Introduction to the Special Issue: Reading Fluency

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Anyone who has been following trends and issues in the teaching of reading knows that the impact and importance of reading fluency on reading instruction has waned in recent years. In the International Reading Association’s annual “What’s Hot, What’s Not” survey of literacy scholars, reading fluency has been identified as a “not hot” topic for the past several years. In recent years fluency has been minimized or dropped from many reading curriculum, and it has been misinterpreted in its instruction by many curriculum developers. In its current downward trajectory I fear that reading fluency will be eventually relegated to a footnote in reading curricula and instruction. Allington noted in 1983 that fluency was a neglected goal of the reading instruction. Thirty plus years later it may be the case that reading fluency continues to be ignored. And, if fluency is ignored instructionally and conceptually, I think that many students in the elementary, middle, and secondary grades around the world will pay the price as they will undoubtedly struggle to achieve full proficiency in reading.

Recognizing how fluency is becoming increasingly marginalized in our school reading programs, I was honored and delighted to be asked by the editors for the International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education to edit an issue of the journal devoted specifically to reading fluency. This, I felt, may be a chance for noted fluency scholars to share their own thoughts, insights, and findings on reading fluency -- what fluency is, why it is important, and how it might be taught and fostered in schools around the world. I gladly accepted this wonderful opportunity. It has been a long time since an entire issue of an academic journal was devoted to reading fluency. (To the best of my knowledge, the last time an academic journal devoted an entire issue to reading fluency was in 1991, Theory into Practice).

I contacted scholars who have been intimately involved in conceptualizing, critiquing, and most importantly exploring why fluency is important and how it can best be taught. Not one of my invitations was turned down. And so, in this issue we present to you some of the latest thinking about reading fluency -- what it is and how it can be fostered and taught in students. In the first article I try to make that case that fluency does matter for readers and that it is a major concern for many students who struggle in reading. Next, Richard Allington, the same scholar who called our attention to reading fluency in the early 1980s, makes the point that fluency is a matter of authentic reading practice, and that many students do not have sufficient opportunities to engage in authentic reading. Ray Reutzel and Stephanie Juth note that reading fluency is not just an oral reading phenomenon. Fluency is important for silent reading and they offer approaches for fostering fluency during silent reading. The next article by Chase Young and Jim Nageldinger explores various contexts and texts for fostering fluency. Effective fluency instruction is much more than making students read fast. Three are
several text types that can be considered for fluency and there are a variety of authentic instructional contexts for fluency. Keith Topping has been researching Paired Reading for a number of years. In his article he offers current insights into how to develop fluency and overall reading proficiency using forms of Paired Reading. Melanie Kuhn, Belinda Zimmerman and I next describe specific and integrated methods of fluency instruction that may be particularly potent for struggling readers. Then, David Paige and Theresa Magpuri-Lavell argue that reading fluency is not an issue only for the elementary grades. Many middle and secondary school readers continue to struggle with fluency and deserve appropriate instruction to become fluent readers. In the final article in this issue, Turkish literacy scholar Kasim Yıldırım and I make that case that fluency is a reading proficiency that extends beyond reading English to reading in most other languages.

I am confident that as you read through the articles presented here you will have a much more complete view of reading fluency. And, I hope that you will see that fluency must be accepted as a competency that must be taught and nurtured in ways that are authentic, engaging, and effective. I wish you great fluency as you embark on this journey with me.

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