and various influences - district or state requirements, colleagues' practices, and their personal likes and interests. The result: most use practices that occur "in the middle."

During our investigation, the teachers reflected on their own beliefs and practices - some of them for the first time. It is possible that this self-reflection caused them to reshape their theory based on their practice or to reshape their practice based on their theory. Irvin (1998) stated that when teachers reflect on their teaching and better understand the learning processes, they are better able to create and improve their learning environments.

We feel that this research speaks clearly to teacher educators, school administrators, and classroom teachers. Pre-service instruction at the university level should encompass development and articulation of theoretical literacy frameworks,

accommodation of the developmental characteristics of middle-level students, and clear demonstrations of effective teaching practices for middle-level students as well as opportunities to practice self-reflection on their beliefs and classroom practices.

Table 1. Participants' Pre and Post Survey Literacy Framework Categories

How Does Reading Ability Develop?	How Does One Read?					
	Text-Based Explanations		Interactive Explanations		Reader-Based Explanations	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Specific Skills Explanations						
Integrated Instruction and Learning Explanations			**Beth** *Ellie* *Karen*	**Beth** *Ann*	*Paula* *Terri*	*Dan*
Holistic Language Learning Explanations	Lauren	Lauren	**Peggy** **Shirley** **Sharon** **Sally** *Terri*	**Peggy** **Shirley** **Sharon** **Sally** *Ellie* *Karen* *Paula*	*Dan* *Ann*	

*   **Bold** = Participants whose categories did not change.
Italics = Participants who changed categories

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