

Licensure Tests and Effective Reading Instruction

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Reading Matters. The Reading First Teacher Education Network (RFTEN) knows well the stark realities announced by the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment. NAEP defines the “basic” level of reading as partial mastery of fundamental skills and knowledge and reported that thirty-three percent of U. S. fourth graders read at this level. Moreover, another thirty-eight percent of fourth graders in the United States read at a “below basic” level. In eight of the 16 RFTEN states, the percentage of nine-year-olds reading below basic exceeds this national average.

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy report, issued in 2005, identified “Level 3” on a prose scale as the proficiency required for high-growth occupations and the minimum standard for success in today’s labor market. It found that only half of the U.S. population, ages 16-65, has reached Level 3 in reading.

The crisis in U.S. reading skills has been reported for decades. However, taking effective action for making sure that every child learns to read has, all too frequently, been slow, halting, or missing.

It is quite likely – indeed, even probable – that candidates can be licensed to teach elementary students in 2006 without demonstrating their proficiencies in essential reading instruction knowledge and skills derived from scientifically-based reading research (SBRR). This assertion is warranted by evidence that only three of sixteen Reading First Teacher Education Network (RFTEN) states require prospective teachers to pass licensure tests that examine knowledge of effective reading practice based on sound research.

There appears to be a gap between the purposes of the Federal “Reading First” grant program—that elementary students learn to read proficiently—and state practices found in standards and licensure for new elementary teachers. One might assume that if teaching reading skills were a state priority, it would be reflected in state Reading/English Language Arts Standards for K-4 students and state licensure requirements for elementary teachers. Yet, only seven of the 16 RFTEN states have adopted student standards aligned with effective reading instruction as identified by scientifically-based reading research. And only three RFTEN states – California, Virginia, and Tennessee – have licensure tests that, if passed, assure them that elementary teachers have knowledge and instructional skills informed by SBRR and the National Reading Panel report of 2000.

NCATE’s concern about this state of affairs led it to develop the RFTEN project. I was asked by RFTEN to look specifically at state licensure tests in reading to determine how well these tests align with the components of effective reading instruction as identified by scientifically-based reading research.

The Base line for What Teachers Need To Know and Be Able To Do. In 2000, the National Reading Panel issued a report describing five components, each strongly supported by research, as essential in teaching children to read. While these are not the only things a teacher needs to know and be able to do, they are the base line that every teacher must be able to master cold – the content teachers must know and be able to teach:

1st is Phonemic Awareness, the ability to teach children to focus on and manipulate phonemes (the smallest units composing spoken language) in spoken syllables and words. Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the two best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of school.

2nd is Phonics, teaching young readers explicitly and systematically to understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter-sound correspondences, to recognize spelling patterns, and to apply this knowledge in reading.

3rd is Reading Fluency, offering beginning readers repeated opportunities for guided oral reading to promote better word recognition, fluency, and comprehension.

4th is Vocabulary Development, helping young readers increase their vocabulary knowledge through direct and indirect teaching, with repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items.

5th is Reading Comprehension, teaching comprehension skills explicitly by demonstrating, explaining, modeling, and implementing specific cognitive strategies to help beginning readers derive meaning in both literary and nonliterary texts by intentional, problem solving, thinking processes.

Preparing New Teachers to Teach Reading. To be effective in teaching children to read, classroom teachers need to know how students learn to read, how to teach students to read, how to judge how well students read, and how to strengthen students' reading skills. These four areas – acquisition, instruction, assessment, and remediation – incorporate a myriad of other topics that include understanding what motivates students to read, differentiating instruction to students with varying needs, selecting reading materials and making assignments that will encourage students to read, and so on. Teacher education programs are encouraged to educate teacher candidates in the conceptual foundations of the reading process (including the historical evolution of English, phonological awareness, and reading research) and in linguistics and the structure of language. In addition, candidates need supervised practice in teaching reading which includes opportunities to become proficient in fostering phonemic awareness and knowing ways to teach letter name and shape recognition; introduce

regular sound-symbol patterns, letter clusters, and syllable types; and promote knowledge of word meanings and vocabulary development, among other things.

Reading Licensure Tests and What Teachers Need to Know. To examine how well teacher licensure tests align with reading research, I engaged the help of Joan Sedita, a recognized reading expert, author, and teacher trainer. We reviewed the Educational Testing Service (ETS) “Test at a Glance” website information, expanded test specifications, and an actual instrument for each of the following teacher licensure tests in the PRAXIS series:

- *Elementary Education: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment* (0011)
- *Elementary Education: Content Knowledge* (0014)
- *Introduction to the Teaching of Reading* (0200)
- *Reading Across the Curriculum: Elementary* (0201)
- *Middle School English Language Arts* (0049)

We also reviewed test specifications and sample test information for three reading licensure tests developed by the National Evaluation Systems (NES) specifically aligned to teaching standards in three states:

- The Massachusetts *Foundations of Reading (PreK-6)*, test 90
- California’s Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA): *Test Information and Sample Written Examination Form* (2002)
- The Virginia Reading Assessment for Elementary and Special Education Teachers (2004)

We found that licensure tests developed specifically to measure a teacher candidate’s knowledge of reading instruction are generally well aligned with the essential components of effective instruction derived from scientifically-based reading research. The multiple-choice items on the three state reading licensure tests developed through the National Evaluation Systems (NES) explicitly measure how well a candidate understands the five components of successful reading instruction. The multiple choice items on Praxis Test 0201, *Reading Across the Curriculum: Elementary*, developed by the Educational Testing Service, are aligned with SBRR. By contrast, Praxis Test 0200, *Introduction to the Teaching of Reading*, is not aligned with SBRR findings.

This means that if licensure tests are the public assurance of teacher knowledge, then only four of the licensure tests we reviewed, three of them in RFTEN states, can serve to assure citizens that elementary teachers who pass them know how to teach reading following SBRR findings. Only Massachusetts, California, and Virginia through their own state-specific tests, and Tennessee, which requires Praxis Test 0201, are able to assure schools and districts that their new teachers have the training to be effective reading teachers. Most states require future elementary teachers to take multi-subject licensure tests that have few items directed explicitly to the teaching of reading (too few to serve as a valid measure) and those items are not closely aligned to the essential components of effective reading instruction as identified by SBRR.

Recommendations Based on this Analysis. Good reading skills are the necessary foundation for a productive and satisfying life, and it is the responsibility of educators to

ensure that every individual learns to read. That being the case, every lever at our disposal should be used to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to be successful reading teachers. States have an opportunity to align their education standards, requirements for teacher preparation programs, and licensure tests so that every teacher will be highly qualified in reading instruction. NCATE has a unique opportunity, through its standards and review processes, to guide and influence the quality of teacher preparation programs in the United States. Teaching reading effectively must be an instructional priority.

****To read the full report, [On Licensure Alignment with the Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction](#), visit www.RFTEN.org***

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