Focus on the Essentials of Reading Instruction

A rubric can guide young teachers toward developing classrooms that focus on literacy, rather than shoving it to the sidelines.

By Alan M. Frager and Elizabeth A. Frye

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We know what happens when beginning teachers can't teach reading effectively. First, they fail when leading discussions to help students connect key passages from texts to important experiences in their lives. Next, they forget that the goal is to teach students that they can make meaning of text. Instead, these teachers begin to teach "the book" by lecturing students about the parts they feel students should know. And last, these teachers feel forced to implement "pop" quizzes, turning the class into a game in which students try to predict the tricks and the timing of the tests.

A damaging gap exists between the time before student teaching, when preservice teachers and their mentors assume that the study of texts is a central and valuable activity, and the period beginning with student teaching, when beginning teachers and their mentors often frame teaching in a way that positions literacy as an optional activity.

But supervisors of student teachers and the mentors for beginning teachers should pay closer attention to reading instruction. To help focus attention on reading instruction, we created a rubric to use in both formative and summative evaluations of beginning teachers' reading instruction. The criteria are based on the vision of a highly literate classroom environment in which the study of texts is a central and valuable activity. This vision of the classroom is supported by most, if not all, state standards for reading instruction, as well as by the standards of the International Reading Association.

A RUBRIC FOR EVALUATION

Grade F: Our rubric for evaluating reading instruction begins with the lowest grade, F, because it is so easy and common to fail in reading instruction. Supervisors who quickly recognize bad reading instruction can also provide the earliest support for helping beginning teachers use more effective methods.

A SOPHISTICATED PRIMER

Reading the whole text aloud. In grades 1 to 4, reading whole books to children is beneficial because most children don't yet have the ability to read them independently. But in 4th grade and beyond, most students are able to read classroom texts, so reading the whole text to the student is doing for students what they should do for themselves. Unfortunately, reading the whole book to students is expedient. Many teachers excuse this practice by arguing that "it *exposes* all students to the important information in the book, which they might not get if they read it themselves."

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The confusion in this view of reading as "exposing" is that reading is an active, not a passive experience. Frank Smith explained that "a popular but misguided definition of reading is *getting information from print*" (2007: 5). When we are reading for meaning and not for information, we aren't happy if someone offers to tell us what the book says. Instead, we want to read and have our own experience with the ideas.

F: Oral round robin reading — and such variants as popcorn reading — is much closer to malpractice than to effective practice.

Oral round robin reading. Very few reading educators advocate round robin reading (RRR), though it is a widely used practice. Opitz and Rasinski explain that oral round robin reading persists for many reasons, including tradition (new teachers "most often explained that they learned about the practice during student teaching and hesitated to give it up for fear of causing problems") and classroom management ("teachers think that if they insist all students do the same thing at the same time, they will be better able to manage and control student behaviors") (1998: 85). However, oral round robin reading — and such variants as popcorn reading — is much closer to malpractice than to effective practice. With RRR, only one person, the reader, is engaged in reading, while 25 others are passive listeners at best, assuming they aren't sleeping or calculating the place in the text when they'll have to read. For most students, RRR emphasizes correctness in word pronunciation, causing good readers to disregard making meaning and poor readers to feel anxiety about stumbling in front of their peers. RRR also works against developing good readers because it's a forward-only, one-speed, no-stopping process. Competent silent reading, on the other hand, is a dynamic process characterized by recursion, a process that involves re-reading parts of a text, changing speeds, and occasionally stopping to look back or ahead, take notes, or just ponder what was just read (Daniels 1994).

Grade C: Our rubric has no D grade. Beginning teachers who regularly and frequently assign students to *silently* read texts (either textbooks or trade books) should receive at least a C in reading instruction. Students can complete their silent reading as-

C: The minimum passing grade is when beginning teachers assign silent reading of grade-level texts and, soon after the assignment, question students about the reading.

signment at home, in class, or both. It is important that the students read silently and that the texts are at the students' instructional level, which is defined by most reading professionals as "the grade level of material that is challenging but not frustrating for the student to read with normal classroom instruction and support" (Harris and Hodges 1995: 118). Instructional-level texts are a critical element in silent reading because easier texts (independent reading level) don't have the challenging ideas, syntax, and vocabulary that lead to steady growth in reading ability.

Classic studies by Dolores Durkin (1978-79) and follow-up studies like those by Michael Pressley and his colleagues (1998) suggest that teachers normally ask questions after students have read a text, but that they don't teach students how they might read and think strategically to generate good answers. So, for us, the minimum passing grade — not failing, but not good, either — is when beginning teachers assign silent reading of grade-level texts and, soon after the assignment, question students about the reading.

Grade B: At the minimum, a teacher must understand how to establish conditions that enable whole-group silent reading to be effective. Bonnie Armbruster and Ian Wilkinson reported a study of these conditions that found:

> the actual effectiveness of silent reading depends *on what teachers and students do during the rest of the lesson*. . . . Teachers need to capitalize on students' increased attention during silent reading and their responsiveness to text content during discussion. In addition, teachers need to hold students accountable for what they read; they need to encourage students to read carefully, reduce their motivation to skim through text, and minimize opportunities for distraction while they wait for their peers to finish reading. (1991:154)

B: Good teachers design before-reading activities that motivate students, activate their prior knowledge, introduce new vocabulary, and develop an awareness of the questions, issues, and debates that frame the text students are reading.

Teachers often use a Before-reading, During-reading, and After-reading (B-D-A) instructional framework. Many teachers begin this process at the end, that is, they first plan the activity that will take place after students have read the text. But establishing a clear purpose for reading is important. Good teachers design before-reading activities that motivate students, activate their prior knowledge, introduce new vocabulary, and develop an awareness of the questions, issues, and debates that frame the text students are reading.

Grade B+: The distinction between good and very good reading instruction is grounded in the gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the students. Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2008) identified five components of gradual release:

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teacher modeling, guided practice, collaborative practice, independent practice, and application of the strategy in authentic reading situations. When very good teachers use guided practice, they design mini-lessons to teach higher-level skills and strategies that address their students' weaknesses.

Grade A: Excellent reading teachers continue to build on the principles of good reading instruction and direct their attention to students' personal interpretations of text. In responsive teaching (Tharp and Gallimore 1989), also called instructional conversations, teachers try to anticipate a range of stu-

A+: To earn the highest mark, teachers must involve their students in critical literacy.

dent responses when planning instruction. Student input drives the discussion (Fielding and Pearson 1994). One way to evaluate instructional conversations is to note whether the students as a group talk more than the teacher. To score an A, the teacher should help students participate in a high-quality discussion, for example, by helping them stay on topic. Other observable techniques include frequent use of these three phrases: "Please read from the text to support that interpretation," "I would like to hear another interpretation of this passage," and "What experience in your life relates to this passage?"

Grade A+: To earn the highest mark, teachers must involve their students in critical literacy. Kathy Hall defines critical literacy as "literacy learning [that] involves learning to understand the socially constructed nature of knowledge and experience as expressed in written and spoken language. It is essentially about being aware of the processes that produce knowledge" (1998: 185). Exceptional reading teachers possess the following characteristics and practices:

- They're mindful of the communities where students live and learn and the concerns of the people in those communities. They weave that knowledge into instructional goals and methods.
- They have a broad definition of text. The text may be a book or article, but teachers may also include other texts that students "read," including film and such community texts as traffic rules.
- They select provocative materials to engage students in critical reflection.
- They encourage multiple interpretations.
- They create opportunities for students to reflect on how they arrive at their opinions, beliefs, values, and arguments. They model their own critical process and support students as they participate in ongoing discussions.

Teachers who challenge students with these practices transform how students transact with text and lay the foundation for students to become active, thoughtful, literate participants in our society.

OUR GOAL

This rubric addresses the specific literacy practices necessary for success in teaching adolescents to be successful in content area reading.

However, others might choose different criteria to assess preservice and early career reading teachers. What's important is for this rubric to promote conversations among teacher educators, school administrators, literacy coaches, and others and that it provides the feedback necessary to guide new practitioners as they pursue the goal of excellence in teaching. K

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