

The Act of Reading: Instructional Foundations and Policy Guidelines

National Council of Teachers of English (US) Date: December 5, 2019

OVERVIEW

Reading is a sociocultural activity in which readers construct meaning from text through the lenses of culture and personal experience (Barton, 2007; Gutierrez, 2008; Perry, 2012). Contrary to popular conceptions of the act of reading, readers do not merely “decode” or “unlock” meanings encoded by authors. Even a simple word like *dog* is interpreted through the lens of personal experience which, in turn, is filtered through cultural representations of dogs and other animals. This does not mean, however, that readers can simply make up meanings without regard to the author’s intentions. Readers must construct responsible readings (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) that take account of the text, the reader’s assessment of the author’s intentions, the reader’s background knowledge and experience, the sociocultural context, and the activity of which reading is always a part.

The act of reading is always embedded in an activity, some purposeful act that makes a particular set of demands on the reader. The role of text in religious rituals is illustrative. For the words to “count” as part of the ritual, they must be read (or sung, included in call & response, shouted) in the right way (standing, sitting, or kneeling) at the right time and the right place (a place of worship). The familiar, if ineffective, practice of round-robin reading works in much the same way. In this case, successful “reading” requires giving the appearance of paying attention, not interrupting other readers, being able to pick up the text in the right place when called upon, as well as reading the text fluently when it is one’s turn. In the same way, a literature discussion in a 10th-grade English class requires that students observe prescribed rules of participation as well as make relevant comments in order to successfully demonstrate that they have read and understood the text under discussion. From this perspective, readers don’t learn to read once and for all as much as they learn to read particular texts, in particular ways, for particular purposes, and in particular contexts (Gee, 1990; Wallace, 2003). The purpose of reading instruction, then, is to expand the range of ways and purposes for which students read.

FOUNDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION

Effective reading instruction is underpinned by key principles that derive from a sociocultural model of literacy and related research including, for example:

- Reading development is strongly correlated with the number of words children read (Allington, 2001/2011). Therefore, all readers must be immersed in a rich program of reading a wide range of accessible texts written for a range of purposes and audiences (i.e., genres) with frequent opportunities to read connected texts.
- Accessible texts utilize predictable linguistic structures and familiar content that enable readers to draw on their linguistic and cultural knowledge, experiences, and interests in the process of making sense of texts (Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996).
- A program of effective reading (and writing) instruction is an ongoing journey throughout one’s schooling and must include opportunities to engage with a wide range of genres, including digital and multimodal texts (Bråten & Braasch, 2017).
- All children require some measure of explicit, intensive, and individualized support and direction depending on their needs as readers. This includes explicit attention to the sound system of
- language where necessary. No child, however, requires unique instruction based on an educational label (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2004).
- Effective reading instruction is informed by factors such as ongoing assessment of students’ reading development, their interests, attitudes toward reading, motivation, and home literacy experiences. This includes routine evaluation of students’ response to instruction since one size never fits all (Scieurba, 2017).
- Reading instruction must focus primarily on meaning. An overemphasis on words, letters, and sounds misleads developing readers as to the purpose of literacy (Smith, 2006).
- Explicit teaching of reading skills is most effective when it is embedded in the context of meaningful reading (Pearson, 2004).

Ultimately, an effective literacy learning environment immerses children in a language “bath” that includes regular opportunities to learn and use various forms of oral and written language as a means of drawing on their background knowledge in support of classroom learning and to fulfill a wide range of purposes with a variety of audiences in different (sociocultural) settings. In the following section, we offer a representative sampling of instructional strategies that emerge from these principles.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHING READING

- Immerse students in a literate environment that includes environmental print and access to a wide range of genres and text types, including digital and multimodal texts (Allington, 2018).
- Read to students regularly and purposefully, including a range of genres and text types.
- Provide students with regular opportunities to read books (or other texts) of their own choosing for extended periods of time.
- Utilize multiple instructional formats (shared reading, guided reading, literature discussion circles, individualized instruction) and regularly reflect on these teaching practices and student progress in order to meet the strengths and needs of students (Bacon, 2017).
- Help students build background knowledge of topics and language that enables students to understand what they read.
- Provide opportunities for inquiry and language study, including vocabulary, word and text structures, and spelling patterns, that emerge from authentic reading experiences (Baumann, 2009).
- Model higher-order thinking skills, using techniques such as think-alouds, to illustrate the range of meaning-making strategies readers utilize in the process of reading, including strategies (e.g., prediction, self-monitoring, reflection) they use before, during, and after engagement with meaningful texts (Murphy et al., 2016).
- Support reading fluency through strategies like repeated and assisted reading as well as the use of books featuring familiar topics, stories, and language (DiSalle & Rasinski, 2017).
- Support students’ reading comprehension by providing regular opportunities for students to respond to reading through discussion, writing, art, drama, storytelling, music, and other creative expressions (Cervetti, 2019; Wilkinson & Son, 2011).
- Expand students’ opportunities for learning and support learning to read a range of genres and text types by integrating reading and writing across the curriculum (Graham & Harris, 2017).

GUIDELINES FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Respect educators as professionals, value their knowledge of the students and community they serve, and encourage them to develop and adjust lessons according to the instructional needs of their students (Allington, 2001/2011).
- Support educators with ongoing, research-based professional development on the teaching of reading, including practices that are considerate of students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds and developmental levels (Darling-Hammond, Hyster, & Gardner, 2017).
- Ensure that classrooms are well resourced, including classroom libraries that feature a range of genres and text types including digital and multimodal texts (Gaiman, 2015; Miller & Sharp, 2019).
- Implement mechanisms for evaluating school structures and practices to ensure that instructional environments are considerate of the range of cultural, linguistic, and personal experiences students bring with them to school (Castellón et al., 2015).
- Promote formative classroom-based assessments that gather information to highlight students’ literacy abilities and assist educators in making decisions on their instruction and curricular choices to best meet students’ needs (Afflerbach, 2016).
- Connect state and district standards with authentic assessment practices that serve to inform instruction with “usefully” reported results and to accurately showcase children’s literacy abilities (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018).

- Establish authentic, embedded, curricular-aligned accountability practices that do not thwart educators' autonomy to best meet students' literacy instruction needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018).

Reading is a human activity—the glue, the bridge, the vehicle that connects students to themselves and other worlds, whether formatted digitally or in print (Goodman, Fries, & Strauss, 2016). Reading promotes knowledge acquisition and vicarious journeys, encouraging exploration of multiple experiences, plot lines, points of view, and interpretations that enhance the knowledge bases of readers, tying together meaning through their personal and cultural lenses. Furthermore, reading serves many purposes: looking inward and outward to establish identity and connect with self and others (Koopman, 2016).

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This statement is a revision of On Reading, Learning to Read, and Effective Reading Instruction: An Overview of What We Know and How We Know It by the Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English (2004).

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