Secondary Reading: Not Just for Reading Teachers Anymore

LISA A. DIEKER AND MARY LITTLE

Reading skills needed at the secondary level are dramatically different from those needed in the elementary classroom. Reading is no longer taught in most secondary classes but is now a tool to demonstrate mastery of numerous content areas. However, what are the options when you cannot read and are a middle or high school student? This phenomenon is true for many secondary students with disabilities and is especially problematic for those students who will never master the use of printed material at the level needed to learn content. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to emphasize the importance of collaboration between general and special educators at the secondary level related to the use of reading and to provide strategies related to using reading material effectively at the middle and high school levels.

Content area teachers are often frustrated when students have difficulty reading at the secondary level, and these fears sometimes increase when a student has an identified disability. This article provides secondary reading strategies at the classroom, team, and schoolwide levels. A strong factor in the success of these strategies is the need for a stronger collaborative infrastructure between general and special educators. Content and learning specialists must collaborate because the skill of reading is typically used to master content at the secondary level. In elementary schools, the emphasis is on teaching the skills of reading; at the secondary level, teachers expect students to use this skill to learn, and if they cannot, it will impact the student across all classes (Al- lington, 2002).

Using the skill of reading to learn content is critical as more and more states implement content area tests for high school graduation. Simultaneously, national legisla-
tion such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) amendments and the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) have established accountability and mastery standards for all students, both with and without disabilities. Yet, for many students with disabilities, the majority of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) have a focus on reading (Lyon, 1995; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2004). If schools are accountable for the success of all students but do not have a strong school-wide focus on literacy, students with reading difficulties can be left behind at the secondary level. In inclusive schools, the standards-based general education curriculum and the individual curricular needs of students with disabilities, as outlined in their IEPs, are at the core of planning discussions for instruction.

Without these types of collaborative discussions and instructional planning at the secondary level, many students with reading disabilities are left in a system in which, if they are fully included, minimal learning occurs. Yet, in a time of high-stakes assessments, if students are removed from the general education curriculum and provided reading instruction, they may miss necessary content knowledge needed to meet graduation requirements (e.g., state assessments) or lack the skills needed to enter college or gain competitive employment. Therefore, literacy instruction must be integrated into the content areas with a collaborative approach between general and special education.

In this article, we present levels of reform that can occur related to the reading process at the secondary level. Within each of these levels of reform is a critical need for stronger collaboration among teachers with various areas of expertise to maximize the mastery of content and enhance literacy skill development for all secondary students. Therefore, as following sections are presented, consider your role in relation to reading and content mastery in your classroom and school and how you might expand your circle of influence in the area of reading. In Figure 1, we share ideas related to teaching reading at the classroom level, team level, and school level. Reform can begin at any part of this model, but it is important to start with an area in which you have the power within "your circle of influence" (Covey, 1989).

A classroom teacher's influence might be in his or her classroom (inner circle), whereas a team leader might start with the beliefs and planning for a team of teachers (middle circle); and an administrator might begin with specific actions and strategies for professional development in reading within the school (outside circle). Whatever approach an educator decides to take, the goal is to provide a model for action by providing specific strategies to initiate or enhance the outcome for increased con-

---

Figure 1. Circle of reading influence.
tent mastery and improved literacy skills for secondary students. The second purpose of this article is to provide strategies to consider related to reading at the classroom, team, and schoolwide levels.

What We Think

Achieving Schoolwide Reform

As accountability for ever-increasing standards is mandated through legislation and policies at the federal and state level, what do these changes mean for teachers and administrators, especially in secondary settings? How do teachers work together to meet the diverse learning needs of secondary students, especially students identified with disabilities in the area of reading?

Clearly, if students with disabilities spend most of their school days in general education and are held accountable for the same standards as all students, attention must focus on instruction, strategies, and supports to students and their teachers within classrooms. As this emphasis shifts to the standards of the general curriculum, the roles and responsibilities of special educators move toward providing instruction and assistance in the classroom (Donaldson & Christiansen, 1990) and using a team approach to meet students' needs (Pugach & Johnson, 2002). For this integration to succeed, there must be collaboration among the school personnel involved in the effort (Friend & Cook, 2003). Through collaborative structures, such as co-teaching, coaching, team teaching, and problem-solving teams, instructional changes can be facilitated. Therefore, given the reform agenda to meet the learning needs for all students, teaching arrangements and collaboration that maximize the skills and knowledge of both teachers must be initiated and enhanced. The focus of these teams of educators must be implementing high-quality, research-based instructional methods, strategies, and programs to meet the diverse needs of all students. This is especially true in content area classes where the most common instructional techniques used are teacher lecture and independent reading by the students (Goodlad, 1984). Thus, not only do students have more content to master but the teaching methods used (e.g., content lectures, textbook regurgitation) may prevent learning if students do not possess the necessary skills (Allington, 2002).

Therefore, as accountability demands increase, so does the importance of providing teachers instructional strategies that reflect the strongest research base available to teach to all students while enhancing literacy skills within the content areas (Carnine, 1999). These strategies increase student access to learning and mastery of content. To facilitate change, teachers must be provided high-quality professional development and time to implement and practice new skills with recognition of their ability to solve problems and affect change in the school. Effective professional development must be a complex and comprehensive process of long-term change within the school. To achieve desired change, a clearly articulated and communicated plan to address commonly identified goals within this system must be developed (Fullan, 1993, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1992). Schools must become learning organizations, where professional development and change become the norm of continuous improvement (Fullan, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Professional development is a goal-oriented and continuous process—supported through mentoring, coaching, and feedback—and contextualized to address perceived needs of students within individual classrooms and schools (Fullan, 2001; Stanford, 1999). Whether co-teachers, a team of teachers, or members of a committee engage in discussions and planning to resolve issues for students at the school, the following questions should be addressed:

- What is the vision?
- What do we want to achieve?

Continued collaboration throughout this planning process is critical for success.

Determining Skills and Resources

Next, determine the skills and resources needed to achieve this vision. During this step, it is very important to articulate the specific goals and potential impact of the plan on student learning. Connections to district, school, and classroom needs related to student outcomes must be described during this planning process. At times, additional learning and resources may need to be directed to this plan. Critical questions will define the specifics for actual implementation:

- Is there a research-based instructional strategy that needs to be learned and implemented?
- Are there necessary resources to commit to this goal?
- How clearly is this goal related to the school improvement plan?
- What resources can be committed to this goal?

Adjusting to change is important in the continued implementation of the developed action plan (Fullan, 2001). Realize that change is a journey, not a blueprint (Fullan, 1993); flexibility and ongoing collaboration are important for school improvement and to meet the needs of all students within inclusive schools. Reading for all students is a greater moral purpose for schools to achieve (Fullan, 2001). This type of systemic change, however, requires an engine to keep it going. That engine requires each teacher and administrator to act as a skilled change agent, pushing for the needed transformations within classrooms and schools and intersecting with other like-minded educa-
tors to form the critical mass necessary to bring about continuous improvements for all students. To begin or enhance this vision, we need to think about what we believe and what we do.

What We Believe

As part of school reform efforts toward inclusive environments, we must create a climate that believes reading is important in all classes, and all students can use reading skills to learn. All educators must emphasize collaboration for this success to occur. When teachers are collaborative, an environment is established where diverse expertise is often embraced and many exciting instructional practices can be implemented that support a struggling reader (Dieker, 2001; Pugach & Johnson, 2002).

Second, we must believe that a positive learning climate can be developed for all students. If students can master the curriculum with modifications or accommodations, they may still struggle with the multiple social aspects of the secondary school climate. Learning theory has focused on the importance of students having "positive attitudes and perceptions" about the learning environment (Marzano, 1992). This primary need must be fulfilled before learning can occur. The issue of motivation is often elevated at the middle and high school levels for many students with disabilities because of the complex social nature of schools. Focusing on both the academic skill of reading as well as social skills content for all students must be considered.

Third, teachers must be assessed regarding what they believe about making accommodations for students with reading disabilities. If a student cannot read text, this will guarantee failure in many subject areas. Just as the day's goal might be to understand the causes of the War of 1812, the teacher also might provide students with a goal of using a graphic organizer to enhance this understanding. This technique is not to suggest that instruction in graphic organizers takes the place of content instruction but is blended with the instruction of critical content.

Before school administrators can require faculty to make accommodations for individuals with disabilities, they need to ensure that there is a shared belief system among school staff regarding the need for said accommodations. Often, teachers want to see a disability before they can believe it exists. Certainly, no teacher who had a student with a spinal cord injury would say to that student, "If you try harder, child, I just know you could walk." Unfortunately, in many classrooms, students with learning issues related to reading are treated this way daily by teachers who think the students could read if they would merely "try harder." Edyburn (2003) advocated that if teachers would treat students who have print disabilities as if they were blind, there would be a much greater understanding of their learning needs. Secondary students who are not proficient readers may not have been taught the skill or may not be able to use this activity to learn. Just as a child with a spinal cord injury may not be able to run around the track, he or she still can circle the track in alternative ways. For many of our secondary students with print disabilities, they need "wheelchairs for their brains" (Dieker, 2003) so they can learn the content in spite of their inability to read. Through MRI brain scans, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) have found that struggling readers do work harder than other students. Students with true reading disabilities may want to master the skill of reading, but this may not be a possibility. Instead, they must have supports to assist them in being able to navigate printed text to succeed at the secondary level.

The perceived role of the reading teacher has a strong influence on how literacy is taught and used at the secondary level. If all teachers believe they are to work in autonomy and that teaching reading is the job of the "reading" teacher (or special education teacher), then many students may fail. However, if each teacher believes it is his or her job to teach the skill of reading or to allow students the tools they need to compensate for a lack of reading skills, then change can occur. This is especially true for teaching teams and collaborating teachers. Too many times in collaborative ventures, teachers spend a great deal of time talking about specific student accommodations rather than on the information or skills that need to be learned. In a team that truly believes in teaching content mastery through embedded reading strategies and compensatory strategies for some, teachers think about both the "what" and "how" of students' learning. For example, in a collaborative team of three content specialists and one special educator, the team may decide a student with a reading disability will work on reading-related goals in a reading class with a specialist during one period and continue that work in the general education English class. However, in social studies, that same
student might use voice software (available now for Microsoft Word®) to read the material aloud. In this type of team discussion, teachers are still focusing on the need to learn reading but also allowing the student to have accommodations when the focus is on learning content, as opposed to skill development. This example does not mean there would not still be strategy instruction in the content class for reading but that the student would not fail the class because of the inability to read.

What We Do

What a school thinks or a team believes about reading can best be assessed by determining what is being done with the reading process in each classroom. A school can have a strong philosophy about reading, but if that philosophy does not influence the team or the individual classroom, then the direct impact is limited. Therefore, ensuring all teachers implement research-based reading strategies to enhance content mastery is critical. The following ideas and strategies are provided to assist teachers using reading as a tool to learn content in their classrooms.

Co-Teach

One instructional practice that can be very effective at this level is co-teaching (Dieker, 2001; Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Pugach & Johnson, 2002). This method can be especially beneficial as it maximizes the diverse expertise of both teachers: the general education teacher in the area of content knowledge and the special educator in the area of strategies and methods to meet individual students’ instructional needs, including reading. At this level, co-teaching teams must work together with parity, yet be certain to maintain that the special educator is focusing on what is “special about special education.” For example, in a strong secondary co-taught team where students with reading disabilities are in the classroom, the special educator would ensure that those students continue to gain reading skills and have the tools necessary to learn the content presented. Co-taught teams should use some type of collaborative lesson planning model (see Dieker, 2002; Little, 2001) to guarantee that individual students’ reading and learning needs are addressed. As co-taught teams are structuring their classrooms for students who are nonreaders or reading below grade level, we have included some instructional strategies and assistive technology tools to consider.

Predict

One strategy that uses same-age peer tutoring and is appropriate for inclusive secondary classrooms is predictions. This particular strategy (Mathes, 1994) focuses on a classwide peer-tutoring model. With this strategy, students are put into pairs and assigned text to read. One student reads aloud while following the procedures outlined:

1. The student who is reading predicts what will happen in the text.
2. The student who made the predictions reads aloud.
3. After reading the passage, the student who read
aloud is asked by the nonreader, “Did your prediction come true? Why or why not?”

4. Finally, the student who read the passage is asked to summarize what is read using 10 words or less. (The nonreader counts the number of words on his or her fingers.)

5. The students switch roles.

If there are several nonreaders in the class, then the students can go through the process of predictions with the teacher reading aloud or just one student doing the reading but both students doing the predictions. This strategy works well for students at this level because the process allows for students to try and try again. Also, the forming of a prediction is a safe technique to use because when students simply “predict” what they think will happen, they can never be wrong.

Use Literature Circles

A strategy used in many classrooms is “literature circles” (Daniels, 2002). This strategy can be used in any classroom, elementary or secondary. Literature circles are especially easy to use in a co-taught environment where two teachers are available to monitor the groups. With this technique, students are assigned segments of the text to read and are then asked to complete their circle. Students can be assigned to one of the following roles:

1. Questioner—This person is to ask the group a question related to the text.
2. Clarifier—This student clarifies words or concepts anyone has difficulty pronouncing or understanding.
3. Summarizer—This student provides a verbal summary of the story (in 10 words or less).
4. Predictor—This student predicts what will happen next in the story.
5. Artist—This student can be doodling a picture related to the story while the reader is reading.

The various roles allow students to use their individual strengths yet contribute to their group in understanding the text.

DISSECT

DISSECT, a decoding strategy designed for secondary learners, provides students with skills in monitoring their decoding abilities (Ellis, Deshler, Lenz, Schumaker, & Clark, 1991). The first step, Discover the context, involves students skipping a difficult word and using clues in the sentence to guess the word. The next step is to Isolate the prefix and pronounce it if possible. Next, students Separate the suffix and Say the stem. If students cannot pronounce the stem, then they proceed to Examine the section of the stem beginning with a vowel. If the stem, or section of the stem, begins with a consonant, students separate or pronounce units of three letters. Finally, if students have completed the five steps and continue to have trouble pronouncing the word, they Check with someone or Try the dictionary.

Apply Paraphrasing Strategies

The mnemonic RAP (Read, Ask, Put in own words) can be used to teach students how to recall main ideas and facts from their reading materials (Schumaker, Denton, & Deshler, 1984), a skill often required at the secondary level. First, students Read a paragraph or short passage silently. Next, students Ask themselves to identify the main idea and details of the text and Put these in their own words. Teachers should provide guidelines for finding the main idea. Schumaker et al. recommended that students orally repeat the paraphrases into a tape recorder and summarize at the end of each passage or paragraph. Other scholars have proposed that students write their paraphrases after mastering the tape-recorded paraphrases.

Apply Assistive Technology

Numerous technology devices are currently available (and are becoming less expensive) to assist students daily with reading individual words or reading text. These tools are perfect to use during collaboration across disciplines and for both general and special education. Table 1 contains some favorite high-tech (typically more expensive) and low-tech tools related to reading and explains how these can be used in collaborative endeavors.

Discussion

Our work with numerous secondary schools has clearly demonstrated that a school’s philosophy (What We Think) impacts the work and beliefs at the team level (What We Believe), which ultimately impacts what is done (What...
We Do) in each and every classroom for each and every student, including those individuals with reading deficits. We have identified nine key points that are critical when addressing reading instruction at the secondary level and have phrased these nine points into questions. These questions can be asked at the classroom, team, or school-wide level with any individuals who are striving to find more effective ways to address the reading needs of students at the secondary level.

1. How is reading perceived schoolwide? What do you and your colleagues believe about reading in the content areas?
2. How do you and your colleagues view your roles related to content teaching and reading?
3. What is specifically working in your classroom, for your team, and at your school to meet the instructional and graduation demands for all students? What possible areas need enhancement or change?
4. What supports and professional development activities are available to address these needs and changes?
5. Are co-teaching and co-planning used as much as possible to ensure alignment of general and special educators' expectations?
6. How are effective reading strategies incorporated into all classes?
7. Do general and special education teachers discuss the compatibility or incompatibility of students' reading needs in general education content classes?
8. Is assistive technology used effectively to meet the instructional needs of students, especially as it relates to the teaching of or accommodating for reading?
9. What goals do you have relative to the learning and mastery of content with embedded reading strategies in your classroom and increased collaboration within your school?

**About the Authors**

Lisa A. Dieker, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Central Florida. Her primary area of research focuses on collaboration between general and special education at the secondary level, with a specific interest in the unique opportunities that exist in urban schools. Dr. Dieker is currently co-directing a grant with the University of Florida and University of South Florida called the "Learning Stream," which focuses on the development of a process to create video for teacher education that impacts student learning in math, science, and reading, and in addition to other editorial duties, she is the co-editor of the *Journal of International Special Needs Education*. Mary Little, PhD, is an associate professor in exceptional education at the University of Central Florida. Her professional and research interests include instructional strategies and methods at the secondary level, program evaluation, teacher efficacy, and student impact related to professional development. She has authored several publications and completed research in the process of classroom action research through the university and the Effective Instructional Practices project, a statewide professional development project beginning its 7th year in Florida. Address: Lisa A. Dieker, University of Central Florida, 4000 Central Blvd., Orlando, FL 32816-1250; e-mail: ldieker@mail.ucf.edu
REFERENCES


Dieker, L. A. (2001). What are the characteristics of “effective” middle and high school co-taught teams for students with disabilities? Preventing School Failure, 46(1), 14–23.


