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Reading as a Necessity: Best Practices for Incorporating Reading into One English Course

Abstract

This action research project investigated the best practices of teaching reading in a middle school curriculum requiring reading and writing to be combined in one English course. A private middle school in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, was evaluated on its use of the best practices. The participants were 24 teachers of 13 different subjects taught to students in seventh and eighth grade. All middle school teachers were sent a survey including questions about the best practices of reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning. The results of this study suggested that best practices of reading instruction were not being used fully in the middle school curriculum and should be expanded.

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by

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B.A. Dordt College, 2013

Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
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April 2016

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Abstract

This action research project investigated the best practices of teaching reading in a

middle school curriculum requiring reading and writing to be combined in one English course.

A private middle school in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, was evaluated on its use of the

best practices. The participants were 24 teachers of 13 different subjects taught to students in

seventh and eighth grade. All middle school teachers were sent a survey including questions

about the best practices of reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction, and cooperative

learning. The results of this study suggested that best practices of reading instruction were not

being used fully in the middle school curriculum and should be expanded.

Many adults agree that the middle school years can be some of the hardest years in life, involving vast amounts of adjustment. Tremendous changes in life happen during these years, including large growths in physical development, emotional maturity, and social interactions. Increases in negative behaviors, including social cruelty, disciplinary discrepancy, and an early adolescent achievement drop cause great anxiety and pressure for students entering fifth and sixth grade (Pickhardt, 2011).

In addition to the physical and emotional hardships students face in the middle grades, adolescents also face academic challenges during this time. In the late twentieth century, research studies demonstrated that as adolescents began and completed their years in middle school, their dispositions toward reading declined (Ley, Schaer, & Dismukes, 1994; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). This same pattern of decline in attitudes toward reading continues today, and more recent studies also expose declines in reading comprehension and in the amount time spent reading (O'Brien, Springs, & Stith, 2001; Wilson, 2006). These negative reading patterns or habits include the attitudes, reading comprehension skills, and time commitment of adolescent readers, and they cause harmful effects on the students' future. In the United States, nearly six million high school students read below grade level and exhibit other poor reading habits (Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003). Struggling readers who graduate from high school often fail to successfully complete college due to their inadequate reading skills (American Diploma Project, 2004).

Problem

Many middle-grade curriculums used to provide their students with what was a sufficient amount of reading experiences. In the early nineties, 85% of fifth through eighth grade curricula included a separate reading course for all students, in addition to a language arts/writing course

(Wood & Muth, 1991). Junior high schools, usually including grades seven through eight or

nine and often focused on high school preparation, were less likely to include this separate

reading course than middle schools, which include fifth or sixth through eighth grade students;

only 74% of junior high schools required the course, while 90% of middle schools required it

(Wood & Muth, 1991).

Current research reveals that 61% of schools require their middle school students to

participate in separate reading courses of some kind (Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008).

However, in these schools, there are 48 different types of reading programs being used in total,

in addition to mixed methods combining more than one of the 48 types. Slavin, et al. (2008),

studied 33 different programs, which serve approximately 39,000 different middle school and

secondary students in the United States. Their study concluded that few good examples of

reading models exist, and only four of the 33 programs that were studied had any data proving

their effectiveness. When one considers the decline in reading habits in the middle grades and

the importance of reading skills in college and career readiness ("English and Language Arts,"

2015), it becomes clear that middle schools are faced with an immediate problem. While over

half of these schools are offering a supplemental reading program, the effectiveness of these

programs is mostly unknown (Slavin, et al., 2008). The decline in reading habits continues to

exist in the middle grades, creating a negative and lasting impact on the reading lives of

secondary and postsecondary students.

Statement of the Research Objectives

Still, the fact remains that many teachers are not given the opportunity to redesign the

course schedule and setup of their particular school. While in 2008, 61% of middle schools

required students take a separate reading course (Slavin, et al., 2008), this percentage has

historically been on the decline, leaving 39% or more schools requiring students only take one

English course each year. Attempting to combine all five communication skills of reading,

writing, speaking, listening, and viewing into one subject does require a purposeful amount of

planning for English teachers, requiring them to meet both reading and writing standards within

one course. For eighth grade alone, there are 77 Common Core standards for the subject of

English ("English Language Arts Standards," 2015). When additional aspects of the subjects,

such as vocabulary, are added to the combined English course curriculum, the content load

becomes increasingly heavier. This study sought to discover the current reading practices

utilized in a middle school and determine the best practices for those teachers who are under that

limitation and must address the declining reading habits while continuing to teach the other four

communication skills.

Research Questions

The questions to be investigated during this research include the following: What are the best

practices for teaching reading to students in the middle grades in schools that have one combined

English course per year? Which reading practices are currently being utilized in the middle

grades in a school that has one combined English course per year?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. All definitions

included belong to the author.

Adolescents are considered those ranging in age from 10-15 years of age.

Content-Area Literacy refers to the ability to read and write materials in a specific subject or

content area. This often is contrasted with separate reading courses, suggesting that history,

science, and other core subjects may take on some of the burden of instructing students how to read their content-related materials, which are often non-fiction.

Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) is a form of the best practice of *cooperative learning* including the reading comprehension strategies of reflecting on a text before, during, and after reading.

Cooperative Learning is a best practice in which students discuss with one another in small groups in order to facilitate learning.

Drama is the name of a course at the school of the survey participants in which students learn the basic skills and techniques of acting.

English is a general term used to refer to the academic subject that includes the communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Integrated Instruction is a best practice in which specific skills, such as reading and writing, are combined into other courses and taught in units, such as interdisciplinary units.

Jigsaw is an instructional strategy in which groups of students each master a different topic, discuss the mastered in those groups, and then transition into other groups to teach their mastered topic to a group of students.

Junior High refers to seventh through eighth or ninth grade. This type of school system often views the seventh through ninth grade years as pre-secondary years, as opposed to distinct middle school years. The focus in most junior high schools is on preparation for high school.

Language Arts is a term used interchangeably with *English*. While *language arts* refers specifically to those *English* skills that develop comprehension and a student's ability to write and speak well, the difference will not be distinguished in this context.

Literacy is the ability to understand and comprehend the English language through reading and writing.

Middle-Level grades include all of the grades encompassed by the terms *junior high* or *middle school*. These grades include fifth through ninth grade.

Middle School refers to a school separate from that of an elementary or high school, including fifth or sixth through eighth grade students. It often consists of teams of teachers, interdisciplinary learning, and considers the students in middle school to be in a time of life that is unique from that of the elementary or high school years. The focus in most middle schools is on the diverse, transitional time of development between elementary school and high school.

Performing Arts is the name of a course at the school of the survey participants in which students study, rehearse, and present musical theater performances.

Problems-Based Learning (PBL) is a theory of learning and instructional strategy in which students are presented with a problem prior to instruction and learn by discovering the answer.

Reading Across the Curriculum is a best practice in which students are required to read in subjects in addition to reading and language arts courses.

Study Skills is the name of a course at the school of the survey participants in which students are enrolled if they have diagnosed learning disabilities and would benefit from modifications and accommodations for learning. This class is the seventh and eighth grade equivalent of a special education program.

Summary

Research studies disagree on the solution for the decrease in reading practices for students in the middle grades. While requiring middle-level students to take a separate reading course may be the best solution to this problem, limitations placed on some schools and teachers

prevent them from incorporating this potential advantage in their curricula. For these specific

situations, understanding how to balance the instruction of the five communication areas in the

subject of English is essential for developing educated readers who are prepared for secondary

schooling. As the consideration of the questions above is undertaken, it is hoped that clear best

practices develop, allowing teachers to expose students to sufficient reading experiences to

increase students' reading habits.

Review of the Literature

Reading is an essential skill for all students to acquire before entering high school,

college, and the workforce. In fact, success in high school and college is also dependent upon a

level of knowledge of close reading acquired during the elementary and middle school years

("English and Language Arts," 2015). However, student interactions with reading are on the

decline, with negative attitudes toward reading increasing, as the struggles to read well also rise

(O'Brien et al., 2001; Wilson, 2006). This decline in reading practices/habits begins when

students enter the middle grades (Ley et al., 1994; McKenna et al., 1995). While requiring

students to take a separate reading course each year in the middle grades may boost reading

habits, limitations on some schools prevent them from providing this solution. Instead, it is

imperative that teachers understand the best practices associated with teaching reading within the

context of a language arts curriculum that is already full.

Several factors may cause the problem of the decline in reading habits. First, students are

often not given enough experience with reading. Wilson (2006) placed a struggling middle-grade

reader in a separate reading course, in addition to the student's English course, and determined

whether or not the separate course influenced his reading abilities. Through her study, Wilson

positively concluded that the separate reading course did increase the reading comprehension and other reading skills for the student.

Similarly, Pikulski (1978) demonstrated the positive role of a separate reading course. Citing a 1977 study, Pikulski asserted that teachers who taught reading separately had students with higher reading test scores than those who taught it in conjunction with other language arts. In Pikulski's article, an expert said that one thing that is for certain based on the 1977 study is that students must spend more time reading in school. While increased experiences with reading have been proven to be effective, 39% of middle-grade schools do not require supplemental reading instruction or separate reading programs for students (Slavin, et al., 2008).

Another factor that may influence the decline in reading habits is the lack of reading instruction. Pikulski's (1978) research suggested that reading could be taught separately or in combination with other communication skills but that the emphasis in either course needs to be on students not only reading, but also on being instructed in the skill of reading.

Wilson's (2006) case study of a struggling adolescent reader attributed negative attitudes towards reading to several discouraging trends cited in additional literature and related to a lack of reading instruction. Schools often fail to provide students with interesting materials and sufficient time spent interacting with thought-provoking reading curricula (O'Brien, 1998; Wilson, 2006; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Middle school students are not provided with enough positive experiences with reading.

Finally, a third factor that may cause the decline in reading habits is the increase in demand for focus on other subjects and skills, such as writing and STEM. Many schools do not have the financial resources or scheduling opportunities to offer reading as a separate course, so they must combine the communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and

viewing into one course. For example, Gold (2006) described a situation that a new private

school faced while trying to create its pedagogy and curricula for its English program. While the

school easily fit reading into the curriculum at the start, pressure from the community, namely

parents and administration, caused the school to lessen its reading instruction and increase

grammar instruction in order to address the low writing abilities of students. This school's

struggles demonstrate the overarching complexities associated with designing English courses

that include pedagogy for all of the communication skills, as the community demands

instructional increases in subjects besides reading.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (2015) confirmed the increasing demands

on English educators. The shifts include teaching beyond the simple skills of reading and

writing and increasing the level of complexity students are able to read and write at in order to

prepare them for college. Additionally, the Common Core shifts require teachers to expand the

amount of academic vocabulary instructed to students to similarly further prepare them for the

future. Two of the remaining key shifts are the necessity for students to read more and especially

to increase the amount of non-fiction reading in their repertoire. This last shift alone could

demand English teachers add one or two more required texts to be read by their students in the

English courses already brimming with required texts.

Fortunately, there are several best practices that bring reading instruction and experiences

outside of the realm of English classes alone. Each best practice may be used to prevent the

further decline of reading habits and even increase the reading habits of students in the middle

grades. The best practices include reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction and units,

and cooperative learning.

First, reading can be used in classes beyond English, making it stretch across the middle grade curriculum and positively influence content-area literacy. Irvin and Angelis (2003) suggested that discussion and deeper conversation in middle school classrooms might develop reading, writing, and other communication skills all at once. Their main theory and belief about literacy learning was that it must be performed across the curriculum. They suggested that one course cannot possibly teach all students how to read and write, and two separate courses could not accomplish this either. Instead, effective English instruction in the middle grades requires and encourages other content areas to take some of the burden on in their own courses. Irvin and Angelis's ideas suggest that core subjects such as science or social studies ought to require reading and writing as essential skills in their curricula as well.

In addition, reading across the curriculum allows students to be able to comprehend texts related to other subject areas, such as scientific articles or primary source documents in a history course. Muth and Alverman (1992), who are proponents of the use of scaffolding in skill development, supported the idea of a separate reading course because of the large amount of data that proved the claim that these reading courses increased reading comprehension since students spent such a significant amount of time reading in class. However, they also identified the restrictions that these courses placed on students who are unable to transfer their reading skills out of reading class. The conclusion they drew is similar to that of Wilson's (2006), in which the subject of her case study was placed in a separate reading course and improved in his reading test scores and comprehension, but he was unable to apply the new skills in any other courses. Because of this limitation, Muth and Alverman (1992) also affirmed content-area literacy as necessary for students to become skilled readers across the curriculum.

Secondly, integrated instruction and units provide a second opportunity for reading to reach into other subject areas, increasing students' reading experience and instruction, even when other courses may be in higher demand than English classes. The National Middle School Association (1995) recommended middle level schools "offer courses and units, taught either by individual teachers or teams, that are designed specifically to integrate the formal school curriculum" (p. 26). Fundamentally, the planning of curricula should provide all teachers with the opportunity to make connections between their courses and the simultaneous content and skills in other content areas and courses. While the report does not specifically mention reading classes, their generalizations suggest that reading skills are one of the items in the curriculum that can be connected across the other disciplines. By following this strategy, other core courses will implement reading and writing so that students make connections between their English instruction and other knowledge areas.

Finally, cooperative learning is a collaborative pedagogical tool to increase the amount of reading instruction for students in the middle grades. Cooperative learning increases the engagement and thinking of students, as they actively listen to and participate in conversations with one another (Coffey, 2008). While cooperative learning is a general term used in many learning contexts and subjects areas, there are specific types of cooperative learning intended to benefit and aid reading instruction.

One specific form of cooperative learning is Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR). CSR is a research-based practice that involves four different steps of developing comprehension. The steps are applied to a text at various times, before, during, or after reading. First, students preview the text by noticing markers like headings, boldfaced words, pictures, and charts. By previewing the text, students already begin engaging with what they will read, subconsciously

considering possible main ideas and directions that the text may take its readers. During this first step, students may also make predictions. Second, while reading, students are responsible for monitoring their own understanding of the text by using several strategies, such as "read-pause-reflect" or "partner retell," in which they summarizing the meaning of a passage to a partner, to further understanding in any confusing passage. If a portion of the text is understood, the student continues on through the reading, only stopping during reading to use the strategies in difficult passages. Additionally, while reading, students "get the gist" of the text by pausing after every couple of paragraphs to explain aloud or in writing the main idea of that section. Finally, when the reading is complete, the students state main ideas, create questions and answers about the text, and write down the most significant information. Further follow-up activities may be used as well, but the heart of CSR is that students are working through the reading in partners or small groups. Leaders of each step and other facilitators may be assigned within the group as well (Abuhasnah, 2015).

Additionally, cooperative learning is often used to assist students in understanding non-fiction texts often found in content textbooks. According to Uttero (1988), cooperative learning allows students focused on the same learning outcome to partner with one another in order to ensure success. Uttero explained that cooperative learning especially assists in triggering preexisting knowledge for students so that they can use that knowledge to make assumptions and create connections to the new content in their reading. As a final best practice of teaching reading, cooperative learning may be one of the broadest categories, including many specific, current best-practices, such as problems-based learning (PBL), jigsaw, case studies, debates, and numerous other instructional strategies (Ferguson, 1989).

The action research designed in this study explored the use of the three best practices of reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning in the researcher's own school context. While the best practices are believed to be necessary in a school with one combined reading and language arts course, it was important to identify any of the best practices already being utilized in the school's seventh and eighth grade curriculum.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 24 seventh and eighth grade teachers at an independent, coeducational, college preparatory school located in the suburbs of a medium-sized city in the Midwest. The school seeks to serve Christian families by requiring at least one parent of a student applying for admission to demonstrate that he or she is a professing Christian. The school's admissions department and committee evaluate students to determine acceptance. The decision of acceptance to the school's six-year, 7-12 academic program is based upon the student's grades, behavior, teacher and pastor recommendations, standardized test scores, and a newly required entrance exam. A family interview also influences the school's acceptance decisions. The 1000 students in the school come from middle and upper class families, the majority of whom are Caucasian. About 20% of the student body is diverse, with half of those students being African American. Asian American students make up 10% of that diversity percentage, Hispanic students make up another 10%, and 20% of the diversity comes from international students from South Korea and Spain.

Teachers at the school are also from the middle and upper class, with over 85% of them being Caucasian. Over 60% of the school's faculty possesses masters and doctorate level degrees in subject-specific or education areas. Eighteen of the 24 teacher participants in the

study have master's degrees in areas related to the subjects in which they teach. The teaching experience of participants in the middle school ranges from less than one year to twenty years. They are teachers of science, STEM, math, social studies, study skills, Bible, English, physical education, health, art, drama, performing arts, and chorus. Finally, the teachers' own reading experiences range from only reading required texts to avid readers who read as many as 12 books per month.

Research Design

Examining current practices and comparing those with current best practice research often uncover best practices. The design of the research in this study was a quantitative study, and an anonymous survey was used as the tool for data collection. The survey sought to determine the reading practices currently used in the instruction of the seventh and eighth grade students. The survey used for this action research began by asking a number of identifying questions, which were then used as variables in the data analysis.

Procedure

In the middle of the second semester, all 32 middle school teachers were sent an email requesting that they fill out a survey about how they use reading instruction in their own classrooms. One week later, a follow-up email was sent to all middle school teachers again. An accompanying cover letter explained that the survey was not required and that responses would be anonymous. The survey included statements about reading practices and strategies without being subject-related. Participants completed five identifying questions, used a Likert scale to rate their current use of various practices and strategies in their own middle school classrooms, and had the option of completing an open-ended question. The three main questions utilizing a Likert scale included a variety of practices and strategies, some of which aligned with the best

practices of reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction, cooperative learning, while others were stand-alone or separate strategies. Twenty-three of the teachers responded to the survey, which made up 72% of the teachers who received the survey. Responses to the survey were then used to determine current best practices used in the school's seventh and eighth grade curriculum.

Materials

The materials necessary to uncover current practices being used in a middle school program with reading and language arts taught in one English course included a researcher-designed email and accompanying cover letter (See Appendix A), along with a link provided to an external survey (See Appendix B) requesting information about the strategies used to instruct, practice, and assess reading in the classrooms.

Results

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data effectively, the numbers one through five were assigned to each item on the Likert scale in order to identify correlations, with one representing "never" and five representing "frequently use." Reading instructional strategies and practices and their frequency of use were examined in their relationship to subject area. Contingency tables represent the proportions of each strategy used within subjects and a comparison of core and Encore courses and courses in the humanities and the sciences. Means and medians were also used to examine the strategies used the most or the least.

In order to best address the research questions about best practices for teaching reading in a school requiring reading and language arts to be taught together in one class and assessing a specific school's current use of those practices, the instructional strategies were sorted into

categories assigned to each best practice, as shown in Figure 1. Strategies mentioned in the

survey that are not included in Figure 1 are not necessarily considered poor teaching practices,

but they are not a part of the three best practices for teaching reading in a curriculum requiring

reading and language arts to be taught in one English course.

Reading Across the Curriculum	Integrated Instruction	Cooperative Learning
Close reading	Peer lesson teaching	Partner or group reading
Teacher read-aloud	Guest speaker	Think-pair-share
Whole-class read-aloud	Field trip	Listen-read-discuss (LRD)
Partner or group reading	Generating questions about a passage or text	Jigsaw
Guided practice		Learning centers or stations
Independent reading of a text of choice, fiction, or non-fiction	Creating mental images about a passage or text	Socratic seminar
Independent reading of a text that is at or above-grade level	Vocabulary instruction; studying or learning new vocabulary	Discussing a passage or text with a small group
Marking the text before, during, or after reading		

Figure 1. Chart showing the instructional strategies sorted into the three best practice categories.

Findings

After sorting the strategies into the three best practices for teaching reading in a

curriculum requiring reading and language arts to be taught in one English course, the researcher

created a contingency table for each best practice, demonstrating the frequency of each strategy

used by each subject area. In each table, the frequency serves as the variable. The numbers

represent the following: Frequently Use (5), Almost All of the Time (4),

Occasionally/Sometimes (3), Almost Never (2), Never (1). The total column represents the total

frequency score for each subject, while the total row represents the total score for each specific

strategy. The totals, averages, or means, and additional data and comparisons for each subject

and strategy are discussed following each contingency table.

Table 1

Contingency Table of Instructional Strategies for Reading Across the Curriculum

	Instructional Strategies for Reading Across the Curriculum							
Variable	Close Reading	Teacher Read-Aloud	Whole-Class Read-Aloud	Partner or Group Reading	Guided Practice	Independent Reading of choice fiction or non-fiction	Independent Reading at or above-grade level	Marking the Text before, during, or after reading	Mean
Art	2	3	1	1	3	1	1	1	1.6
Bible	3.5	3	3.5	2.5	3	2.8	2.5	2	2.8
English	3.7	3	2.7	3.3	4.7	4	4	3.5	3.6
Health	3	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	1.9
Math	2	3	1	2	3	1.3	1	1.3	1.8
Music	1	1	2	2	2.5	1.5	1	1	1.5
Performing Arts	2	1.5	3	3	2.5	1.5	1	2.5	2.1
Physical Education	3	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	1.9
Science	2.8	2.3	2.3	3.1	3.5	2.3	2.1	2.4	2.6
Social Studies	3.6	2.6	2.2	2.8	3.6	2.9	3.5	2.6	3
Spanish	3	3	2	5	5	1	1	1	2.6
STEM	2	2.5	1.5	2.5	3.5	1.3	1	1.5	2
Study Skills	3	4	1.5	1.5	3	1.5	1.8	1.8	2.3
Mean	2.7	2.5	1.9	2.7	3.3	1.8	2.7	1.7	

The data in Table 1 indicates that the various instructional strategies for the best practice

of reading across the curriculum are all used by at least one subject area. There are also some

strategies that are never used by some subject areas. The English curriculum uses these

strategies most frequently. The English mean score of frequency is 3.6, which is 0.6 higher than

Social Studies, which is the subject using the strategy of reading across the curriculum the

second most frequently. Both means demonstrate that the social studies curriculum incorporates

these strategies occasionally or sometimes, while English employ them almost all the time. Art

and Music use the instructional strategies for the best practice of reading across the curriculum

least frequently, with means of 1.6 and 1.5 respectively. This means that both Art and Music

never or almost never use the best practices.

Table 1 also displays the mean frequency of use of each strategy by all of the subjects

combined. Guided practice is the most commonly used strategy with a score of 3.3, which

means that on average, guided practice is used occasionally or sometimes in the middle school

curriculum. Marking the text before, during, and after reading and independent reading of

choice fiction or non-fiction are used the least frequently in the middle school curriculum.

Scores of 1.7 and 1.8, respectively, indicating that those strategies are employed never or almost

never.

Table 2

Contingency Table of Instructional Strategies for Integrated Instruction

| | Instructional Strategies for Integrated Instruction | | | | | | |
Variable	Peer lesson teaching	Guest Speaker	Field Trip	Generating Questions about a Passage or Text	Creating mental images about a passage or text	Vocabulary Instruction	Mean
Art	1	3	3	1	1	3	2
Bible	2.5	1	1	3.5	3.5	2	2.3
English	2.3	1.3	1.3	3.3	2.7	4.7	2.6
Health	3	3	1	2	2	2	2.2
Math	2.5	1.5	1.5	3.5	4	3	2.7
Music	3	3	3	1	2	3	2.5
Performing Arts	3	2.5	2.5	1	2	3	2.3
Physical Education	3	3	1	2	2	2	2.2
Science	1.8	1.8	1.8	2.8	2.3	3.8	2.3
Social Studies	3.2	2.3	1.6	3.6	3	3	2.8
Spanish	3	1	1	3	3	4.5	2.6
STEM	2.5	2	2	3.5	3.5	3.5	2.8
Study Skills	1.5	2	1	2.5	2.5	3	2.1
Mean	2.5	2.1	1.7	2.5	2.6	2.3	

The data in Table 2 demonstrates that the instructional strategies for the best practice of integrated instruction are overall almost never or sometimes/occasionally used, since the mean frequency for every subject lies between 2 and 3 on the five-point Likert scale. Social Studies

and STEM were the classes with the highest frequency of use of these strategies with a 2.8. Again, Art represents the lowest frequency of use with a mean of 2.

Table 2 also displays the data representing the instructional strategies for the best practice of integrated instruction and each strategy's frequency of use in each subject area. Again, the means support the fact that these best practices are each used almost never or sometimes/occasionally. Creating mental images about a passage or text has a mean score of 2.6 on the five-point Likert scale and is the instructional strategy used most often, while field trips are used least frequently and have a mean score of 1.7.

Table 3

Contingency Table of Instructional Strategies for Cooperative Learning

	Instructional Strategies for Cooperative Learning							
Variable	Partner or Group Reading	Think-Pair-Share	Listen-Read-Discuss (LRD)	Jigsaw	Learning Centers or Stations	Socratic Seminar	Discussing a text or passage with a small group	Mean
Art	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Bible	2.5	3	3	2.5	1	3	2.5	2.5
English	3.3	4.7	2.7	2	3	3	3.7	3.2
Health	3	2	2	1	2	1	3	2
Math	2	3	1.5	2	1	2.5	4	2.3
Music	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1.3
Performing Arts	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
Physical Education	3	2	2	1	2	1	3	2
Science	3.1	3	1.8	1.3	2	1	3.3	2.2
Social Studies	2.8	3.6	3	3	2.6	3.2	3	3
Spanish	5	5	4	4	1	1	3	3.3
STEM	2.5	2.5	1	2	2	2.5	3.5	2.3
Study Skills	1.5	2	2	1.5	1.5	1.5	3.5	1.9
Mean	2.6	2.8	2.1	1.9	1.7	1.8	2.7	

The data in Table 3 establishes the data for the use of the instructional strategies for the

best practice of cooperative learning in each subject area. Spanish and English use the

cooperative learning strategies most frequently, as demonstrated by their means of 3.3 and 3.2. Some of the strategies, such as Think-Pair-Share (TPS), are used frequently or almost all of the time, which is clear through high frequency ratings in the upper 4's range and two 5 ratings by the Spanish teacher survey participants. Again, Art and Music have the lowest frequency means with only 1 and 1.3. Art specifically reports never using any of cooperative learning instructional strategies. Music uses only TPS.

Finally, Table 3 also demonstrates the data representing the instructional strategies for the best practice of cooperative learning and how frequently they are used in each subject area. While the consistent rating of 1 from the Art teacher survey participants may negatively skew the data slightly, that consistency does not affect which instructional strategy is used more or less frequently than the others. TPS is used most frequently and has a mean frequency of 2.8, meaning the strategy is almost used occasionally/sometimes in the middle school curriculum. Discussing a text or passage with a small group is a close second to TPS with a mean frequency of 2.7. Learning centers or stations and Socratic seminars are used the least commonly. Learning centers has a frequency mean of 1.7, while the mean frequency of use for Socractic seminars is 1.8.

For the data in Figure 2, the Likert scale was assigned numbers that ranged from 1-5, and the scores represented the following: Frequently Use (5), Almost All of the Time (4), Occasionally/Sometimes (3), Almost Never (2), Never (1). The best practices included reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning.
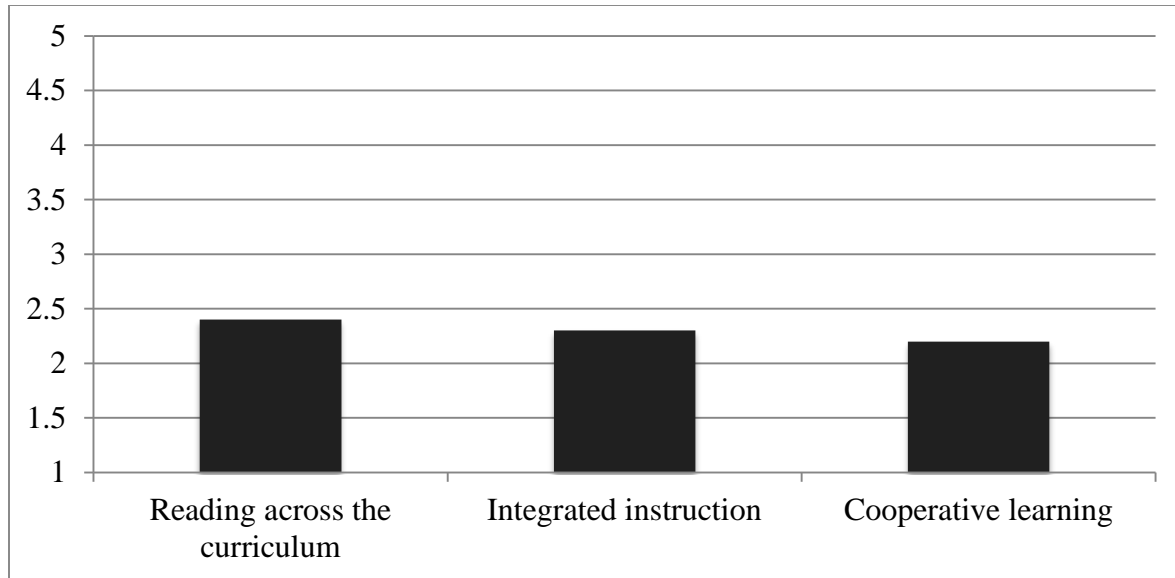
Figure 2. Bar graph showing the mean frequency of three best practices of teaching reading combining all of the subject areas.

Figure 2 demonstrates that reading across the curriculum is the best practice used most frequently by the middle school teachers who were survey participants. The mean frequency for the instructional strategies of reading across the curriculum is 2.4, while it is 2.3 for the instructional strategies of integrated instruction and 2.2 for the instructional strategies of cooperative learning. In Figure 2, the three bars represent that the average use of all of the instructional strategies of the best practices all fall below 2.5, which means that they are used almost never or sometimes/occasionally.

As in Figure 2, for the data in Figure 3, the Likert scale was assigned numbers that ranged from 1-5, and the scores represented the following: Frequently Use (5), Almost All of the Time (4), Occasionally/Sometimes (3), Almost Never (2), Never (1). The best practices combined in the mean frequency of use include reading across the curriculum, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning.
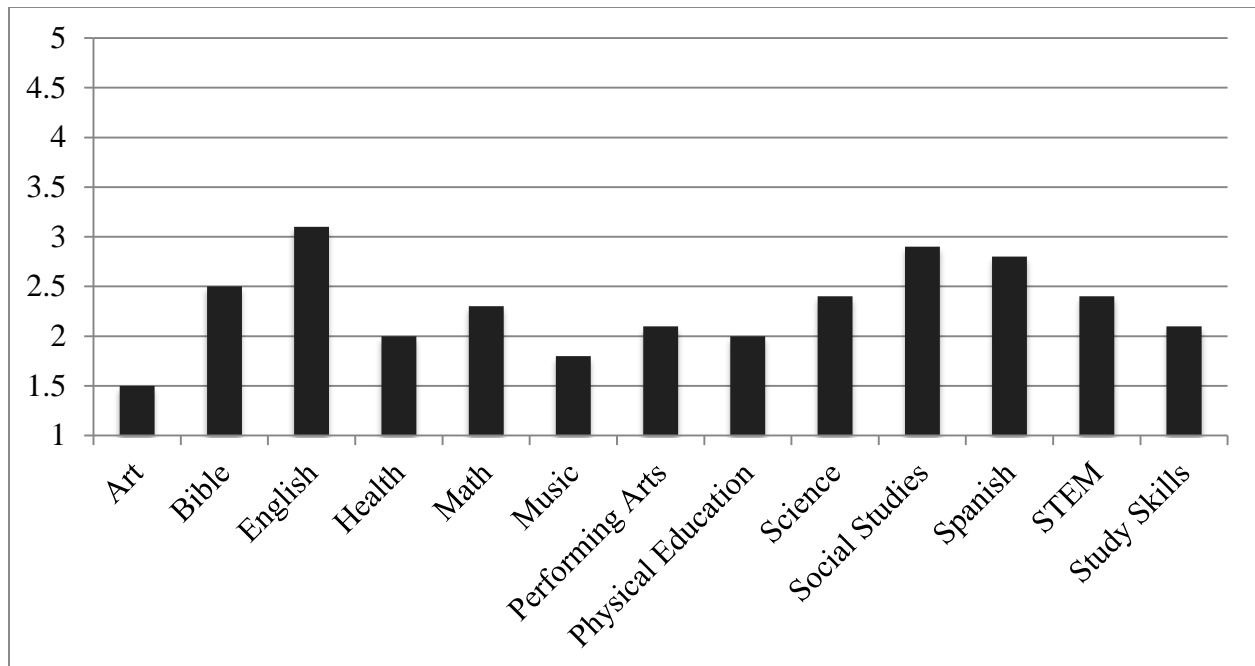
Figure 3. Bar graph showing the mean frequency of use of the three combined best practices

sorted by subject area.

Figure 3 demonstrates that English, Social Studies, and Spanish use best practices of

reading in their curriculum and instruction most frequently. English has the highest frequency

with a mean of 3.1, while Social Studies is 2.9 and Spanish is 2.8. Art and Music are the classes

using the best practices of reading the least frequently; art has a mean of 1.5, while music is 1.8.

Discussion

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover the best practices for teaching middle school

students reading in order to increasing reading practices for adolescents. The context of the

instruction was specifically in a school that requires reading and language arts to be taught in one

English course. After examining several best practices, the action research study involved

surveying current middle school teachers in the researcher's school in order to discover which of

the current best practice strategies were already being used in the seventh and eighth grades.

Summary of Findings

The survey results demonstrated that English, Social Studies, and Bible are consistently

the classes most frequently employ the instructional strategies of the three best practices. The art

and music curriculum implements the best practices least frequently.

Additionally, while reading across the curriculum is the best practice used most

frequently in the middle school curriculum, the difference between the frequency of use of the

three best practices is small. None of the best practices were used almost always or frequently at

all.

The major discovery from this data is that the best practices of reading across the

curriculum, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning, which are intended to increase the

reading habits of adolescents, are not being implemented fully in the middle school curriculum.

While the curriculum for some subjects incorporates several of the instructional strategies for the

best practices, none of the subject areas integrate any of the best practices frequently or almost

always, which may cause a burden on the English curriculum that includes writing instruction as

well.

Recommendations

Based on the given data, the research would recommend that the school's seventh and

eighth grade teachers continue to expand their use of the best practices of teaching reading. Due

to the declining reading practices in the past several decades (O'Brien, Springs, & Stith, 2001;

Wilson, 2006), providing adolescents with sufficient reading experiences and instruction is

important. In a school with the requirements of reading and language arts being taught together

in one course, the curriculum and students' reading practices would likely benefit from increased reading experiences through reading across the curriculum, integrated reading instruction, and cooperative learning.

Specifically, it would be beneficial for teaming and collaboration to develop an implementation plan for the best practices, especially since reading across the curriculum and integrated instruction involve working across subject areas. While it may be challenging and rare for art or music classes to incorporate reading instruction into their classes, even a slight increase in reading instruction through the use of the best practices may assist in contesting the decrease in reading practices of adolescent students (O'Brien, Springs, & Stith, 2001; Wilson, 2006). Since the school already has organized teams and team meeting times built into the schedule, some of this time should be dedicated to planning for reading experiences in subjects other than English and brainstorming ideas for integrating instruction. For deeper, clearer implementation, a study group may also be created to facilitate this process.

Limitations

While the researcher took time to include as many common instructional strategies and other tools of assessment on the survey, the list was not exhaustive. This means that teachers may currently use additional reading strategies that fall under the best practices categories but were not included on the survey. While the final question on the survey was an open-ended question asking teachers to list any additional strategies they may use for reading practices in the classroom, participants may not have put much thought into the final question, preferring to end the survey or assuming the lengthy lists covered all of the possible strategies. All five of the participants who responded to the open-ended question listed strategies already mentioned in the previous question lists.

Additionally, while the survey stressed that teachers consider each instructional strategy in the context of teaching and assessing *reading*, many of the strategies included in the survey could be used to assess other skills. Teacher completing the survey may have selected strategies that they use to assess skills besides reading, which would misrepresent which of the best practices' strategies were currently being used in the school's curriculum.

When considering future research opportunities existing for a similar study, the opportunities are definitely possible. Any nationwide declines in learning such as the decrease in reading abilities (Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003), would be worth incorporating a similar research project in one's own school context. Determining best practices through research followed by an evaluation of one's school could be done with a similar type of survey. Using a Likert scale allows participants to respond easily and allows researchers to evaluate the data and responses quickly. A similar research process could be followed to evaluate the use of best practices for any subject area, content area, or skill.

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APPENDIX A

Email

All,

I know that Spring Break starts today! I also know that this means you most likely don't want to be asked to do any more work. However, if you're still feeling energized and would like to, I'd love it if you'd be willing to fill out a survey for me.

The survey is completely voluntary and provides the data for my current master's thesis of the best practices for teaching reading to middle school students. I would estimate that it would take you 5-10 minutes to complete.

Your responses are anonymous and confidential, and the consent form is attached. Please take time to review the information on the consent form prior to beginning the survey. I'll send a follow-up and reminder email towards the end of Spring Break before I close the survey.

If you're willing, here is the link --- https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PSX2F9D

Your time and responses are appreciated! But again, there is no obligation. Have a wonderful break!

Kristin

--
Kristin Janssen
8th Grade English

Cover Letter
Information & Consent for Reading Survey

Thank you for taking the time to read these materials!

Investigator: Kristin Janssen, student in Education 510, Dordt College

Purpose: You are invited to participate in my research on the best practices for teaching reading to middle school students in a school in which reading and writing are taught in the same course. I hope to learn the instructional strategies, practices, and assessments that our middle school teachers are already using to improve students' reading habits, while also identifying any missing best practices of teaching reading if any exist in our curriculum. You were selected as a possible participant because you teach one or more classes of middle school students.

Procedures: The study will take place through a survey created on Survey Monkey. The link to the survey is included in this email and will most likely take you 5-10 minutes to complete. You will be asked to complete some identifying information questions, respond to several statements about teaching and assessing reading, and share additional reading practices utilized in your classroom that are not included in the survey.

Benefits/Risks: There are no direct benefits for participating nor any foreseeable risks. In general, the study will benefit the investigator's own learning and benefit students, as the results may be used to change or expand our reading instruction in the middle school.

Confidentiality: All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential and accessible only to the investigator and faculty sponsor, except as may be required by law. If any publication results from this research, results will be written in a way that protects your identify.

Your Rights: If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop participation at any time with no penalty to you. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask me. If you have additional questions about this study, feel free to email my faculty sponsor, Dr. Pat Kornelis (pat.Kornelis@dordt.edu).

In conclusion, you are making a decision whether or not to participate. The completion of the survey indicates that you have decided to participate, having read the information above and having had your questions answered.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of participation!

APPENDIX B:

Survey

Strategies for Teaching Reading

Welcome!

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this survey! Your feedback will be very helpful and informative. For questions or clarifications, email me at kjanssen@wcastl.org.

Through the results of this survey, I hope to learn the instructional strategies, practices, and assessments that our middle school teachers are already using to improve students' reading habits. I also hope to identify any missing best practices of teaching reading that may exist in our curriculum.

If you teach both middle school and upper school students, please complete the survey while considering only your middle school students and classes. Additionally, please note that your answers should reflect your use of **reading instruction** and **reading assessment**, not your general use of the strategies listed in the survey.

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Strategies for Teaching Reading

Participant Identifiers

In order to analyze the survey results in the best way possible, please complete the following questions.

* 1. Which subject(s) do you teach?

* 2. How many years have you taught middle school students?

* 3. What were your undergraduate degrees of study?

4. If any, what were your graduate degrees of study?

* 5. Describe your own reading habits.

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* 6. In your middle school classroom, how often do you use the following instructional strategies for teaching reading?

	Never	Almost never	Occasionally/Sometimes	Almost all of the time	Frequently use
close reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
teacher read-aloud	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
whole-class read-aloud	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
partner or group reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
direct instruction or lecturing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
guided practice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
vocabulary instruction	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
modeling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
conferencing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
hands-on learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
think-pair-share	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
listen-read-discuss (LRD)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
jigsaw	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
learning centers or stations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
peer lesson teaching	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
cues and questioning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Socratic seminar	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
debate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
guest speaker	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
field trip	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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* 7. In your middle school classroom, how often do you assign the following strategies for increasing student reading habits?

	Never	Almost never	Occasionally/Sometimes	Almost all of the time	Frequently use
independent reading of a text of student choice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
independent reading of a required fiction text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
independent reading of a required non-fiction text (ex. biography, textbook)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
independent reading of a text that is at-grade level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
independent reading of a text that is above-grade level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
marking the text before reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
marking the text during reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
marking the text after reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
writing notes on a text while reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
writing notes on a text after reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
identifying characteristics of a passage or text (titles, headings, subheadings, boldface words, charts, tables, diagrams, graphics)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
making inferences about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
making and verifying predictions about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
generating questions about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
preparing for an in-class discussion of a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
preparing for an oral report about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
studying or learning new vocabulary	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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* 8. In your middle school classroom, how often do you use the following tools for assessing reading abilities?

	Never	Almost never	Occasionally/Sometimes	Almost all of the time	Frequently use
creating or filling out a graphic organizers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
discussing a passage or text with the whole class	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
discussing a passage or text with a small group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
participating in a Socratic discussion of a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
writing a reflection of a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
writing an essay about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
giving an oral report about the passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
identifying main ideas and supporting details in passages or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
identifying unknown vocabulary by using context clues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
assessing for reading fluency (speed, accuracy, appropriate phrasing and expression)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
identifying characteristics of a passage or text (titles, headings, subheadings, boldface words, charts, tables, diagrams, graphics)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
making inferences about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
making and verifying predictions about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
generating questions about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
creating mental images about a passage or text	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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9. Please describe any additional forms of reading instruction, homework, or assessment that you use in your classroom that were not included in this survey.

If there are no additional strategies, you may leave the box blank.

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