Reading Instruction for *All* Students

Reading instruction has always been stressed for elementary school students, but today it takes on increased importance for *all* grades. Reports like *Time to Act* and *Reading at Risk* raise concern about a lack of depth in the literacy education of adolescent students and lament a general decline in reading among young adults. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading state that "all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school," and studies of literacy point to the rising expectations for reading in both schooling and the workplace. [1] Documents like these indicate that teachers need to help all students become readers, regardless of whether they are in elementary or secondary school, so they can succeed in the information age.

Two terms are circulating in current discussions of reading instruction: textual complexity and close reading. Textual complexity is defined in the CCSS as a three-part entity. It includes *quantitative dimensions* such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and cohesion, all of which can be measured by computer software; *qualitative dimensions* such as levels of meaning, clarity of language, and knowledge demands, all of which require human readers; and *reader-text variables* such as reader motivation, knowledge, and experience, qualities best assessed by teachers who know students and texts. [2] Both the qualitative dimensions and the reader-text variables depend upon the professional judgment of teachers, especially the reader-text variables, because only teachers know students well enough to help them find the best text for the purpose at hand, something "leveling" systems cannot do. Research on student readers and the texts they read confirms the need for teachers to play a key role in matching individual students with specific books at appropriate levels of textual complexity:

What we know about our students as readers:

▮ Students come to reading tasks with varied prior reading experiences, or prior knowledge, which can support their reading of complex texts.

▮ Students who are engaged and motivated readers read more often and read more diverse texts than students who are unmotivated by the reading task.

▮ Students who develop expertise with a particular kind of reading—science fiction or online games, for example—outside of school may not think this kind of reading will be valued by their teachers. [3]

What we know about the texts students read:

▮ In and out of school, the texts students read vary significantly, from linear text-only books to multimodal textbooks to online hypertexts, each of which places different demands on readers and requires different strategies and approaches to reading.

- Students read texts from a variety of disciplines, so content area literacy is important.
- The level of difficulty or complexity in a text is not the only factor students consider in choosing texts; interest and motivation also matter.
- Readability or lexile levels can vary significantly within a single text, so it is important to consider other dimensions of textual complexity. [4]

Close reading has been proposed as the way to help students become effective readers of complex texts, and it can be useful, especially when used alongside other approaches. The difficulty is that close reading can be defined in multiple terms. It can mean searching for hidden meanings, positioning the text as the only reality to be considered, and focusing on formal features. Close reading is also a highly contested term among college English instructors. Critics condemn it for conceptualizing the text as a closed world, for limiting student access, and for emphasizing form over content. [5]

Furthermore, research shows that reading comprehension depends on a more complex approach. Specifically, reading comprehension results from the integration of two models, text-based and situation-based. The text-based model focuses on the way words are organized into sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts. The situation model refers to the meaning that results from integration of the text-based approach with the reader's prior knowledge and goals. Close reading is aligned with the text-based approach, and it encourages students to see meaning as one right answer to be extracted from the text. Close reading is often conflated with providing textual evidence for making a claim about a text, but any approach to reading can insist on warrants for interpretations of texts. By itself, then, close reading cannot ensure that students will develop deep understandings of what they read. [6]

Implications for Instructional Policy

Research-based understandings about students, texts, and reading underlie instructional approaches that support students' learning to read complex texts across grade levels and disciplines. Policymakers need to affirm the value of multiple approaches and support teachers' efforts to adopt instructional practices that call upon a variety of effective strategies, including the following.

- Recognize the role that motivation plays in students' reading by modeling for students how to engage with complex texts that do and do not interest them.
- Engage students in performative reading responses such as gesture, mime, vocal intonation, characterization, and dramatization to enable active construction of meaning and construct a collaborative environment that builds on the strengths of individual students.
- Have students read multiple texts focused on the same topic to improve comprehension through text-to-text connections.
- Foster students' engagement with complex texts by teaching students how different textual purposes, genres, and modes require different strategies for reading.
- Encourage students to choose texts, including nonfiction, for themselves, in addition to assigned ones, to help them see themselves as capable readers who can independently use reading capabilities they learn in class.
- Demonstrate, especially at the secondary level, how digital and visual texts including multimodal and multigenre texts require different approaches to reading.
- Connect students' reading of complex texts with their writing about reading and with writing that uses complex texts as models so they will recognize and be able to negotiate many different types of complex texts.
- Develop students' ability to engage in meaningful discussion of the complex texts they read in whole-class, small group, and partner conversations so they can learn to negotiate and comprehend complex texts independently. [7]

When teachers can choose from a range of research-based and theoretically grounded instructional approaches, their students learn how to choose from, apply, and reflect on diverse strategies as they take up the varied purposes, subjects, and genres that present complex challenges for readers. Publishers, as well as policymakers and administrators, play an important role in assuring that teachers have appropriate texts and materials to support effective instruction.

Implications for Policies on Formative Assessment

Research shows that formative assessment enables teachers to draw on their knowledge of the students in their classes in order to adjust instruction over time. Accord-

ingly, educational policy needs to affirm the importance of high-quality formative assessment in reading instruction. [8] Formative assessment of reading can take many forms, as the examples below show:

- Teachers can help students develop awareness of their diverse experiences and knowledge—all of which affect the ways they engage with texts. These include reading experiences in previous grades and in out-of-school spaces. Once students have identified their experiences and knowledge, teachers can help students build on them in approaching complex texts—including when their background experiences and knowledge enhance and/or interfere with their ability to read complex texts.

- Asking students to think aloud as they read complex texts can help teachers identify which instructional supports and interventions will best support readers as they face new reading challenges.

- When teachers have identified students who struggle to remain engaged as they read complex texts, they can assess students' interests in order to provide texts that are more likely to foster student engagement.

- Teachers can assess students' ability to think about their reading and about how different kinds of texts impact their reading. This increased awareness can improve students' ability to read complex texts for various purposes. [9]

Implications for Policies on Professional Learning for Teachers

Reading research shows that educational policy needs to include professional development opportunities that enable teachers to match instructional approaches to diverse student needs. In order to support teachers' ability to draw on a complex set of instructional approaches in service of diverse learner reading outcomes, teachers need frequent and sustained opportunities to learn with one another about the range of instructional supports, interventions, and formative assessments as they emerge from the latest reading research and practice. Opportunities to deepen understanding of topics like those listed below will prepare teachers to help students meet the challenges of textual complexity:

- Broaden the repertoire of approaches to reading instruction, drawing on recent and authenticated research.

- Deepen understanding of which combinations of reading strategies are most effective for achieving a particular instructional goal or addressing the needs of a particular student.

- Learn about how disciplinary distinctions open opportunities and challenges for teaching students to read for varied purposes.

- Develop insight into which reading strategies are effective in all disciplines and which are uniquely suited to specific fields. [10]

Preparing students to read complex texts effectively is one of the most important and most challenging responsibilities of schools. With research-based support from policymakers and administration, teachers can enable students at all grade levels to comprehend, draw evidence from, and compare across a wide variety of complex texts.

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