Special Report

RAND Report on Reading Comprehension

Suppose that educators, through intensive efforts, ensured that all children received effective reading instruction in the primary grades and were reading fluently by the time they finished 3rd grade. Would that mean that all students would be proficient readers in high school and beyond? No, says the RAND Reading Study Group in *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension*, prepared for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The national campaign now aimed at grades 1–3, although important, should be only the first step. Fluency and word recognition are important foundational skills, but they do not automatically lead to effective comprehension.

Some of these good 3rd grade readers will progress on their own to proficiency in reading, but many will not. Many will need explicit, well-designed instruction in reading comprehension to continue making progress. (p. 2)

Unfortunately, teachers who search for research-based strategies to help struggling older readers find that the knowledge base is "sizeable but sketchy, unfocused, and inadequate as a basis for reform in reading comprehension instruction" (p. xii), according to the report. The study group does identify some basic findings that research has established, including the following:

- Early instruction designed to increase students' reading fluency lays a solid foundation for gains in comprehension. The most effective fluency instruction consists of repeatedly reading aloud from the same text, either with teacher assistance or independently.

- Instruction in metacognitive strategies can improve reading comprehension. Good comprehenders read for a purpose and actively monitor their own understanding of what they read. Explicit instruction in such strategies as questioning, summarizing, comprehension monitoring, and using graphic organizers can help poor readers learn to retain, organize, and evaluate the information that they read.

- Teachers foster comprehension development when they connect comprehension strategy instruction with in-depth learning of content in such disciplines as history and science. If students learn that these strategies are tools for understanding the ideas in texts, then the strategies become purposeful and integral to reading activities.

- Teachers who give students choices, challenging tasks, and collaborative learning structures increase students' motivation to read and comprehend text.

- Despite research establishing the effectiveness of instruction designed to enhance comprehension, typical classrooms across the primary and upper elementary grades do not devote adequate time and attention to comprehension instruction.

The report calls for an expanded research agenda to address many unanswered questions about reading comprehension. It especially decries the lack of effective test instruments to assess reading comprehension because teachers cannot evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction without reliable and valid assessments that are aligned with the curriculum.

Unfortunately, most currently used comprehension assessments reflect the purpose for which they were originally developed—to sort children on a single dimension by using a single method. (p. 53)

As a result, these instruments do not reflect the complexity of comprehension, instead equating it with more limited skills, such as vocabulary, domain-specific knowledge, word reading ability, and other reader capacities that are only part of comprehension. Such assessments are not useful for teachers and tend to narrow the curriculum. Therefore, the study group views the development of an assessment system for reading comprehension as a high priority for education policymakers.

—Reviewed by Deborah Perkins-Gough
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Letter to the Editor

Leading from the Heart

I have become aware of my omission of a bibliography as part of my article, "The Culture Builder" (May 2002). I regret that I did not cite some of the excellent contemporary resources on school culture. The best book I have read on the subject, for instance, is by Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson, *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership* (1998, Jossey-Bass).

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Your Turn

Do you agree or disagree with the opinions expressed in this issue? Let us know what you think by e-mail at el@ascd.org or by fax at (703) 575-5891. Please include your full name, affiliation, and address.

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