

A Good Start Is Not Enough: What It Will Take to Improve Adolescent Literacy

by Timothy Shanahan & Cynthia R. Hynd-Shanahan — September 05, 2006

Reading instruction has been reformed successfully in the primary grades, but with no consequent improvement in adolescent literacy. This commentary asks the question: What changes can the states and federal government make to education policy that will boost adolescent reading achievement?

Recently, American College Testing (ACT) issued a report about the problems with adolescent literacy (ACT, 2006). ACT thinks America's teens should be able to read well enough to get into college and to complete freshman year successfully (attaining at least Cs in their basic subjects). Their analysis of middle and high school reading achievement over the past several years suggests this isn't the case for a growing percentage of students. In fact, ACT reported that while many eighth graders are not on track for this kind of triumph, the numbers of students who are not ready actually increases as students move through high school; progressively fewer 10th and 12th graders are on track to do well.

In the early 1990s, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) uncovered a downturn in reading achievement across the grades (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005). Students were testing more poorly than they had at any time since the inception of NAEP in 1971; these declines were most evident with vulnerable populations, such as African-Americans or children from low-income families. These low scores precipitated an energetic response in U.S. schools, first as a result of many state and local initiatives, and later, with the impetus from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

These school reform efforts were based on common premises: that schools needed to devote more attention to reading instruction; and also, that research should be the basis of their instructional and curricular choices. Another basic belief was that an early response was essential; that is, reformers thought that if you gave children a good start in reading, America's reading problems would be solved. The most recent NAEP data suggests that these reading reform efforts have been a boon to America's children (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). However, they also suggest that relying solely on a good start is wrongheaded.

A decade of NAEP test scores and trend data show that the energetic response to the reading needs of primary children has been successful. The nation's nine-year-olds are doing better than ever, and this is especially true for groups that have lagged far behind in the past. Although that is great news, there is some bad news as well: the scores for eighth graders haven't gotten better even though these students have been beneficiaries of the improved start in reading. Why? While states upgraded their elementary reading standards for students and teachers, and elementary school districts and publishers were making their programs of reading instruction more extensive and rigorous, virtually no attention was paid to the needs of older students.

We have already seen what happens when early efforts at raising achievement are not followed up by continued later efforts. Many early interventions enjoy initial success, but long-term benefits have been more elusive (Reynolds & Temple, 1998). We suspect that these improved starts are cannibalized by later teachers who are pleased with the better-prepared entrants, but who lack the knowledge, skills and resources to extend or even preserve the hard-won early gains. So, even though raising early reading achievement is a good idea, it will only matter in the long run if a sturdy house is built on a strong foundation; that is, if the good start is followed up with a good middle and a good end.

Gradually, educators and policymakers are waking up to the reality of adolescent literacy (e.g., Berman, 2005; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Kamil, 2003; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999); however, even with a good start, our kids won't be able to read and write well enough to succeed without more attention to reading instruction in the middle schools and high schools. What should this improved instructional effort look like? Given the success of the primary grade reforms, it might seem wise simply to extend Reading First-style improvements up through the grades. And that might be a good idea, depending on what exactly is extended.

Amount of Explicit Instruction

One of the most striking changes of the decade has been the increase in the amount and explicitness of reading instruction available to primary grade children. These increases are very similar to those that occurred in math instruction during the 1990s—when math achievement rose markedly in the U.S. Research shows that time spent engaged with teaching matters (Fisher & Berliner, 1985); yet, the amount of reading instruction available to older students has often been left to chance.

Reading First (RF) requires a minimum of 90 minutes of reading instruction per day for young readers; studies indicate this is leading to a big instructional advantage for these kids (Moss, Jacob, Boulay, Horst, & Poulos, 2006). However, the picture is very different in most middle schools and high schools. At these levels, only the least skilled readers usually get much explicit reading instruction. Moreover, the ACT study reveals that many adolescents don't even get sufficient opportunities to read science, literature, or mathematics. Schools need to make a serious effort to ensure that students are required to read demanding, disciplinary texts, but in order to make this work, schools will also have to require greater amounts of reading instruction for all students—to teach them how to handle the special demands of texts drawn from unique disciplines. We have been studying these demands as part of a Carnegie project in which teams of disciplinary experts, teacher educators, and high school teachers are

examining expert literacy practices in chemistry, mathematics, and history. We have found that the approach to literacy—understanding how a text is structured, what counts as important information, what information is open to critique, and so on—differs depending on the discipline (Hynd-Shanahan & Shanahan, in press).

This means that providing the experiences and instruction that adolescent students need is complicated—it requires knowledge of the kind of specialized literacy demands that are characteristic of disciplinary texts. It also requires time—no one teacher has enough time to provide all of this. Some schools have tried double-block English periods to increase time availability, but in most cases this has just doubled the amount of English instruction without a commensurate change in the teaching of reading. Even if it did increase reading instruction, it is unlikely that this method would be adequate since few English teachers are prepared to help kids to successfully read technical materials drawn from science or math.

Curriculum Reform

An essential ingredient of success in the primary grade reading reforms has been a strong focus on a more specific, rigorous, and complete reading curriculum. States have adopted more specific learning standards for phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, and vocabulary, based upon reviews of the research that show that enhanced teaching of these areas leads to greater learning overall (NICHD, 2000). Commercial instructional programs have begun emphasizing these elements too, as have district and state professional development initiatives.

In contrast to these serious and thoughtful efforts, few states have put in place specific instructional standards to guide upper grade literacy instruction. What is needed are standards that—by grade level and discipline—detail the types of text features and text structures that students should be able to handle, the kinds of reading comprehension strategies they need to control, and the kinds of vocabulary and fluency skills they must develop. Of course, teacher preparation standards should be ensuring that high school teachers know how to teach these things as well. (We've heard policymakers claim that we lack the research advantage that we had for the primary grades; that is, they think the National Reading Panel (NRP) report (NICHD, 2000) that reviewed what works in reading only considered studies of young children. This is not the case. NRP looked at research from Kindergarten to Grade 12, so it is a very appropriate place to begin with adolescent literacy curriculum reform.)

The Importance of Professional Development

Efforts to enhance reading in the primary grades have depended to a great extent on improvements in professional development. Many states began their primary grade reforms with professional development academies, and coaching support has become a mainstay of many successful elementary programs. Reading First, in fact, may well be the most extensive professional development-based instructional reform in the history of American education.

Greater attention to professional development is also needed for secondary school teachers. The ultimate success of reform efforts will depend greatly on the amount and quality of the education provided to teachers and administrators. However, the professional development of secondary teachers is more complicated than that of elementary teachers. Many secondary teachers lack any previous preparation in reading instruction—or even in providing reading support for students within their subject matter. Also, the nature of what is needed by readers in the upper grades is specialized by discipline, so not all secondary teachers need to know the same thing about reading instruction. For example, few reading coaches have knowledge of the special literacy requirements of math, science, technology, literature, and history, so teacher coaching might not be as successful as it seems to be in the primary grades.

Differentiation: Meeting the Needs of All

Another important force in efforts to improve primary grade reading is the desire to better support struggling readers. Increasingly, teachers carefully monitor student learning (usually with brief assessments administered several times each year), and then provide increased instructional help in the classroom or through various pull-out interventions. This kind of targeted support keeps children from falling as far behind as they might have in the past, and additionally, can help boost a school's average reading achievement.

Certainly, striving readers in secondary schools would benefit from such monitoring and targeted assistance, but the dimensions of this support would need to be different. There are not, for instance, well-validated, brief monitoring assessments that can be used to identify problems along the way with older students (and there probably will not be—since the amount of change expected in reading skills during a semester tends to be smaller than the standard errors of measurement of these kinds of tests). In addition, few schools are well prepared to help teens catch up if they are far behind. Freshman academies and classes for underperforming readers during ninth grade have become commonplace in America's schools, but these programs are usually limited to one grade level; we think they are needed in all of the upper grades. Freshman reading classes often lack well-prepared teachers, appropriate materials, or sound curriculum, so the game is often not worth the candle.

Conclusions

It is time we recognize that, when it comes to reading, a good start is not enough. There is a very real need for ambitious efforts to improve reading achievement for our older students. However, doing this successfully will require that we recognize both the essential similarities and differences in the circumstances that have made primary grade reading improvements work. The federal government and many individual states have invested large amounts of time to improve primary grade reading achievement with good results. But they have also failed to support reading education sufficiently for students once they pass third grade. This is a

big mistake for anyone who cares about the kids or our nation.

References

- American College Testing. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IO: ACT.
- Berman, I. (2005). *Reading to achieve: A governor's guide to adolescent literacy*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association.
- Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. (2004). *Reading next: A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Fisher, C. W., & Berliner, D. C. (1985). *Perspectives on instructional time*. (Research on Teaching Monograph). Baltimore: Pro-Quo Books.
- Hynd-Shanahan, C., & Shanahan, T. (In press). Content area reading/learning: Flexibility in knowledge acquisition. In K. Cartwright (Ed.), *Flexibility in literacy processes and instructional practice: Implications of developing representational ability for literacy teaching and learning*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kamil, M. (2003). *Adolescents and literacy: Reading for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Moore, D. W., Bean, T. W., Birdyshaw, D., & Rycik, J. A. (1999). *Adolescent literacy: A position statement for the Commission of Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Moss, M., Jacob, R., Boulay, B., Horst, M., & Poulos, J. (2006). *Reading First implementation evaluation: Interim report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. Reports of the subgroups*. [NIH Publication No. 00-4754]. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Also available on-line: <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/report.htm>
- Perie, M., Grigg, W.S., & Donahue, P.L. (2005). *The nation's report card: Reading 2005*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Perie, M., Moran, R., & Lutkus, A.D. (2005). *NAEP 2004 trends in academic progress: Three decades of student performance in reading and mathematics*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Reynolds, A. J., & Temple, J. A. (1998). Extended early childhood intervention and school achievement: Age thirteen findings from the Chicago Longitudinal Study. *Child Development*, 69, 231-246.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: September 05, 2006
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 12696, Date Accessed: 8/4/2015 10:40:32 PM

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)