

Reading Beyond Grade 3

Teaching children how to read to learn is as important as teaching them how to learn to read.

By Catherine E. Snow

A great many efforts are focused on early literacy development — ensuring that children read at grade level by grade 3. While this is a noble goal and one on which we still need to work hard, it is not ambitious enough. We need to be thinking about the literacy-education needs of older children as well.

Reading well at grade 3 does not ensure school success. Children still have a lot to learn about reading in the middle school and secondary grades.

- They need to learn to process the much more challenging texts they will encounter, with their denser grammar, unfamiliar words, and complex ideas.
- They need to learn how to learn from reading — as well as how to be critical of what they read.

Unfortunately, the knowledge base for how to teach children the comprehension and analysis skills they will need to read their social science, math, and science texts is inadequate.

Many children read well at the end of grade 3 but encounter difficulties in the higher grades because the task of reading to learn is so different from the task of learning to read.

The preparation of teachers does not adequately address children's needs for reading comprehension instruction. We know that child outcomes relate to the quality of the instruction received, which in turn reflects teacher preparation and ongoing teacher professional development.

Yet teacher preparation and professional development programs are inadequate in the crucial domain of reading comprehension.

There is a good deal we already know about addressing the practical challenges of improving reading comprehension outcomes. In particular, several of the prerequisites to success reading comprehension have been identified.

Prerequisites to Successful Reading Comprehension

- Successful initial reading instruction resulting in rapid and accurate word reading
- Good oral language skills (large oral vocabularies, good listening comprehension)
- Well-developed stores of world knowledge in a variety of subject areas
- Social interactions in homes, classrooms, and the community that motivate students to read
- Opportunities to practise reading for various purposes
- Lots of exposure to many different kinds of reading materials
- Various specific instructional practices that have proven to be particularly effective in improving reading comprehension
- Instruction based on an appropriate and well-articulated alignment between curriculum and assessment

While the knowledge base available to improve practice in literacy instruction focused on comprehension is not as extensive, as coherent, or as well developed as for early reading, we do know a good deal. For example, a number of practices designed to improve comprehension and vocabulary have been demonstrated to be effective in experimental studies.

These include: prereading discussions; Reciprocal Reading; Questioning the Author; Word Wizard; teaching comprehension strategies explicitly; previewing material in the native language with English language learners; and so forth.

We also know that students need to continue to read a lot, and to be guided to read books of an appropriate level, so that they have opportunities to practise reading skills, to learn new vocabulary items, and to be exposed to a variety of text.

Reading comprehension is massively affected by features of the texts being read, by the match of topic to individual readers' interests, by the motivation of the reader to succeed, and by the social-cultural context in which reading takes place, as well as by the quality of instruction received.

Each reader brings unique resources of knowledge and strategies for interacting with text. Many good readers would struggle with a physics text, others would stumble over poetry, and lots would find the Congressional Record hard going.

Children whose tested reading level is at grade 2 may well work their way through the Harry Potter series if all their friends are talking about it. Immigrants who may be excellent readers in their native language find too many unfamiliar words in texts they read in English, and thus fail to comprehend them.

What we need to know is how to promote effective reading comprehension in cases where some or all of the facilitatory factors are absent.

We need to devote special attention to students who show poor comprehension. Particular sub-classes of poor comprehenders are of great interest — e.g., those who read words well but find it hard to construct meaning across longer texts, second language speakers, children who show good comprehension for some topics but not for others.

Ultimately, ensuring progress in school, participation in citizenship, and employability will require that all the various groups of poor comprehenders are provided with opportunities to develop reading comprehension skill.

(Adapted with permission from "Improving Reading Outcomes: Getting Beyond Third Grade," www.aspeninst.org. Dr. Snow is Henry Lee Shattuck Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education.)