The Role of Content Literacy in an Effective RTI Program

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Response to Intervention (RTI) has become a potent influence on the design and delivery of literacy programs in elementary schools throughout the United States. Premised on a tiered approach, its advocates characterize RTI (Gersten et al., 2008) as a comprehensive strategy that includes universal screening, high-quality instruction for all students, and needed interventions for struggling students to prevent additional learning difficulties. I have purposely highlighted the phrase “high-quality instruction for all” to draw attention to the idea that RTI, though emerging out of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), is being offered to schools as a system of instruction and remediation for every student (Applebaum, 2009; Commission on RTI, 2010).

How can legislation for the learning disabled spawn a system of instruction and intervention for struggling and nonstruggling students alike? The answer lies in the language of IDEA requiring schools to institute preventive measures that attempt to reduce the number of students who experience initial failure. Within RTI, the frontline of prevention is Tier 1, or the general education classroom, where every student regardless of ability is to receive high-quality instruction. Thus, the preventive possibilities of RTI are only as good as the Tier 1 supports classroom teachers provide students.

The general education classroom is also where students receive their first exposure to and ongoing experiences with disciplinary content (Brozo, in press). It stands to reason, therefore, that classroom teachers are more likely to meet the learning needs of every student if they are knowledgeable of and skillful in content literacy practices (Alvermann, Swafford, & Montero, 2004; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

The Emerging Importance of Content Literacy in Tier 1

Our elementary school classrooms are more diverse now than at any time in the history of U.S. schooling. With this diversity come numerous challenges, not least of which is ensuring all children develop literacy and learning skills to acquire information and concepts in the content areas (Brozo & Puckett, 2009).

In the hands of skillful classroom teachers, content literacy strategies can be mediated in ways that differentiate instruction to meet the reading, writing, and learning needs of students with diverse abilities and backgrounds (Edyburn, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Tomlinson, 2005). This is an indispensable skill for a classroom teacher working in an RTI program because of the expectation that responsive instruction at Tier 1 will diminish the need for Tier 2 and 3 supports for most students (Brozo, 2010).

An interesting new influence on content literacy comes from the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI; www.corestandards.org). Questions about the extent to which these standards will be adopted notwithstanding, it appears inevitable that in the coming years they will impact how reading is taught in the elementary grades and beyond. What’s revolutionary about these new standards is that they situate literacy and language development squarely within the content areas. Citing the failure of traditional reading schemes to leaven achievement of children and youth in the United States—as evidenced by flat trend lines on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and a slipping in rank on international assessments—common core proponents assert that prevailing literacy curriculum needs to shift from a focus on developing reading skills and
building fluency with simple narratives toward reading and writing to gain knowledge and express new understandings with informational text.

Even the title of the common core English language arts standards for grades 6–12 makes clear this significant shift in emphasis: “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects” (CCSSI, 2010). This new focus for literacy in the service of content learning is defended on the grounds that building “a foundation of knowledge in these fields [will give students] the background to be better readers in all content areas” (CCSSI, 2010, p. 10).

At least four decades of research in reading comprehension support the primacy of relevant prior knowledge (Pearson, Kamil, Afflerbach, & Moje, in press). As the so-called fourth-grade slump (Brozo, 2005) demonstrates, children who acquire good reading skills may not be able to transfer those abilities to comprehending content text if they lack relevant prior knowledge for that content. In other words, reading is domain specific (Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss, 1979; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005).

The force of domain-specific knowledge on comprehension cannot be dismissed. This phenomenon became vivid for me once again when I was jarred from sleep by my alarm clock early one morning at the recent IRA convention in Chicago, USA. While I slowly sat up in bed, the local newscaster calmly uttered these words: “Live hogs found July unchanged.” What an odd expression, I thought, as I wrote the words out on the small hotel notepad. A few days later in a graduate practicum I was directing, I presented this sentence to one of our third-grade tutees. He was able to read it flawlessly and fluently but had no idea what it meant. Indeed, when I shared the sentence with my graduate tutors, only one, who had grown up on a farm with livestock, got the gist. The point is that to comprehend this expression, reading skill alone is not enough; one must also possess the needed background knowledge, in this case, of trading in commodities. As I was to discover, Chicago is the home of the Mercantile Exchange, where trades in live hog futures take place daily.

My episode in domain-specific reading comprehension reminds us that knowledge about life and all manner of things (even trading in commodities) is necessary to have successful meaning-making experiences with texts that inform. This knowledge can be gained by exploring content topics through reading. Teachers skillful in content literacy practices can increase students’ reading capacity, vocabulary, and knowledge with texts focused on real content.

**Ensuring Content Literacy for All**

Even as RTI and the common core standards exert increasing pressure on classroom teachers to meet the reading and learning needs of all students in all subject areas, it is important to consider structural and curricular reforms necessary to ensure effective content literacy instruction occurs for whole classes in Tier 1 (Brozo, in press). Following are three guidelines:

1. Instill the awareness that content learning and content literacy learning are inseparable.
2. Premise the language arts curriculum on reading to learn.
3. Increase print encounters and experiences with informational text.

**Instill the Awareness That Content Learning and Content Literacy Learning Are Inseparable**

Advocates of content area reading have been saying as much for nearly a hundred years (Mraz, Rickelman, & Vacca, 2009). Teachers who recognize how thinking, reading, and communicating are inseparable from the content of the disciplines can craft instructional practices that braid language development with knowledge building in science, history, math, and all the other subjects (Brozo & Puckett, 2009). It is essential, in other words, for a fifth grader who is knowledgeable in science to also possess the literacy and communication skills that enable him or her to acquire additional science information and concepts through reading and to write and talk in ways that demonstrate to others his or her science knowledge.

**Premise the Language Arts Curriculum on Reading to Learn**

Notions that there is a dichotomy between learning to read and reading to learn must surely be put to rest. Whether about the structure of language or the structure of a molecule, about what motivates a main character or what motivates a political leader, about
places in the heart or places in Africa where French is spoken, all reading is learning. Children should be brought to see this as the purpose of reading right from the start.

As a result of this transformation, the development of skills as the focus of reading instruction will be replaced by gaining knowledge and building cognition through reading. Approaching the language arts in this way may hold a key to engaging curiosity as well as expanding ideas and content knowledge (Brozo & Pearson, 2002). The common core proponents argue that proficiency in reading and writing can only be achieved through a curriculum that is “coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades” (CCSSI, 2010, p. 10).

Increase Print Encounters and Experiences With Informational Text

It is more important than ever for children to know how to read for and critically evaluate information from both traditional and online sources (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004), because as they progress through the grades and enter adulthood, most of what they will encounter will be informational in nature. Furthermore, because reading problems that may develop in the primary and elementary grades tend to become generalized over time, adversely affecting cognitive development and overall performance in all subjects (Stanovich, 1986), it’s critical that young children receive instruction that builds knowledge and literacy skills not just during language arts period but throughout the school day. Therefore, early in their schooling experiences children should receive exposure to a variety of informational texts (Benson, 2003; Kamli & Lane, 1997).

Yet, many teachers in the early grades may not be giving informational text the kind of attention it deserves. Indeed, the common core advocates reassert what Duke (2000) found a decade ago: Primary-level teachers in the United States continue to privilege simple stories as the source material for reading instruction. This occurs even though some children, especially young boys (Zambo & Brozo, 2009), may actually prefer informational texts to narrative stories (Caswell & Duke, 1998). For these children, informational texts may be an entryway to literacy learning, and limiting children’s contact with informational text may leave them ill-prepared for the demands of standardized tests and subject area textbooks (Brozo, 2005; Brozo & Calo, 2006), as well as those placed on them as citizens in an information age.

References


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