Introduction

Still Wanted

Teachers With Knowledge of Language

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Still a Reality: Inadequately Prepared Teachers

My long-standing concern about the preparation and professional development of teachers responsible for preventing and remediating reading and spelling disabilities (Moats, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2009) is shared by many colleagues (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard, 2001; Brady & Moats, 1997; Mather, Bos, & Babur, 2001; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Moats & Lyon, 1996). In our classrooms, workshops, and research studies, we find that teachers often feel unprepared to address the instructional needs of students with language, reading, and writing problems, although these groups compose the large majority of those in remedial and special education. Teachers often have minimal understanding of how students learn to read and write or why many of their students experience difficulty with this most fundamental task of schooling. Although the quality of implementation of an instructional program has everything to do with its success (Haager, Heimbichner, Dhar, Moulton, & McMillan, 2008), poor implementation of adopted programs is a major reason why students at risk fail to progress. Unfortunately, current educational policies and funding practices continue to focus on program selection, school organization, and student test scores—not teachers, the contexts in which they teach, or the leadership and professional development required to ensure “teacher quality.” Thus, the research on teachers and teaching reported in this special issue of *Journal of Learning Disabilities (JLD)* is all the more welcome and needed.

This special issue of *JLD* enables us to consider why reading, writing, and language instruction may not be effective even though federal, state, and local policies may promote the value of evidence-based reading programs. The contributors to this issue consider the content knowledge, attitudes, learning experiences, and working environments that support teachers’ ability and willingness to implement research-based instruction. Teachers cannot teach well what they do not understand themselves, and these articles help explain why deep understanding is hard for teachers to acquire and why the path to progress is more complex than sometimes realized. Below is a brief summary of some obstacles to improvement that have been underappreciated in the past and that come to light in this issue.

Concepts About Language and Reading Are Elusive

One of the most common findings in studies of teacher knowledge is that teachers are unaware of or misinformed about the elements of language that they are expected to explicitly teach. Given the strong consensus that explicit, systematic teaching of both spoken and written language structure is important when students cannot intuit this information (Ehri & Snowling, 2004; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005), we should expect that teachers can identify phonemes, graphemes, syllables, morphemes, basic parts of speech, sentence structures, and narrative or expository discourse organization. Unfortunately, levels of content knowledge about language are typically found to be very low (Bos et al., 2001; Moats, 1994; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Spencer, Schuele, Guillot, & Lee, 2008).

For example, in a recent study by Spencer et al. (2008), the authors found that “the phonemic skill level of the reading and special education teachers was not sufficient to provide accurate phonemic awareness intervention. . . . Many teachers had specific misconceptions about speech and print” (p. 517). One of the easiest items of the survey required teachers to correctly identify the number of speech sounds in the word *stop*. Only 55% of teachers accurately indicated that *stop* has four sounds, even though this item was one of the easiest on the survey. In contrast, the accuracy rate was 89% for speech and language pathologists. Teachers were very confused about the number and identity of phonemes in words (e.g., that the word *rose* ends in the phoneme /z/, not /s/!) and consequently did not understand the structure of phoneme–grapheme correspondence. Most concerning about these
findings was the evidence that special education teachers did no better on the knowledge survey than did reading teachers or general education kindergarten and first-grade teachers. Spencer et al. concluded that “effective training must help educators to thoroughly understand that speech maps to print (and not the reverse), to analyze speech without reference to print, and ultimately, to think clearly about how speech maps to print” (p. 518).

The elusiveness of foundational concepts of language may affect teachers’ attitudes about their instructional responsibilities. Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, and Stanovich (2009 [this issue]), investigating first-grade teachers’ priorities and preferences in beginning reading instruction, showed that this group’s preferred time allocation for reading instruction typically did not conform to models substantiated by current research. Special education teachers did not favor intensive code-based instruction for students at risk. Teachers with more knowledge of the orthographic code were somewhat more inclined to spend time teaching phonics, but overall the content knowledge of first-grade teachers was relatively low, and the teachers preferred to spend their time on literature-based activities and independent reading and writing.

Levels of disciplinary content knowledge may also interact with teachers’ receptivity to learning about the linguistic foundations of reading instruction. Cunningham, Zibulsky, and Callahan (2009) examined the ability of preschool teachers to accurately evaluate their knowledge of language and emergent reading development, documenting that preschool teachers tend to overestimate their knowledge of phonological skills, the alphabetic principle, phonics, and early reading acquisition. A related study with elementary school teachers (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004) also demonstrated that teachers’ calibration of their knowledge—that is, their ability to realistically estimate their relative strengths and weaknesses—was often inaccurate and could diminish their receptivity to learning more about the “technical” aspects of their discipline. Teachers with higher levels of awareness of language structure tended to underestimate what they knew, whereas teachers with lower levels on objective measures tended to overestimate what they knew. These and other studies suggest that the knowledge base for teaching speech to print relationships is hard to access and not gained simply through classroom experience or introspection. This reality may present subtle and hidden barriers to teachers’ understanding of the content and pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach children how to read.

The abstract and complex nature of language, in conjunction with the efficiency with which literate adults can access the meaning of printed words, makes it easy to overlook the sophistication of linguistic concepts necessary for reading development. In addition, English orthography does not represent speech in any transparent or simple manner, and it is easy for literate adults to allow their spelling knowledge to mislead them when it comes to dissecting spoken language into syllables, phonemes, and morphemes. Becoming analytical about language for the purposes of systematic instruction is no more “natural” for a teacher than it is for many students.

The Disciplinary Knowledge Base Takes Substantial Time to Learn

Courses provided in teacher licensing programs are often insufficient in content and design to enable students to learn the subject matter and apply it to the teaching of reading (Walsh, Glaser, & Dunne-Wilcox, 2006). Even when courses are well designed, the few hours allotted to the study of language, language-based learning, and instruction may not be enough to enable prospective teachers to achieve high levels of mastery (Spear-Swerling, 2009 [this issue]; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2003, 2004). As Cunningham et al. (2009) argued, teachers learn at different rates and often begin their coursework or professional development with inaccurate ideas about how much, and what, they should learn to be effective in the classroom. Many need direct feedback about the differences between their actual knowledge and what they believe they know. Some will need much more time than survey courses allow to learn concepts that are abstract and inaccessible. A response-to-instruction model makes sense for teachers as well as their students, wherein formative assessments and progress-monitoring tools are used to inform teachers about their attainment of content mastery and extended learning opportunities are available for those who need them.

Boosting teachers’ knowledge to a high enough level so that it will affect student outcomes often involves extended time and consistent mentoring. For example, McCutchen and her colleagues (2002; McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009) conducted 10-day summer institutes focused on language structure, the science of reading, and the application of linguistic concepts and showed significant links among teacher knowledge, teacher practice, and student learning on a range of outcome measures. Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, and Sammons (2009 [this issue]) concentrated on teaching first-grade teachers about selected components of instruction, including phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency.
for 35 hours in the summer and followed that instruction with in-class mentoring. In study in high-poverty schools funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Moats & Foorman, 2008), we spent at least 30 hours of workshop time on each topic—phonology, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing—ultimately to the significant benefit of participating teachers and their students.

**Good Information Is Difficult to Find**

A clear obstacle to improvement of the disciplinary knowledge base for reading instruction is the dearth of good textbooks and teaching materials for teacher preparation and professional development. Walsh et al. (2006) found that the most popular texts used in reading courses failed to address the five essential components of instruction identified by the National Reading Panel and that information provided about language and reading research was often inaccurate. Joshi, Binks, Graham, et al.’s (2009 [this issue]) study of textbooks echoes and elaborates those findings. Not only do the most often-used textbooks in reading deemphasize the essential components of research-based instruction, but also the information provided may contain misinformation about the findings of research on reading acquisition, the nature of English orthography, and the difference between phonology and phonics. Spencer et al. (2008) reported that the instructional materials used by the teachers in their study contained many errors of linguistic analysis; for example, *ox* was identified as having two phonemes (it has three, /ŏ/ /k/ /s/), and *off, on, olive, and one* were identified as beginning with “the sound for the letter o,” although these words begin with the phonemes /au/, /ŏ/, and /w/. Such details do matter because we can help students make sense of the relationship between spoken and written language only if the information they receive is complete and accurate.

**Expertise Goes Unrewarded**

In a recent study, Brady et al. (2009) found that experienced teachers came into their study knowing no more about reading and language than did novice teachers, as measured on objective assessments. Furthermore, some of the most experienced teachers tended to be the most skeptical of the professional development project and the most inclined to reject information about explicit teaching of language structure if it challenged their prior beliefs. But these individuals were not likely to experience any consequence for their lack of receptivity. Similarly, the more eager participants who obtained better results did not receive either monetary or professional incentives for the quality of their work. Clearly, these circumstances need to change through the leadership of national and state education policy makers and professional organizations.

**What Should We Do?**

Progress toward true professionalism in reading instruction and special education, resting on deep knowledge of content and skills necessary to teach students who struggle to learn, is possible with the adoption of remedies such as the following.

**Leadership Training**

Superintendents, principals, and other instructional leaders need ready access to the best sources on the consensus findings of reading, writing, and language research and need to be accountable for implementing best practices. Federal and state leadership academies should reward leaders who attend colloquia, receive mentoring or technical assistance, and emulate schools or districts that excel in reading and language instruction.

**Higher Education Consortiums**

College faculty who teach reading courses need support and incentives to maintain current, relevant, and substantive course content that is aligned with current research (see Joshi, Binks, Hougen, et al., 2009 [this issue]). For the past 5 years, the Texas Higher Education Collaborative, supported with state funds, has sponsored a consortium for university faculty members to meet, share syllabi and resources, and learn from researchers and from each other. Student teachers prepared by faculty members who have participated in the collaborative have been shown to obtain better student outcomes than instructors from nonparticipating programs (Binks, 2008). This model could be beneficial if replicated throughout the nation.

**Interdisciplinary Credentialing**

There are far too few cross-disciplinary programs in language and literacy. Substantive study of language structure and language learning is often unavailable to those being credentialed in reading and special education, although there should be substantial common ground in the training of school-based speech and language pathologists, reading specialists, and special
educators. Exceptions to the rule, known to this author, are programs at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, at Simmons College in Boston, at California State University, Monterey Bay, and at the University of Kansas.

Meaningful Definition of Specialist

Specialists should be individuals whose advanced knowledge and skills elevate them to the higher ranks of a profession. Specialists should earn that title by passing rigorous tests of relevant knowledge (see Stotsky, 2009 [this issue]), by applying best practices in their field, and by showing that they can achieve progress with students who are challenging to teach. Currently, the title does not reliably indicate that an individual possesses greater teaching competence, higher status, leadership responsibility, or influence within public education. Professional groups outside of state accreditation and credentialing agencies, such as the Academic Language Therapy Association, Association of Educational Therapists, National Institute for Learning Development, and Association of Orton Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, have constructed their own credentialing systems for specialists that are independent of public education. A new set of umbrella standards for specialists in reading and language, advanced by a national advisory group, might serve to promote professional consistency across states and private entities. Common professional standards guide many other specialists, including school psychologists, speech and language pathologists and therapists, and occupational therapists. It seems reasonable to assume that we can achieve this for reading specialists and special education teachers.

Conclusion

The work reflected in this special issue of JLD represents substantial progress toward the goal of improving teacher licensing standards, preservice teacher education, professional development, and mentoring in the area of literacy instruction. Not only have we documented gaps in the typical teacher’s foundational knowledge for teaching language-based literacy skills, but also we understand that those gaps are often accompanied by teachers’ inaccurate perceptions of what they need to know and do to help students learn. These misunderstandings should be confronted through formative assessments, direct feedback to teachers, and extended opportunities for teachers to learn and apply the requisite understandings in supportive contexts (Kaiser, Rosenfield, & Gravois, 2009 [this issue]). The field has gained greater insight into the relative difficulty of concepts about language structure and literacy acquisition, the time required for teachers to develop knowledge and practical skills, and the importance of mentoring as teachers acquire expertise.

Finally, the articles make abundantly clear that teaching reading and related skills to students with learning challenges is a complex task under the best of circumstances. Simply mandating better student outcomes or the implementation of scientifically based reading instruction denies the reality that teaching is the means by which these goals are accomplished. To improve teacher quality, we must first take to heart the necessity of establishing literacy as a content-laden teaching discipline—just as we acknowledge math, science, and the arts as content-laden teaching disciplines. Useful national standards for knowledge and practice, meaningful state licensing tests, informative textbooks and courses, professional development aimed at measurable goals of application, and greater rewards for those who demonstrate expertise are all future outcomes to which our field must aspire.

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References


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