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Strand of Work: Theoretical/Integrative

Abstract

The demands of literacy tasks change appreciably after students have mastered the basics of reading words accurately and with reasonable automaticity. At about age 10 reading becomes a tool for acquiring information, understanding a variety of points of view, critiquing positions, and reasoning. The results of international and U.S. assessments show that many students who succeed at early reading tasks struggle with these new developmental challenges, focusing attention on the instructional needs of adolescent readers. Commonly used approaches to comprehension instruction in the post-primary grades, such as teaching reading comprehension strategies, do not adequately respond to the multiple challenges adolescent readers face. One such challenge is the need to acquire discipline-specific ways of reading, writing, and thinking, often from teachers who are themselves insufficiently aware of how reading literature differs from reading science or history. We argue that appropriate attention in instruction to discipline-specific literacy practices, to maintaining an authentic purpose for assigned literacy tasks, and to the role of focused discussion as a central element in teaching comprehension would improve reading outcomes and would revolutionize current theories about the nature of reading comprehension.

Implications

This handbook chapter reviews and integrates the strengths and limitations of generic strategy instruction and lays out the rationale for expanding conceptions of reading for understanding to focus on literacy practices and the functions of reading and writing in different disciplines. This expanded conception would contribute to revamping current theories and models of reading comprehension, instruction and assessment as well as the rethinking of the preparation and continuing education of teachers.

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