***The Consequences: Too Many Students Reading at Too Low a Level***

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The impact that low reading achievement has on students’ readiness for college, careers, and life in general is significant. To put the matter bluntly, a high school graduate who is a poor reader is a postsecondary student who must struggle mightily to succeed. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004) reports that although needing to take one or more remedial/developmental courses of any sort lowers a student’s chance of eventually earning a degree or certificate, “the need for remedial reading appears to be the most serious barrier to degree completion” (p. 63). Only 30 percent of 1992 high school seniors who went on to enroll in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 and then took any remedial reading course went on to receive a degree or certificate, compared to 69 percent of the 1992 seniors who took no postsecondary remedial courses and 57 percent of those who took one remedial course in a subject other than reading or mathematics. Considering that 11 percent of those high school seniors required at least one remedial reading course, the societal impact of low reading achievement is as profound as its impact on the aspirations of individual students.

Reading levels among the adult population are also disturbingly low. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, Boyle, Hsu, & Dunleavy, 2007) reported that 14 percent of adults read prose texts at “below basic” level, meaning they could exhibit “no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills”; a similarly small number (13 percent) could read prose texts at the “proficient level,” meaning they could perform “more complex and challenging literacy activities” (p. 4). The percent of “proficient” readers had actually declined in a statistically significant way from 1992 (15 percent). This low and declining achievement rate may be connected to a general lack of reading. As reported by the National Endowment for the Arts (2004), the percent of U.S. adults reading literature dropped from 54.0 in 1992 to 46.7 in 2002, while the percent of adults reading any book also declined by 7 percent during the same time period. Although the decline occurred in all demographic groups, the steepest decline by far was among 18-to-24- and 25-to-34-year-olds (28 percent and 23 percent, respectively). In other words, the problem of lack of reading is not only getting worse but doing so at an accelerating rate. Although numerous factors likely contribute to the decline in reading, it is reasonable to conclude from the evidence presented above that the deterioration in overall reading ability, abetted by a decline in K–12 text complexity and a lack of focus on independent reading of complex texts, is a contributing factor.

Being able to read complex text independently and proficiently is essential for high achievement in college and the workplace and important in numerous life tasks. Moreover, current trends suggest that if students cannot read challenging texts with understanding—if they have not developed the skill, concentration, and stamina to read such texts—they will read less in general. In particular, if students cannot read complex expository text to gain information, they will likely turn to text-free or text-light sources, such as video, podcasts, and tweets. These sources, while not without value, cannot capture the nuance, subtlety, depth, or breadth of ideas developed through complex text. As Adams (2009) puts it, “There may one day be modes and methods of information delivery that are as efficient and powerful as text, but for now there is no contest. To grow, our students must read lots, and more specifically they must read lots of ‘complex’ texts—texts that offer them new language, new knowledge, and new modes of thought” (p. 182). A turning away from complex texts is likely to lead to a general impoverishment of knowledge, which, because knowledge is intimately linked with reading comprehension ability, will accelerate the decline in the ability to comprehend complex texts and the decline in the richness of text itself. This bodes ill for the ability of Americans to meet the demands placed upon them by citizenship in a democratic republic and the challenges of a highly competitive global marketplace of goods, services, and ideas.

It should be noted also that the problems with reading achievement are not “equal opportunity” in their effects: students arriving at school from less-educated families are disproportionately represented in many of these statistics (Bettinger & Long, 2009). The consequences of insufficiently high text demands and a lack of accountability for independent reading of complex texts in K–12 schooling are severe for everyone, but they are disproportionately so for those who are already most isolated from text before arriving at the schoolhouse door.

Source: Common Core Standards for English language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies and Technical Subjects