

Lowering the High School Dropout Rate in the United States: The Need for Secondary Reading Specialists and How Scarce They Really Are

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Abstract

Almost seven thousand students drop out of high school every day in the United States. The most common reason these students drop out is that their poor literacy skills prevent them from keeping up with the demanding curriculum. Therefore, the dismal graduation rate is due, in part, to the lack of reading instruction and support provided to secondary students. Despite the limited number of secondary students with proficient reading skills, the majority of secondary schools in the United States do not provide systematic literacy support in content area classrooms or additional support for struggling adolescent readers. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the number of secondary reading specialists employed in United States public schools. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Surveys were utilized. The results show that there are a strikingly small number of full-time reading specialists employed at the secondary level.

Keywords: dropout, literacy, secondary, high school, reading specialists

1. Introduction

Adolescents entering the adult world in this era will need to read and write more than any other time in human history (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Despite this assertion, Kamil (2003) notes that there are approximately 8.7 million fourth through twelfth graders in the United States who are unable to read and comprehend the material in their textbooks. Further, the results of the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate that the average twelfth-grade student has a lower reading score than in 1998 and 1992 (Grigg, Daane, Ying, & Campbell, 2003). These results indicate that students need effective education in reading beyond the elementary classroom. However, the literacy needs of adolescents have been given significantly less attention than the literacy needs of younger children. In their position statement on adolescent literacy, Moore, et al. (1999) state:

Adolescents are being short-changed. No one is giving adolescent literacy much press. It is certainly not a hot topic in educational policy or a priority in schools. In the United States, most Title I budgets are allocated for early intervention – little is left over for the struggling adolescent reader (p. 1).

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education's (2005) publication on adolescent literacy, there are millions of high school students struggling with their reading skills long after they leave the third grade. Further, almost seven thousand students drop out of high school every day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). It is estimated that one in ten high schools in the United States is considered a "dropout factory" – a term given to a high school where no more than 60% of the students who begin attending the school as freshman complete their senior year (Zuckerbrod, 2007). Due to the large number of students who fail to complete high school, there are an estimated 1.3 million students who should have earned a diploma with the Class of 2010, but dropped out before doing so (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). "By dropping out, these individuals significantly diminish their chances to secure a good job and a promising future" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The most common reason these students drop out of high school is that their poor literacy skills prevent them from keeping up with the increasingly demanding high school curriculum (Allington, 1994; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Kamil, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Therefore, the dismal graduation rate is due, in part, to the lack of reading instruction and support provided to secondary students.

Despite the limited number of secondary students with proficient reading skills, the majority of secondary schools in the United States do not provide systematic literacy support in content area classrooms or additional support for struggling adolescent readers (Sturtevant, 2003).

As noted in *Every Child A Graduate* (Joftus, 2002):

Research shows...that students who receive intensive, focused literacy instruction and tutoring will graduate from high school and attend college in significantly greater numbers than those not receiving such attention. Despite these findings, few...high schools have a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy across the curriculum (p. 3).

Despite the need for reading specialists at the secondary level, little support is given to struggling adolescent readers. Many students “are not given the extra support they need to make a successful transition to high school and are lost in ninth grade” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Rather, reading instruction is found mainly in the elementary grades, leaving thousands of secondary students to continue to struggle with their literacy skills. Since reading specialists are primarily employed at the elementary school level, the majority of the research on reading specialists has been conducted at that level (Sweet & Anderson, 1993). Since limited research has occurred at the secondary level, this study focused on identifying the number of secondary reading specialists in public schools in the United States.

2. Review of the Literature

While approximately seven thousand students drop out of high school every school day, thousands of students can barely read on the eve of their high school graduation (Joftus, 2002). Of these students who do graduate, only approximately 30% have the necessary skills and qualifications to attend college (Greene & Winters, 2005). Of the students that do graduate from high school, over half will enroll in remedial courses in college (NCES, 2001). Clearly, students in the secondary grades need just as much attention focused on their literacy skills as students in the elementary and middle grades.

2.1 The Need for Secondary Reading Specialists

While there have been a limited number of studies on the direct link between the work of reading specialists and the reading achievement of students (Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001), there have been studies that have supported the theory that reading specialists have a positive impact on the literacy skills of students and professional educational organizations have shown support for the employment of reading specialists at all grade levels. According to the Market Data Retrieval Report (1997), states with above average proficiency scores in reading on the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress also had the highest percentage of reading specialists. Further, two studies conducted in Connecticut found that in comparable schools, students in schools with reading specialists had higher reading test scores than those students in schools without reading specialists (Baron, 1999; Klein, Monti, Mulcahy-Ernt & Speck, 1997). Goon (2001) found that reading achievement scores of students in middle schools with the services of reading specialists were higher than the scores of students in middle schools without the services of reading specialists. The International Reading Association (1999) notes that secondary schools where reading specialists work with content area teachers show great promise and Quatroche et al. (2001) state that “professionals with extensive knowledge of reading instruction can and do make a difference” (p.292). However, Carter & Klotz (1991) note that administrators and school board officials are often unaware of the potential of reading specialists to positively affect the growth of adolescents’ reading skills.

During the 1990s, the International Reading Association recommended that the number of secondary reading specialists increase (Long, 1995). However, rather than an increase in the number of reading specialists as a response to the recommendations of the International Reading Association, the number of reading specialists beyond the elementary grades declined. Reading specialists at the secondary level were often the first positions to be eliminated from a school district’s budget, leaving Vacca (1998) to refer to reading specialists at the secondary level as “endangered species” (p.609). Moore et al. (1999) note the neglect of the literacy needs of adolescent readers:

Despite the prevalence of literacy in adolescents’ lives, educational policies, school curricula, and the public currently are neglecting it. For instance, state and federal funding for middle and high school reading programs in the United States has decreased. Fewer and fewer schools are able to hire reading specialists who work with individual students and help teachers of all subjects be more effective teachers of reading (p.3).

Santa (2000) also notes the decrease in reading specialists beyond the elementary grades:

Ten years ago, we had reading specialists at the middle school and high school levels. They collaborated with teachers to fulfill a mission of assisting all content teachers in implementing reading strategies in the classroom. They worked side-by-side with science and mathematics teachers. They facilitated classroom research, investigating issues of reading, writing, and learning. ...But when funding shrank, the reading specialists were the first to go.... Reading specialists, especially at these levels, have become viewed as expendable luxuries (p.1).

During the late 1990s, results of reading test scores indicated that many children and adolescents were not developing into proficient readers. As a result of this growing awareness of the reading deficiencies of children and adolescents, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. Although the goal of the NCLB is the same as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (to improve the reading and academic achievement of all students), the NCLB has primarily influenced the reading education of students in the elementary grades. Despite the attempts of the government to improve the reading instruction for all students, much of the attention has been focused on the needs of early readers. A study done by Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, and Wallis (2002) surveyed reading specialists from across the United States and found that of the respondents, only 8% worked at the high school level. In their position statement on adolescent literacy, Moore et al. (1999) state: Emphasizing the achievement of early readers has not produced adolescents who read and write at high levels of proficiency. Adolescents deserve increased levels of governmental support.

This includes appropriate funding for intervention services in the upper grades (p. 9). Farber (1999) notes that while funds are poured into programs for elementary school children, governments fail to fund many programs for secondary students. Further, she notes that government leaders mistakenly believe that reading develops automatically once the reader masters the fundamentals. The truth is that while many high school students are able to read the words on a page, many are unable to fully comprehend the text. In other words, they may not have the skills to summarize, draw conclusions, or relate the information to their own prior knowledge. Therefore, it is essential that these students receive effective instruction to develop their literacy skills. There has been minimal research conducted that supports the belief that reading specialists have a positive effect on secondary students' reading achievement. "The effectiveness of reading specialists...has not been studied on any wide basis, partly because there were so few reading specialists at the secondary level" (Sturtevant, 2003, p.7). Due to the importance of improving the literacy skills of adolescents and the lack of research focusing on reading specialists at the secondary level, this study sought to identify the number of secondary reading specialists employed at public schools in the United States.

3. Methodology

The National Center for Education Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences, is the primary federal entity for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to education. In the 1980s, the National Center for Education Statistics designed the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a set of questionnaires designed to gather data on schools and school personnel. This survey is the nation's largest sample survey of the characteristics of public, private, and Bureau of Indian Affairs/tribal schools. The survey has been administered six times during the following school years: 1987-1988, 1990-1991, 1993-1994, 1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008. The survey consisted of several questionnaires, including one designed specifically for teachers to complete. Approximately 40,000 teachers participated in each of the six survey administrations (1990-1991, 1993-1994, 1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008). The Teacher Questionnaire asked participants about issues such as their education and training, teaching assignment, teaching experience, certification, teaching workload, perceptions and attitudes about teaching, job mobility, workplace conditions, teacher preparation, induction, organization of classes, professional development, and the use of computers.

To comply with privacy laws, the National Center for Education Statistics prevents the general public from accessing individually identifiable information. To do so, the National Center for Education Statistics makes data available to the general public in an abridged version, known as "public-use data." All information that would disclose the identity of individual administrators and teachers is removed. This data has been coded, aggregated, or otherwise altered to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. For researchers who qualify, "restricted-use data" may be used for analysis.

This data contains individually identifiable information that is confidential and protected by law. Only those who have official clearance from the National Center for Education Statistics may access this data. This researcher holds a license to utilize restricted-use data. In this study, selected restricted-use data from the 1990-1991, 1993-1994, 1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008 School and Staffing Surveys were analyzed to examine the number of secondary reading specialists in public schools.

4. Results

Similar to a study on reading teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (Meyer & McGrath, 2004), respondents to the Schools and Staffing Surveys' Teacher Questionnaires who reported a main teaching assignment in the field of reading were considered "reading specialists." Responses from the five surveys were analyzed (see Table 1) to determine the number of secondary reading specialists. Data collected from each of the survey administrations was weighted, which allows the actual survey numbers to represent the larger population. Data collected during the 1990-1991 school year showed that of the 2,455,051 teachers, 5,051.88 (.20 percent) were employed as secondary reading specialists. Similarly, results of the 1993-1994 questionnaire indicate that of 2,321,689 teachers, only 2,622.68 (.11 percent) of those were employed as secondary reading specialists. Data analyzed from the 1999-2000 administration of the survey showed that of 2,731,845 teachers, 2,521.32 (.09 percent) were secondary reading specialists. Responses from the 2003-2004 questionnaire indicated that only 1,267.76 (.03 percent) of the 3,250,600 teachers were secondary reading specialists. Finally, results from the 2007-2008 survey indicate that only 6,198.88 (.15 percent) of the 3,898,420 teachers were secondary reading specialists.

5. Discussion

Results from all five surveys reveal an astonishingly low number of these teachers. Less than one percent of teachers in the nation were employed as secondary reading specialists during the 1990-1991, 1993-1994, 1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008 school years. These results indicate a consistent trend of a small number of teachers employed as secondary reading specialists. This strikingly low number of secondary reading specialists, at a time when research indicates an increased need for them, should prompt policymakers to review the obstacles suppressing additional staffing in this area and the incentives that might increase the employment of secondary reading specialists. Teacher education units and state and national policymakers should consider increasing recruitment efforts for secondary reading specialists. Since research indicates that support for reading instruction stops formally at the end of the elementary grades, and if the expectation is that all students are to have an equal chance at receiving a high-quality education, there needs to be an increase in the number of reading specialists placed at the secondary level.

6. Recommendations for Further Research

This study was based on the belief that reading specialists at the secondary level are effective at improving the literacy skills of adolescents. This study provides a foundation for identifying areas of further research focusing on secondary reading specialists. More specifically, it is recommended that future research address the following:

Recommendation 1

Additional research is needed to determine if the trends identified in this study are ongoing. The Schools and Staffing Survey will be administered again in an upcoming school year. When available, that data will allow for further analysis of the trends presented in this study and will reveal if any changes in the number of secondary reading specialists have occurred.

Recommendation 2

If possible, additional research should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of reading specialists on adolescents' reading skills. Reading achievement scores should be examined to determine if these teachers have a positive effect on the reading skills of students. Since so little research has been conducted on secondary reading specialists, conducting research to confirm that these individuals have a positive effect on the reading skills of students at the secondary level is essential.

Recommendation 3

Further research should examine any obstacles preventing the increase in the number of secondary reading specialists. Obstacles such as lack of funding for these positions, lack of awareness of the need for these specialists, and/or lack of reading specialists trained to address the unique needs of struggling adolescent readers should be examined.

Recommendation 4

Further research should analyze the placement of secondary reading specialists. Because there are so few of them, identifying the placement of secondary reading specialists is difficult, but essential, to determine if the majority of these individuals are employed at high-poverty schools where they are most needed, or if they are employed at low-poverty schools where they are least likely needed.

7. Summary

Cutting the dropout rate in the United States in half for just *one* class of students would result in billions of dollars in increased earnings and create more than 50,000 new jobs in the nation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). One way to assist in lowering the dropout rate is to provide those students with additional support in the area of literacy. However, the literacy needs of adolescents have been given significantly less attention than the literacy needs of younger children. All students at the secondary level who struggle with reading need access to reading specialists who can provide them with expert guidance and instruction to improve their reading skills. According to the International Reading Association (2000), reading specialists are key factors in producing improved reading achievement. However, as the results of this study show, there are very few reading specialists employed at the secondary level, leaving thousands of secondary students to continue to struggle with their literacy skills and the dropout rate to continue to climb.

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Table 1: Secondary Reading Specialists

	Weighted Responses				
	1990-1991	1993-1994	1999-2000	2003-2004	2007-2008
Number of teachers	2,455,051	2,321,689	2,731,845	3,250,600	3,898,420
Teachers reporting a main teaching assignment in the field of reading in public schools at the secondary level	5,051.88	2,622.68	2,521.32	1,267.76	6,198.88
Percentage of teachers reporting a main teaching assignment in the field of reading in public schools at the secondary level	.20	.11	.09	.03	.15