Abstract

Historically, defining Reading Comprehension has been as difficult as attempting instruction. Support for a continual assessment and a lack of instruction has existed for many years. Theoretical views of the construct of Reading Comprehension and the variables considered to be involved have changed in recent years. Traditional approaches to instruction in Reading Comprehension focussed primarily on features of the text. More recently, recognition of the importance of metacognition has occurred which has been supported by research that has demonstrated its significant effects on student ability. The interactive and cognitive view of Reading Comprehension evident in recent literature acknowledges the importance of the knowledge the reader brings, the critical features of the text being
read and the purpose for
reading. Whether these changes in theory have been reflected in changed
teaching practices in
classrooms is a question that remains unanswered. Some evidence
commenting on the
transformation of these theoretical changes into classroom practice is
presented. While this data
has been drawn from a relatively small sample, some general conclusions
can be made
concerning teaching practices and assessment in a broad range of
regular and special education
classrooms. Recommendations for future research and discussion conclude
the paper.

Introduction

This paper overviews a sample of the literature and research in
reading comprehension from the
sixties and seventies to compare and contrast these with current views.
Rather than presenting
an overall picture of "then " and "now", a series of points for
discussion will be used to more
clearly develop directions of research and approaches to instruction.
In addition, this paper
provides details of a small study piloting a questionnaire concerning
current practices, in New
South Wales, for assessment and instruction in reading comprehension.
The number of studies
in reading comprehension in recent times has meant that each discussion
point presented could
easily be expanded into an entire paper in its own right. For each
point, readers may wish to
follow up, in more depth, the issues raised. This paper has attempted
to provide an overview of
the area rather than a comprehensive discussion of the entire body of
work.

Section 1: Conceptual Factors

Defining Reading Comprehension
Historically, reading and reading comprehension have not only been
difficult to define, even to
separate, but have been suggested as critical in determining the focus
of reading programs
(Clymer, 1968 , p.8). Definitions of reading direct the focus of
instruction in specific skills, for
example oral reading, completion of cloze passage, retelling or
answering questions. The resultant emphasis within programs will be reflected in differential student abilities as various tasks are considered more critical to reading and reading comprehension. More than two decades ago, the need for a balance in reading programs between skills instruction and meaning was raised (Clymer, 1968; McCullough, 1968).

A review of early models of reading, including reading comprehension, was provided by Clymer (Clymer, 1968) and this includes reference to an unpublished paper by Barrett (Barrett, undated cited by; Clymer, 1968, p.17 - 23). Clymer cites Barrett's claim that teachers face two misconceptions concerning reading comprehension instruction: "considering comprehension a single unitary skill and... assuming that comprehension contains so many separate skills as to be unmanageable" (Clymer, 1968, p.17). Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension uses general headings including "literal comprehension...reorganization... inferential comprehension... evaluation ... appreciation" (Clymer, 1968, p.18). Despite an abundance of discussion and research in the years since Barrett's claim, the misconceptions he outlines and the taxonomy he suggests might still be relevant for teachers today.

Durkin's classic study of reading comprehension instruction provides distinctions between comprehension instruction and comprehension assessment (Durkin, 1978). Comprehension instruction was said to occur when the "teacher does/says something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single isolated word"(Durkin, 1978, p.488). Examples of the sorts of observed teacher behaviours included any explanation that "focuses on individual words but in the context of a sentence or more....extracting meaning from single sentences or pairs of sentences... instruction with paragraphs (or more)"(Durkin, 1978, p.489). Durkin clearly distinguished these situations from comprehension assessment which included when the "teacher does/says something in order to learn whether what was read was comprehended. Efforts could
take a variety of forms - for instance, orally posed questions; written exercises; request for picture of an unpictured character in a story" (Durkin, 1978, p.490).

Durkin reported that, within those definitions, "practically no comprehension instruction was seen...whether children's answers were right or wrong was the big concern" (Durkin, 1978, p.520). Where answers were incorrect, teachers stated this and the task of finding the correct answer became "guess what's in my head"(Pearson, 1985, p.727). In addition, "never did children have to prove or show why they thought an answer was correct" (Durkin, 1978, p. 490).

From about 18,000 minutes, almost 300 hours, of observations, Pearson reports Durkin could only classify 45 minutes as instruction (Pearson, 1985, p.728). While Durkin qualifies this as a small amount of observation, it should be noted that teachers observed were requested to be "the best teachers" aware of the focus on comprehension (Durkin, 1978, p. 495).

Current definitions of reading comprehension, including "the myriad of skills that involve getting meaning from the printed page" (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990, p.275), suggest strongly that reading comprehension is implicit within most definitions of reading. In addition, present descriptions of reading comprehension focus on the complexity of reading and comprehension (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990) - even referring to reading as a "system" (Adams, 1990, p.3). The organisation of texts of reading instruction into reading comprehension and decoding as separate chapters may imply a separation into two distinct types of skills (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990 ; Howell, Fox, & Morehead, 1993). However, acknowledgment of the interactions between these skills is provided (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990, p.40).

Despite this acknowledgment of the complexity of the task of reading, and reading comprehension, some consideration of the appropriateness of Durkin's definitions (Durkin, 1978)
within the current views seems warranted. Indeed, if a replication of the Durkin study were undertaken in classrooms in the nineties, the question might be raised as to how different the findings might be?

An initial emphasis on text-based factors
An early emphasis was placed on the importance of the text to be read (Pearson, 1985) and exemplified in research concerned with readability (Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988). The main difference encountered by students as they progressed through grades was not in differences in skills taught, questions asked or specific instruction, (Durkin, 1978), but in changing the difficulty level of the text. Readability formulae were based upon features of the text, namely words per sentence, sentences per paragraph or syllables per word (Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988, p.20). Student skills and knowledge were disregarded in determining the difficulty level of a particular passage (Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988, p. 128). Reading comprehension involved students making "some degree of 'approximation' to the text read" (Pearson, 1985, p.726).

More recent approaches to instruction in reading comprehension have considered the prior knowledge of the reader, the purpose for reading and the features of the text (Weisberg, 1988). These factors and their interaction determine the success of the student. Prior knowledge consists of not only existing knowledge of the passage topic but, also, knowledge of metacognitive skills involved in monitoring reading and understanding (Howell, Fox, & Morehead, 1993). This recognition of the existing, "enabling skills" (Howell, Fox, & Morehead, 1993, p. 183-4) that the reader brings to the task of comprehension has included a shift into studies of "thinking skills" (Williams & Ellsworth, 1990).

Measures of Reading Comprehension
Originally, measures of reading comprehension used in classrooms included completion and correction of answers to questions (Durkin, 1978). The adequacy of such measures of has been questioned, often on the basis that the questions might be answered without reference to the passage read (Della-Piana & Endo, 1973) and may not indicate
comprehension but topic knowledge or general knowledge of the world. It has been suggested that only questions that can be answered as a result of reading the passage reflect the gain in comprehension (Bormuth, 1969 as cited by; Della-Piana & Endo, 1973, p.907). An alternative method of measuring comprehension involved a prediction or guessing techniques where students were requested to guess individual words in a story one after the other (Coleman & Miller, 1968 cited by;

Della-Piana & Endo, 1973, p.907). This measure was concerned with "information gain"(Della-Piana & Endo, 1973, p.907) determined by the improvement in scores on first and second administrations of the same passage.

More recently, measures of reading comprehension have been included in standardised, normative measures of reading. Such measures may be oral, may involve memory (Neale, 1988) or may involve written, multiple choice answers without memory for text (Australian Council for Educational Research, 1986). As with all normative tests, there is an error of measurement and the usefulness of scores depends upon the norming process: whether the student tested is similar to the norming population and how recently norming was completed. Consideration has been given to the validity of alternative measures of reading comprehension, including less formal teacher constructed assessments (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988). This work evaluates question answering ability, recall, oral passage reading rates and cloze passages through comparisons with normative measures using correlational techniques (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988). Conclusions from this study must be qualified, since the subjects only involved boys in junior high school with mild or moderate handicaps. Findings included the high correlational support for reading rate, written recall and question answering (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988, p.27). The results for written recall were, in fact, higher than for oral recall - an interesting
finding as students with these sorts of disabilities often have considerable difficulties with written tasks (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988, p. 26; Poplin, Gray, Larsen, Banikowski, & Mehring, 1980 as cited by). In addition, the results for the question answering task were qualified by the complex procedure used to formulate the questions (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988, p.27).

While this evidence supports, in a qualified way, the use of alternative assessments of reading comprehension, increasing use of curriculum-based measurement techniques has been documented for determining eligibility for resources and for tracking reading progress in both special education settings (Shinn & Hubbard, 1992) and regular classrooms (Rodden-Nord & Shinn, 1991). This supports the use of reading rate or fluency as a general indicator of reading and comprehension ability.

Increasingly, support for a method of assessment more reflective of cognitive processes, rather than correct or incorrect answers, has been evident in teaching strategies that focus on "think aloud" techniques (Baumann, Jones, & Seifert-Kessell, 1993). This is reflected in assessment procedures (Dewitz, Carr, & Patberg, 1987; Jacobs & Paris, 1987 for questionnaires) that attempt to monitor metacognitive processes (Stevens & Slavin, 1995). Further developments include the expansion in use of portfolio assessments within curricula where an attempt has been made to measure change over time, across tasks, from different sources, including peers, and across different content areas (Board of Studies, 1994, p. 262).

While not wishing to suggest that such assessments are not critical indicators of student performance, some doubt has been cast on the ability of these procedures to reflect thinking processes and stand up to scrutiny in terms of validity and reliability (Baker, O'Neil Jr., & Linn, 1993). On this basis, there seems to be a movement toward assessments reflecting cognitive processes but that refinement, testing and validation of these procedures is yet to be documented.
Early Intervention
The importance of early intervention in remediating difficulties is not a recent phenomenon. As early as 1964, evidence suggested that intervention at grade two, as opposed to grade nine, "with children having reading problems yielded considerably greater success" (Della-Piana & Endo, 1973, p.896; Schiffman, 1964 as cited by). The importance of early intervention has been exemplified in recent years with the emergence of specific interventions that focus on the early years of schooling (Wright, 1993) and more specifically the focus on Reading Recovery (Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Wheldall, Centre, & Freeman, 1993). Irrespective of the debate on the effectiveness of Reading Recovery (Centre, Wheldall, & Freeman, 1992; Hiebert, 1994), there has been much earlier assistance given to many students having difficulties with reading than would otherwise have occurred.

Focus on Student Characteristics
Early discussions of reading tended to consider student characteristics as a fairly major factor in the development of early reading skills. Factors such as socio-economic status of the child's family and neurological factors of the child were thought to play an important role in reading (Della-Piana & Endo, 1973). While it is still acknowledged these factors may affect disposition toward reading, current views consider instruction should be matched to the needs of the student (Howell, Fox, & Morehead, 1993). Where the student does not possess prior knowledge or strategies for a particular task, instruction should be provided to change that situation: "prior knowledge, and use of strategies can both be altered through careful evaluation and focused instruction"(Howell, Fox, & Morehead, 1993, p.28). There is available evidence to support this from research supporting "thorough teaching of a few effective reading strategies" (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989, for an overview). Such a shift in emphasis, from student characteristics that are relatively difficult to change to the critical importance of
instruction, has increased the importance of the role of the teacher in designing and sequencing instruction and in providing students with resources and support for success in reading and comprehension.

Impact of Vocabulary Knowledge
The importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading and reading comprehension is another area where general agreement, in principle, of the role of this factor has consistently been evident in literature and research. However, some changes in the focus of instruction and in the ability to provide instruction might be evident in some recent studies. The importance of vocabulary has been documented in many early studies, in terms of familiarity of words, knowledge of words the ability to demonstrate knowledge of word meanings and the "emotional intensity of words" (Della-Piana & Endo, 1973, p. 904). Early instruction may not have provided teachers with the information to ensure students "owned the word" (Pearson, 1985, p.729, italics in original text). The example cited by Pearson, typifies early instruction in vocabulary, where students look up a word in the dictionary and select the meaning (the example used being "exasperated" (Pearson, 1985, p. 728) and write a sentence using that word (the example of the sentence being "He was exasperated" (Pearson, 1985, p.728) not necessarily demonstrating understanding of that word's meaning with the sentence).

Discussion on the change of focus in vocabulary instruction and research has been outlined (Beck & McKeown, 1991). According to this review, early vocabulary research was concerned with "vocabulary size at various ages and educational levels, the relationship between vocabulary ability and general mental ability, which words were most useful to know and the development of a corpus of words for us in creating more readable texts" (Beck & McKeown, 1991, p.789). This review also provides details of the change in focus of recent work in response to the "information processing models" (Beck & McKeown, 1991, p.790) which demand a more cognitive approach. Further discussion is given to what might be
described as a much more
detailed approach to work in this area where the need to clearly define
the nature and scope of
"words" and what is meant by "knowing" a word (Beck & McKeown, 1991).

More recently, the effects of vocabulary have been demonstrated and
more detailed assessment
of existing student knowledge of vocabulary and extensive, explicit
instruction in vocabulary
have been recommended (Ryder & Graves, 1994). This work suggests that
"the sort of
vocabulary instruction that is likely to improve reading comprehension
- surely one of the major
goals of teaching vocabulary prior to students reading a selection - requires students to
manipulate words in rich and varied ways, to discuss words and their
relationships, and to
explore and justify the relationships and associations they discover as they discuss words" (Ryder & Graves, 1994, p. 150-1). A further critical point from this paper (Ryder & Graves, 1994) was
that current instruction included many words that the students were
already familiar with.

Some have argued that direct instruction in vocabulary is a task that
is too great for any teacher,
with the analogy of "comparing the task of directly teaching vocabulary
to that of trying to fill
a swimming pool with a teaspoon" (Adler, 1990; Nagy, 1990; cited by
Zechmeister, Chronis,
Cull, D'Anna, & Healy, 1995, p.201). While this task remains daunting,
teachers may feel ill-
prepared for vocabulary instruction. However, more recently,
suggestions have been made to
reduce this task by instructing in "functionally important words"
(Zechmeister, Chronis, Cull,
D'Anna, & Healy, 1995, p. 201) which would constitute a much smaller
learning set. In addition,
support for the importance of specific types of vocabulary has proven
to significantly affect
reading comprehension. This has included work in a specific topic
(Beck, McKeown, Sinatra,
& Loxterman, 1991) and dealing with vocabulary used in teacher
questioning (Cunningham &
Moore, 1993). Furthermore, there is tentative support for the
cumulative nature of vocabulary
acquisition suggesting that reading ability may have a compounding
effect on vocabulary knowledge as skilled readers improve in their vocabulary knowledge more than weaker readers (Nicholson & Whyte, 1992). Based on this evidence, the importance of teaching vocabulary to students and its relationship to comprehension (Beck & McKeown, 1991) cannot be denied. This validates the recent claim for more research in the area of vocabulary knowledge and instruction (Beck & McKeown, 1991).

Section 2: Instructional Factors

The Role of the Teacher

The reported role of the teacher in early comprehension, with the lack of "instruction" detailed earlier in this paper, contrasts with later views which support the presentation of strategies, methods of finding answers or solving difficulties with comprehension followed by a period of teacher guided practice in the new skill (Pearson, 1985). Pearson outlined this model of instruction involving a gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student (Pearson, 1985, p. 732-3), using examples of research, including question-answer relationships (Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985) and reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984). He goes on to describe the changing role of teachers as those "who share an interpretive community with their students, they become willing to share their cognitive success (and failures!) with students" (Pearson, 1985, p. 736).

A further example of this is in a school setting where "transactional strategies instruction" has been incorporated (Pressley, et al., 1992). These types of instruction clearly direct the teacher to describe clearly the process of arriving at a correct answer to a problem in reading comprehension, rather than merely correcting, with a clear focus on the process of getting the solution.

Difficulties have arisen in attempting to apply this model (Pearson,
to classroom instruction, as to when, how and why the teacher "releases responsibility" (Pearson & Fielding, 1991, p.848). This criticism might also be levelled at scaffolded systems of instruction, where teachers determine, sometimes on a response by response, or even minute by minute, basis, how much and what type of instruction or support to give to students. "In scaffolded instruction, the teacher's instruction grows at least as much out of an analysis of the learner's ongoing understanding as it does out of an analysis of the text or the task at hand"(Pearson & Fielding, 1991, p.849). This type of approach would be equally difficult to implement and would require considerable skill on the part of the teacher who must walk a fine line between providing too little and too much support. An additional difficulty appears, not in the delivery of this type of instruction, but more in the extensive inservicing required for proficient performance in this type of instruction (El-Dinary, Pressley, & Schuder, 1992).

Summarising the role of the teacher, "research supports direct and explicit teacher action associated with planning, motivating, information giving, and mediating student understandings" (Roehler & Duffy, 1991, p. 877). Such a statement does not support pre-scripted lessons, but rather promotes the view that teachers should "flexibly adapt their instructional actions to fit particular situations"(Roehler & Duffy, 1991, p.877). This view raises the importance of the role of the teacher, adopting an interactive approach in reading instruction which promotes "combinations of teacher actions" within more "naturalistic" teaching situations (Roehler & Duffy, 1991, p.878).

Grouping for Instruction
Early research and literature provide evidence of grouping for reading instruction (Durkin, 1978) with teachers tending to group students by reading ability. For the remainder of the time, when the teacher taught another group, students completed worksheets (Durkin, 1978, p.514). The recent change in the view of comprehension has laid even more emphasis on the critical role of the teacher in modelling strategies and explicitly explaining the cognitive processes involved in
Some strategies, like reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1988), would be difficult to implement within whole class instruction.

While ability grouping has been claimed to be "pervasive" (Barr & Dreeben, 1991, p. 885) in schools, difficulties have arisen in examining the research as a result of a lack of explicit definitions as to "whether 'ability group' means grouping within or between classes" (Barr & Dreeben, 1991, p. 892). Despite such problems, evidence suggests that instruction occurred in classes that were "heterogenous in ability, with children placed in groups on the basis of reading ability within classes" (Austin & Morrison, 1963 cited by; Barr & Dreeben, 1991, p. 892). More recently, a meta-analysis (Slavin, 1987) found that while improved learning outcomes were not evident from "ability-grouped class assignment... that students grouped across grades for reading instruction learned more than comparable students in self-contained classes in nine of eleven studies" (Barr & Dreeben, 1991, p. 895; Slavin, 1987 as cited by). Thus, reviews have mixed results for grouping and further research is clearly warranted (Barr & Dreeben, 1991, 905).

Range of Relevant Reading Tasks
Early research noted the emphasis of instruction in "reading" lessons, the use of basal reading schemes and the absence of any use of other subject areas, for example social studies, for the instruction in reading comprehension (Durkin, 1978). Recently, the definition of reading has been considerably widened in relation to the tasks and texts involved. In determining levels of reading comprehension, recent assessments have included tasks involving the interpretation of tables and graphs within reading comprehension (University of New South Wales, 1994). Such assessments, revealing a much more realistic picture of reading skills required by students in daily reading activities, have been supported by research into these types of "real world" reading
tasks by adults (West, Stanovich, & Mitchell, 1993). Controversy concerning this type of research is evident (Taylor, 1994). Whether such tasks are reflected in teaching practices remains to be seen.

Studies have reported significant effects on reading comprehension of students in specific content areas where certain instructional strategies have been applied, for example in science (Lovitt & Horton, 1994) and social studies (Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1991). Textbooks on reading instruction devote separate sections to comprehension strategies for narrative as contrasted with expository text (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990; Kameenui & Simmons, 1990). These are indicators of the increasing need for instruction in areas other than those traditionally considered "reading" lessons.

Types of Questions asked

Early documentation of questions asked by teachers pointed to a reliance upon low-level, literal questions in reading comprehension (Durkin, 1990). Further claims suggested that questions "represented a random barrage of questions that do not cohere with one another...do not form a line of questions" (Beck, McKeown, McCaslin, & Burkes, 1979 as cited by; Pearson, 1985, p. 727). The suggestion is made that using questions that "focus student attention on salient story elements" will improve comprehension (Beck, 1984 as cited by; Pearson, 1985, p.727). The importance of using different types of questions and providing instruction in those types has been validated (Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985). More recently, some coverage has been given to "authentic questions" and the importance of specific questions within the task the reader has to complete, rather than the type of question asked (Busching & Slesinger, 1995, p.341).

Research into Practice

Concerns about the translation of reading research into teaching practices have suggested that, while research supports effective instruction in reading comprehension, these practices may not have made their way into classrooms (Alvermann & Moore, 1991). Of more
concern, is the recent comparison between the most effective strategies supported by research within real school situations (Marston, Deno, Kim, Diment, & Rogers, 1995) suggests that this translation into classroom practice may not have been as "easy" as was originally thought (Marston, Deno, Kim, Diment, & Rogers, 1995). In addition, criticisms have been levelled against the quality of educational research, in general (Kamil, 1994; Pressley & Harris, 1994), and, more specifically, at reading comprehension research (Lysynchuk, Pressley, d'Ailly, Smith, & Cake, 1989; Ridgeway, Dunston, & Qian, 1993). At this stage, there is little evidence available about the current instructional practices in regular classrooms in reading comprehension.

Piloting of Questionnaire
A questionnaire was developed in an attempt to determine whether the current practices for the assessment and instruction of reading comprehension have changed since Durkin's (1978) article. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) includes items that provided scope for a wide variety of answers and for individual responses by participants, organised into separate sections for assessment and instruction. The participants in this survey were attending a presentation on a reading topic at a conference focussing on students with learning difficulties in primary classrooms. This sample, all attending a session devoted to reading instruction, may be considered a group of respondents whose interest in reading may be greater than a randomly selected sample of teachers.

The general characteristics of the participants, indicated in Table 1, reveals that most classified themselves as special educators. From a total of sixty participants as the session, forty eight completed questionnaires were returned, all of which were used in the following analysis of data. It should be noted that this group could all be considered interested in the instruction of reading comprehension and, as such, results may be differ from a randomly selected group of teachers.
One qualification concerns the coding of the responses from the completed questionnaires. While questions attempted to enlist a single response by requesting participants to indicate the method or choice they most often used, many respondents gave more than one response to items. The nature of reading comprehension, which lends itself to many causes and multiple solutions, may have been responsible, in part, for these types of responses. Rather than attempt to choose between responses, all responses were coded. As a result, on many occasions, there are more responses than the number of questionnaires returned. Coding all responses was justified on the basis that there was no way of knowing which response might be preferred by respondents.

Table 1 - Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported Teaching Area</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special Educator</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (eg. Administrative, Speech Pathologist )</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Respondents</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Results

All results are reported for the total number of respondents and indicate all responses made on the questionnaires. For the assessment of reading comprehension, curriculum based measures were favoured over standardised, normative measures with 47 responses reporting use of curriculum based measures and 24 responded reporting the used of normative measures.

Additional details, from Table 2, indicated that passages with questions was the most common form of curriculum based measure reported, with 16 responses. Three other curriculum based measures, oral retell, written retell and cloze passage all scored comparably. Of the normative measures, the Neale Analysis received the highest number of responses, namely 21.

Table 2 - Types of Comprehension Assessments Reported (Total Number of Responses)

Table 3 outlines the responses reporting the types of passages used in
assessments. The use of both narrative and expository text for assessment was evident. However, the use of narrative text appeared to be preferred, with 31 responses favouring its use compared to 18 responses favouring the use of factual passages.

Table 3 - Types of Passages used to assess Reading Comprehension

Identification of a problem with reading comprehension was felt to be an important component of this survey. A fairly even spread between the sources of information for identification was evident with difficulties in answering oral questions in class receiving marginally more responses than completion of other sorts of comprehension activities, see Table 4

Table 4 - Source of Information for Identification of Reading Comprehension Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Information for identification</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inability to orally answer questions in class</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to complete cloze passage</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to read passage</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination &amp; other</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For designing instructional programs for reading comprehension, Table 5 provides details of the types of information used. The most common response recommended classroom assessments but other sorts of information were also used either as alternatives or supplements.

Table 5 - Source of Information for Designing Instruction in Reading Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Information for Instruction</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative Assessments</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published Manuals</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Assessments</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist Consultant Advice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination &amp; other</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 - Exercises usually Completed to improve Reading Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Exercise</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Retell</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage and Questions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloze</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Retell</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (including combination)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 - Subjects (Key Learning Areas) used for Instruction in Reading Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area (Key Learning Area)</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies (Human Society &amp; Environment)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 - Usual Method of Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Instruction</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of theme, character, main ideas</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Retell with instruction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage and questions - corrected</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloze Passage with correction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (2 other, 3 all of the above)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions from this Small Pilot Survey

Firstly, all conclusions made from the above dated must be regarded as questionable because of the small scale of the study and the specific nature of the group to whom the questionnaire was given. This small pilot surveyed an "interested group", who attended a specific session at a conference on reading comprehension as compared with Durkin's survey where the "best" teachers were chosen for observations (Durkin, 1978). Whether any conclusions, other than tentative indicators, can be made from such a small sample, is extremely doubtful. Furthermore, there is no data available to support the use of strategies in actual classroom situations and there were no observations of classrooms included within this pilot.

Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions about the possible practices that may be occurring in classrooms for the assessment and teaching of reading comprehension can be made. In contrast to Durkin's findings, some support was evident for instruction in reading comprehension during social studies (Human Society and Its Environment being the closest equivalent). While this seemed to support instruction in other than traditional reading lessons, a major inconsistency resulted in the most common type of instruction. The most common method of instruction was in discussion of sorts of things typical in Narrative text and most commonly related to English, namely discussion of theme, character or main ideas.
Some additional inconsistencies with practicalities in classrooms can be noted. Firstly, the types of passages used to assess reading comprehension reflected a spread of both factual and fiction texts. This, also, appears to conflict with the most common form of instruction. There was a match between assessment practices and instructional practices with both focussing on oral responses for the identification of comprehension problems and the most common exercise reported for improving comprehension being oral retell of a story. The practicality of implementing an oral retelling procedure within a regular classroom, or even within a small group, where individual attention is required, is doubtful. It was encouraging to see the predominance of curriculum-based assessments in both the assessment and for designing instruction in reading comprehension.

Future Directions
As for the future of instruction in reading comprehension, whether changes have occurred in classroom practices is questionable. A response, at that time, to Durkin's findings noted that "all to little is known about teaching reading comprehension" (Smith, 1978, p. 535) and went on to attribute " a large part of the problem is the all too commonly held view that reading is really separate, different, and apart from other things which are taught in schools" (Smith, 1978, p. 537). Possibly, a replication of the Durkin study, observing classrooms might provide interesting conclusions.

Given the predominance in recent studies for scaffolded instruction, future research should attempt to operationalise, in explicit terms, how such approaches would be applied in classrooms. Since such teacher instruction evolves out of "an analysis of the learner's ongoing understanding" (Pearson & Fielding, 1991, p.849), the evidence teachers use to determine student understanding needs to be clearly defined. Furthermore, how this "analysis" of student understanding occurs and connections with subsequent teacher instruction need to be explored.
The increased emphasis on accountability in schools and pressure of time in schools has laid the basis for the use of more efficient forms of assessment in reading, for example curriculum-based measures. Support for such a move can be found in research supporting this procedure in regular classrooms (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Phillips, & Bentz, 1994) and in the tentative support of the small pilot completed within this paper.

Perhaps, future research may delineate a smaller number of strategies that can be modified for particular types of text rather than totally different strategies. Skilled comprehension would appear to include not just understanding today's or tomorrow's reading passage but understanding the message communicated from a range of inputs and varying strategies to facilitate that understanding. Finally, an increasing focus should be given to the importance of comprehension, its instruction and the need to provide programs that specifically attempt to lay a solid foundation upon which students can continue to develop, learn new skills and learn how to learn independently. Clearly, while considerable work has been done, there are still many unanswered questions to be addressed.

References


Research Quarterly, 26, 251 - 276.


Appendix - Questionnaire

ASSESSING & TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION: CURRENT PRACTICES
This survey has been written for two purposes. Firstly, it will provide a some idea of the current methods used to assess and teach Reading Comprehension in schools in New South Wales. Secondly, it will serve as an "advance organiser" for the Conference Presentation that follows. As an "advance organiser", this will allow participants in this session to consider carefully their current ideas and practices and place this presentation within their individual perspective on the topic.

THE SURVEY SHOULD BE COMPLETED EASILY WITHIN TEN MINUTES AND PASSED TO THE FRONT OF THE ROOM.

EITHER CIRCLE OR WRITE YOUR ANSWERS FOR EACH QUESTION - PLEASE REMAIN ANONYMOUS - THANK YOU

CURRENT POSITION: a) Classroom Teacher  b) Special Educator  c) Executive Teacher  d) Other, Specify: ____________________

ASSESSING READING COMPREHENSION
1. What type of assessment in Reading Comprehension would you use MOST OFTEN?
   a) Neale Analysis of Reading (Comprehension)
   b) Passages with questions to answer
   c) T.O.R.C.H. Assessment Test
   d) Written Retell of story
   e) Cloze Passage
   f) Other, Specify __________________________

2. Would you use a time limit for an assessment of Reading Comprehension?
   a) YES, always
   b) NO, never
   c) SOMETIMES, Specify when____________________________

3. What type of passage would you usually use to assess Reading Comprehension with your students?
   a) fiction passage extracted from a class novel
b) factual passage on a class theme

c) unseen fiction passage on a known topic

d) factual passage previously taught in class

Specify________________________

4. Could you estimate the reading fluency of the students you teach who are having the most difficulty with reading?

a) No idea, not necessary
b) Yes definitely, Specify________________

c) Approximately, Specify __________________________

5. How would you know that a student has problems with Reading Comprehension?

a) inability to answer questions orally in class
b) inability to complete cloze passage
c) inability to read passage
d) inability to write
e) poor performance in Basic Skills Test
f) poor performance in another test ________________________
g) other, Specify _____________________________

TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION

6. Where would you get the information for instruction in Reading Comprehension?

a) Results from normed test eg Neale, Basic Skills
b) Manuals from published programs or reading schemes
c) Assessment in your classroom
d) Assessment & Advice from Specialist eg School Counsellor, Supp.T. Learning
e) combination, Specify__________________________

7. What type of exercise or activity would your students complete most often to improve Reading Comprehension?

a) cloze passageb) oral retell of story
c) written retell of storyd) passage and questions to be answered
e) other, Specify _____________________________

8. How often each week would your students have opportunities to work on Reading Comprehension?

a) onceb) twice
c) five timesd) other, Specify ____________
9. What Key Learning Areas would you use for instruction in Reading Comprehension?
a) English b) H.S.I.E. 
b) Mathsc) Science 
d) Combination of ___________d) Other, Specify ________________

10. What method would you usually use for instruction in Reading Comprehension?
a) Discussion of themes, characters, main ideas 
b) Cloze Passage with instruction in correct answers 
c) Passages and Questions with instruction in correct answers 
d) Story Retell with instruction in omissions and misconceptions 
e) Other, Specify 
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________