The Evolution of What's Hot in Literacy

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Abstract— The annual What's Hot, What's Not in Literacy survey has served to highlight topics receiving attention in the field over the last 15 years. What we know as literacy has drastically shifted alongside advances in legislation, policy, and curriculum. As a result, what was once hot may subsequently receive less attention or even fall of the list entirely. So what happens to those topics that were once hot? Are they still valued enough by classroom teachers to warrant attention within their literacy programs? This article examines the context around previously hot topics and characterizes current teacher sentiments towards these topics to characterize how the field of literacy has changed over the last 15 years.

For over 15 years the annual What's Hot, What's Not in Literacy Survey has helped define the literacy agenda and highlight the issues receiving attention in the field. The process for conducting this survey is really quite simple. After being read a brief paragraph of directions, 25 literacy leaders from around the world are asked to rate a topic as "hot" or "not hot," based upon how much attention the topic is currently receiving in the field of literacy. Each year, the International Reading Association publication, *Reading Today,* contains an article discussing the composite results of the survey identifying topics as "hot," "very hot," and "extremely hot." Those topics that are receiving less attention are also identified ("not hot"; "cold"; "extremely cold"). The results are widely cited (Ortlieb, 2012; Samuels, 2012; Rasinski, 2012) and longer pieces discussing the issues (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2011; Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2012; Cassidy, Brozo, & Cassidy, 2000; Cassidy & Wenrich, 1998; Cassidy & Valadez, 2012) have appeared in a variety of venues over the last 15 years. The results have been translated into Spanish and replicated in Denmark, the United Kingdom, Romania, and in Europe as a whole (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2006; Cassidy & Persson, 2005/2006). Of course, the caution is always to remember that "hot" is not

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synonymous with "important" but merely a representation of the attention a topic is receiving from literacy professionals. Had participants been asked in any year if the specific topic was "important," their responses would probably have been quite different.

The list for any given year is determined by asking respondents from the previous year to add, delete, or modify the topics from the previous year. Thus, for instance, the 27 topics identified for 2013 (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012) were determined by asking the 25 literacy leaders from 2012 to modify the list. Over the years, the list has changed dramatically! Therefore, we thought it would be interesting to revisit some of the topics that were once "very hot" and are now "cold" or have dropped off the list completely. In doing so we were keenly aware of many of the old clichés – "here today, gone tomorrow"; new wine in old bottles"; "what goes around, comes around." Why were these issues initially a focus of attention and why are they no longer in the spotlight? Have those issues that were once receiving so much notice disappeared completely or have some facets of the topics become accepted as routine parts of literacy programs or even still utilized today with the demands of the Common Core State Standards?

BALANCED READING (1997-2004)*

In the latter half of the 1990s, balanced reading instruction garnered attention in the field (Pressley, 1998; Reutzel, 1998/1999) and developed into the hottest reading topic from 1997-2000 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 1999/2000; Cassidy & Wenrich, 1998/1999). Although debate ensued about its exact definition, most reading professionals agreed that balanced reading programs contain elements of skills instruction alongside high quality literature (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998/1999). In other words, a blending of the two approaches to teaching reading (skills and whole language) ensued by taking the best of each, which was first proposed by Spiegel (1992).

Balanced reading emerged, in part, due to the discrediting of the whole language approach supposedly for its lack of a strong research underpinning (McKenna, Stahl, & Reinking, 1994; Pressley, 2005; Texas Education Agency, 1997). Even *Time* magazin*e* reported that the fashionable word in the reading controversy is *"balance"* (Collins, 1997, p. 81). *Balanced literacy* programs aimed to achieve independent reading by mid-first grade (Freppon & Dahl, 1998) through the utility of a skill-based approach to reading and writing instruction based on individual needs using high interest, leveled reading materials (Reutzel &

Cooter, 2000). A variety of balanced approaches to reading instruction were shown to have positive effects in the elementary grades (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998; Duffy, 1991; Wharton-MacDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). Practices such as the ever-popular guided reading were extracted, preserved, and tweaked from whole language programs as children were then placed at their current reading levels alongside ongoing strategic assessment (Zygouris-Coe, 2001).

Skill instruction (e.g., phonics, spelling, writing) more often than not was embedded within basal readers and workbooks that are still found in elementary schools today. The scope and sequence of skills provides an outline for curricular planning and instruction while authentic elements included quality literature for teacher read alouds and leveled trade books for student reading (Lonigan, Farver, Phillips, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2009). Aiming to provide a systematic structure for using literature, balanced reading programs generally include many elements based upon fundamental evidence-based practices, as set forth by the National Reading Panel (2000). Other programmatic elements include self-selected reading, quality literature, and writing instruction; these aspects of balanced reading programs continue to be a focus of many classroom teachers, though not necessarily under the overarching term *balanced reading* (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013).

Evidence of balanced reading still exists in schools. Certainly, most classroom reading programs try to focus on both skills and literature (Morrow & Kramer, 2013). However, the current focus in K-12 classrooms based in the U.S. is addressing the Common Core State Standards. Effective literacy teachers must seamlessly utilize a host of strategies and supportive literature to promote reading achievement (Alvermann, 2002; Ortlieb, 2010; Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012) regardless of the term assigned to their basic reading programs (e.g. whole language, skills-based, balanced, common core). Remaining centered on determining what works for students is critical, alongside sensible approaches of assessment, planning, instruction, and evaluation (Ortlieb & Cheek, 2008). Perhaps a transformation is needed; just as balanced reading bridged the gap between whole language and skills based instruction (Au, 2002), a new agenda for reading is needed to link skills-based instruction with new literacies instruction. We propose the term "prime literacies" – those literacies central to success in print and digital textual environments throughout the common core.

DECODABLE TEXT (2001-2005)*

As skills-based elements of reading began to regain a foothold in schools in the late 1990s (Adams, 1999), decodable texts, or those requiring students to decipher text using the phonics skills taught in early grades (K-1) were staples within virtually every classroom (Foorman, Fletcher, Francis, Schatshneider, & Mehta, 1998; Hiebert, 1999). As legislative mandates such as those in California renounced the Whole Language approach to reading (Cassidy, Brozo, & Cassidy, 2000), renewed emphasis was given to skills based materials such as decodable texts. Having the opportunity to practice reading texts inclusive of phrases such as "Dan ran to the man" was viewed as an extension of teacher-led phonics instruction, as students demonstrated knowledge of variable onsets and patterned rime. However, many literacy experts perceived decodable texts as dull and nonsensical (Goodman, 2005; Graham & Kelly, 2012). Critics maintained that reading decodable texts

could be likened to the reading of word lists; without context and purpose, reading is not enjoyable or meaningful (Ford & Opitz, 2011). The very nature of reading is to understanding and gain meaning, not just to practice pronouncing words and decoding words.

Oft times, teachers debate as to the effectiveness of using decodable texts in their classrooms. It is the connection of reading skills to content acquisition that must be made apparent regardless of the type of text used. In the common core era, interdisciplinary foci rely upon the teacher's craft to draw between textual and real-world connections to students' prior knowledge and experiences (Ortlieb, Verlaan, & Cheek, 2013). More than ever, teachers must be ready to do more than provide decodable texts; they must share unique insights with their particular students that cannot be accomplished without high quality literature and a teacher who is pedagogically adept (Gunning, 2012). We strongly believe they are prepared to do just that!

LITERACY COACHES, READING COACHES, & READING SPECIALISTS (2005-2013)*

Undoubtedly, the professional development focus of the No Child Left Behind mandates had a tremendous influence on the popularity of this topic. Although the topic was first publicized by Wasik in 1999, it was not until 2005 that the topic first appeared on the list and was immediately "very hot." Key elements of literacy coaching were outlined in "Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches" by IRA and other constituencies (2006); numerous chapters and texts were specifically tailored to address the evolving role of what it means to serve as a literacy/reading coach or specialist (e.g., L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010; Saddler & Nigus, 2009; Toll, 2005). Dole and Donaldson (2006) delineated three objectives for literacy coaches: setting goals, maintaining an active presence in classrooms, and establishing credibility as individuals who provide assistance to teachers with their reading instruction. These notions, along with Dole's (2004) article entitled, *The Changing Role of the Reading Specialist in School Reform*, set the stage for a growing body of literature and best practices for reading/literacy coaches and specialists (Allington, 2006; Hasbrouck & Denton, 2007; Marsh, 2008; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). However, by 2013, with reduced federal funding and other issues demanding attention, the topic was considered "very cold."

Despite funding concerns, it is generally agreed upon that having a literacy leader in every school is pivotal towards all students' reading success, whether in elementary, middle, or high school (Bean, 2008). In educational sites with or without designated positions for reading/literacy coaches, it is incumbent upon content area teachers to be mindful of literary tasks required of their students (Vaughn et al., 2013) and in turn, minimize the difficulties students may experience.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE-BASED READING RESEARCH & INSTRUCTION

IRA's position statement adopted by the Board of Directors in 2002 set out to define what the term 'evidence-based reading instruction' meant, provide a set of best practices, and suggest resources for teachers to improve their instruction. Through

evaluating meta-analyses stemming back to Bond and Dykstra's (1967/1997) *First-Grade Studies* and as recent as the National Reading Panel (2000) findings, particular attention has been paid to establishing a core group of best practices in literacy instruction as a template from which teachers can draw. Although the literacy practices were not heavily critiqued, the notion that there are such things as best practices for all learners posed problematic to a field that recognizes diversity and individual student needs (Xu, 2012).

The National Reading Panel's analytical method of only selecting research conducted in quasi/experimental conditions to evaluate also raised the eyebrows of many reading professionals who value qualitative data as well (Allington, 2000; Coles, 2001; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002; Krashen, 2001; Yatvin, 2002). In schools nationwide, reading professionals are tired of being confined to using selected practices suggested over a decade ago for instruction with students who must be prepared to meet the ever changing multi-literacy needs of today (Leu et al., 2013). While an evidence base is important for reading practices, it is equally significant those practices address current needs of youth (August & Shanahan, 2010). It is through teacher inquiry and continued research that advancements can be made in this light.

VOLUNTEER TUTORING (1998-2000)*

The initiatives of U.S. Presidents are often key factors in determining the "hot issues." In his State of the Union speech in 1997, then President announced his intention of devoting significant federal funding to hiring college work study students to tutor at-risk elementary students (e.g., America Reads Program). Suddenly, colleges and universities around the country began receiving funds to hire untrained college students to tutor (Edmundson, 2002). The initiative also resulted in a publishing boom of texts for training and supporting novice reading tutors (Morrow & Walker, 1997; Pinnell & Fountas, 1997; Roller, 1998). Numerous professional articles (Topping, 1998; Wasik, 1998a) and research (Fitzgerald, 2001; Wasik, 1998b) on the topic also began to appear. Even before the topic was in the limelight, community-oriented schools often recruited volunteers to serve as "reading buddies," as they were paired with students experiencing difficulty in reading (Ortlieb, 2012).

These programs, much like mandates, often use "more time" to address lack of school-wide improvement in reading. The motto "if they cannot get it in one hour, give them an extra 30 minutes" served as one impetus for volunteer reading programs (Kim, Samson, Fitzgerald, & Hartry, 2009). However, the quality of instruction varied according to the skill set of the tutor (Invernizzi, 2003). The lack of consistency and complete dearth of research to substantiate such programs (Ritter, Barnett, Denny, & Albin, 2009) resulted in federal funding being withdrawn in large part, though some schools trust whole-heartedly in the effectiveness of volunteer reading with their students. Just as with any instruction in small groups or one-on-one, it is necessary for students to transfer those skills back into the classroom setting to sustain lasting reading success (McAndrews & Msengi, 2013).

In districts that place considerable emphasis on standardized test scores, after-school tutoring programs are often facilitated by classroom teachers (Gordon, Morgan, Ponticell, & O'Malley, 2004; Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001; Rothman & Henderson, 2011). In those settings where study skills and reading interventions are provided, students can benefit from the varied exposure to prerequisite skill instruction needed for academic growth (Laster, 2013). In contrast, those tutoring sessions that merely consist of worksheet after worksheet of test preparation and practice may very well lead students to become disenchanted with the love of learning and school outright (Ortlieb & Doepker, 2011). It is the cultivation or the repudiation of interest in reading that has a lasting impact on independent literacy learning.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

So what can we conclude from the examining literacy topics that were hot in the past? Literacy is in an ever-shifting field, sometimes labeled as faddist (Reutzel & Cooter, 1990) or as a swinging pendulum (Slavin, 1989), where foci can shift based upon policy, popularity, and previous lack of attention. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 45 states, has directed attention to some of the very hot topics on the survey (e.g., comprehension, adolescent literacy, common core standards, college and career readiness, informational texts). Whether a shift to new literacies or a back-to-the-basics approach to literacy instruction is on the forefront, it is difficult to predict what will receive increased attention in the future. Staying current with literacy publications and the annual What's Hot survey serves to inform literacy professionals about what a variety of experts think are hot issues. But what is hot in one's classroom is ultimately a teacher's prerogative. Of course, bringing new ideas and successful practices to fruition in the classroom is a principal goal of identifying what's hot in literacy.

*(Note * - The years in parentheses beside each topic denote the time span that the term was on the list – not necessarily the years that it was "hot" or "very hot." In some instances, the exact wording of the term changed slightly over the years the topic was on the list.)*

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