

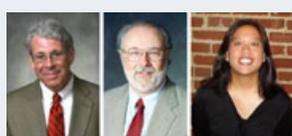
# Is Fluent, Expressive Reading Important for High School Readers?

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This study explores the link between fluency and comprehension through an examination of the importance of prosodic reading in secondary students.

Recall a time when you listened to a fluent speaker. Did you notice how the speaker used her voice to help deliver her message? She raised the pitch at some points and lowered it at others; sped up here but slowed down there; spoke loudly in certain places but softly in others; and used pauses for dramatic effect. Although you would probably agree that the words carried the major portion of the speaker's meaning, we think you would also admit that the use of voice helped to express her meaning and hold your interest.

Reading scholars have recognized that this same phenomenon works in reading as well (Klauda & Guthrie, 2008; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson 2011; Schwanenflugal, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004; Schwanenflugal,



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Meisinger, Wisenbaker, Kuhn, Strauss, & Morris, 2006). Readers enhance textual meaning by reading with appropriate fluency. Fluent readers tend to read in a way that constructs meaning, whereas less-fluent readers tend to struggle with making meaning. A reader's ability to construct an interpretation of a text can be hindered by slow, laborious word-recognition skills. Poor prosody may lead to confusion through inappropriate or meaningless groupings of words.

Yet, despite a growing body of research that is establishing the connection between fluency and comprehension, reading fluency too often receives little attention, particularly with adolescent readers (Paige, 2012; Rasinski, Padak, McKeon, Wilfong, Friedauer, & Heim, 2005; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Although it was identified as a critical element in effective reading instruction by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000), recent surveys of literacy experts indicate that fluency should not be considered a "hot" topic (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2010; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2011). We think several reasons contribute to this diminution of reading fluency (Rasinski, 2012). Among these are the widespread

misconceptions that reading fluency is exclusively an oral-reading phenomenon, that reading fluency is essentially speed of reading with little connection to reading for meaning, and that reading fluency is chiefly an issue for the primary grades (Ashby, 2006; Goodman, 2006; Pressley, Hilden, & Shankland, 2005; Rasinski, 2006).

In this article, we explore these misconceptions. Reading fluency is normally associated with oral reading because it is there that the most pronounced features of fluency (automatic word recognition and prosody) are most visible. Fluent reading is marked by oral reading that is of appropriate rate and expression. There is no reason not to believe, however, that the same features of fluent oral reading are not operating during silent reading as well.

Reading fluency is made up of at least two key components. One is word recognition automaticity, the ability to recognize words in text so effortlessly that a reader can devote limited attentional resources to the more important task of making meaning from the text (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Logan, 1988; 1997; Perfetti, 1977, 1985). Automaticity is usually measured by reading speed. Readers who progress at an appropriately quick rate evidence that their word recognition is more automatic than those who read at a slower and more labored rate. Although automaticity is often measured by reading rate, using instructional time and resources to focus students on reading faster is not an effective approach to develop automaticity. Automaticity in word recognition is best developed through wide and deep (repeated) reading. Fluency is not speed-reading; fluency is automatic word recognition that is most often measured through reading speed.

A second, and often neglected, aspect of reading fluency is prosody, or expressiveness in text reading (Schreiber, 1980, 1991). Fluent speakers are most often marked by their ability to modulate their voices to enhance the meaning of their speech. Similarly, fluent readers, when reading orally, exhibit prosody that reflects the meaning of the text. They speed up and slow down, raise and lower pitch, increase and decrease volume, and embed pauses and lengthened syllables that reflect punctuation and enhance textual meaning. By contrast, those who are less fluent tend to read in a word-by-word monotone manner that makes the understanding of the text more difficult. Fluency is more than automatic word recognition; fluency also consists of prosodic reading that reflects textual meaning.

In addition, reading fluency is often viewed as a competency that is mastered in the primary grades (NICHD, 2000). For example, Chall's (1983) well-known model of reading development positions fluency as a competency to be mastered in the early stages of reading. The assumption is that for most normal developing readers, fluency is mastered early. By the upper-elementary grades and beyond, fluency should not be a major concern for most readers. Such an understanding implies that by the secondary grades, fluency instruction should be minimized, if offered at all.

A growing body of research has begun to challenge all three of these misconceptions (Paige, 2012; Paige & Magpuri-Lavell, 2011; Rasinski et al., 2005).

### Fluency Solely as Oral Reading

Large-scale studies of fourth-grade students have found that fluent oral readers tend to have high levels of comprehension when reading silently (Pinnell et al., 1995). Similarly, those students whose reading was judged to lack fluency also struggled with comprehension when reading silently (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005; Pinnell et al., 1995). We may infer, then, that the same mechanisms that foster fluency in oral reading also operate during silent reading. Moreover, those mechanisms that foster fluency also help readers make meaning of texts, whether a text is read orally or silently. Indeed, scholarly work has begun to explore the nature of silent-reading fluency (Taylor, 2011), and recent studies have demonstrated promise in improving fluency and overall reading achievement through scaffolded silent-reading interventions (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Kim & White, 2008; Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008; Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008a). Thus, an emerging school of thought recognizes that fluency is not simply an oral-reading phenomenon. And instruction in fluency, whether in oral or silent reading, will impact oral and silent reading comprehension.

### Fluency as Prosody

Automaticity in word recognition is often viewed as the essential component of fluency; it is most often assessed by measuring students' reading rate. This view has led to the misconceptions that fluency and reading rate are one and the same and that the best way to improve fluency is to train students to read

quickly. We feel that reading rate is a measure of automaticity and that automaticity is best developed through wide and deep (repeated) reading, not through instruction aimed exclusively at increasing reading rate.

Although a strong relationship exists between automaticity and reading comprehension, studies have shown an equally strong and substantial relationship between measures of reading prosody (expression) and silent-reading comprehension (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Daane et al., 2005; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Pinnell et al., 1995; Rasinski et al., 2009). That is, students who read with appropriate expression when reading orally tend to have better comprehension when reading silently than students whose oral reading is marked by less expressive reading. These findings are highly suggestive of an important role that prosody plays in reading fluency and overall reading proficiency.

## Fluency as a Primary-Grade Phenomenon

Although we agree that fluency is a competency that requires nurturing and instruction during the earliest stages of reading development, research has shown that automaticity in the word-recognition component of fluency, as measured by reading rate, is strongly associated with good comprehension in the secondary grades (Paige & Magpuri-Lavell, 2011; Rasinski et al., 2005). Moreover, the prosody component of fluency has been shown to be associated with measures of silent-reading comprehension and overall reading achievement at the upper-elementary and middle grades (Rasinski et al., 2009). The extent to which the prosody component of fluency is associated with silent-reading comprehension has yet to be demonstrated at the high school level. In the study reported in this article, we explore the nature of the prosodic component of oral reading and its association with the silent-reading comprehension of ninth-grade students.

## Our Study

Our study took place at Washington (pseudonym) high school, whose overall academic achievement, as measured by the end-of-year state assessment, is in the bottom five percent of high schools within the state. Moreover, the school has struggled with student reading and academic achievement for more than a

decade. The study sample consists of 108 students out of the 282 (38.2%) enrolled ninth graders who provided parental consent. Of the 108 students in the study, 46 were female and 62 were male. Forty-six students were Caucasian, 53 were African American, 5 were Hispanic American, 2 were Asian American, and 2 were of other ethnicities. Five of the students were English learners, and 86% of the student population received free or reduced-price lunches. The average age of the students was 14 years 6 months.

Students were asked to do two reading tasks. First, all were administered the Test of Reading Comprehension: Fourth Edition (TORC-4). The TORC-4 is a standardized measure of silent-reading comprehension. It comprises five subtests, which together produce an overall reading-comprehension composite score.

Each student was also asked to read a grade-level 408-word narrative passage. The selection of a grade-level text was deliberate because the expectation of schools, districts, states, and the federal government is for grade-level achievement. Therefore, regardless of students' individual (or independent) reading level, they are held to grade-level standards. Students' oral readings were digitally recorded and then analyzed for prosody using the Multidimensional Fluency Scale (Rasinski, 2010; Rasinski & Padak, 2005a, 2005b; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). The Multidimensional Fluency Scale is a rubric that allows teachers to listen to and rate students' readings based on four prosodic dimensions: expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace (see Table 1). The four subscores are summed to yield a total prosody score. The scores range from 4 (lowest level of prosody) to a high of 16. To assess inter-rater reliability of prosody scores, a random sample of 22 scores (20.3%) was selected. The study authors then rated the readings under conditions in which each was blind to scores given by the others. Cohen's kappa was calculated and resulted in a statistic equal to .80, suggesting very good inter-rater agreement (Cohen, 1960; Fleiss, Levin, & Paik, 2003).

Students were assessed individually in a quiet room on the oral reading measure. The

*Students who read with appropriate expression when reading orally tend to have better comprehension.*

TABLE 1 Multidimensional Fluency Scale

Score	Expression & Volume	Phrasing	Smoothness	Pace
1	Reads words as if simply to get them out. Little sense of trying to make text sound like natural language. Tends to read in a quiet voice.	Reads in monotone with little sense of phrase boundaries; frequently reads word by word.	Makes frequent extended pauses, hesitations, false starts, sound-outs, repetitions, or multiple attempts.	Reads slowly and laboriously.
2	Begins to use voice to make text sound like natural language in some areas but not in others. Focus remains largely on pronouncing the words. Still reads in a quiet voice.	Frequently reads in two- and three-word phrases, giving the impression of choppy reading; improper stress and intonation fail to mark ends of sentences and clauses.	Experiences several "rough spots" in text where extended pauses or hesitations are more frequent and disruptive.	Reads moderately slowly.
3	Makes text sound like natural language throughout most of the passage. Occasionally slips into expressionless reading. Voice volume is generally appropriate throughout the text.	Reads with a mixture of run-ons, midsentence pauses for breath, and some choppiness; reasonable stress and intonation.	Occasionally breaks smooth rhythm because of difficulties with specific words, structures, or both.	Reads with an uneven mixture of fast and slow pace.
4	Reads with good expression and enthusiasm throughout the text. Varies expression and volume to match his or her interpretation of the passage.	Generally reads with good phrasing, mostly in clause and sentence units, with adequate attention to expression.	Generally reads smoothly with some breaks, but resolves word and structure difficulties quickly, usually through self-correction.	Consistently reads at conversational pace; appropriate rate throughout reading.

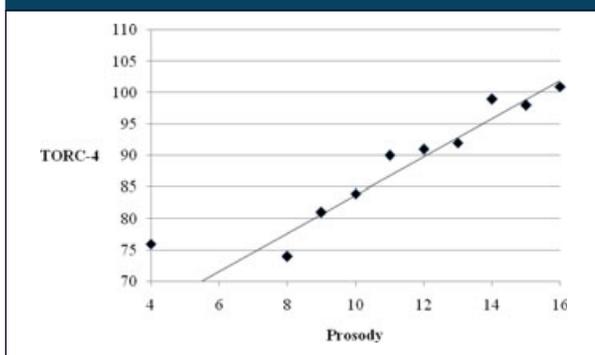
TORC-4 was group administered in the school under the supervision of the school administration, teachers, and two of the authors.

We present the results of the study in Table 2. The left-hand column indicates student prosody performance as indicated by ratings on the Multidimensional Fluency Scale. The right-hand column presents students' silent-reading comprehension scores from the TORC-4. The Figure provides a visual display of the same data. A definite

linear relationship emerges between oral prosody and silent-reading comprehension. That is, as students' oral prosody increases, their comprehension also improves. Ninth-grade students with the highest levels of prosody are the same students with the highest levels of reading comprehension. Students who manifested the lowest levels of oral prosody also tended to have the lowest levels of comprehension when reading silently.

Rasinski (2010) suggests that scores of 8 or less on the Multidimensional Fluency Scale may indicate a reader who is experiencing difficulty in reading fluency. In the present study, 17 students (16% of all students in the study) were assigned scores of 8 or less, and 5 of these were English learners (ELs). Moreover, these 17 students also scored below the 25th percentile on the TORC-4. Thus, as measured through the often-neglected prosody component of fluency, not only is oral reading fluency correlated with silent-reading comprehension, but a significant number of ninth-grade students have yet to achieve a minimally acceptable level of fluency. These are also the same students who exhibit

FIGURE Oral Prosody and Silent Comprehension for Ninth-Grade Students



significantly poor silent-reading comprehension. We included five ELs in our study sample but wondered if our results would have changed significantly if their scores were not included in the data. In other words, does the inclusion of EL scores skew the relationship between prosody and comprehension? Removing the EL scores reduced the number of students scoring 6, 10, and 11 on prosody by 1, 2 and 3 students, respectively. The same relationship between prosody and silent-reading comprehension remained and, in fact, was slightly strengthened.

### Making Sense of the Results

Table 2 and the Figure provide clear evidence of the association between oral-reading fluency, as measured by prosody, and silent-reading comprehension for students well beyond the primary grades. The relationship between fluency and comprehension is most likely reciprocal: students' comprehension of a text better affects their oral fluency (expressiveness). We further believe that students' level of prosody in reading affects their reading comprehension. Appropriate prosody is reflective of the meaning of a text. Readers who read with good expression are enhancing their understanding of the passage. And for students to read with appropriate expression, they must continually monitor the meaning of the passage. Moreover, good readers tend to hear themselves reading even when reading silently (Rasinski, 2010). Thus, elements of prosody are likely to be embedded in silent reading. We note that a significant number of ninth-grade students in this study appeared to

experience significant difficulty in expressive oral reading.

Our study suggests that prosody is an important part of fluent and proficient reading and that fluency is an issue that goes beyond the elementary and middle grades. Oral-reading prosody is related to silent-reading comprehension for secondary students as well, and a significant number of students have prosody levels well below expectations.

A growing body of evidence, mostly from studies conducted with elementary-grade students, has demonstrated that instruction in reading fluency can lead to improvements in fluent reading, comprehension, and overall reading proficiency (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). Secondary schools such as those where our study was conducted have a significant number of students with poorly developed fluency. Instruction in fluency may lead to improved comprehension for these students. For those schools containing a large number of students with appropriate fluency, a focus on fluency and prosody may be unnecessary. We recognize that several challenges are present in secondary classes containing a significant number of students who struggle with fluency. The first is that, in general, little time is allocated to direct reading instruction in content classes. When reading instruction does take place, it is most often organized around strategies to improve reading comprehension. At the same time, students possessing poor fluency generally do not improve on their own, although ample evidence suggests that appropriate fluency instruction results in gains in comprehension. Indeed, in his review of comprehension strategy instruction, Willingham (2007) suggests that comprehension instruction is most effective once students have acquired some degree of fluency in their reading. The decision quickly becomes a matter of allocation of scarce instructional time to curricular objectives. However, it does seem clear from our results that some focus on prosody for struggling secondary readers may be appropriate for improving fluency and silent-reading comprehension.

So for those students who would benefit, where might prosody instruction take place within the secondary curriculum? One suggestion is to incorporate it into classes designed specifically for readers who struggle most with reading. We have seen excellent teachers energize students around strategies to develop fluency and prosody that result in more fluent readers. Content classes, particularly

**TABLE 2 Prosody and Silent Reading Comprehension Scores**

Prosody Score	Number of Students	Mean TORC-4 Score
16	11	101
15	4	98
14	8	99
13	5	92
12	19	91
11	23	90
10	10	84
9	9	81
8	8	74
6	4	61
5	3	67
4	2	76

social studies and English language arts, offer another opportunity for prosody instruction. The content taught in these classes often involves in-class reading. These can be opportunities to incorporate strategies using the content to address fluency and prosody needs. Still another area is with instruction for ELs, in which creative teachers are using prosody strategies to help students who are still acquiring competency in English to improve their fluency. In the next section we present ways in which secondary teachers and interventionists may work to improve their students' fluent prosodic reading.

### Choose Materials That Lend Themselves to Prosodic Reading

Certain reading materials are appropriate for providing prosodic reading experiences for students. These include texts that have a strong rhythmical quality, a strong voice, or both. Narratives that have a strong voice and passages or entire plays that are meant to be performed orally for an audience are natural candidates for use in prosodic instruction. If a text is meant to be read aloud for others, the performer (reader) must ensure that his or her voice helps carry the meaning to the audience. Similarly, the rhythmical nature of poetry (including song lyrics) makes these literary works ideal for prosodic reading. Moreover, since poetry is meant to be performed orally, readers must work to ensure that their voices carry meaning to the audience. A large volume of poetry appropriate for the secondary grades is available, and Readers Theatre offers a variety of scripts that are meant to be performed. In addition, secondary students can transform segments of narrative and informational texts drawn from content-area courses into scripts for practice and eventual performance in front of an audience. When transforming texts into another format such as scripts, students need to consider how the essential meaning of the original will be maintained. This transformation becomes an exercise in comprehension and writing. Later, when students engage in rehearsing and performing scripts, their focus must be on conveying meaning through voices as well as words.

### Deep and Wide Reading

Practice is perhaps the best way to develop fluency in any endeavor, whether that endeavor is memorizing a musical score, mastering an athletic movement,

learning a dance, or reading a text. In-school reading practice is most often associated with wide reading. Wide reading involves reading a text, engaging in a response activity, and then moving on to reading a new text. Reading a variety of texts rather than a single one is likely to be more interesting and motivating, and because wide reading exposes readers to a variety of genres and topics, it motivates students to engage in the reading practice (Reutzel et al., 2008a, 2008b). A recent review of research in fluency has shown that wide reading is an effective practice for improving fluency and overall reading proficiency (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011).

For struggling readers, however, reading a text once and then moving on to a brand-new text may not be the most optimal experience. Their initial reading of a text is not fluent. And if that initial reading is their only reading, then these students are engaged in a process of practicing disfluent reading. Sometimes, struggling readers need to practice a given text (or at least a portion thereof) several times before moving on. This practice is known as repeated reading (Samuels, 1979); we have also come to call it "deep" reading, to imply that, for some readers, wide-reading practice needs to be balanced through more in-depth practice. The research on wide, or repeated, reading has also shown great promise, especially for struggling readers at the elementary level (Rasinski et al., 2011). Research on repeated readings at the secondary level likewise looks promising (Rees, 2005) but has been limited. Repeated readings, in combination with wide reading, have been shown to be successful in motivating middle and secondary students to engage in the reading practice they need (Reutzel et al., 2008a, 2008b). We recommend that deep or repeated reading also be used at the secondary level, especially with students who struggle with fluency and reading comprehension.

Because fluency is often measured by reading speed, fluency instruction involving repeated readings has evolved to focus students' attention more on improving their reading speed and less on comprehension (Rasinski, 2006; Samuels, 2007). This is an unfortunate and unintended consequence of using reading rate as the primary measure of fluency, and it negates the reciprocal relationship that exists between reading fluency and comprehension.

In searching for a more authentic approach to reading fluency, we return to the notion of reading performance. If students will be performing a text (e.g., a story, poem, or script) for an audience, they

will most likely have engaged in rehearsal prior to the performance. Rehearsal is a form of repeated reading. Moreover, it is a form of repeated reading in which the focus of students' attention is not on improving their speed of reading but on conveying meaning both through words and through their oral performance of those words (prosody). Again, the use of narrative, poetry, and Readers Theatre scripts seems to offer rich opportunities for students to engage in this more authentic and meaning-oriented form of repeated readings. A typical scenario involves individual or small groups of students rehearsing a text over several days and then performing it for an audience. Such a routine becomes a regular (weekly) part of classroom instruction. Research into this form of repeated reading has shown great promise in improving elementary students' fluency, overall reading proficiency, and motivation to read (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Although limited, research with secondary students has shown similar promise (Rees, 2005).

## Assisted Reading

Assisted reading involves a less-fluent reader reading a text orally while listening to a fluent oral rendering of the same text by another reader (Rasinski, 2010). This activity can take the form of reading with a partner (paired reading), reading while listening to a recorded version of the same text, or reading with a group of other readers (choral reading).

Although choral reading is often associated with elementary reading, recent research demonstrates remarkable promise with students beyond the elementary grades (Paige, 2008, 2011a). For example, not only was choral reading found to encourage decoding and fluency development in sixth-grade readers, but less-fluent students also reported that they felt comfortable enough to read aloud (Paige, 2011a). Since the entire class reads the same text aloud with the teacher, whole-class choral reading provides these readers with a "tent of anonymity" (Paige, 2011a, p. 13) that shrouds them from potential peer ridicule, thus making it safe for them to practice reading. This is important because, although adolescents who struggle with fluency are less motivated to engage with texts, teachers can create the conditions that encourage them to read (Paige, 2012). Whole-class choral reading can also be applied to the content areas. When the technique was used in conjunction with science texts taken from the curriculum, seventh-grade teachers

reported that students more quickly acquired initial background knowledge that enabled deeper teaching and learning of science content (Paige, 2008). Findings from studies of one form of choral reading, called Unison Reading (McCallister, 2010), indicate substantial growth in reading fluency and overall reading achievement.

## Fluency: An Instructional Tool for Helping Secondary Students Who Struggle With Reading

Clearly, we face a crisis in the United States when it comes to the literacy development of secondary students. The recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) reveals that only 35% of eighth-grade students scored at or above proficient in reading. That leaves some 65%, almost two-thirds, scoring below proficient; from this group, 38.5% scored below basic—more than one in every three eighth graders. These results are confirmed by other studies suggesting that only one-third of high school graduates are ready for college-level reading (American College Testing, 2010). A recent longitudinal study by Lee (2010) analyzed results from the NAEP, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, and Terra Nova assessments conducted during the last 28 years. The findings indicate that although reading attainment of fourth graders increased by about three months during this period, achievement at the eighth-grade level stalled and high school reading achievement decreased by one year. This evidence strongly suggests that significant numbers of high school students are not achieving at an elevated level in an environment that demands increasingly expanded literacy skills.

One possible contributor to this lack of progress among many secondary students lies in fluency. Our report suggests that reading fluency (as measured by prosodic oral reading) among ninth-grade students is strongly associated with reading proficiency (as measured by silent-reading comprehension).

*Our report suggests that reading fluency among ninth-grade students is strongly associated with reading proficiency.*

Moreover, we also note that a significant number of ninth graders have failed to achieve even a minimal level of fluency on grade-level material. Moreover, fewer than half the students in our study scored a fluency level of 3 or 4 on all four dimensions of assessed prosodic reading. Fluency appears to be a major concern for many students.

## Take Action

### STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Try a short whole-class choral reading for a change of pace. Secondary students who struggle with fluent reading are usually reluctant to read aloud, and the act of reading in unison will help them feel more secure.
- ✓ Choose a short text (100–150 words): a poem, short story, excerpt from a play, a literature piece, or even a social studies or science passage that is fun, interesting, and, ideally, part of your curriculum.
- ✓ Provide a copy of the text to each student and then briefly introduce the text by explaining important content and context features, unfamiliar vocabulary, and relevancy.
- ✓ Explain that being able to read with expression is evidence that a reader understands and comprehends the text.
- ✓ Model an expressive reading of the text by reading it aloud while the class follows along silently. Be sure to practice in advance. Ask students to listen carefully for characteristics that make the reading expressive.
- ✓ Invite students to join you in a choral reading, with everyone reading aloud in unison, as in a choir. Start the students off by counting down “three, two, one.” A couple false starts and laughter may ensue.
- ✓ Listen carefully for the “rough spots” as students read aloud. Repeat the activity several times, encouraging the class to make their reading sound as expressive as possible. Audio record the first and last readings so that students can hear the difference.
- ✓ Remember never to single out any student for poor, good, or insufficient reading. Choral reading provides a “safe zone” for students who normally will not read aloud.

Yet the reality is that fluency is not an instructional priority in the middle and secondary grades. Indeed, research at the primary-grade level finds that fewer than five minutes per day are devoted to fluency instruction (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008). If fluency is not a priority in the primary grades, why should we expect it to be a priority at the secondary level? If 40% or more of our students leave fourth grade with less than minimal levels of fluency (Daane et al., 2005; Pinnell et al., 1995), it is highly unlikely they will receive the necessary instruction to overcome this deficiency, which likely contributes to some of their reading difficulties.

Our study, as well as previous studies on fluency at the secondary level, suggests that fluency does need to be made more of an instructional priority, especially for those secondary students who struggle in reading. We call on secondary-level reading teachers and specialists, as well as secondary-school administrators and school-district curriculum directors, to make reading fluency the instructional priority it deserves to be. When we do that, we will have real potential for helping secondary (and adult) students who struggle with reading.

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## More to Explore

### CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

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