
Teacher Competencies For Effective Primary Reading Instruction

As noted at the outset of this section, members of the Early Reading Success Panel decided to begin their consideration of K-3 teacher competencies by thinking about the competencies K-3 children need to be successful in reading. Given the competencies necessary for children, teachers must be able to **teach effectively to children with diverse needs the following skills: out-of-context word identification, fluent and accurate word identification in context, comprehension, spelling and writing.**

Teachers need:

- *the skills required to teach out-of-context word identification, word identification in context, comprehension, spelling and writing;*
- *an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between oral language and reading;*
- *competency in assessment;*
- *ability to motivate all children; and*
- *ability to collaborate with professionals in and out of school and with parents.*

Second, teachers must have a **broad knowledge base** that includes an understanding of the important and reciprocal relationship between oral-language competencies and reading, and why various kinds of language weaknesses or patterns (such as limited English proficiency or use of dialect) may create problems for children in reading. They must possess knowledge of the stages of development children typically pass through, not only in reading, but also in spelling, writing and oral language. And they must understand the nature of written English, for example, that English is a complex alphabetic system in which one often has to attend to patterns of letters within words. Teachers need sufficient understanding of English word structure to recognize when a word is phonetically irregular and must be taught by sight (e.g., some should not be used to practice decoding of silent-e words, because it is an exception), and to recognize optimal places to divide long words for decoding (e.g., to help a child decode the word graphic, the teacher should divide the word after the h, not after the p).

In teaching comprehension, teachers should understand the distinction between active construction of meaning and retrieving verbatim information from a text. They need to understand the relationships between reading comprehension and other important competencies, such as word-identification skills and vocabulary. They must be able to scaffold questions to help students develop understanding; for example, if a student is unable to answer a question, the teacher must be able to follow up with questions that guide the student to grasp important points, as opposed to simply giving the student the answer or calling on another student. And they must be able to teach essential comprehension strategies, such as prediction, summarization, the use of text structure and the use of graphic organizers.

Other important areas include knowledge about diverse learners, not only diversity in terms of abilities (i.e., both high-achieving and struggling readers), but also in terms of language and culture; knowledge about avail-

able children's books and instructional resources, including technology; and knowledge about major patterns of research findings in reading and the need to stay reasonably current with research findings on an ongoing basis.

Third, teachers need competencies related to **assessment**. For example, they must be familiar with common approaches to assessment of literacy (e.g., running records, informal reading inventories, portfolios, informal teacher-designed tests, standardized tests, screening and diagnostic measures) and the respective advantages and disadvantages of various approaches. They must be able to design good informal tests, administer and interpret the results of various tests, keep organized records and, most important, use test results effectively to adjust or improve instruction.

In assessing children's performance, teachers also should be able to use knowledge about development and the processes involved in learning to read, spell and write (discussed in Section I), as well as about grade-level expectations. Consider, for example, a child who has good phonetic spelling and generally represents all sounds in a word, but who still cannot spell many words conventionally. (This is the kind of youngster who might spell leader as leder, station as stashun and wooden as wudin.) Teachers should recognize that, if this child is a first grader, his or her spelling is very likely grade appropriate, whereas if he or she is a third grader, there is cause for concern. Nevertheless, even if this student is not lagging in terms of grade level, he or she would benefit from increased emphasis on learning common letter patterns in words and conventional spelling of grade-appropriate words.

Fourth, teachers need to be able to **motivate children** from a variety of backgrounds and at a variety of achievement levels. The ability to motivate children requires that teachers relate well to youngsters and that they have a good knowledge base about available children's books. In fostering children's motivation to read, teachers should recognize the importance of creating a "reading-rich" classroom environment, of using books as rewards, and of selecting books matched to children's independent and instructional reading levels. And they should be sensitive to various causes of poor motivation (e.g., underdeveloped skills vs. boredom related to lack of challenge vs. inadequate access to books of interest).

And fifth, teachers should be able to **collaborate with other professionals, both in the school and in the larger community, and with parents**. For example, as discussed in Section I, professionals such as reading specialists, special educators, speech and language pathologists, bilingual specialists, library media specialists, and public children's librarians can serve as valuable resources in establishing an effective program of reading instruction. K-3 teachers should know how different specialists may

be helpful and should be encouraged to draw upon their help. In addition, teachers should be able to work as partners with parents in fostering children's literacy development. Ways that teachers can collaborate with parents (and students) include encouraging various kinds of literacy activities in the home and discussing constructively the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work.

The list of teacher competencies (pages 72-80) is organized into the following five areas: (I) the knowledge base needed by teachers; (II) instructional skills needed by teachers, including not only the ability to teach specific reading and reading-related skills, but also classroom management and the use of technology; (III) competencies involved in assessment; (IV) competencies involved in motivating children; and (V) competencies involved in working effectively with other professionals and with parents.

Although the list of teacher competencies is organized into five separate parts, there are many interrelationships among these different areas. For example, effective teaching of important reading competencies (part II) is critical to effectively motivating children to read (part IV); children who are taught effectively are more likely to be successful readers, and success is motivating. Similarly, teachers' knowledge about factors such as children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds, stages of development in reading and English word structure (part I), all influence their abilities to be effective in teaching reading (part II) and in assessment (part III). Good assessment (part III) is essential to effective instruction (part II). And so on.

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The competencies that follow are for all K-3 teachers; they have not been broken down by grade level. Because children's language and literacy skills vary greatly, a teacher at any particular grade level must be able to address instructional needs at a variety of grade levels. For example, although most children enter kindergarten as nonreaders, a few can read well even before the onset of formal schooling, and kindergarten teachers must know something about more advanced levels of reading, spelling and writing development in order to address these children's instructional needs effectively. Similarly, although most third graders should be decoding words well, a few third graders may still need work on first-grade-level word-decoding and phonemic-awareness skills. Third grade teachers will need to know about beginning levels of reading achievement in order to help these children.

As was the case for the lists of children's competencies, the list of teachers' competencies was influenced by a wide variety of sources, including the presentations of various experts to the panel; previous Connecticut documents (e.g., Connecticut State Department of Education, 1998) and

similar documents from other states; the report of the National Research Council, *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (1999); the position statement of the International Reading Association on teacher education in reading (IRA, 2000) and *IRA Standards for Reading Professionals* (IRA, 1998b); and a number of other important sources, including Ehri and Williams (1995), Pearson and Duke (2000) and Pressley et al. (1996).