Using Scaffolding to Foster Middle School Students' Comprehension of and Response to Short Stories

This research study was designed to investigate how two popular approaches to teaching literature, a reader-response approach and a cognitive-oriented approach, affect middle level students' learning from narrative text, specifically asking what differences does using each approach have on middle school students' comprehension of and response to short stories.

Knowledge about how these two approaches affect students' learning from text can assist teachers in choosing either a reader-response approach or a cognitive-oriented approach, depending on the outcomes they desire for the reading of a specific text. This knowledge is especially important because in the field of reading, there are currently two, often polarized factions that favor one of these two approaches, frequently at the exclusion of the other. This polarization can be seen in a number of sources, for example, by comparing the orientation of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1984) to that of *Counterpoint and Beyond* (Davidson, 1988), or most recently by considering the opposing positions presented in *What Research Says about Reading* (*Educational Leadership*, 2004.) This study may serve as a reminder that both approaches are valuable, but have different effects on student outcomes. Using the best suited approach for a desired outcome will help to increase students' deep and lasting understanding and appreciation of the text they are reading at the time, and foster their understanding, learning from, and appreciating each and every text they read.

During the middle grades, the demands for mindful reading dramatically increase. Despite the fact that many middle grades students are facing these transitions in their reading abilities at the same time as struggling with these new expectations for reading, their literacy needs are frequently neglected. Instruction in the necessary skills often does not occur, and students may be easily frustrated in trying to comprehend difficult text. It is not surprising that during the middle grades an overall negative trend in attitudes towards reading instruction begins (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995), perhaps largely because students are not receiving either the amount or the type of instruction they need to be successful. The latest NAEP results highlight this problem: While three-fourths of 8th graders can perform at the basic level on comprehension assessments, comprehending primarily literal information, less than 3% of 8th graders can perform at the advanced level, analyzing and extending information from what they read (US Department of Education, 2003).

The study used a dominant-less dominant mixed-method design, with the dominant design a quasi-experimental design with student as the unit of analysis and a covariate of student reading ability. The less-dominant design involved qualitative data gathered through interviews, field notes, teacher journals, and student surveys. The two approaches to teaching literature were operationalized in four Scaffolded Reading Experiences (SRE), a form of literature instruction that focuses on assisting students in reading, comprehending, and learning from individual texts and has proven effective with middle level students in previous studies (Cooke, 2002; Fournier & Graves, 2002; Rothenberg & Watts, 1997). Four SREs for two short stories (one SRE for each approach) were created for use with sixth-grade students, and taught to 85 students by two teachers at a diverse, urban middle school. The dependent variables used to assess students' comprehension and response were scores on assessments, and results were analyzed using an analysis of covariance. The qualitative data was coded for emerging categories using Nvivo software, analyzed using the constant-comparative method, and used to add thick description and context to the study.

Students taught with the reader-response SRE performed significantly better on the response-oriented items on both knowledge and application assessments ($F(1, 158) = 78.80$, $p < .001$ with an effect size of .33; $F(1, 158) = 711.36$, $p < .001$ with an effect size of 0.82) and students taught with the cognitive-oriented SRE performed significantly better on the cognitive-oriented items on both knowledge and application assessments ($F(1, 158) = 310.34$, $p < .001$ with an effect size of .66; $F(1, 158) = 490.00$, $p < .001$ with an effect size of 0.76.) The teachers found the reader-response SRE easier to teach because they felt more familiar with teaching responding, but strongly agreed that both the cognitive-oriented and the reader-response SREs and, in particular, both of the additional purposes of the SREs (learning a variety of response modes and learning to defend answers using textual evidence) were very useful for their students.Students' interviews and survey results showed that students' affective reactions were based more on the stories than on the approach with which they were taught, and that they found both learning about different ways to respond and learning how to use textual evidence to defend answers to comprehension questions useful.

In general, the results of the study showed that the approach to teaching literature used affected the understanding of and response to text.The results strongly suggest that certain approaches to teaching literature are especially effective for certain purposes.In this study, the two approaches used affected students' abilities to both name various ways one might respond to a text and use correctly a variety of response modes, and to explain how to defend one's answers to comprehension questions and to do so for short-answer questions about short stories.The Reader-Response SRE was the most effective for the first set of tasks, and the Cognitive-Oriented SRE was the most effective for the latter set.The success of students in completing the varied assessment tasks targeted toward their treatment group, but not those tasks related to the opposite treatment group, highlights the fact that both the cognitive-oriented approach and the reader-response approach to teaching literature are useful for teaching particular purposes— purposes related to their theoretical bent— but not all purposes.

In addition to this major finding, an important result from the qualitative data was the teachers' positive attitudes towards each of the approaches and their purposes.This finding is quite important when one considers again the issue of polarized factions supporting one approach over the other.The teachers' positive reactions to both SRE treatments suggest that they see a need for using both approaches, or perhaps a combined approach, to teaching literature.It is interesting to note that both teachers also agreed that the Reader-Response SRE was easier to teach because it represented a more familiar approach to teaching literature.This suggests that many middle school teachers may need to have more acquaintance with using a variety of approaches for teaching literature.