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# MINIMAL COMPETENCIES IN READING FOR SECONDARY CONTENT TEACHERS

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In discussions among secondary reading teachers you are almost sure to hear the statement that every teacher should be a teacher of reading. This is a recurrent theme of reading conferences and the vigor with which an author espouses this end is one of the criteria by which secondary reading texts are judged. On paper or as a conference theme this is a wonderful concept. In reality though it seems at best difficult to achieve and at worst represents tremendous naivete on the part of reading educators.

Most teachers in secondary schools recognize the problems that poor reading ability causes their students. The difficulty that these students have in dealing with the concepts and practice materials transmitted via the printed page is a continuing source of concern to secondary teachers regardless of content area. Teachers try to deal with these problems in a number of ways and to be honest we must also say that at times the press of the day-to-day regimen saps one's strength and the students are left to their own abilities with the hope that the poor reader absorbs some of the information through osmosis.

While recognizing the difficulties that the reading abilities variable presents, most secondary teachers do not aspire to be reading teachers. If math teachers wanted to become reading teachers they would do so. The same holds true for science teachers, social science teachers, English teachers, etc. Those that are interested in becoming reading teachers should be encouraged to do so, for their content area background represents a tremendous resource. For content area teachers who lack this desire, however, no good will come of attempts to convince them that reading skills are any more critical than their content area skills. They chose a specific content area because they were interested and, in many cases, extremely talented in the transmission of its concepts and vagaries. Any attempt to compromise the integrity of their content area to teach reading will be met with resistance. As Duffy has so succinctly observed, "every teacher a teacher of reading . . . when quoted pugnaciously to a group of . . . content teachers, will create more antipathy than sympathy" (1975, p. 4). We feel that a reasonable alternative proposition is that content area teachers become increasingly aware that student reading ability represents an important variable in their instruction and that they consider this variable when designing instructional strategies. Additionally, content teachers should become aware of the role that the secondary reading

teacher can play in helping them meet the reading needs of their students, within the structures of their discipline.

We recognize the role that reading must play in a student's education. We also feel that it is questionable practice to say that students don't need printed material to succeed in any class. This assertion is in effect saying that whatever students need to know about a discipline can be taught them now and that the state of a discipline is such that what is taught today will stand them in good stead as long as they live. Teachers, more so than most, realize the foolishness of this assumption, but yet unprofitable educational practices continue.

### *Teacher Preparation*

The secondary teacher has traditionally been prepared as a content area specialist. This method has emphasized knowledge acquisition rather than knowledge transmission. Generally, contact with the College of Education has been limited to methods courses with depressingly little emphasis placed on the major teaching method and learning resource used in secondary schools; reading.

When we speak of reading in this context we are obviously not speaking only of decoding, for most secondary students are competent decoders. Nor are we speaking only of comprehension since the assumption that if only students could comprehend they would learn, denies the need for good teachers. Rather, we are speaking of reading as an instructional variable that must be considered in the *planning* stages of instruction.

To effectively incorporate reading variables into instructional differentiation the content area teacher needs to develop a minimal level of competence in several areas. The four primary areas are: 1) understanding the reading process, 2) assessing student abilities, 3) assessing print material, and 4) techniques for differentiating instruction. While by no means comprehensive the following list of competencies offered in each of these areas will provide the content area teacher with entry level skills. These competencies were drawn from experiences developing and revising CBTE curricula in reading for content area teachers (Allington, 1974; Bader, Strange, Merkle, 1973). We have pared the list to the essential core components, those abilities the students identified as essential.

### *Understanding the Reading Process*

Keeping in mind these are only entry level competencies, we feel that in order to understand the reading process a content area teacher should:

1. recognize the roles of print. purpose, semantics and syntax in gathering meaning from print
2. understand the relationship between reading ability and their content area

### *Assessing Student Abilities*

To provide a minimal level of competence in assessing student abilities the teacher should:

1. understand the philosophy underlying norm referenced, criterion

- referenced, and informal assessment instruments
- 2. develop a strategy for examining assessment data with a particular emphasis on interpreting test results
- 3. become familiar with commonly used tests of reading ability

### *Assessing Print Material*

Because print material is used in nearly every content area class the teacher should:

- 1. understand the concept of readability and familiarize himself with the administration and interpretation of a readability formula
- 2. identify patterns of writing employed by authors in content area texts
- 3. identify key vocabulary in content area texts
- 4. familiarize himself with the CLOZE procedure to determine student's ability to process information as presented in texts
- 5. assess text suitability for meeting pre-specified content objectives

### *Instructional differentiation*

The teacher who demonstrates the previous competencies has made progress. However, gathering and storing information does not automatically improve instruction. The effective teacher incorporates the information gathered into a plan for instructional differentiation. At an entry level the teacher should:

- 1. employ such techniques as the Directed Reading Activity, as needed, in content area lessons
- 2. develop study guides for a content area text
- 3. identify strategies for teaching key vocabulary at different levels
- 4. identify and establish comprehension goals for content areas
- 5. develop a strategy for meshing content goals, comprehension goals, and student's needs/abilities
- 6. employ multiple and/or multilevel texts to meet instructional goals
- 7. familiarize himself with the advantages and disadvantages of other differentiation techniques: SQ3R, prequestioning, advance organization, etc.
- 8. identify the role of the secondary reading teacher in aiding both teachers and students in meeting educational goals

### *Summary*

The competencies outlined above are entry level skills designed to improve content area instruction. Every teacher is not a teacher of reading but every teacher at times employs print material in the instructional process. Unfortunately as Burnett and Schnell (1975) have pointed out, "it is easier to address the issue of how to teach reading directly than it is to prepare teachers to teach reading indirectly as it relates to content area instruction." (p. 547) However, because of the pervasive use of print materials in our educational process, secondary educators must have a certain facility with various aspects of the reading processes. Teaching content through reading requires educators to be prepared to assess print

material and student abilities and to then differentiate instruction based on assessment.

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