Every Teacher Is a Reading Teacher

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This article both summarizes and discusses the components of the Florida Reading Endorsement mandated by 2006, for all middle and secondary teachers who teach at least one reading class. Statistics are cited which emphasize the need for continued reading instruction beyond elementary school, by all teachers, regardless of what subject they teach. The five core components of reading are defined. Examples of strategies which focus upon these components are provided. State initiatives designed to equip Florida with the best-trained reading teachers in the nation, are explored. The conclusion reached, is that if we are to eliminate or at least reduce reading failure, all teachers must view themselves as reading teachers.

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Courses in the teaching of reading have been and continue to be, an integral component of preservice teacher preparation programs in the areas of early childhood and elementary education. We correctly assume that those who plan to teach in grades pre-kindergarten to six will be helping youngsters through initial and continued instruction in reading on a daily basis. However, those who are preparing to teach at the middle school or secondary levels have been offered little, if any, training in reading instruction. It has been wrongly assumed that middle school and secondary students have already mastered reading to a level where additional instruction is not warranted. As we now know, for many youngsters, nothing could be further from the truth.

Statistically, “scientists estimate that 95% of all children can be taught to read.” (Moats, 1999. p. 7) However, we also know that 20% of elementary children have significant problems in learning to read. Among minority populations, African-Americans, Hispanics, and limited-English speakers, the rate of reading failure ranges
from 60 to 70 percent. As a result, “approximately 25% of adults lack the basic literacy skills required to do a typical job” (Moats, 1999, p. 7).

As is the case with so many other issues, prevention rather than remediation is the key. “Once behind in reading, few children catch up unless they receive intensive, individual, and expert instruction, a scarce (and expensive) commodity in most schools” (Moats, 1999, p. 9).

The tragedy with reading failure is that most of it is unnecessary. “However, reading is a job for an expert . . . . Learning to read is a complex linguistic achievement. For many children, it requires effort and incremental skill development. Moreover, teaching reading requires considerable knowledge and skills . . . .” (Moats, 1999, p. 11).

“The demands of competent reading instruction, and the training experiences necessary to learn it, have been seriously underestimated by universities. . . . The consequences for teachers and students alike have been disastrous” (Moats, 1999, p. 11).

It is possible to bring up to grade level middle and high school children who are poor readers. The appropriate instruction that is required to accomplish this task will take considerably more time and effort than it would to achieve this with younger children.

In recognition of the sizable percentage of children who experience reading problems, and in acknowledgement of the affect of those problems across the curriculum, the state of Florida has mandated that all middle and secondary teachers who teach at least one class in reading be required to complete an endorsement in the area of reading instruction by 2006. Eventually, it is expected that this mandate will expand to include all middle and secondary teachers regardless of the subject or subjects they teach.
The components of this reading endorsement include: six semester hours in understanding reading as a process of student engagement in both fluent decoding and the construction of meaning; three semester hours in administering and interpreting assessments to include screening, diagnosis, and monitoring progress in order to prevent, identify, and remediate reading difficulties; three semester hours devoted to prescribing, differentiating instruction, and utilizing appropriate strategies and materials based upon scientifically based reading research, to prevent, identify, and remediate reading problems to increase reading performance; and three semester hours in a supervised practicum to obtain practical experience in increasing the reading performance of students through prescription, the use of appropriate strategies and materials, based upon scientifically based reading research to prevent, identify, and remediate reading difficulties (Ashburn, 2002).

A total of thirty-six million dollars has been allocated toward accomplishing the goal of having Florida have the best-trained reading teachers in the nation. These funds will serve to promote the following initiatives:

The establishment of a preeminent reading research center housed at Florida State University, headed by Dr. Joseph Torgesen and Dr. Robert Gagne. In a partnership with the FLaRE (Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence) Center at the University of Central Florida, The Reading Research Center will offer professional development courses.

Professional development for current teachers will be provided in concert with five major publishers of textbooks. These publishers include Scott Foresman, SRA/McGraw Hill, Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin, and Macmillan/McGraw Hill. Together
they have vowed to provide up to 100 hours of professional development for every kindergarten through 5th grade teacher. This training will be coordinated through the Department of Education.

The state has created reading academies designed to train K-5 teachers in the latest research-based methods of reading instruction. These academies coordinate their work through the Department of Education, the Reading Research Center at FSU, and the FLaRE Center at UCF.

An on-line reading classroom for teachers has been created to enable them to enhance their knowledge of research-based reading instruction, and/or work toward recertification in reading on their own time schedule.

A summer reading professional development program has been provided for teachers and administrators of grades 6-12. During the past two summers, this program, administered by FSU, provided stipends to participants and offered courses designed to help partakers to understand the reading process and intervention strategies for secondary readers having trouble; diagnose and monitor reading problems; and prescribe and use appropriate methods and materials to improve reading. In addition to the stipend paid participants, the program covered tuition and the cost of texts and other materials used in the courses.

Two teacher preparation program reviews required by the federal government’s “Reading First” initiative have also been included. One reviewed reading courses offered to future teachers in initial teacher preparation programs designed for those who will teach grades K-3. The second review was designed to make recommendations related to state licensure and certification standards in the area of reading.
All of these initiatives and components of the reading endorsement program are built upon the major reading components of Scientifically Based Reading Research: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The core components of the reading process are defined as follows: phonemic awareness – being able to take spoken words and separate them into their individual sounds or phonemes (knowledge of the written word is not included in this skill); phonics – a method of reading instruction that stresses letter-sound relationships; fluency – “rate and accuracy in oral reading” (Torgesen, Rashotte, & Alexander, 2001, p. 336); vocabulary – knowledge of semantics and morphology; and comprehension – being able to make meaning from written language.

The courses within the reading endorsement focus on specific, direct, and expert instruction in each of the core components. For example, students are taught the principles of using sound matching, sound isolation, sound blending, sound substitution, and sound segmentation to instill or to augment phonemic awareness. In the area of effective vocabulary instruction, they are encouraged to teach vocabulary in context, rather than in isolation; to engage students actively in expanding and enriching their vocabulary knowledge; to teach students strategies to expand their word knowledge (such as by learning prefixes and root words); to repeat exposure to new words over time so that students come to “own the words”; to build a language-rich environment in which they model a wide vocabulary; and to encourage students to read widely. Strategies included to enable teachers to increase reading fluency include repeated readings (the strategy most often cited in research as positively influencing fluency), using computers with programs specifically targeting fluency, class-wide peer tutoring, and previewing
texts to prevent fluency problems. Finally, in the area of comprehension, the reading endorsement courses emphasize pre-reading strategies such as brainstorming, KWL, and think alouds; reading strategies including reciprocal teaching, and the use of visual organizers; after reading techniques such as webbing, Venn diagrams, story pyramids, and others.

Over seventy-five years ago, William S. Gray, a renowned reading specialist, wrote about the need for all teachers to be reading teachers. Many teachers still resist the concept that, “Every teacher a teacher of reading” (FLaRE, 2002). Recently, others have espoused the same philosophy. “. . . English/language arts teachers and reading specialists cannot go it alone. The responsibility for teaching reading is a shared one, belonging to all teachers in all subjects” (Vacca, 2002, p. 187). Thus, every teacher is a reading teacher.
References


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