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Bridging the Gap between Accountability and Reading Comprehension

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Accountability is the buzz word in the field of academia. Since the implementation of federal mandates like the No Child Left Behind Act and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, educational stakeholders throughout the nation have been scampering about trying to ascertain: (1) *who* is responsible for the dismal academic performance of the nation's youth on state and national assessments, (2) *how* can it be fixed, and (3) *where* do they start. Using the results of annual reports from assessments like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), stakeholders conclude that: (1) the solution to the nation's academic woes lies with classroom teachers; (2) improvement in student performance is imbedded within research-based pedagogical practices; and (3) providing a solid foundation in reading comprehension will result in proficient academic performance for all students.

In other words, the solution to the nation's poor student achievement is imbedded in students' ability to read. The fundamental skill of reading is required in every subject that is taught throughout the public school system. Thus, if students cannot "read" or comprehend contextually, then it is reasonable to conclude that they will not be academically successful. Furthermore, if students are not academically successful, teachers have to account for such pedagogical shortcomings; hence the direct correlation between accountability and reading comprehension. How can public school teachers effectively address the epidemic of poor reading comprehension amongst the nation's youth? How can teachers address the respective needs of every student in the classroom and improve reading comprehension skills simultaneously?

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The researchers purport the impetus that will bring about the desired results is differentiated pedagogy. Although children in the average classroom share many similarities, each child is intrinsically and extrinsically different (Knowles, 2009). Children come to school with a multitude of experiences and emotions, which requires lessons that are differentiated to meet each student's needs. These concepts, combined with the notion of high-stakes testing and accountability, make the need for differentiated instruction imperative. Therefore, the first step is to assess students early on to become aware of their reading skills and abilities. Based on the results, teachers should begin to differentiate instruction.

As a result, teachers will find that they have the following types of readers in their classroom: struggling readers, general readers, and advanced readers. Teachers may need to use the technique of scaffolding for struggling readers, in order for them to begin thinking about the text. Some strategies may include outlining information, helping students make predictions, and helping students evaluate their own predictions. General readers are able to make connections to the text in some way. After having made a connection, students should be able to transfer their thoughts and interactions from the text to writing. Advanced readers are able to approach the text without apprehension and apply or relate it to other content areas. The advanced readers are able to discuss text in detail. It is these three types of readers that will be assessed using high-stakes tests (www.glencoe.com).

Building reading comprehension skills to pass high-stakes tests mandated by No Child Left Behind is a top priority. Once students have mastered vocabulary, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension skills, then they can be considered effective reader. Reading comprehension skills separate "unskilled" readers from "skilled" readers. Students have been

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shown to predict their reading comprehension based on subjective assessments of both their ease in processing text and their levels of comprehension.

The reading mode alone affects a number of children. Typically, secondary students read silently when reading for comprehension. Skinner states (2007), “If comprehension is assessed after a student reads aloud, then it is important to ascertain if reading mode of topography significantly affects comprehension” (9). Several theories are present that suggest that reading aloud and reading silently may systematically impact comprehension differently. Furthermore, these theories suggest that the mode of reading may have differential effects on comprehension, depending on the skill of the reader.

Some researchers have found evidence that individuals comprehend more after reading silently when compared to reading aloud. Oral reading requires the reader to allocate a portion of their limited cognitive resources to pronunciation, intonation, and emphasis of words. As a result, the reader’s cognitive resources being focused, in part, on the dynamics of reading aloud, reduce resources available for comprehension. Because some children are less skilled readers, they may not have automatic decoding skills. Therefore, they may be more likely to focus the majority of their cognitive resources on phonological recordings, as opposed to comprehension (Hale, et al., 2007, 10).

Several findings are recognizable for the choice of reading modes. Beginning readers that read orally, do better on reading comprehension tests. Reading aloud to students should not stop at 3rd grade; it should continue into the high school years (Knowles, 2009). In relation to silent reading versus oral reading, poor readers have higher comprehension scores when reading aloud, average readers have better comprehension scores when reading silently, and students that

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have strong reading skills are not affected either way. However, one positive aspect of reading aloud is teachers actually get to monitor all students reading performance to observe if they have read the entire passage. On the other hand, when students read silently, teachers are not assured that they have read the entire passage (Skinner, 2007, 11). It is evident that less skilled readers are least likely to read silently. They do, however, try to employ some reading strategies such as skimming and scanning. They also scan the questions, so this makes them feel they do not need to read passages in their entirety. By not reading thoroughly, it shows that students lack fluency and other required reading skills needed to fully comprehend text.

Students who lack fluency are not able to read with accuracy, or with an appropriate rate, expression, and phrasing. Armbruster states (2002), “Fluency is important because it provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension” (16.) One way to improve fluency is through repeated and monitored oral reading. More fluent readers focus their attention on making connections among the ideas in a text, thus allowing them to focus on comprehension. Students that are less fluent readers spend a lot of time focusing on decoding and assessing the meaning of individual words, which leaves little focus on comprehending the text. It is also important to understand the vocabulary of texts. Vocabulary is an essential part of reading comprehension. If students can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not really reading. Some strategies that can be taught to aid in reading comprehension are generating/formulating questions, answering questions, summarization, recognizing text structure, and graphic organizers (Armbruster, 2002, 17-23).

In the classroom, students find it easier to comprehend and learn when they have considerate text. Some features of considerate text are as follows: clear titles, headings,

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subheadings, visual aids, and directly stated main ideas. The first characteristic that a considerate text must have is clear text structure, which means the sequencing of ideas or actions. It may be presented through chronological order, comparison and contrast, or cause and effect. The second characteristic of considerate text is coherence, which refers to the way parts of the text are connected. The last characteristic of considerate text is audience awareness, which refers to the degree with which text anticipates and fulfills readers' needs (www.glencoe.com).

In conclusion, the notion of high-stakes testing, accompanied by a rigorous system of accountability, is here to stay. Therefore, teachers have to get in line with state standards and teach students what is most important for mastery on these standardized assessments. The skill that is the vehicle to this success is reading. It is evident that reading comprehension is an enormous problem when it comes to high-stakes testing. Therefore, teachers must be proactive and interactive in meeting the many, yet different, needs of every student in the classroom to ensure academic success. Then, the field of academia will slowly begin to see the gap diminish between accountability and student achievement through reading comprehension.

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