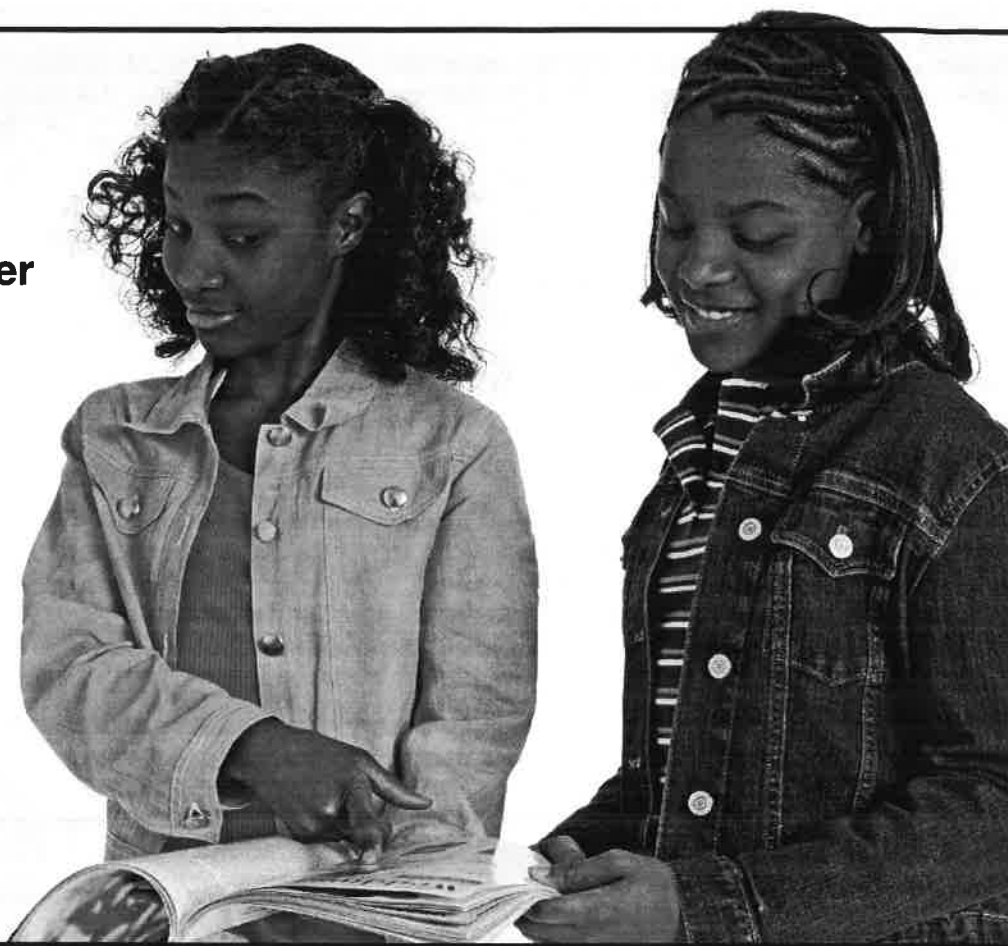

Literacy and Literacy Teacher Education in Grades 4-8

FAITH H. WALLACE,
JOYCE E. MANY,
BARBARA STANLEY,
SHANNON HOWREY,
JOHN PONDER,
TERESA FISHER
AND EUDES AOULOU



Reading is a developmental process beginning with a foundation built in the primary grades and continuing throughout the lives of students and adults. Misconceptions arise that every *child will learn to read by third grade*, thus, students will be able to read for a lifetime. However, different and sophisticated reading skills are needed as students progress through grade levels and in life. Reading becomes more complex. The processes of reading, which are necessary for more intensive study, change from *learning to read*, the focus of elementary school instruction to *reading to learn* (Chall, 1983). Text becomes a source of information using technical terms and graphics to further explanations. We specifically emphasize that reading instruction should also change in middle schools, as students are required to engage in more intensive study of subject matter (Irvin, 1992). Adolescent students in middle schools must be critical consumers of information from a multitude of print sources which requires different and additional reading strategies than are used

during the learning to read phase of instruction. Despite the emphasis on the early development of reading skills fostered by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, content area readers in grades four through high school continue to fall behind. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered every other year, is considered by many as the nation's report card for evaluating academic gains of student progress across the United States. This biennial assessment is conducted in various academic fields and grade levels. The assessment of reading in grades 4 and 8 includes three areas: reading for literacy experience, to gain information, and to perform a task, two of the sub areas focusing on reading to learn cited by Chall (1983). On the 2005 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), eighth-grade students' scores continued to decline from previous years with 29 percent of students reading below the basic level (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005).

Georgia Students

Georgia students' performance has remained consistently below the national averages in fourth-grade testing. From 1992 to 2005, fourth-grade students' reading scores indicated no significant difference from year to year for students who performed at or above the NAEP Basic Level, including Proficient and Advanced Levels. Eighth-grade students appear to have increased their ability with informational reading tasks when compared to the performance of fourth-grade students, with a larger percentage of students testing at or above the Basic Level in 1998, in 2003, and in 2005. However, caution must be taken since the percentage of Georgia students above the basic level (high 60%) is still below the national level of 71% for 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

More distressing indicators are evident when we look closely at those Georgia students who do not meet the Basic Level of literacy as tested by the NAEP, as was the case for 42 percent of the fourth grade students. In 2005, fourth-grade girls out performed boys by at least 10 percentage points with 47% of the boys not achieving a basic level of proficiency but only 37% of the girls not scoring at the basic level. A similar difference in eighth grade percentages exists with 39% of male students and 27% of female students scoring below Basic Level. Further contrasts are apparent when NAEP results for Georgia students are examined in light of students' race. At the fourth-grade level, 60% of the state's African American students score below the basic level of proficiency, with Hispanics at 54%, Caucasian at 25%, and Asian/Pacific Islander at 16%. In the eighth-grade, the percentages continue to drop, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

An additional perspective on Georgia's middle grade students' literacy achievement can be obtained by analyzing the results for the Georgia's Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). Examination of the 2006 standardized test scores for fourth and fifth graders on the CRCT indicate two subgroups are considerably less successful than their

counterparts. Students identified as English language learners (ELL) and the students with disabilities had a much lower rate of passing the CRCT than their classmates. English language learners struggled on this assessment with only 50% of ELL fourth graders and 46% of ELL fifth graders passing the reading section. The percentages of students with disabilities who passed the state reading assessment in fourth grade was 61% and in fifth grade 59%. In other words, students from these two subgroups have the greatest need for better instruction in reading and language arts. Given these findings, the students in Georgia clearly need strong literacy teachers, texts that support learning, and tasks that students can perform successfully. This is critical as we become more of a text-based consumer society and technology is changing more rapidly than ever before.

Effective Middle Grades Literacy Instruction

Reading to learn has long been used to describe the transition in literacy focus between the primary and intermediate grades. In grades four through eight, students encounter texts which present new and different challenges in vocabulary and comprehension. First, texts that are used in these grades require that students have more content-specific vocabulary knowledge (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Consequently, effective vocabulary instruction for middle grades includes teaching selected words and allowing for repeated practice in a language- and word-rich classroom environment (Blachowicz, Fisher, & Watts-Taffe, 2005), as well as teaching generative word elements (e.g. morphemes) and contextual analysis for independent word-solving (Baumann, Edwards, Font, Tereshinski, Kame'enui, & Olejnik, 2002; Carlisle & Stone, 2005).

Second, an increase in text quantity and difficulty, particularly in the content-areas, requires that students have an established base of comprehension skills and strategies. For example, students need the ability to organize more complex ideas (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005) and recognize structural patterns within text (Armbruster, 1991). They need to be able to activate strategies such as accessing prior

knowledge (Stahl, 1989), creating images as they read (Gambrell & Bales, 1986), generating questions (Davey & McBride, 1986), monitoring comprehension (Baker & Zimlin, 1989), and remembering what they have read (McMahon & Wells, 2007).

While greater independence of learning is expected in grades four through eight, children are diverse in the literacy skills they have acquired (McMahon & Wells, 2007). Effective teachers use a variety of methods to teach and practice these skills, including explicit instruction and modeling (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Ruddell, 1997). Strategies for comprehension of complex texts need to be directly taught, modeled, and practiced continually (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Gambrell, Morrow, Pressley, & Guthrie, 2006), as students take on more responsibility for learning. Effective teachers encourage and support students' growing independence through multiple grouping strategies offering varied amounts of support as needed (Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995).

Concurrent with this stance, effective middle-grades teachers consider learning a work in progress. Student work is evaluated on multiple qualities rather than on a single achievement standard, with the goal of providing specific feedback on progress to the student and as a formative tool in planning for future lessons (Allington & Johnston, 2002). Effective teachers are able monitor this progress through an in-depth knowledge of reading and writing processes (Ruddell, 1997), and there is clear evidence that the expertise of the teacher in these areas affects the rate and depth of student learning (Block, 2001; International Reading Association, 2000).

Intermediate-grade students at every level need to be motivated to persist in navigating the more sophisticated cognitive demands required by texts (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Teachers need to be aware of how to motivate their students, despite the fact that intrinsic motivation to read begins to decline sometime after the fourth grade (Gottfried, 1985; McKenna, Kear, &

Ellsworth, 1995). Effective teachers model not only comprehension strategies but enjoyment and participation in the reading process. In their classrooms, learning often takes the form of shared inquiry through discussion of topics, with reading integrated throughout subject areas (Knapp, 1995; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). Teachers create stimulating activities with personal relevance to the students (Ruddell, 1997; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991), and there is evidence that curriculum which supports student autonomy and choice, real-world connections, and social collaboration increases both motivation and comprehension skills (Guthrie, Wigfield, Barbosa, Perencevich, Taboada, Davis, Scafiddi, & Tonks, 2004).

Georgia Middle Grades Literacy Teachers

Clearly, there is a burden on literacy teachers to meet the unique and demanding needs of their students, curriculum, and standards. Perhaps that is why there is currently a lack of highly qualified middle grades reading teachers in Georgia. According to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC), there are no universities in the University System of Georgia with an undergraduate reading program and scant few with an alternative certification program with an emphasis on reading (MAT) (Wiseberg, 2006). There are, however, many universities offering graduate reading programs, specifically the Reading Endorsement.

Georgia middle-grades teachers make up a small percentage of teachers obtaining reading certification as indicated by valid certificates or endorsements in reading as of June 2006. Only 21% of teachers with a Reading Endorsement were middle grades teachers and only 20% of teachers with a Reading Specialist certification were middle grades teachers (Wiseberg, 2006).

With the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards, the need for highly qualified middle grades reading teachers is more of an issue than ever. Middle grades standards include a reading across the curriculum strand for all content areas at all grade levels. The standard includes providing



students with a wide variety of texts to supplement content learning, discussing texts in the classroom, and building vocabulary through reading. Thus, there is a need for more middle level reading certified teachers, particularly at the initial preparation level. Further, middle grades content area teachers are in need of reading preparation in order to comply with the new reading standards.

At the 2006 Literacy Summit, middle grades educators were charged with the professional preparation of middle school literacy teachers and discussed these issues. Their concerns with the current status of teacher education programs led to a position statement on middle grades literacy teacher preparation, composed of the following beliefs:

- Middle-grades teachers should be familiar with the vast psychological, emotional, social, physical, and cognitive changes that are typical of most early adolescents while recognizing the need for instruction that is individually appropriate;
- There should be an increased emphasis on the need to understand the literacy learning processes of early adolescents in middle-grades teacher preparation programs;
- Teacher preparation programs should include careful placement of pre-service teachers with model teachers in field settings where they will observe and participate in exemplary middle school education;
- Middle-grade pre-service teachers should have field-based experiences in a variety of

settings to ensure a broad understanding of the school setting;

- Middle-grades teacher preparation programs should include an increased emphasis on service learning;
- Middle-grades teacher preparation programs should emphasize the need for extensive collaboration with teachers in a variety of content areas;
- Middle-grades teacher preparation programs should be based on relevant standards that have been established for middle grades education (e.g., National Middle School Association), literacy (e.g., National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association), and new teacher preparation (e.g., INTASC);
- The acquisition of literacy learning is both social and political, and as such, middle grades teacher preparation programs should stress social justice and equity;
- Assessment should be ongoing and varied in middle school classrooms and should lead to more effective instruction.

Recommendations

As the members of the middle-grades group concluded their discussions, they recognized that efforts to address literacy in the middle grades in Georgia cannot move forward without recognizing the role of the principal in providing the instructional leadership in the school. Hughes and Ubben (1994) and Grisham, Lapp, and Flood (2000) noted that among other roles a site administrator may have, leadership in curriculum development and instructional improvement is central and has increasingly become more important. Given the importance of administrators as curriculum leaders, principals need to be active and inspiring in order to have cohesive, dynamic and effective reading programs. This was stressed by Wepner and Seminoff (1995) who noted that an enriched reading program had administrators, reading specialists, classroom teachers, parents, librarians, auxiliary personnel, school board members, community members and students working closely together to develop and implement a cohesive and system-wide program. Radencich (1995) also added that

successful literacy programs provided opportunities for all students, have a high degree of organization, and create enthusiasm for reading. Each principal has the responsibility and the authority to be perceived as a steward, with the implied commitment of service to people, to the organization, and to the teachers to promote effective reading programs in schools (Senge, 1990).

Grisham, Lapp and Flood's (2000) guidelines for developing effective literacy programs can help principals become literacy stewards, including 1) have mutual concerns with teachers about the school's reading programs, 2) provide needed staff development, 3) get involved with students' literacy activities, and 4) promote awareness of the school's reading programs in the community.

Therefore, the participants in the Summit's groups focusing on literacy in the middle grades and on middle-grades literacy teacher preparation strongly recommended that principals in Georgia follow and apply these principles. Principals need to be knowledgeable and to create a motivating environment for the teachers of reading in middle schools. Sharing mutual concerns with reading teachers and content area teachers, who are also responsible for reading instruction in the middle school, will promote the effectiveness of reading programs on a consistent basis, including identification of areas for staff development. Secondly, principals should model literacy acts within the student community, which will provide a

significant impact by example. Finally, principals can be catalysts for involving the whole community to support literacy efforts of teachers and students. Parents, volunteers, and business partners can make powerful contributions, as role models and community reading leaders if they are willing to be involved. By marshalling the support of all stakeholders, principals can set the stage for effective middle school literacy programs. Principals' leadership is an important key element to have cohesive, dynamic and effective reading programs in middle schools.

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