

Summary:

The expertise of adolescent literacy teachers

Sheri R. Parris, Cathy Collins Block

Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, Vol. 50:7 April 2007

Adolescent literacy experts were interviewed about the qualities of accomplished literacy teachers they knew personally. These qualities were compiled and defined to provide a guide for all classroom teachers.

(An) intensified focus on increasing adolescent literacy achievement highlights the need ... to describe teaching practices at the secondary level that create the greatest gains in student literacy abilities. (This is) important for various reasons:

1. Past research has shown that primary students benefit from different types of teaching at different stages in their literacy development, so it is reasonable to assume that different types of teaching are needed at distinctive stages of literacy development for secondary students.
2. Previous research has not clearly described the distinguishing qualities of outstanding secondary teachers so that others can emulate them. There is a need to provide rich and detailed descriptions of effective literacy teaching and show what that practice looks like.
3. Teachers are the single most important factor that determines student achievement and highly effective teachers share similar characteristics.

“The purpose of this study was to identify practices that create the greatest literacy gains for secondary students and to distinguish the qualities of highly effective secondary teaching behaviours (Grades 6 through 12).”

It is important to note that content area teachers often lack the knowledge to help students effectively manoeuvre through increasingly complex texts in different content areas.

Researcher’s method:

Highly effective teachers were defined by the following criteria:

- they taught students who significantly outperformed their peers in the same school building on standardised literacy tests and state-wide literacy tests over three or more years
- they displayed a consistently high level of professional actions or received teaching awards
- they were observed for three or more years by the supervisor who recommended them.

1. Supervisors were contacted and asked to describe at least two qualities that distinguished one highly effective literacy teacher.
2. These qualities were organised into eight domains of teaching expertise.

Domain 1: Literacy approaches used to teach: Teaching pedagogy

“The strongest indicators of highly effective secondary literacy instruction were the distinctive approaches to teaching and learning that were used in the classrooms. ...Not only do exemplary secondary teachers use a variety of instructional strategies themselves, but they also emphasise to colleagues the need to teach reading strategies to students... (They use) a wide variety of instructional approaches that allow students to:

- a) use critical thinking skills*
- b) ask questions*
- c) participate in decision making (even in regard to choosing their own assignments)*
- d) become increasingly independent learners.*

Exemplary secondary literacy teachers incorporate inquiry into instruction. They are not enablers, explainers or excusers. They are questioners. Exemplary secondary teachers allow students to struggle a bit when trying to figure things out and often answer a question with a question. They consciously promote independent thinking and encourage students to take ownership of their work. Students of exemplary secondary teachers become familiar with, and are motivated by, intrinsic rewards.

Domain 2: Methods of addressing diverse needs

“The second most frequently cited indicator... relates to how highly effective teachers address a broad range of differences (i.e. developmental, emotional and cultural needs). Highly effective secondary literacy teachers understand the discrepancy in students’ reading abilities is vast by the time they reach adolescence. Exemplary teachers do not complain about this range in abilities nor do they argue that their struggling readers should have already been taught to read in (primary) school. They know that literacy is a continual learning process that requires continual development, refinement and practice. These teachers know remedial and developmental reading strategies. These teachers frequently assess students informally and have a broad range of expertise to tailor activities to individual needs.

Successful secondary literacy teachers also recognise, respect and adapt to the diversity in backgrounds and the diverse needs of their students. These teachers have well-planned lessons that provide the foundation and confidence they need to be intelligently spontaneous in the classroom. In addition, these teachers constantly revise the curriculum to maintain relevance and to meet the continually changing needs of their current students. This is especially important with adolescents who are in constant flux developmentally. This domain becomes even more significant when we consider that a typical secondary teacher will be responsible for the learning of 150 to 180 adolescents each day.

Domain 3: Personal characteristics

Teachers with the following personal qualities created more successful learning environments for their students:

1. taking personal interest in and caring about their students
2. willing to take risks, be creative and experiment
3. being prepared and organised with a clear plan for achieving goals
4. collaborating with peers to create new learning opportunities
5. having high expectations of self
6. having a love of reading and learning.

Domain 4: Knowledge base

Highly effective teachers have a deep and broad understanding of their content and new, research-based reading strategies.

Exemplary teachers think of literacy development as a central component of their instruction.

Domain 5: Quality and quantity of literacy activities used

This domain relates to the number and depth of well-chosen teaching/learning activities, including:

1. hands-on activities
2. activities, projects and competitions that make connections between content areas
3. scaffolding
4. mini lessons for a specific reading strategy
5. discussions rather than lectures
6. including instruction in how to read a variety of genres
7. variety of grouping strategies
8. inviting constructive feedback between peers
9. encouraging critical and analytical thinking
10. building informed student choices into the selection of reading and writing materials and assignments
11. providing ample feedback to students and relevant feedback to parents
12. plenty of varied opportunities for students to write and share their work.

Domain 6: Amount of professional development

Highly effective teachers engage in continuous professional education and keep abreast of current research to maintain a thorough knowledge of best practices.

Domain 7: Relationship with students

Highly effective secondary literacy teachers develop quality relationships with students, including trying to understand and interact positively with students and use humour.

Domain 8: Classroom management

Highly effective secondary literacy teachers develop student-teacher respect, provide uninterrupted time for learning, emphasise academic learning and high expectations, among other things.

“Our research corroborated long-held beliefs that all secondary teachers, regardless of content area, must be willing to view themselves as literacy teachers.”