Topics Teachers and District Leaders Think are VERY HOT

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Abstract

This study took the 2010, 2011, and 2012 What's Hot lists (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010; Cassidy & Loveless, 2011) and compiled the featured literacy practices and concepts into one survey incorporating a likert scale. The survey was then given to teachers and district leaders in northeastern Texas to determine what they believed to be the "hot" issues in their P-12 classrooms and/or districts. The study found a 66% match among the expert's and participants' lists. In addition, the data were examined by socioeconomic status (SES), school rankings (exemplary, recommended, and acceptable) and school settings (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban). Findings revealed that the "hot" topics varied in surprising ways.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to compare the literacy practices and concepts that literacy experts identified as being *"hot"* (i.e., the center of current attention), to those that classroom teachers and district leaders identified as the center of attention in their schools. In addition, socioeconomic status (SES), school ranking (i.e., exemplary, recommended, and acceptable), and school settings (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban) were used to examine the data.

The Topics

For over 15 years, Cassidy and others have published a *What's Hot* list of literacy topics. "The major purpose of the *What's Hot* list has always been to briefly familiarize literacy

professionals with issues and concepts that currently are a focus of attention" (Cassidy, 2012, p. 3). Throughout the years, this publication has certainly made an impact on the field of literacy.

How are "*hot*" practices and concepts identified for the *What's Hot* list? Each year the list is slightly modified. Cassidy contacts the 25 literacy leaders who had responded to the list of topics the previous year and asks them to suggest modification, additions, and deletions. Thus, the new survey is formed. He then interviews selected literacy experts who have national or international perspectives on literacy. Each interview begins with Cassidy reading the following:

> I am going to mention some literacy practices and concepts that have been the center of attention and/or research in the last ten years. Currently, some of those practices are receiving more and positive attention in the field; and they are a focus of research. In other words they are "*hot*". Some of the mentioned practices are enjoying less or negative attention and are not a focus of current research. In other words, they are "*not hot*".

> I will ask you whether each of the practices is "*hot*" or "*not hot*". A vote for "*hot*" does not mean that you agree with or favor the particular practice or concept. It merely means that you see it as a focus of current positive attention. Similarly, a vote for "*not hot*" doesn't mean that you are not interested in the topic yourself. All of the terms should be applied to literacy instruction. After I ask you whether the topic is "*hot*" or "*not hot*", I will ask you if the topic should be "*hot*" or should be "*not hot*". (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012, p. 53)

Following the interviews, the data from the experts is tallied. The topics receiving at least a 50% agreement from the experts is identified as "*hot*". Topics having at least a 75% agreement are identified as "*very hot*", while topics that had a 100% agreement received an "*extremely hot*" ranking.

The Current Study

The current study took the "*very hot*" items from the 2010, 2011, and 2012 *What's Hot* (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010; Cassidy & Loveless, 2011) and compiled the featured literacy practices and concepts into one survey incorporating a likert scale. The purpose of the new survey was to identify the practices and concepts that classroom teachers and district leaders identified as "*very hot*" (i.e., the center of attention in their schools). The results were then compared to the original rankings given by the literacy experts (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010; Cassidy, Loveless, 2011).

As seen in Table 1, the experts' "*very hot*" issues (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010; Cassidy, Loveless, 2011) are listed for the identified years. Upon further examination of these "*very hot*" topics, four literacy topics spanned two of the three years (i.e., ESL Learners, high-stakes assessment, literacy coaches, and comprehension), while two literacy topics spanned all three years (i.e., adolescent literacy and response to intervention). In addition, three topics were not duplicated in any year (i.e., early intervention, struggling/striving readers, and core learning/literacy standards).

Table 1

The "Very Hot" Topics for 2010, 2011, and 2012

Topics	Years		
	2010	2011	2012
Adolescent Literacy	√	√	√
Comprehension	—	√	√
Core Learning/Literacy Standards	—	—	√
ESL Learners	√	√	—
Early Intervention	—	√	—
High Stakes Assessment	√	√	—
Literacy Coaches	√	√	—
Response to Intervention	√	√	√
Struggling/Striving Readers	—	√	—

√ Indicates item was identified by the experts as a "*very hot*" topic.
— Indicates item was not identified by the experts as a "*very hot*" topic.

Methods

Participants

The 40 participants in this study were graduate students working on their master or doctoral degrees. There were thirty-six females (90%) and four males (10%). The participants had various jobs in their individual school districts. There were 24 (60%) classroom teachers, four (10%) literacy coaches, two (5%) principals, four (10%) assistant principals and six (15%)

district curriculum leaders. The majority of the participants reported that they had been teaching or in the education field for 0-12 years (80%). In addition, 75% of the participants were in the age range of 36-50 years old and they were mainly Caucasian (75%).

Data Collection

The data were collected in a four-step procedure. First, the 2010, 2011, and 2012 *What's Hot* lists created by Cassidy and others were combined into one list, which created a 31-item survey instrument. Second, to make the survey a likert-scale instrument, 1-5 was added to each statement, with 1 being not concerned and 5 being strongly concerned. Third, the survey was created as an electronic survey. Fourth, an introductory letter and the survey were emailed to the participants. Participants were given seven days to complete the online survey.

Data Analysis

The results of the survey were placed into SPSS to determine the mean score for each topic listed on the likert-scale survey. Next, as Cassidy determined the "*very hot*" topics by those that received at least 75% agreement among the experts, it was decided by the researchers that items identified by the participants with a 4.5 mean or higher were to be considered "*very hot*" topics. Next, the data was examined using three variables: SES settings (i.e., low, middle, and high), rankings of schools (i.e., exemplary, recommended, and acceptable), and school setting (i.e., rural, suburban, urban). After each examination of the data within the variables, the results were compared to the original expert lists.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study. Findings will be presented in the following subsections: Whole group, School ranking, SES, and School setting.

Whole Group

When looking at the data from the whole group, as seen in Table 2, there were six "very hot" topics (i.e., high-stakes assessment, curriculum-based assessment, response to intervention, comprehension, core-/literacy standards, and critical reading and writing). High-stakes assessment, curriculum-based assessment, and response to intervention received a mean score of 4.6 while comprehension, core- /literacy standards, and critical reading and writing received a mean score of 4.5.

The original *"very hot"* topics identified by Cassidy and others included nine topics for 2009-2011 (see Table 1). However, the participants in this study indicated that six literacy topics were receiving attention in their classrooms or in their school districts (see Table 2).

Ultimately, there were four topics that were identified by both the experts and the participants (i.e., comprehension, core learning/literacy standards, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention).

Additionally, five topics that were deemed "*very hot*" by the original experts were not identified by the participants (i.e., adolescent literacy, early intervention, ESL learners, Literacy Coaches, and struggling or striving readers). Also, two literacy topics that were not on the original list were determined "*very hot*" by the participants of this study (i.e., critical reading and writing, and curriculum-based assessment).

Table 2

Survey Topics and Mean Scores

Survey Topic	Mean Score
Adolescent literacy**	4.3
Adult literacy	2.8
Comprehension**√	4.5
Core learning/literacy standards**√	4.5
Critical reading and writing√	4.5
Curriculum-based assessment√	4.6
Differentiated instruction	4.1
Disciplinary/content area literacy	4.1
Direct/explicit instruction	4.1
Early intervention**	4.4
English as a second language (ESL)**	3.8
Fluency	3.8
High-stakes assessment**√	4.6
Informational/non-fiction texts	4.2
Intertextuality/reading multiple texts	3.8
Literacy coaches/reading coaches**	3.2
Literacy and adolescent boys	2.9
Motivation/engagement	4.2
Multicultural literature	3.5
New literacies/media literacies	3.8
Phonemic awareness	3.2
Phonics	3.2
Political/policy influences on literacy	3.1
Preschool literacy instruction	3.3
Professional staff development (inservice)	4.1
Response to intervention (RTI)**√	4.6
Scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction	3.9
Struggling/striving readers**	4.1

Teacher education for reading (preservice)	3.2
Word meaning/vocabulary	3.8
Writing	4.0

** Identifies the experts' "very *hot"* topics.
√ Identifies the participants "v*ery hot"* topics.

School Ranking

There are four rankings that Texas's schools can receive— exemplary, recommended, acceptable, and not acceptable. These rankings are determined by standardized assessment scores. The collected data was analyzed to determine if there was a difference in the identified "*very hot*" topics among schools of different rankings. In addition, the topics selected by variable group were then compared to the topics selected by the literacy experts.

Table 3 displays the "*very hot*" topics identified by the participants at exemplary, recommended, and acceptable schools. As displayed in Table 3, the three variable groups did not share a commonly chosen topic. In addition, the three variable groups also paid attention to very different topics. Participants from recommended schools reported nine "*very hot*" topics (i.e., adolescent literacy, adult literacy, comprehension, core learning/ literacy standards, critical reading and writing, early intervention, high stakes assessment, informational/non-fiction, and response to intervention); six of these topics were on the original expert list (i.e., comprehension, adolescent literacy, core-learning/literacy standards, early intervention, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention). This is a 60% match. The participants in schools with acceptable rankings reported three "*very hot*" topics (i.e., adolescent literacy, high stakes assessment, and curriculum-based assessment); two were on the original expert list (i.e., adolescent literacy and high-stakes assessment). This is a 20% match.

Ultimately, there were three "*very hot*" topics that were common among recommended schools and acceptable schools (i.e., adolescent literacy, comprehension, and high-stakes assessment). In addition, exemplary school participants reported comprehension as being the only "*very hot*" topic at their schools.

Table 3

Survey Data Organized by School Rankings

Topic	Schools		
	Exemplary (n=6)	Recommended (n=20)	Acceptable (n=14)
Adolescent Literacy**	—	√	√
Adult Literacy	—	√	—
Comprehension**	√	√	—
Core Learning/Literacy Standards**	—	√	—
Critical Reading and Writing	—	√	—
Curriculum-based Assessment	—	—	√
Early Intervention**	—	√	—
High Stakes Assessment**	—	√	√
Informational/Non-fiction	—	√	—
Response to Intervention**	—	√	—

** Indicates the experts "*very hot*" topics.
√ Indicates the participants "*very hot*" topics.
—Indicates that the topic was not identified as a "*very hot*" topics.

School's Social Economic Status (SES)

SES has shown to be a powerful factor in the learning process (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007). The collected data was analyzed to see if there was a difference in the identified "*very hot*" topics among schools of different SES and those identified by the experts. As seen in Table 4, there were no topics found to be "*very hot*" across all three variable groups. However, there are five common topics that are "*very hot*" in low SES and high SES school districts (i.e., core learning/ literacy standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum based assessment, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention).

When comparing the variable groups responses, the participants in low SES schools identified six "*very hot*" topics (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum based assessment, early intervention, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention). Four of these topics were also on the experts' list (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, early intervention, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention). This is a 36% match. The participants in middle SES schools reported two "*very hot*" topics (i.e., comprehension and professional staff development); one of these topics was also on the experts'

list (i.e., comprehension). This is a 9% match. Lastly, the participants in the high SES schools reported nine "*very hot*" topics. Five of these topics matched the original experts' list (i.e., adolescent literacy, comprehension, core learning/literacy standards, high stakes assessment, and response to intervention), which creates a 45% match.

Table 4

Survey Data Organized by School's SES

	Social Economic Status		
Topic	Low (n=20)	Middle (n=14)	High (n=6)
Adolescent Literacy **	—	—	√
Adult Literacy	—	—	√
Comprehension**		√	√
Core Learning/Literacy Standards**	√	—	√
Critical Reading and Writing	√	—	√
Curriculum-Based Assessment	√	—	√
Direct/Explicit Instruction	—	—	√
Early Intervention**	√	—	
High-Stakes Assessment**	√	—	√
Professional Staff Development	—	√	—
Response to Intervention**	√	—	√

** Indicates the experts "*very hot*" topics.
√ Indicates the participants "*very hot*" topics.
—Indicates that the topic was not identified as a "*very hot*" topics.

School Setting

The collected data was also analyzed to see if there was a difference in the identified "*very hot*" topics among school settings and those "*very hot*" topics identified by the experts. As seen in Table 5, there were no "*very hot*" topics that spanned across all three school settings, and the urban school settings did not identify a topic with a mean of 4.5 or greater; thus, they did not identify any topics as "*very hot*". Furthermore, four of the "very hot" topics identified by the suburban schools also received attention by the rural schools (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum based assessment, high stakes assessment, and response to intervention).

How did the topics identified by the variable groups compare to those identified by the experts? The rural participants reported ten "*very hot*" topics (i.e., core learning/literacy

standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum based assessment, direct/explicit instruction, early intervention, fluency, high-stakes assessment, motivation/engagement, professional staff development, and response to intervention), with four being on the experts' list (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, early intervention, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention). This is a 36% match. The suburban participants reported five "*very hot*" topics (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum based assessment, high stakes assessment, and response to intervention), and three of these topics were also on the experts' list (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, high stakes assessment, and response to intervention). This is a 27% match.

Table 5

Survey Data Organized by School Setting

Topic	School Setting		
	Rural (n=14)	Suburban (n=14)	Urban (n=12)
Core Learning/Literacy Standards**	√	√	—
Critical Reading and Writing	√	√	—
Curriculum-Based Assessment	√	√	—
Direct/Explicit Instruction	√	—	—
Early Intervention**	√	—	—
Fluency	√	—	—
High-Stakes Assessment**	√	√	—
Motivation/Engagement	√	—	—
Professional Staff Development	√	—	—
Response to Intervention**	√	√	—

** Indicates the experts "*very hot"* topics.
√ Indicates the participants "*very hot"* topics.
—Indicates that the topic was not identified as a "*very hot"* topics.

Discussion

This section summarizes the findings and provides a brief discussion for each of the variable groups (i.e., whole group, school ranking, SES, and school setting).

Whole Group

The participants in this study indicated that there were six "*very hot*" topics in their schools, while the experts indicated that there were nine globally. When looking for similarities in the lists, both groups felt comprehension, core learning/literacy standards, high-stakes assessment, and response to intervention were "*very hot*" issues. However, when looking at the differences, the participants in the current study listed two categories in addition to those on the experts' lists (i.e., critical reading and writing, and curriculum-based assessment).

Critical reading and writing are important skills and they have a reciprocal relationship (Stotsky, 1983). That is, reading helps you become a better writer and writing helps you become a better reader. The second topic, curriculum-based assessment provides assessment of a student's skills and guides individual interventions (Guskey, 2003; McLean, Wolery, &Bailey, 2004). These two topic items were also "*very hot*" when looking at all three variables (i.e., rankings, SES and setting). This makes sense, as it helps teachers teach, reteach and differentiate instruction.

School Ranking

When looking at the data across rankings, the participants identified four topics that were being discussed in their schools, but were not identified by the experts as being discussed globally (i.e., adult literacy, curriculum-based assessment, critical reading and writing, and informational/non-fiction text). It is interesting that the participants, (i.e., educators in P-12 settings) identified adult literacy as "*very hot*". One may wonder why P-12 educators would identify adult literacy as a "*very hot*" topic. We can only theorize for their reasoning at this point. Perhaps, adult literacy is the definitive goal they have for their students and thus, a "*very hot*" topic on their campus.

Less surprising then adult literacy being identified is that curriculum-based assessment, critical reading and writing, and informational/non-fiction text were identified as "*very hot*". Research tells us that learning to read informational/non-fiction text involves the integration of accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, prior knowledge, inferencing, synthesizing, questioning and understanding text features (Fountas, & Pinnell, 2001; Hoyt, 2002). Therefore, it is understandable that these three topics were chosen as "*very hot*" issues.

Perhaps the most interesting and surprising item by school ranking was that acceptable schools did not have comprehension on their list and they appeared to be mostly concerned with assessment. One hopes that they are using the results of these assessments to teach, reteach and differentiate for their students, which is in line with response to intervention and comprehension, even though these topics were not considered "*very hot*".

Interestingly, exemplary schools only identified comprehension as "*very hot*" and this makes sense, as comprehension is the essence of reading (Durkin, 1993) and one of the key components of reading (National Institute on Child Health and Human Development, 2000). If a student is able to comprehend, they have mastered word recognition and decoding skills (Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1967), they have also gained reading fluency (Dowhower, 1991; LaBerge

& Samuels, 1974) and sufficient vocabulary knowledge (McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985).

Social Economic Status of Schools

When looking at the data by SES, about half of the topics considered "*very hot*" were not being discussed globally and therefore not on the experts' list. There was only one topic, comprehension, which was common among middle and high SES groups. Participants in the high SES schools reported nine "*very hot*" topics (i.e., adolescent literacy, adult literacy, comprehension, core learning/literacy standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum-based assessment, direct/explicit instruction, high-stakes assessment, and RTI); middle SES participants reported two topics (i.e., comprehension and professional staff development), while low SES reported six (i.e., core learning/literacy standards, critical reading and writing, curriculum-based assessment, early intervention, high-stakes assessment, and RTI). This is surprising considering the SES research (Evans, 2004; Griffith, 2000; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006), which states that low SES schools typically have more students who struggle. This would lead one to believe that they should have more topics that they are discussing on their campuses. However, this was not the case.

Setting of Schools

When looking at the data by settings across schools, four more topics were considered "*very hot*" that were not on the experts' list. They were direct/explicit instruction, fluency, motivation, engagement, and professional development. Research has shown that these topics are important in the learning process. For example, direct/explicit instruction is a strategic collection of instructional practices that allow the teacher to focus on the needs of individual students (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009). Pardo's article (2004) reports that, *What Every Teacher Needs to Know about Comprehension,* every teacher should "provide explicit instruction of useful comprehension strategies" (p. 277). More specifically, "teachers help students become good readers by teaching how to use the strategies of monitoring, predicting, inferring, questioning, connecting, summarizing, visualizing, and organizing" (Pardo, 2004, p. 277). Direct instruction can be used to build fluency (Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, 2009), the second identified topic. Fluency impacts reading because it is correlated to reading comprehension. LaBerge and Samuels (1974) reported that automaticity in word recognition frees up the reader's attention for use in comprehension.

What about the other three "*very hot*" topics identified (i.e., motivation, engagement, and professional development)? Higher motivation leads to more engagement in the reading process; this is important as engaged readers read for understanding (Guthrie &Wigfield, 2000). Reading motivation seems to be associated with the following four key features: access to books in the classroom, opportunities to self-select books, familiarity with books, and social interactions with

others about books (Gambrell, 1996). In addition, extensive research has shown that teachers are the most important variable in the classroom and have the greatest impact on student achievement (Goldhaber, 2007; Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004); thus professional development for teachers should be a major concern in all school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

Looking at each setting, the rural participants identified ten "*very hot*" items, the suburban participants identified five, and urban participants didn't report any. One may initially conclude that the urban setting is not concerned with these topics. However, keep in mind that research has shown that urban schools are struggling (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). This could lead one to believe that urban schools should have many topics being discussed on their campuses.

Conclusion

This study was designed to compare the "*very hot*" literacy topics identified by literacy experts to those identified by teachers and district leaders. This study demonstrated that a variety of topics are considered "*very hot.*" In addition, it is believed that even though suburban, rural, low SES, and acceptable schools did not pick comprehension as a "*hot*" topic, comprehension is intertwined with a variety of the other topics selected. It is this integration of literacy topics within the curriculum that may provide the best results (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2007; Moore, Moore, Cunningham, & Cunningham, 2003). Thus, maybe the exemplary schools have the right idea, as they picked one "*very hot*" topic, which was comprehension. Perhaps, exemplary schools' intensive focus on comprehension has allowed them to delve deeply into the essence of reading (Durkin, 1993), rather than working on a surface level.

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