

Original Paper

Making the Case for Reading Instruction with Adolescents

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Abstract

Adolescents who struggle with reading face persistent academic and social challenges that extend beyond the classroom. Despite decades of research and reform efforts, national assessment data reveal stagnant reading achievement among middle and high school students. This article argues for renewed attention to reading instruction with adolescents, particularly for those whose literacy skills remain below foundational thresholds. Drawing on a case study of 152 high school students receiving intervention in San Diego, the authors highlight the significant gaps in decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension that hinder progress. The paper examines historical approaches to adolescent literacy, including content area and disciplinary literacy, and explains why these strategies often fall short for the most struggling readers. Instead, the authors call for interventions that explicitly address four critical areas: self-efficacy, background knowledge, decoding, and word knowledge. Evidence from research syntheses suggests that such interventions can produce meaningful gains when instruction is responsive to students' profiles and when texts are appropriate for adolescents' developmental levels. Ultimately, the case is made for systematic, intentional reading instruction in secondary settings to ensure equitable opportunities for academic success and lifelong literacy.

Keywords: adolescent literacy, reading intervention, decoding threshold, self-efficacy, vocabulary development, disciplinary literacy, struggling readers

Introduction

Learning to read is complex. There is no reading gene transmitted from one generation to the next. Every brain must be taught to read anew. But how best to accomplish this continues to be a widely discussed, and at times has become a politicized question (Hanford, 2018; Pearson, 1996). Some have even noted that teaching reading is indeed rocket science (Moats, 1998). Thankfully, many children learn to read in elementary school. However, for those who struggle there exists continued study and debate regarding causes and scientifically-based reading supports (Lyon & Chhabra, 2004). Chief among these has been the science of reading (Seidenberg, 2017) and its related best instructional practices (Foorman et al., 2016; Seidenberg, 2013). Proponents of the science of reading place a strong emphasis on direct and intentional instruction of phonological processes and alphabetic principles in early literacy instruction and express concern about the knowledge base of literacy educators to do so (Hurford et al., 2016).

The focus of the science of reading has been at the elementary level. But instruction that promotes learning to read well is not just an elementary school issue. There are a worrisome number of adolescents who have not made expected progress in reading, a pattern that has been in place for decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The 2023 National Assessment of Educational Progress results (www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2023) for reading found that scores for eighth graders are essentially the same as they were in 1971 (256 points in 2023 compared with 255 in 1971). Despite efforts, there have only been a few years when scores were minimally higher (2012 was the highest, at 263 points).

The impact on society of failing to learn to read is significant. Adolescents who do not read well experience difficulties succeeding in their core subject classes (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). They

become unmotivated to participate in class and define themselves as learners who cannot succeed at school because they perceive reading as too hard for them (Klauda & Guthrie, 2015). Although their negative self-perceptions lead to later problems with employment, earning ability, and interest in civic life (Kutner et al., 2007), a more immediate concern is that their negative day-to-day school behavior serves to shield them from others on an uphill trajectory which exacerbates their low self-efficacy and academic inabilities (Kremer et al., 2016).

As an example, we will profile the recent reading performance of 152 high school students who received reading intervention services in San Diego, California. They were the lowest performing students at the school but did not qualify for special education services. Demographically, 100% of them qualified for free lunch and 65% of them were learning English as an additional language but were not newcomers. In terms of their reading profiles, only 42% passed the Yopp-Singer Test of Phonemic Segmentation, 62% were at the lowest level on the Core Phonics survey, all of them performed below grade 5 in terms of fluency and vocabulary, and 72% performed at grade 3 or below on measures of comprehension. This paints a picture of the dire needs when it comes to reading instruction for these adolescents.

There is no shortage of recommendations for remediating adolescent reading skills (e.g., Lovett et al., 2021). A few decades ago, the focus was on content area reading (e.g., Readence et al., 1981), which focused on helping students read the texts they were assigned in their subject classes. More recently, it was broadened to integrate reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing in text-related learning (Flood & Lapp, 1995). Now consider these 152 high school students. Their current reading proficiencies are not sufficient to significantly benefit from most content area reading approaches which include strategies such as questioning, concept mapping, making inferences, re-reading, and summarizing (Chauvin & Theodore, 2015). It's not that these are bad ideas, and they likely benefit many students. But adolescents who need the most support are not making progress with this level of instruction. One of the missing ingredients in this approach is motivation (Barber & Klauda, 2020; Webber et al., 2023).

To address this, some have argued that adolescents need to find books that resonate with them and that will awaken their inner reader (e.g., Miller, 2009). In this approach, students choose their own books from a library filled with high-interest books and teachers carve out time for reading. In some cases, teachers are encouraged to have students "write, reflect, analyze, and participate" (Amato, 2024) which is better than simply assigning reading time. To be sure, increasing reading volume is an important aspect of improving reading performance (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021). But simply introducing students to books and giving them time to read on their own is not likely to radically improve the performance of students such as those profiled earlier. Stanovich (1986) recognized a Matthew Effect in reading: the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. It appears that this effect is more pronounced for decoding efficiency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Pfof et al., 2014). Thus, it is plausible that stronger readers benefit more from reading volume. It's not that the students identified here would not benefit from reading time. In fact, they do need to practice what they are being taught. But practice alone does not make perfect. When asked to read texts of their own choosing in class, they read fewer words than their peers and often avoid reading all together. They also do not like to be seen reading books that their peers perceive to be very easy and thus the allocation of instructional minutes for independent reading time seems to be less effective for students who struggle the most with reading. As Shanahan (2018) asks, should students be reading on their own when they have a skilled teacher available to guide them to read better?

More recently, the field of adolescent literacy has focused on disciplinary literacy. This is a more complex or higher level of literacy than was the focus of content area reading. For example, in Wisconsin, disciplinary literacy is defined as the confluence of content knowledge, experiences, and skills merged with the ability to read, write, listen, speak, think critically and perform in a way that is meaningful within the context of a given field (<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/cal/pdf/section2.pdf>). As Shanahan (2017) notes, "Fundamentally, because each field of study has its own purposes, its own kinds of evidence, and its own style of critique, each will produce different texts, and reading those different kinds of texts are going to require some different reading strategies." For students who struggle significantly with reading,

this is aspirational. Yes, they need to understand the nature of the discipline, but they need to develop the basic literacy skills described as the foundation of disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

Thus, our call for renewed interest in teaching reading to adolescents. We need to identify the foundational skills that students need to learn. And we need to allocate sufficient time to provide this needed intervention for adolescents. The evidence suggests that efforts to address the reading needs of adolescents are generally effective and that “students mostly maintained gains made during intervention at follow-up time points” (Daniel et al., 2021, p. 170). In their synthesis, the overall effect size for reading interventions was strong ($g = .78$) and the average amount of intervention time was 15.6 hours, with a range from 1 to 55 hours. Combining this with other studies of reading intervention (e.g., Clark et al., 2017; Flynn et al., 2012), there are several important aspects to consider when it comes to reading instruction for adolescents. The design of the reading intervention should emanate from the needs of the students being served because there is no single profile of a below grade level adolescent reader (Brasseur-Hock et al., 2011). Having said that, there are some common areas that tend to require attention when it comes to adolescents who struggle with reading. And we need to be careful about the students’ perspective of reading intervention classes. As Baye et al. (2019) note, “readers were unhappy about having to take a remedial reading class (instead of art, music, or physical education, in most cases) and were not motivated to once again work on material that they had difficulty with in elementary school” (p. 156). We need to consider the formats for reading intervention and question if they need an entire class that prevents them from taking other classes or if the support can be provided in other ways.

Components of Reading for Adolescents

First is self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s capacity to execute behaviors necessary to achieve a goal (Bandura, 1997). Thus, students need a goal and for some, reading is not a goal. Sometime in the past, that goal was given up and too many students define themselves as bad readers. Their mindset is that they cannot improve, so why try? Supporting these students is not as simple as telling them that their teachers have a goal for them. When reading self-efficacy is compromised, students need to experience success and make the connection between their effort and the impact or result (Vaughn et al., 2020). Thus, educators who support struggling readers need to ensure that scaffolds are in place for students to experience success and that they make explicit the connection between effort and outcome.

Part of each intervention lesson should include time spent on developing students’ self-efficacy. This requires that the tasks are moderately hard which means that teachers must select appropriate texts that are complex for the students they are teaching. These texts need to be relevant for adolescents and allow them to practice and apply the skills they are being taught. We observed a lesson for a 9th grader in which the teacher had selected *Jack’s Junk* (Allison, 2023). If you work with adolescents, you can probably guess the comments made by the student who did not want to read this book. When the texts are appropriate, teachers encourage student effort and name the successes. In a different 9th grade class, the teacher used generative artificial intelligence to create a decodable text with silent e patterns, with the content focused on sports based on the student’s interest. As the student experienced success with each sentence, the teacher noted that success and recognized the student’s effort. At the end of the lesson, the student commented, “Can I take this home? I gotta practice it again so I can read it to my brother.”

Second, knowledge impacts understanding of texts and activating relevant background knowledge can help students learn more (Brod, 2021). Students with limited knowledge can still make gains when their knowledge is developed. There seems to be a knowledge threshold and when students are below that level, their performance suffers (Simonsmeier et al., 2021). Importantly, teachers can develop knowledge with students which aids their understanding of texts. Unfortunately, some of the students who struggle with reading did not receive instruction in content areas during elementary school because their teachers were told to focus on reading skills. This may seem like a contradiction, but there is evidence that time spent in content area learning, such as social studies and science, improves reading performance (Tyner & Kabourek, 2021). We cannot go back and teach the content that students missed in previous years, but we can identify the relevant knowledge that needs to be developed and activated

for students to learn to read.

Thus, intervention efforts need to consider the knowledge required of the content and implement strategies to build that knowledge. There are several ways to build knowledge with students, such as interactive videos in which the student is assigned content to watch while the system pauses to ask a question that the student must answer before the video continues. When possible, this can occur outside of the class day so that more time can be focused on learning to read. If that is not possible, teachers can use the quad text set model (Lupo et al., 2018) in which students are taught with a less complex text, a multimodal text, a narrative text or current events article, and then a more complex text. As the student encounters these various sources, their knowledge builds such that they can access the more complex text. In doing so, teachers can also build student's sense of efficacy, reinforcing their effort and the impact it has.

Third, there is evidence for a decoding threshold. When students have not yet passed this threshold, instructional attention must be focused on decoding. Wang et al. (2019) summarized two studies with a combined student sample of 40,000 students and noted that "the relation between decoding and reading comprehension can only be reliably observed above a certain decoding threshold" (p. 387). Their findings suggest that scoring below the decoding threshold was "associated with stagnant growth in reading comprehension" (p. 387). Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that students will benefit little from interventions focused on comprehension if they have not passed the decoding threshold.

If students are below the decoding threshold, teachers should focus intervention time on the appropriate next steps decoding. For example, teachers can use the RISE assessment (ccdd.serpmedia.org/rise.html) and if students score below 235, the instructional focus should be decoding. That doesn't mean that other students have mastered decoding or that lessons should avoid more advanced decoding such as multisyllabic words, but scores below the threshold demand instructional attention to decoding. Although there is not agreement on the scope and sequence of decoding skills for older readers, generally instruction starts with letter recognition, moves to blending, short and long vowels, r-controlled, diagraphs, and so on. There are several curriculum options available for teaching decoding skills, but it's important to recognize the first point we made about intervention: the texts must be appropriate for adolescents. We cannot simply place texts written for first graders in the hands of eighth graders and expect miracles. We need to avoid students feeling embarrassed by the support they receive (Frankel et al., 2021).

Fourth, vocabulary is an important consideration. However, not in the traditional sense of focusing on technical terms that students need to know in their content area classes. Hopefully, students will learn those words from their teachers as part of the regular lessons they receive. We recognize the effect that word knowledge has on student performance in several areas, including reading and writing but also science and math (Townsend et al., 2020). In terms of interventions, students need to learn how words work, not just the meaning of hard words. Words work in a number of ways and students need to understand topics such as syllable rules and morphology (Bhattacharya, 2020; Goodwin et al., 2017). As Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004) demonstrated, instruction in graphosyllabic analysis improved the performance of adolescents who struggled with reading. They taught students to pronounce the word (with assistance if necessary), then divide the spoken word into syllables. Students then matched spoken and written syllables and blended the syllables to read the whole word. In doing so, student reading performance increased.

In addition to syllable instruction, students need to understand morphology. As Berne and Blachowicz (2008) note, teachers need to "help students learn about words by showing them how word parts and analogous words assist in meaning making when encountering unknown words" (p. 316). Remember, however, that if they are below the decoding threshold, the majority of the intervention time should be on decoding instruction and practice. Morphology instruction requires that students learn patterns and begin to recognize the parts of words. Brice (2004) notes that students need to be taught syllable types and syllable division, base words, prefixes, and suffixes, compound words, and function words. Pacheco and Goodwin (2013) suggest that teachers focus on part-to-whole, parts-to-whole, analogy, and whole-to-part experiences with students. Hendrix and Griffin (2017) define this as (p. 58):

- *Part-to-whole*: To determine the total meaning of a word, students first identify apparent roots and their meanings within a word.
- *Parts-to-whole*: In similarity to the part-to-whole approach, students identify not only apparent morphological roots within a word to determine meaning but also prefixes and suffixes.
- *Analogy*: Identified word parts are compared with other similar word parts from previously acquired vocabulary or schemata to determine meaning.
- *Whole-to-part*: An entire word and its meaning are considered to deductively determine the meaning of roots or affixes within the total word.

Thus, our call for quality reading instruction for adolescents. Classroom teachers in middle and high school should continue their best efforts to integrate generic and disciplinary literacy instruction into the learning experiences for students. This likely benefits large numbers of students. And we should collectively work to get excellent texts in the hands of our students and help combat the overall decline in reading as noted in the National Endowment for the Arts publication *Reading at Risk* (www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/RaRExec.pdf). However, for adolescents who struggle mightily with reading, the focus should be on reading. We highlighted four aspects of intervention efforts, from self-efficacy and background knowledge, to decoding thresholds and word knowledge, that should be the focus of these efforts. We argue that these are critical, foundational skills that adolescents must develop if they are to make progress in reading.

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