

Literacy Challenges for the Twenty-first Century

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The economic, political, and social challenges facing the United States demand literacy skills that go well beyond the ability to recognize words and decode text. To attain adult success today young Americans must be able to use reading to gain access to the world of knowledge, to synthesize information from multiple sources, to evaluate arguments, and to explore in depth fields as disparate as history, science, and mathematics. To complicate the challenge, schools must not only better prepare students for these demands but also reduce sharp disparities in literacy outcomes between disadvantaged and privileged children. Low literacy levels among children from less advantaged families dramatically reduce the potential for upward mobility.

If educators and policy makers are to advance the literacy of young Americans, they must understand the skills that children need today. Successful reading instruction balances attention to the skills required for accurate and fluent word reading with opportunities to expand students' knowledge, comprehension, and language. In far too many U.S. classrooms, too much instructional attention is paid to word reading and too little to the development of knowledge, comprehension, and language.

Literacy instruction in the primary grades generally focuses on accurate and fluent decoding of grade-level texts. Little time goes to science, current events, or social studies. Thus, children have the opportunity to learn reading as a tool, but the content that would support their later use of that tool for purposes of comprehension and further learning may be neglected.

During the transition to the departmentalized subject structure of grades six through eight, literacy instruction is typically severed from content instruction. Excellent readers and well-informed readers do not suffer under this regimen; they adapt their reading skills to the reading of science and history textbooks. But students with marginal reading skills, and good readers with limited knowledge stores, encounter often insurmountable tasks. No one teaches them how to read science or history. And their history and science teachers, unaware that the literacy demands of their texts deviate from those of books their students have read earlier, often do not know how to teach reading.

The Findings

This volume explores current levels of literacy, their determinants, and new strategies to improve literacy.

****Over the past forty years, student reading scores on assessment tests have changed little while math scores have gone up significantly. U.S. reading scores are about, or a little above, average compared with those in other developed countries. Gaps in student literacy, by socioeconomic status and race, are striking. Although black-white and Hispanic-white disparities have narrowed somewhat, socioeconomic gaps have widened. And these gaps do not typically narrow as children progress through school. The black-white gap increases between kindergarten and third grade and widens further by eighth grade.**

****Because literacy gaps exist before children even start school, nonschool factors—families, communities, peers, use of English in the home, health and health-related behaviors, participation in preschool and summer programs—clearly play a role in the acquisition of literacy skills and likely continue to exert an influence as children age.**

**Although U.S. schools have made considerable progress in teaching skills-based reading competencies, reading instruction in the primary grades focuses too much on improving students' word reading skills and too little on developing comprehension, vocabulary, and conceptual knowledge.

**Schools are falling short in teaching the knowledge-based competencies, such as conceptual and vocabulary knowledge, that are at the root of socioeconomic gaps in reading outcomes. Strengthening the in-school language environments of students from non-English speaking and low-income homes would help develop these competencies.

**Reading to learn content is the core educational task from fourth grade through high school. Literacy skills needed to learn in one subject area, such as history, are quite different from those needed to learn in another area, such as biology. Instructional interventions that enable students to read to learn successfully in different disciplines have not been widely adopted.

**Many school-based initiatives and reforms target the organizational features of U.S. schools that inhibit best practices in literacy. Among those initiatives are comprehensive school reform and charter networks that focus on curriculum, professional development, quality control, and data use; programs to attract, reward, and promote better teachers; and the multistate Common Core State Standards, which set learning goals for a variety of content areas at each grade level.

**Although rapid growth in the popularity of e-reading could aggravate existing disparities in students' literacy outcomes, maximizing the potential of e-reading that is based on universal design principles and on evidence-based instructional practices could improve literacy outcomes for a wide variety of readers.

Policy Implications

Contributors to this volume argue that U.S. policy makers, educators, and school systems have overemphasized technical reading skills and underemphasized conceptual knowledge and skills, and must focus more attention on informational text and analytical writing in instruction from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Developing these advanced skills will be difficult and costly. Children from low-income and non-English-speaking families must have access to strong preschools through programs that provide parental education, home-visiting services, and high-quality center-based care and education. Ideally they should then attend well-resourced schools that are staffed by knowledgeable and linguistically sophisticated teachers and that offer after- and out-of-school enrichment programs.

The breadth and complexity of the challenge are daunting. But the challenge can be met. Both Finland and Singapore improved the quality of classroom teachers and created the needed learning environments by limiting access to the teaching profession to the top college graduates and by according teachers the high levels of respect due to professionals engaged in shaping the next generation. It is not a short-term plan, but it is the only one that has worked anywhere at a national scale, and it is almost certainly a prerequisite to the successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards.