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The relationship between reading comprehension skills and self-concept during preadolescence

Linda Hathaway

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Relationship between Reading Comprehension Skills and Self-Concept during
Preadolescence

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In partial fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors

Department of

Literacy Education

By

Linda Hathaway

DeKalb, Illinois

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Patricia Rieman

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Abstract

This paper is about the relationship between reading comprehension skills and levels of self-concept during preadolescence. I refer to Vgotsky's sociocultural theory to establish a preliminary connection and delve further into defining the differences between self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy. I talk about students' views of their own cognitive abilities, contributing factors to positive self-concept and how some struggling students cope in the classroom. Next is provided a short descriptive list of skills all students should utilize in their academic learning. Finally, I add suggested ideas from author Cris Tovani to provide students with the necessary skills needed for reading comprehension success identified earlier in the paper..

The foundation for learning is reading and understanding what is read. If any part of your ability to read and comprehend is impaired, chances are you'll struggle in school. Since more children are learning to read as early as pre-kindergarten, expectations become set for many students in kindergarten to already be familiar with the alphabet and sounds. What about the students who do not have exposure to the written word early, are they starting out their school career already labeled as at risk for reading failure? At the time my oldest child was in kindergarten it was the place where letters were introduced and explored throughout the entire year. It seems on some level that is still happening now but, with the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it appears pressure is on educators for reading readiness at earlier ages than before.

Through parental experience, I have observed in my own children that the early elementary grades focused on personal word banks and proficiency at decoding the many nuances of the English language. By third and fourth grade reading instruction seemed more focused on comprehension strategies than on decoding skills. At fifth grade and on into middle school, my observations were such that students became cognizant of their own reading abilities and the reading abilities of their classmates. They knew which reading group was the low group and who had difficulty reading aloud. It is during this time, fifth grade and middle school, children enter into the preadolescence stage of development, in which puberty begins, a child's self-awareness increases and testing independence is in sight. Here are some questions I would like to explore throughout this research paper.

- How are reading comprehension and self-concept interconnected during preadolescence?
- What coping strategies do preadolescents use to mask the fact that they are not good readers or do not comprehend what they are reading?

- What strategies and tools can teachers equip struggling readers with to help their literacy?
- How can teachers provide a safe, noncompetitive learning environment for today's learners?

In order to empower children to become life-long learners, teachers need to understand the relationship between social-emotional growth and academic achievements. Interactions between cultural and social activities are connected to cognitive development (Santrock, 2004, p. 35). If we look at Vygotsky's sociocultural cognitive theory, it states, "the development of memory, attention, and reasoning involves learning to use the inventions of society, such as language, mathematical systems, and memory strategies" (Santrock, 2004, p. 35). Vygotsky also "believed that children's social interaction with more-skilled adults and peers is indispensable in advancing cognitive development" (Santrock, 2004, p. 35). Teachers need to provide differentiated and collaborative learning, as well as comprehension strategies and tools for students to use throughout their academic careers.

Being able to understand and use comprehension strategies allows readers to increase their content knowledge, thereby providing them with increased academic success and career potential. As students feel success in different areas, their self-concept grows and they are more apt to take risks in learning new content, ideas and concepts to further their educational and career goals. Chapman and Tunmer believed that "within the context of reading, the way in which children appraise their reading capabilities is expected to influence motivational aspects, such as interest in reading and reading persistence, which influences children's reading achievement" (as cited in Conlon, Zimmer-Gembeck, Creed & Tucker 2006). Additionally, reading comprehension and self-concept impacts whether or not a person chooses to be a life-long learner. In order to be a life-long learner one has to acquire the skills necessary and also the desire to learn. Elementary school is where the foundations for learning are set, it is also here

students discover whether or not they enjoy learning new ideas, concepts and information. If they enjoy learning, they are on the path to a successful academic career.. However, if students struggle with learning, see it as a chore or punishment, or do not have the support needed from home or in the classroom, there is a chance that they will not attain academic success. Chapman and Tunmer state further, "other factors that contribute to children's reading problems include biological, environmental and self-system processes, such as children's attitudes to reading and perceptions of their own reading performance (as cited in Conlon et al., 2006).

Since self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-concept may be confused, clear definitions are warranted for the purpose of this paper. According to Ormrod, self-esteem is "an individual's own judgments and feelings about their personal value and worth;" as opposed to self-efficacy, which Ormrod defines as "an individual's beliefs of their own capability in achieving specific goals" (2003 p. 64-65). The distinction is in the words worthiness for self-esteem and capability of achievement for self-efficacy.

General self-concept, the overarching component, Harter defines as individual beliefs about self, personality, strengths and weaknesses (as cited in Ormrod, 2003, p. 64-65). There are three domains within self-concept in which students perceive themselves as competent; cognitive, social and physical (Ormrod, 2003, p. 64-65). Ormrod describes characteristics of self-concept as "multifaceted and hierarchical in nature" (2003, p. 65).

Harter defines the three domains of self-concept as follows; the cognitive domain is where students perceive their abilities in learning academics. The social domain is the student's perception of self as related to peers and adults. The physical domain is the student's perception of self in both athletics and appearance (as cited in Ormrod, 2003, p. 64-65). As students develop and grow they begin to make self-perception distinctions within each of these domains.

For example, they might view themselves as good in one subject but poor in another (Ormrod 2003, p. 65). In addition Harter and Rosenberg, suggest, "as children reach adolescence and gain increasing capability for abstract thought, they begin to think of themselves in terms of general traits, such as smart, athletic, or friendly" (as cited in Ormrod, 2003, p. 69). Furthermore, "social acceptance and physical appearance are far more important to most young adolescents than academic competence" (D. Hart, 1988; Harter, 1990; Harter et al., 1998; as cited in Ormrod, 2003, p. 69).

Past feelings of success and failure contribute to a child's self-concept, so it is very important for a teacher to understand how a student views his or her own competencies. Teachers need to make deliberate attempts to help children attain or retain a positive self-concept in all three areas, cognitive, social, and physical.. Since "students tend to behave in ways that mirror their beliefs about themselves, those who have positive self-views are more likely to succeed academically, socially and physically" (Ormrod, 2003, p. 65).

"Schools are most likely to support students' positive self-esteem by implementing strategies that promote their self-concept" (Manning, 2007). If students have positive self-concepts in their cognitive abilities, they are more likely to follow directions, pay attention, work independently and seek to solve challenging academic tasks. With negative self-concepts of cognitive abilities students are more likely to have behavior issues, be frequently absent or fail to turn in assigned work.. Students need to possess and employ reading comprehension skills in everything they read from fiction to non-fiction from fantasy to poetry and even in environmental print they encounter everyday in order to foster a positive self-concept in their cognitive abilities.

Within the social and physical domains, students with positive self-concepts are more likely to join extra-curricular clubs and activities, run for student office, be defined by peers as 'popular' and participate in school athletics. In contrast, students with negative self-concepts in the social and physical domains view themselves as uncoordinated or clumsy, rarely participate in school athletics tend to keep to themselves and may even display anger toward others. (Ormrod, 2003, p. 65).

Colvin and Schlosser conducted a study examining how literacy behaviors supported a sense of self in the middle school classroom. Their findings were such that students with limited literacy strategies struggled with reading comprehension tasks and therefore had a lower level of self-efficacy compared to academically successful peers (1997). The students with limited literacy strategies "despite enrollment in special skills classes, lacked the repertoire of knowledge about learning strategies" (Colvin and Schlosser, 1997).

Alverman, Swafford and Montero cite research done by The Center for the Study of Reading (CSR), that defines reading comprehension as "a complex interactive process in which readers construct meaning by (1) connecting what they know to what is written in a text and (2) engaging in discussions with other readers in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes. All of these things, the readers own knowledge, other's knowledge, the context in which the reading takes place, and the purpose for reading influence a reader's comprehension." (2004, p. 21)

Additionally, Pressley gives us a descriptive list of reading comprehension strategies students should have in their toolbox.

- 1) The ability to make connections between what is read and what they already know
- 2) Creating images while reading

- 3) The ability to draw inferences
- 4) Asking questions as the read
- 5) Determining the difference between more and less important information
- 6) Being able to summarize what they read
- 7) Monitoring their own comprehension of text (as cited in Alverman, Swafford and Montero, 2004, p. 21).

The associations between students' personal knowledge and reading of similar texts to current readings help foster comprehension. Being able to visualize or create images in their minds of what they are reading provide students with the likelihood of remembering and understanding the text. Using clues given in the text, readers are able to infer the author's intended message. The ability to ask questions before, during and after reading helps students comprehend by giving their reading a purpose and allows them to monitor their own comprehension and seek clarification. The use of determining the difference between levels of importance in a text depends of the purpose for reading. For example, if a student is reading a non-fiction text for information on animal habitats, then the significant material they are looking for would not be the animal's shelter. The ability to retell the important details of what was read without giving away the whole story is summarizing. A good way to relate it to the students is to have them think about telling a friend about a movie they recently saw. Finally, monitoring comprehension is defined as knowing when your thought process is engaged in retaining the information you are reading and making adjustments such as asking questions to clarify your understanding of the content (Alverman, Swafford and Montero, 2004, p. 23-36).

So, what is the connection between self-concept and reading comprehension? As stated earlier, children have a self-concept in three domains (Ormrod, 2004, p.64-65). The cognitive

domain is where students have perceptions of their abilities as a learner. Students who perceive themselves as "not good at reading" appear to have a distinct disadvantage when it comes to learning. Manning asserts that "promoting high self-concept is important because it relates to academic and life success" (2007). Since reading is a primary foundation for learning, readers who struggle may not excel in other academic areas unless the teaching relies more on discovery or hands-on learning. The absence of success then directly relates to self-concept views in the cognitive domain. Harter maintains that "as students develop, they better understand how others view their skills and better distinguish between their efforts and abilities. As a result, their self-perceptions become increasingly accurate" (as cited in Manning, 2007). In a study by Sweet and Burbach a relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension was discovered. Their findings were that "self-esteem was predominant over reading comprehension both congruently and unidirectionally. Increases in self-esteem were followed by increases in reading comprehension achievement while decreases in self-esteem were followed by decreases in achievement" (1977).

How are preadolescents coping now? As students develop both socially and academically, they discover different coping strategies for each situation they are in. For example, if they are in a group and do not understand a joke told by a peer, chances are they will laugh anyway because they do not want to appear stupid. My personal observation of one coping strategy related to reading, that some teachers are already aware of, is the strategy of "fake" reading. Some students who have comprehension struggles still choose books aimed for their grade level or ones they see their "smarter" peers reading and pretend to read them. The observations noted were in classrooms as early as third grade and primarily during independent reading time. "After observing a number of classrooms in low performing schools, we

ascertained that struggling students often are adept at 'playing school' (Taylor, Hasselbring and Williams, 2001).

After a year-long study, Hall concluded that how students coped with reading tasks depended on three things "(a) his or her perception of his or her abilities as a reader, (b) how he or she wanted to be seen as a reader, and (c) his or her desire to comprehend and learn from the text" (2006). In addition, the learning atmosphere and teacher interaction in some classrooms also play a role in the students' display of "fake" reading. Referring again to my personal observations, some classrooms supported struggling readers by having students buddy read, others offered no support, choosing instead to overlook readers who needed additional help.

How can teachers better equip the students who struggle in reading comprehension so they become academically successful? Since children are imitative creatures, it is important to model behaviors you want them to display. This works well with early elementary children, but what about the late elementary and middle school students? Teachers need to automatically incorporate comprehension strategies into all daily lessons. Start out with modeling all the tools students should already have when they come into class. A little reinforcing does not hurt if they already practice these skills and teachers connect with those struggling readers that cope by pretending. It is important for teachers to realize some struggling students do not have mastery of the skills necessary for the task of comprehension and not to attribute their lack of motivation as laziness (Hall 2006). Hall also states "teachers and researchers need to talk to struggling readers to learn how the social and cultural worlds they occupy affect their decisions with text and instruction" (2006). Additionally, Hall notes student-teacher interaction was influenced by "(a) the teacher's perception of the student's cognitive strengths and weaknesses as a reader and

(b) how motivated the teacher thought the student was in trying to apply behaviors that might increase comprehension" (2006).

A variety of reading strategies and programs are taught to pre-service teachers and many more are found in teacher resource books as well as ones recommended by reading program publishers. We will explore five ideas here taken from Cris Tovani's book *I Read It, but I Don't Get It; comprehension strategies for adolescent readers*, (1) Developing a purpose for reading, (2) thinking aloud, (3) marking text, (4) double-entry diaries and, (5) comprehension constructors. These strategies are written primarily for use with struggling adolescent readers but with some adjustments they can be incorporated into classrooms of early adolescent learners.

Tovani discusses a way to make students aware that they already employ the skill of developing a purpose by asking students if and why they read the inserts that come with music CDs (2000, p. 23). This question alone gives students a connection to reading comprehension that makes it something tangible. With further demonstration they will know they need to figure out what it is they want to learn from the text before they begin reading. A quick activity is to give each student a topic and have them find a book, a magazine or a newspaper article about the topic. Tell them that their purpose for reading was to be sure the source they chose was about their topic. When they have their source ask them how they knew it was about their topic. The answer should be that they had to read some part of or all of it to find out.

The next skill Tovani discusses is thinking aloud (2000, p. 26-27). There are many different strategies that fall under the thinking aloud skill, they are: connection to background knowledge, inferences, asking questions, determining important information, summarizing and visualizing. For each strategy, a separate mini-lesson would need to be taught. A quick activity is to take a short text passage to share aloud with the students. If the intention is to teach

connection to background knowledge, only inform the students of the topic and let them share any prior knowledge they have. If the intention is to teach determining important information, be sure to model how to pick out the important information. For example, to solve a word problem in math students need to determine what information will help them solve the problem. For summarizing have students connect it to telling a friend about a recently seen movie or TV show. If the skill is for the children to visualize the text have them close their eyes while a passage from a text is read and immediately draw the picture in their head without talking to classmates.

The third skill from Tovani is marking text (2000, p. 29-30). While Tovani suggests the use of highlighting directly in the text, unless each child has his or her own personal copy of the book, this is not feasible. However you can make copies of important passages and have the children highlight on those or, another suggestion Tovani has is applying sticky notes directly on the pages of the book to mark passages (2000, p. 29). Another part of this skill Tovani provides is coding the text (2000, p. 29). She suggests giving codes for the different types of thinking you want the students to employ. For example, using a "7" for question or letters like "T2T" for text to text connection. Students should also "describe their thinking" says Tovani (2000). Be sure in the beginning you provide starter phrases such as "I wonder ... " or "I think ... " and only assign one code at a time so students do not become frustrated (Tovani 2000, p. 29).

Tovani describes double-entry diaries as the next skill (2000, p.30). Using two columns in a piece of paper students copy text straight from the book on the left side and in the right they employ a "thinking option" such as "I am confused because ... , this is important because ... I wonder ... this reminds me of..." As with all the other strategies so far, you must model this and

allow for students to practice. Through this practice students become familiar and interact with the text as they read (Tovani 2000, p. 30-32).

The last skill we will discuss here from Tovani is comprehension constructors (2000, p. 32). "A comprehension constructor often requires readers to use two or more thinking strategies and is typically introduced after [the] marking text and double entry diary [strategies]" (Tovani 2000, p.32). Through the use of a teacher made worksheet, which Tovani provides examples of in her book, students answer comprehension questions using various strategies already taught.. She incorporates the strategies into the comprehension questions by asking questions like "As you were reading, what were you thinking?" Tovani's comprehension constructors also have explicit directions of steps for students to follow to make inferences, connections, and questioning (2000, 121-134).

Incorporating instruction for these skills into lessons in any content area will help not only the struggling reader but also enhance the skilled reader.. If it is a process practiced often, students will begin to use it not just in Language Arts class but will carry it over into other academic areas as well.. What will this do for a learner's self-concept? The answer is easy, if he or she feels successful as a reader he or she will view their own cognitive abilities in a positive light and feel more confident academically. By consistently modeling these strategies and providing opportunities for all learners to experience the joy of understanding what they read, a teacher will set in motion positive social growth of the student's self-concept, a foundation on which to build academic success, and the creation of a life-long learner..

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