

# The Fundamental Importance of Literacy

## Introduction

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I was shocked that my students reached high school without mastering the basic skills of reading and writing. My first year, the majority of my students read on a third to fifth grade level, and a class could range from pre-primer to ninth grade.

**– Bernard Weber, Mississippi Delta '03**

Not only did I think I would not have to teach literacy skills to my seventh and eighth grade science students, but I avoided teaching those skills in my first semester. I avoided the science textbook and used demonstrations, labs, and short lectures to help students master the science content. However, when it came time for students to display their knowledge on a mock-standardized test, they fell dramatically short of where their performance in my class had been. Why? I hadn't taught my students how to read scientific information and process it independently. It became obvious that literacy was the key lever in allowing my students to showcase their knowledge and potential.

**– Aaron Pomis, North Carolina '02**

## I. Literacy as Gateway

As Teach For America corps members, alumni, and staff, we are unified by our conviction that all children should have an equal chance in life. As middle school and secondary teachers, one of our greatest opportunities to alter our students' life prospects comes through teaching our students to read, write, and communicate effectively. No single intervention will have as dramatic an effect on a student's future learning and success as will a solid foundation in literacy:

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed.<sup>1</sup>

In classrooms studying English, math, science, social studies, art or a foreign language, being able to read and write at the appropriate level is fundamental to gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter at hand. Quite literally, a student's reading and writing skills are portals to and catalysts for whole worlds of learning. For all of us, regardless of our classroom content or the age of our students, providing targeted reading and writing instruction when students' skills are lagging and continued instruction when students are on grade level is paramount to their success in school and in life.

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, David et al. "Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement." The Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association, March 18, 1999, p. 3.  
[http://www.reading.org/downloads/positions/ps1036\\_adolescent.pdf](http://www.reading.org/downloads/positions/ps1036_adolescent.pdf), accessed on 7/1/2010.

## Fundamental Importance of Literacy

Contrary to the once commonly held belief that teaching reading and writing is solely the responsibility of elementary teachers and secondary English teachers, educators and researchers across the country now assert that teaching students the skills necessary to make sense of a variety of texts and write for a variety of purposes is a task to which *all* teachers must commit themselves. In fact, the idea that students will arrive at secondary grades ready to read without further training and support is a proven myth, even in the best of school districts. A proficient fifth grade reader will generally remain on a fifth grade reading level unless he or she is consistently taught strategies to effectively access, and gain knowledge from, more difficult and specialized texts. A student who arrives in eighth grade U.S. history a grade level or two behind in reading and writing skills will continue to fall behind—in both literacy and in content area knowledge—because he or she won't be able to comprehend the texts necessary for learning the subject matter. Even the best prepared students need continued instruction in reading and writing during grades six through twelve. As a secondary teacher, you have an opportunity and responsibility to dramatically expand your students' options in life by building upon the foundational skills taught in elementary classrooms, emphasizing reading and writing instruction and practice, and providing targeted, remedial instruction when necessary.

## II. The Stark Reality: Literacy and the Achievement Gap

We recognize the fundamental importance of literacy to expanding life opportunities for our students. And at the same time, for those of us teaching secondary students, there is perhaps no more obvious sign of the achievement gap than our students' often lagging literacy skills. In fact, the *absence* of literacy skills in the students we teach is one of the key indicators of the achievement gap in the first place.

While they cannot do justice to the individual students embodying them, the numbers and statistics on this issue are revealing. Approximately 26% of eighth graders and 23% of twelfth graders do not have even partial mastery of the fundamental reading skills expected at their grade levels. Assuming that these rates apply comparably to all middle and high school students, six million students in grades six through twelve are reading below basic levels.<sup>2</sup> By some estimations, one in four high school students reads at a "below basic" level.<sup>3</sup> By another, 20% of adolescents cannot identify the main idea in what they have read, and 95% cannot extend or elaborate on what they read.<sup>4</sup> In all likelihood, you will teach many of the students who make up these disturbing numbers.

The demographic patterns of these deficiencies support what we know about the achievement gap more generally. Reading problems disproportionately affect African American, Latino and low-income students. Among this group of students, the average ninth grader is performing at only the fifth- or sixth-

*I had no idea what it meant to be English teacher. I had to teach kids literature? No problem ... then I was put in a middle school with students who are up to 5 grades behind in reading. I realized I had to teach them literary skills and how to actually read. These literary skills are imperative for our students' success. If they cannot read at grade level, they will struggle in other content areas.*

**Heather Haines, Philadelphia '03**  
**Principal, Perspectives Calumet High School**

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<sup>2</sup> Joftus, Scott. "Left Out and Left Behind." Alliance For Excellent Education, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, David et al. "Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement." The Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association, March 18, 1999.

[http://www.reading.org/downloads/positions/ps1036\\_adolescent.pdf](http://www.reading.org/downloads/positions/ps1036_adolescent.pdf), accessed on 7/1/2010.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

grade level in reading.<sup>5</sup> And, while high-performing students' reading levels have risen, average-performing students have made no progress over the past ten years. In fact, the lowest-performing readers have become less successful over this same time period.<sup>6</sup>

This long-building crisis has gone largely ignored in our middle and high schools. Although there is increasing focus on the literacy needs of older students, until recently the emphasis on literacy instruction was confined to the elementary campus:

While great attention has been paid to increasing early childhood education opportunities and reaching the national goal of making sure every child can read by third grade, little has been done to confront the real and growing problem: Hundreds of thousands of high school students, particularly in low-income areas, can barely read on the eve of their high school graduation. The problem begins earlier, in our nation's middle schools.<sup>7</sup>

Conventional thought tells us that once students enter middle school, they move from learning to read and write to reading and writing in order to learn. That is, older students are expected to know how to read and write so that in the upper grades those skills become vehicles for mastering new and more challenging concepts. Unfortunately, many of our students enter the secondary grades without the basic foundation of literacy skills that they need to read and write to learn. As a result, they fall farther and farther behind. One study that focused primarily on urban centers makes this point:

A recent report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York found that more than half of the students entering high school in the 35 largest cities in the United States read at the 6th grade level or below. By the middle grades, the majority of students may appear *skillful* in the mechanics of reading but aren't *strategic* enough in their ability to explore and interpret meaning. They often just go through the motions of reading and writing—saying the words or putting the words on paper. As many content-area teachers would attest, more and more of today's middle and high school students abandon reading altogether as a way of learning.<sup>8</sup>

Given the above statistics regarding the achievement gap and its connection to a very real literacy gap, we cannot afford to have the middle and high school students we teach abandon reading as a way of learning and writing as a way of processing and sharing that learning. Literacy's fundamental importance to our quest to close the achievement gap explains why we put special emphasis on teaching literacy at both the elementary and secondary levels at the summer institutes, and why as secondary teachers, you must incorporate reading and writing instruction and practice into your content area courses.

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<sup>5</sup> Balfanz, Robert, James McPartland, and Alta Shaw. "Reconceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era." Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, Prepared for Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, April 2002.

<sup>6</sup> National Association of Educational Progress. "Nation's Report Card: Reading 2002." Available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003521>, accessed on 7/1/2010.

<sup>7</sup> Joftus, Scott. "Left Out and Left Behind." Alliance For Excellent Education, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Vacca, Richard T. "From Efficient Decoders to Strategic Readers." *Educational Leadership*, November 2002, p. 9.

## Fundamental Importance of Literacy

### III. Preview of the Secondary Literacy Text

The purpose of this text is to introduce you—a new teacher of a particular secondary content area in an under-resourced school, serving students who most likely have lagging reading and writing skills—to the methods and tools used to infuse reading and writing instruction into a secondary classroom. When thinking about reading and writing instruction at the secondary level, there are two main branches on the building-students'-literacy tree. First, the continued instruction in reading and writing that naturally takes place in a secondary English class: exposure to rich and varied vocabulary, learning the finer points of grammar, writing analytical research papers, engaging in class discussions about the themes, plot elements, and characters of recently-read novels. Second, the slightly less natural but equally important literacy instruction in a content area class: learning the more-specialized vocabulary of the subject matter, learning to apply comprehension strategies to informational texts, and engaging in the writing process.

*My high school biology students would quickly open their science textbooks to absorb the “cool” images of magnified bacteria, volcanic lava, or foreign species of animals. But, the second we would start reading the textbook, my students felt (and looked) completely lost. My understanding of the importance of teaching literacy skills skyrocketed after the first unit exam I gave produced abysmal results. I was not sure whether my students had not understood the material I had taught or if they had not been able to read the questions on the exam. Literacy skills had to become a part of my biology class if I wanted my students to attain 80% average content mastery on skills at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level!*

**Monica Piquet-Rodriguez, Houston '01**  
**Director, Fantastic Learning Opportunities**

As mentioned above, schools, teachers, and researchers have realized not only the opportunity but also the need to focus expressly on reading and writing skills in courses other than English/language arts, instruction that some call “content area literacy.” The need for content area literacy instruction is especially apparent in under-resourced schools, given the often-lagging literacy skills of the students we teach. To give a few quick examples of content area literacy instruction, a social studies teacher can help students master the skill of identifying the main idea and supporting details in a passage. A science teacher can teach students the writing process through explicit instruction on how to write a lab report. A math teacher can build in occasions where students learn the Greek and Latin affixes and roots crucial to understanding math terminology yet, are applicable to other content areas as well.

Through this text, through your literacy sessions this summer, through your ongoing professional development over your two-year commitment and perhaps beyond, you will work toward mastery of a number of research-based approaches and techniques for advancing your students' ability to read and write at the appropriate level, regardless of the secondary content area you teach.

This text will support you as you begin to explore incredibly challenging questions, such as:

- How does an eleventh grade English teacher improve the comprehension skills of students when their...flu-...fluency...is...so...low...that...they...read...word...by...word?
- How does an eighth grade geography teacher introduce vocabulary such as “Mesopotamia,” “Euphrates,” and “Cuneiform”<sup>9</sup> when students have trouble decoding multi-syllabic words?
- How does a biology teacher help her students comprehend the complicated passages in her textbook—a textbook written for tenth-graders when over half of her students read on a fifth or sixth grade level or below?

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<sup>9</sup> Cuneiform (kyoo' – neh – form') 1. *noun*. An ancient wedge-shaped script used in Mesopotamia and Persia. 2. *adjective*. Wedge-shaped.

Those questions and others will be addressed through the five chapters of this text.

**Chapter One** will provide an introduction to the world of “secondary literacy.” We will begin by explaining that the skill of reading is one of many layers, as demonstrated in the chart on the right. Those layers include everything from to knowing that we read from left to right (book and print awareness), to knowing the sounds that letters make (the alphabetic principle and phonics), to understanding the meaning of several words strung together (comprehension). Vignettes will illustrate the range of reading and writing deficiencies your students may exhibit, and with each vignette, we’ll discuss the various diagnostic tools you could use to get a clearer understanding of a student’s specific reading problem and to benchmark future growth. This chapter closes with strategies that will help you determine in what ways and to what degree a text is appropriate for your students.

Decoding				Comprehension			
Book and Print Awareness	Phonemic and Phonological Awareness	The Alphabetic Principle and Phonics	Word Recognition	Fluency	Background Knowledge	Vocabulary	Comprehension Strategies

**Chapter Two** will explore three major threads of reading in which the students we teach are most often behind: word recognition (which involves word and structural analysis and recognizing words with “automaticity”), vocabulary knowledge, and fluency (which is defined as the ability to read words quickly, accurately, and with good expression). We’ll explain what each of these skills involves, discuss how they are foundational to reading comprehension, and share strategies for building students’ proficiency in these areas in both a secondary English class and other content area classes.

**Chapter Three** will make visible the normally invisible reading comprehension strategies that independent readers subconsciously use to make sense of texts. These strategies include monitoring one’s comprehension, asking questions, making predictions, and summarizing, among others. Classroom vignettes will detail how teachers of all content areas can model the thinking that occurs in good readers’ minds. The explicit modeling of such cognitive strategies, which can be done through any content area reading, is a critical step to moving our students from struggling to independent readers.

**Chapter Four** digs deeper into comprehension by examining how students can practice applying various comprehension strategies before, during, or after reading. These pre-, during- and post-reading strategies will activate students’ prior knowledge, help them connect their prior knowledge and experiences to the text, identify challenging vocabulary, and provide structures for them to summarize the material – skills that are necessary to reinforce in all secondary classrooms.

**Chapter Five**, on writing, addresses strategies for giving your students multiple opportunities to write informally, such as in journals, quick writes, and exit slips. Such “writing to learn” strategies deepen and extend comprehension of what students have read, and highlight the integral connection between the reading and writing process. Strategies for implementing the more formal five-step writing process, in both content area and secondary English classes, will also be discussed.

In the **Conclusion**, we peer into a secondary English, math, social studies, and science classroom in order to give you a more complete picture of secondary classrooms where content area instruction is intertwined with explicit instruction in reading and writing skills, and where students’ literacy skills are consequently improving along with their mastery of the content area. We will close with some general principles to keep in mind as you consider how to best meet the literacy needs of your secondary students.