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# Content Subjects and Reading: Are All Teachers Reading Teachers?

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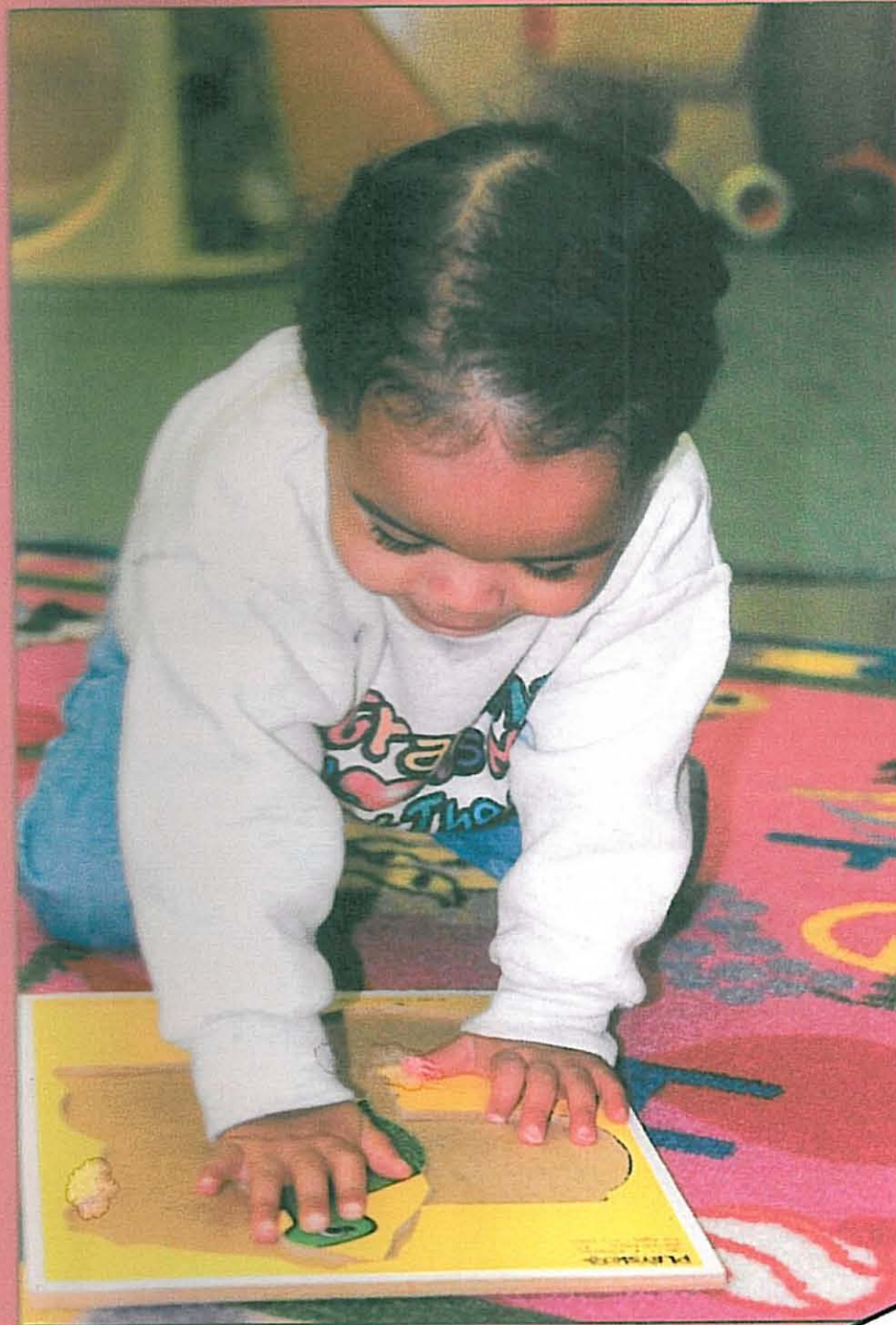
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Winter 2006/07

# Childhood Education

Infancy Through Early Adolescence



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Visual Arts



Child Prostitutes in  
Ethiopian Schools



Connecting to Science  
Through Drawing



History and Art  
of Cemeteries



Including Children  
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Infancy Through Early Adolescence

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# Content Subjects and Reading: Are All Teachers Reading Teachers?

Jill A. Jones

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Effective educators plan reading instruction by considering all of the contributing variables: the students' background knowledge, cultural heritages, oral language, strengths and needs, home influences, as well as the current educational environment and the type of text (expository, narrative...). Each variable is powerful and could easily encompass its own article; the purpose of this article is to discuss the last variable—"the current educational environment"—and its impact on reading instruction.

Having a broad spectrum of teaching experience allowed me the distinct advantage of personally viewing how the educational environment affects reading instruction. As a 1st-grade teacher, I quickly learned that the entire environment is set up around instruction in reading (and all the literacy components). Primary teachers approach their classroom environments and lesson planning with reading in mind. The reading centers, classroom library, guided group table, arrangement of students, print-rich environment, and other classroom characteristics are all intended to assist with the literacy process. While content instruction is also included, this environment presumes the integration of reading and content instruction. Professional development usually reflects this reading emphasis, with workshops concerning phonemic awareness, phonics, word walls, reading running records, effective learning centers, etc. It is easy to

ascertain that reading is the mainstay of the primary grades and that all primary teachers are naturally expected to be reading teachers.

While teaching 5th grade, I became acutely aware of the environmental shift from reading as the mainstay of instruction to the assumption that reading instruction was "complete"; it was now time to get down to the business of teaching important concepts. Delineating the social studies curriculum is the easiest way for me to depict this educational/environmental shift. The 5th-grade social studies textbook began with "The Land Bridge" and how the Americas may have become populated and ended with "The Jimmy Carter Years." And that was 10 years ago. Naturally, more of my energy was expended on teaching the content area items, while reading was relegated to a "block of time" in my busy day. Professional development encompassed curriculum mapping, science workshops, and use of math manipulatives.

Middle school became even more departmentalized and when I began teaching high school science, I officially entered the world of a "specialized and content-driven educator." Although I used many of my elementary reading strategies, I quickly became aware of the culture surrounding me; I like to refer to members of this culture as the "surgeons" of education. I use this analogy because surgeons (and high school teachers) are the specialists in their field and proud

of their rank and knowledge. They worked hard to become specialists and are often unable to understand the thinking of their general practitioner (primary and intermediate teacher) counterparts. They see themselves as the elite. I was clearly expected to understand and teach science concepts; reading issues were addressed in other classrooms or before entering high school. I can still remember the look of complete disbelief on my department chair's face when I told him I *wanted* to go back to the elementary setting. He said, "Why would you want to teach *that* when you have the necessary knowledge to be here?"

Although my years as a high school science teacher date back almost a decade, my work as a reading coach has shown me that these definitive environmental/educational shifts still occur. The continued existence of this environmental infrastructure has led me to ask, "Am I watching an educational paradigm shift or an argument in semantics?"

## Adolescent Reading Instruction and Legislation

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) appears to take the lead in the "every teacher a reading teacher" initiative. I believe this act began the process by requiring schools to assess and report their results; these disaggregated scores clearly highlighted the literacy struggles of adolescents.

According to a 2004 National As-

assessment of Educational Progress report, over 8 million adolescent students (in grades 4-12) struggle to read. In response to this situation, Biancarosa and Snow (2004) wrote "Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy." This report was aimed at summarizing best practice for adolescent learners and has been highly endorsed by state and local governments. My synopsis of this report is, "Every educator is responsible for the literacy needs of his or her students."

The National Association of State Boards of Education (2005) also addressed the issue of "every teacher a reading teacher," albeit inadvertently, in its report on adolescent literacy. The report encouraged policymakers to support school districts in efforts to infuse literacy strategies "in all content areas" and to provide guidelines for preparing teachers to implement "content-based literacy instruction."

It is apparent that content area teachers are beginning to feel the heat of reform as their administrators continue to receive mandates and directives concerning the need to make everyone accountable for the literacy demands of their students. The question remains, however—do we really want all teachers to be "reading teachers"?

### What Is a Content Teacher?

Content area teachers typically choose their profession because they "loved a subject—physics, mathematics, art, history, political science, biology . . ." (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004, p. 8) and wanted to share their passion with others. The typical job requirements in Florida are an undergraduate degree in secondary teacher education certification and successful completion of state tests. These teacher candidates are required to take approximately 53 credit hours in their content field of study (this number may vary among institutions and concentration) and

27 methodology credit hours. Only one reading methodology course, "Content Reading: Middle and Secondary Schools," is required. However, NCLB is drastically changing who works with our children because it defines highly qualified teachers as people who have a strong academic background, specifically leaving out language regarding an understanding of teaching methodology. Some states have taken this language and broadened their acceptance of teachers. In Florida, business professionals are now teaching math, chiropractors are teaching science, and political science majors are teaching history. None of those degrees requires taking methodology courses.

### What Is a Reading Teacher?

The definition of a reading teacher is complicated. This title can signify several job positions: Reading Specialist, Reading Coach, Intensive Reading Teacher, Supplemental Academic Instructor, Title 1 Teacher, and Elementary Teacher; recently, it has come to be juxtaposed with the Content Teacher. Each title defines the role differently.

My first job as a Reading Specialist (now known as Reading Coach) was in 1999, only 7 years ago. At that time, a teacher had to have her master's degree in reading and at least 3 years of teaching experience to even be considered for this leadership role. The three Reading Specialists at my school were spread out among the K-5 grades; each of us had the edict to meet the needs of struggling readers by supporting and training their teachers. We were constantly modeling different literacy strategies, based on our conversations with each teacher (which occurred during planning time, team meetings, after school, lunch . . .). Student work samples, teacher surveys about our support services, and testing scores held us accountable to our administrators. We were also expected to attend literacy conferences and

take advantage of other professional development opportunities.

I am afraid the times have changed. Supply and demand is not limited to the shelves of Wal-Mart; the current climate of meeting the literacy needs of adolescents has resulted in the hiring of more reading personnel than were currently available. The following story clearly explains what is occurring in Florida and many other states.

*It is 20 minutes into the first day of class and I believe I have successfully created an environment of trust and mutual learning. All five of these graduate students appear to understand the task before us this semester, to dig deep into the remedial reading process. Four of the five graduate students have already made connections to their current practice and explained why they have chosen to attend my class. The fifth student, rather shy and quiet, begins to share her thoughts. Then someone else enters the classroom and slams the door. I turn in my chair to see a woman in her late fifties enter the room. I greet her with my eyes and then return my attention to the graduate student who was beginning to share. "Ummm, do we have to meet at this time each week?" the new student asks. I quickly introduce myself and learn that the new student's name is Deb (all names are pseudonyms). "This time is not going to work for me," Deb states. "I do not have enough time after class to get here!" She then tells me where she works. Another student explains she is in the same area (she was here on time); she even offers to help her find an alternate traveling route. Deb then states, "Okay, here is the deal. I taught home economics for over 20 years in Illinois. I have moved to Florida and got bored, so I started subbing. The middle school I was at needed an intensive reading teacher so midway through last year, they hired me. This new job works out great for me because I only need three more years of work to get social security. I am here because the idiotic Department of Education says I need 7 more credit hours in Reading. Can you believe they*

accepted a reading class I took back in 1963?! They are desperate. Anyhow, I don't think it is necessary. I just help the kids with their homework during my class and that seems to make them happy. I also tell great stories about decorating. Let me tell you about the time I redecorated my bedroom. . . ." I gently explain the rigors of this class. She then explains to me, "It is [either] you or taking the online endorsement courses offered through the district. Those are free but I don't like the computer, so you get me."

I wish I could say that Deb was my only encounter with this "new breed" of reading "teacher"; yet, I have more such stories than I wish to repeat. Art, physical education, and music teachers are "magically" transformed overnight into reading teachers at the wave of their administrators' "placement wand."

On a more positive note, I have also had the great opportunity to work with a few educators who are striving toward honing their pedagogy by learning how to use effective strategies to meet their students' needs. These educators want to understand the reasoning behind the methods and are eager to roll up their sleeves to dig into the world of best practice. Fred is my favorite example. He left a lucrative engineering position to give back to the community. He has aggressively taken classes, attended workshops, and read dozens of books aimed at helping him meet the needs of his students. Fred also was placed in an intensive reading class; his attitude is entirely different than Deb's. I truly believe many of his middle school students will attribute their future success to "this one middle school reading teacher who cared and made learning appear easy."

### Proud To Be a Reading Teacher

Now I will return to my original question: Am I viewing a major shift in education as all teachers become

reading teachers? For goodness' sakes, I hope not! We need confident, content teachers just as much as we need cocky and confident surgeons! These are the individuals who took multiple four-credit hour science and math classes because they loved their subject; we should not discourage them or detract from their accomplishments.

More important, what is a reading teacher? I believe a true reading teacher is the same as a content teacher; he or she is a skilled "surgeon" in the field of literacy. Reading teachers have their master's degree in reading and still feel they have more to learn. These are the teachers you see swarming conferences and leaving with careful notes, a book bag full of new books, and a mind racing with ways to improve their craft. I am proud to be a reading teacher.

Teachers who equip themselves with a plethora of educational strategies in order to "cure" the many "ails" of their students are the teachers who leave the biggest impression on their students. They are teachers who care about their students and strive toward improving their pedagogy (or andragogy for the older students).

According to Richard Altenbaugh's (1998) work with urban school drop-outs, a strong pedagogy, regardless of a person's title, is what matters. Altenbaugh analyzed the transcripts of over 100 students who dropped out of school and quickly discovered these students had fond memories of the few teachers who were caring and demonstrated strong pedagogical skills. The following student quote is just one example of the positive remarks these students had about teachers who created a student-centered environment:

"What we did. His projects. It was hard, but he made everything look easy. He would explain it real carefully. He would sit down and talk to you. If you didn't know it, he would sit down and

talk to you. If he had to show you, he would show you. He would talk to you first. We watched movies and dissected." (Altenbaugh, 1998, p. 66)

A national poll on teacher quality conducted by the Educational Testing Service backs up this finding (Hart & Teeter, 2002). The poll showed that 42 percent of respondents linked strong pedagogy with quality, while only 19 percent wedded the teachers' understanding of the subject with teacher quality.

Teachers take great pride in their "names"; I believe they should keep their titles and simply strive toward excellence by pursuing professional development opportunities. I am proud to call myself a Reading Teacher. While I do not expect all teachers to succumb to the rigors of training I have undertaken, I do expect all teachers to take their title seriously, looking at their students' needs and seeking out information to meet those needs!

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