

Reading Preparation of Secondary ELA Teachers

A U.S. SURVEY OF STATE LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS

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What U.S. secondary ELA teachers know and do not know about reading may be largely dependent on the state in which they receive their initial licensure.

Sobering statistics have repeatedly shown that many middle and high school students in the United States struggle with reading (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011), a phenomenon identified as the *adolescent literacy crisis* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Biancarosa and Snow (2006) suggest that roughly 70% of adolescents struggle with reading and require differentiated instruction to meet their literacy needs. Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress data revealed that of eighth-grade students sampled nationally, 24% read at a below-basic level and only 34% read at or above a proficient level (NCES, 2011). Moreover, limited literacy skills cause 3,000 students to drop out of high school every day, and both dropouts and high school graduates demonstrate significantly worse reading skills than two decades ago (NCES, 2005).

These sobering trends have prompted



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professional organizations to frame the problem and call for action (International Reading Association [IRA], 2012; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2007). However, the role that teacher preparation can play in addressing the crisis remains unclear. A growing number of prominent scholars within the literacy community have decried the lack of research regarding teacher preparation in reading (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Dillon, O'Brien, Sato, & Kelly, 2011; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Risko et al., 2008; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). In spite of a growing research base pertaining to the diverse literacy experiences and instructional demands of adolescent readers (Bean & Harper, 2009; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Moore, 2009), the majority of reading preparation research is targeted at the elementary level (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000; Dillon et al., 2011; Hoffman & Roller, 2001; Jacobs, 2008; National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2006, 2009). Risko et al. (2008) found only 11 studies published within the last decade that considered reading coursework in secondary teacher preparation.

Despite the intensifying demand for secondary preservice teachers to be knowledgeable of and prepared for the extensive and varied developmental reading needs of adolescents, large discrepancies exist in the amount and type of reading preparation delivered in secondary teacher preparation programs (Dillon et al., 2011). Currently, 46 states are in the process of implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for grades 6–12 (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2012). Meeting the new standards in the English language arts (ELA) will require teachers to help their students comprehend texts of unprecedented complexity—a challenge requiring that ELA teachers possess an understanding of both reading development and reading instruction if they are to serve those students who are reading significantly below grade level. But to what extent do current licensure requirements prepare them to do so?

The purposes of this study are to summarize the research into secondary reading preparation, then to examine the nature of reading instruction in secondary schools and especially in ELA classrooms, and lastly to clarify the status of ELA certification in the United States by surveying licensure requirements now in place in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Research in Secondary Reading Preparation

Varying constructs exist for the term adolescent literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Dillon et al., 2011; National Institute for Literacy [NIL], 2007; Snow et al., 2005). To emphasize the role of school contexts in literacy development, Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008) and Edmonds et al. (2009) designate adolescent readers as students in secondary schools (commonly grades 6 through 12). I have adopted this definition for the present study.

Research concerning teacher education in reading made up less than 1% of the total studies published from 1970 through 2000 (Anders et al., 2000). The dearth of empirical research caused Hoffman and Pearson (2000) to declare, “The paucity of research

in the area of reading teacher education is disturbing given the large number of reading researchers who spend a good portion of their daily lives immersed in teacher preparation” (p. 41). *Reading Today’s* survey of issues judged “What’s Hot and What’s Not” by 25 leaders in the field of literacy research has featured “teacher education for reading (preservice)” in both the “What’s Not” hot and “Should be Hot” categories annually from 2000 through 2013 (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012, p. 9).

Although elementary teacher preparation in reading has received increasing attention from the literacy community, significantly less empirical research has addressed the secondary level (Dillon et al., 2011; Risko et al., 2008). In a 2008 review of research, Risko et al. found that the majority of research relating to secondary teacher preparation in reading related to teachers’ beliefs about the role of reading within their content area instruction. The numerous policy reports released over the last decade concerning the reading instruction of adolescents have called for major reforms in the preparation of secondary content teachers (Dillon et al., 2011; Moore, 2009). Demands for all secondary teachers to be knowledgeable of both reading development processes and effective reading instruction have intensified as staggering statistics have highlighted the disparate reading abilities and achievement of the nation’s middle and high school students (Allington, 2007; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy [CCAAL], 2010; Ericson, 2001; Hall, Burns, & Edwards, 2011; IRA, 2012; National Adolescent Literacy Council, 2007; NIL, 2007; Snow et al., 2005). In their newly updated position statement on adolescent literacy, the International Reading Association (2012) emphasized that middle and high school students “deserve differentiated literacy instruction specific to their individual needs” and a “culture of literacy in their schools with a systematic and comprehensive programmatic approach to increasing literacy achievement for all” (p. 2).

Reading Instruction in Secondary Schools

The role of reading instruction in secondary content classrooms is significantly less well defined than at the elementary level, with fewer, if any, requirements for reading coursework and related field experiences in secondary teacher preparation (Dillon et al., 2011; Moore, 2009; Risko et al., 2008). The entrance into

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middle school often means the end of formal reading instruction for the vast majority of students, despite rising concern about the reading achievement of adolescents (Biancarosa & Snow; Ericson, 2001; Hall et al., 2011; IRA, 2012; NIL, 2007; Snow et al., 2005). Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2011) argue that the poorly designed curricular demands of the secondary school construct have virtually eliminated reading instruction after the elementary grades, leaving a substantial number of struggling adolescent readers at risk. Students continue to require developmentally appropriate reading instruction throughout middle and high school and deserve teachers who are fully prepared to meet their diverse reading needs (Allington, 2007; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Ericson, 2001; Hall et al., 2011; Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Moore, 2009; NIL, 2007; Snow et al., 2005).

Research has suggested that secondary teachers are often unprepared, or even disinclined, to address the developmental reading differences present in their classrooms, leaving struggling adolescent readers especially discouraged (Anders, 2002; Ericson, 2001; Hall et al., 2011; Ness, 2009; Snow et al., 2005; Stewart & O'Brien, 1989). Identified struggling readers are commonly removed from content classes to receive remedial reading or tracked into less demanding classes, problematic practices that do not necessarily guarantee instruction differentiated to target individual reading needs (Allington, 2007; Moore, 2009; Snow et al., 2005). Two additional trends serve to exacerbate the problem: a decreasing number of reading specialists working in secondary schools and a consequent shift in responsibility to content area teachers for delivering instruction that supports the needs of struggling readers (Anders, 2002; Snow et al., 2005). These trends recently prompted IRA (2012) to call upon schools to “increase the number of middle and high school literacy specialists” (p. 2).

Recently published policy reports targeting adolescent literacy insist that secondary content teachers must possess the foundational reading knowledge to address the diverse needs of adolescent readers (CCAAL, 2010; IRA, 2010, 2012; NIL, 2007; RAND, 2002; Snow et al., 2005). Biancarosa and Snow (2006) emphasized that secondary teachers must demonstrate a “solid understanding of how to teach reading and writing to the full array of students present in schools” (p. 5). The National Institute for Literacy (NIL, 2007) stressed the need for secondary teachers to possess an understanding of reading development to “become aware of the literacy skills that skilled

readers possess and recognize when students struggle with these foundational skills” (p. 3). The recently revised IRA (2010) standards for middle and high school content classroom teachers expect teachers to understand “the theoretical and evidence-based foundations of reading and writing processes and instruction” (p. 1). Moreover, the CCSS in ELA for grades 6 through 12 expect students to develop both content and literacy skills concurrently.

I stand with many in the literacy community who believe that all content area teachers should possess knowledge of reading development (e.g., Draper, 2009; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; IRA, 2010), and it is important to note that wide reading within the content areas is strongly encouraged within the Anchor Standards of the ELA CCSS, in order for students to build the background knowledge necessary to become stronger readers in all areas (CCSSI, 2012). However, current implementation of the CCSS in ELA in nearly all U.S. secondary schools is falling largely to ELA teachers (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). Consequently, this study focuses on the preparation of these teachers.

Reading Instruction in English Language Arts

Despite the sheer volume of reading expected and the varying reading abilities of students, the instructional focus in secondary ELA classrooms shifts from mastering *literacy* skills to mastering *literature* concepts (Dillon et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2011; Moore, 2009). Many adolescent readers are marginalized by the traditional whole-class reading assignment, the predominant method of instruction in middle and high school ELA classrooms (Ericson, 2001; Hall et al., 2011; Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Snow et al., 2005). The ELA classroom experience is crucial to an adolescent's literacy development (Hall et al., 2011; Ivey & Fisher, 2006). Hall et al. (2011) assert that reading is often treated as a prerequisite in American ELA classrooms because teachers focus “less on teaching reading as on requiring students to read in order to interpret texts in certain ways. The ability to read fluently for literal comprehension is often just assumed” (p. 19). Hall et al. recognize that nearly every feature of the curriculum standards used in the vast majority of secondary ELA classrooms implies the need to teach reading, and they encourage American teachers to make reading instruction a normal part of the ELA classroom.

Secondary ELA teachers are often ill-equipped to deliver developmental reading instruction despite the scores of adolescent readers who struggle with the curricular demands of grade-level material (Ericson, 2001; Hall et al., 2011; Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Ness, 2009; Snow et al., 2005). Meyer and Walpole (2010) reported that ELA middle and high school teachers were no more knowledgeable about adolescent literacy than teachers in other content areas. Their findings document Ericson's (2001) assertion that "high school English teachers rarely have the backgrounds to assist the least able readers in their classes, and additionally are often uncertain about what reading instruction actually involves" (p. 2).

Reading Coursework for Secondary Licensure in English Language Arts

In 1983, Farrell and Cirrincione (1984) surveyed the educational agencies of all 50 states (collectively referred to hereafter as State Education Agencies, or SEAs) to compare the reading coursework required for secondary licensure. They found that 32 SEAs required reading coursework for certification in all areas, five required reading coursework for ELA teachers only, and 14 required no coursework in reading for secondary licensure. Exactly a decade later, in 1994, Come Romine, McKenna, and Robinson (1996) reexamined the reading requirements for all areas of secondary licensure (both the middle and high school levels) in 51 SEAs (50 states and the District of Columbia) through telephone calls to state licensing agencies. Come Romine et al. found that 48 SEAs required "specific coursework or have established a competency in reading methods for all or some of their middle and high school teachers" (p. 197). More specifically, the authors discovered that "content area reading" (p. 196) was the predominant requirement at both secondary levels for all content area teachers, with few exceptions. At the high school level, two SEAs required reading methodology for only ELA teachers, and one required it for both ELA and social studies teachers. Further, 10 SEAs expected coursework or competencies in "developmental reading" (p. 196) at the middle school level for all content teachers, whereas three required it at the high school level for all teachers and one required it only for ELA and social studies teachers. The difference between content area reading and developmental reading was unclear in the study.

Subsequently, Levine's (2006) report on the status of teacher preparation programs revealed that reading requirements for licensure had changed, although not necessarily for the better. According to Levine, only 39 SEAs required coursework in reading for licensure. Further analyzing the requirements, Levine found that 20 SEAs did not specify the number of credit hours and that the remaining 19 ranged in requirements from 2 to 12 credit hours, with 6 as the mode. Levine assessed state teacher education requirements as failing to "assure high quality" (p. 65) in teaching candidates.

The purpose of this review was to describe the current status of *reading development* requirements for initial secondary ELA licensure by conducting a survey of 51 SEAs (50 states and the District of Columbia). Based on the numerous calls for secondary ELA teachers who are knowledgeable in reading development in order to meet the needs of the diverse readers within their classrooms, including the 2003 IRA position paper calling for all beginning teachers to "know how reading develops," the requirement of knowledge of reading development was defined as including all five key areas of reading instruction identified in the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (NRP): phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Following the publication of the NRP report, the vast majority of literacy researchers have expressed agreement that these five areas largely define the reading development continuum (Mesmer, Powell, & Mesmer, in press). These components are included in the CCSS in ELA as "Foundational Skills," "Literature," and "Informational Text" standards (CCSSI, 2012).

Method

The regulations for each of the 51 SEAs were first examined to determine if coursework or competencies in reading development were required for initial licensure in secondary ELA. The majority of SEAs ($n = 44$) also offered initial middle-level licensure, and these requirements were also reviewed. For the seven SEAs without a middle-level option, the requirements for the broader secondary range, usually 6th through 12th grades, were inspected. I began with each SEA's Department of Education website and looked for links to licensure or certification requirements, teaching standards, and/or teacher competencies. All SEAs provided some information regarding their licensure

requirements through their websites or links to state regulations. In the few cases these documents contained no mention of reading, I followed up with telephone calls to SEA certification officers.

Terms I believed were vague enough to warrant further investigation included *secondary reading development*, *reading processes*, and *developmental reading*. When the available guidelines were unclear with regard to required reading competencies, I further inspected programs of study and course syllabi from a minimum of two universities offering SEA-approved teacher preparation programs. Specifically, I looked through course descriptions, assigned readings, and additional requirements for subject matter involving the study of the comprehensive reading development process. In the few cases in which there was ambiguous or little information regarding development coursework or competencies, and yet where demonstration of this knowledge was required on initial licensure assessments, I classified the SEA as requiring knowledge of reading development.

To further understand the reading development knowledge expected for licensure, I reviewed each SEA's testing requirements for secondary ELA licensure. I examined the testing resource materials, including available content guides, for content pertaining to reading development. This information was readily available for those SEAs requiring testing for secondary ELA licensure ($n = 48$). All information regarding testing requirements for licensure was located online.

Descriptive data addressing the research questions were compiled within a spreadsheet for

comparisons across jurisdictions. To ensure that the data were complete and current, I reviewed the materials for all 51 SEAs on four separate occasions over the course of more than 18 months (March 2011, June 2011, September 2012, and November 2012).

Results

Secondary licensure requirements vary considerably across jurisdictions, as demonstrated in Figure 1, with only 18 SEAs requiring knowledge of reading development at both the middle and secondary levels. As shown in Figure 2, only five of these SEAs also expect demonstration of reading development knowledge on required licensure exams: Idaho, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, and Washington; three assess it only at the middle level: Illinois, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Both New York and Idaho require that all teaching candidates demonstrate knowledge of reading development on an exam for initial licensure, regardless of content area or certification grade range. In fact, Idaho requires that all preservice teachers pass the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Assessment, an exam that was developed collaboratively by literacy professors and reading teachers with the goal of assessing future teachers' understanding of components of reading instruction, including reading development (Squires, Canney, & Trevisan, 2009). California and Louisiana also require reading development knowledge for all content areas; however, neither SEA assesses this knowledge on licensure exams. Finally,

FIGURE 1 Reading Development Requirements

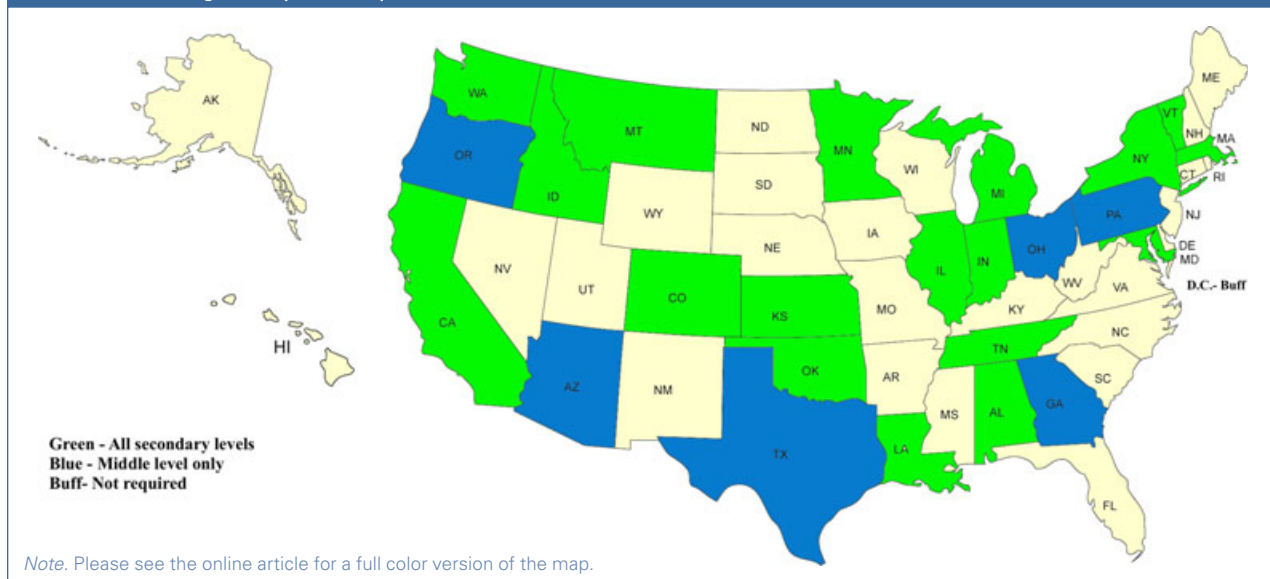


FIGURE 2 Reading Development Requirements

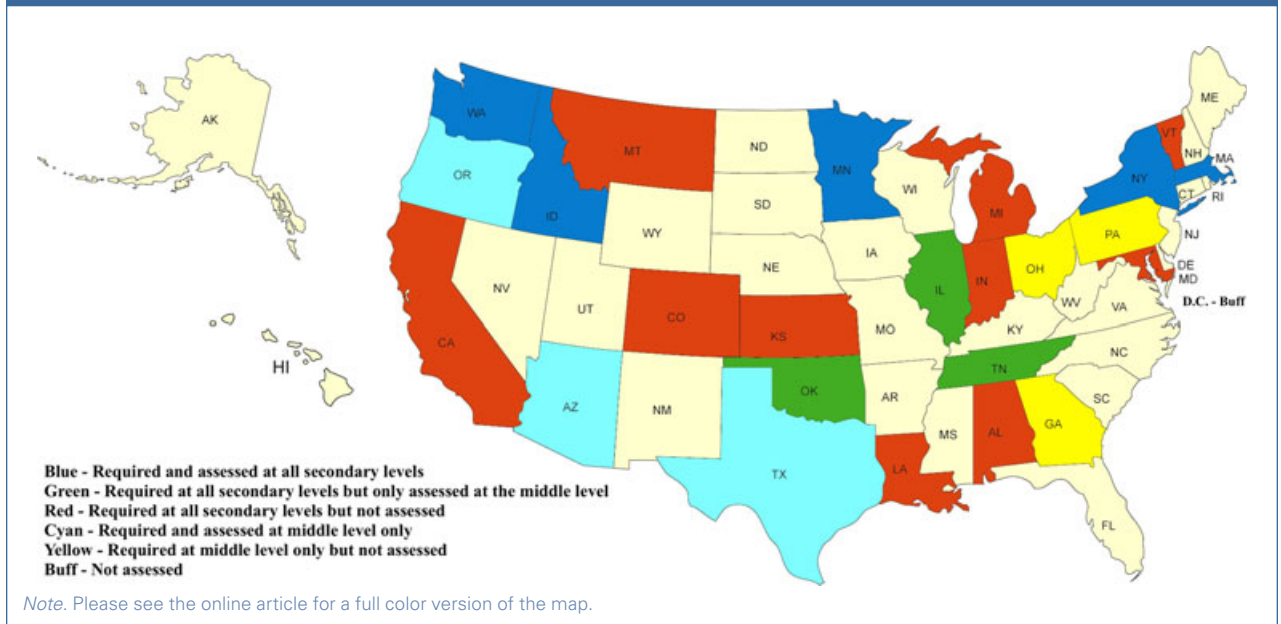
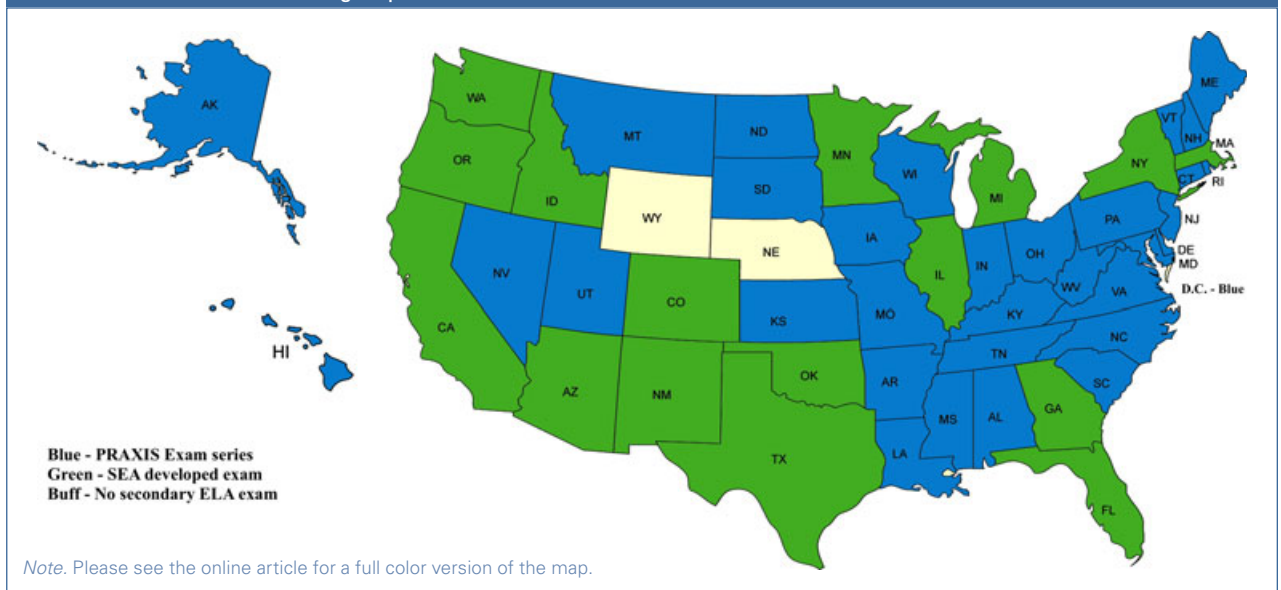


FIGURE 3 Initial Licensure Testing Requirement



six SEAs require reading development knowledge solely at the middle level, and only three assess this knowledge on required licensure exams.

As shown in Figure 3, the majority of SEAs ($n = 32$) require a passing score on one or both tests in the English Language, Literature, and Composition PRAXIS series (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2010, 2012a) for initial secondary ELA licensure. Of the aforementioned 18 SEAs that require reading development knowledge, eight use this exam series. The two tests that make up this series contain strictly ELA content, and

neither assesses knowledge of reading development or reading instruction (ETS, 2012a). Further, the majority of the SEAs that offer middle-level certification ($n = 28$) require the Middle School English Language Arts PRAXIS test for middle-level certification (ETS, 2010). Although this exam contains an essay question titled “Teaching Reading/Writing” (p. 1), closer inspection of the content reveals that examinees are expected to respond only to either “a piece of student work OR a classroom situation” in which they must “analyze...to determine strengths or weaknesses” and “describe an

instructional activity referencing the identified strengths or weaknesses” (p. 3). The test contains no further assessment of knowledge of reading instruction. One notable exception is Tennessee, which requires that all content area teachers seeking middle-level licensure pass the PRAXIS Reading Across the Curriculum: Elementary exam (ETS, 2012b). This exam assesses knowledge of all five components of reading development. Tennessee is the only SEA to require this test above the elementary level.

Several SEAs ($n = 15$) use testing that was developed specifically for the SEA. Of these SEAs, nine require reading development knowledge at all secondary levels (including the middle level), yet only five assess the demonstration of this knowledge on licensure testing at all secondary levels, and two assess it only at the middle level. Additionally, four of the SEAs that developed their own testing require reading development knowledge solely at the middle level, and only three of these four assess it on the licensure exam.

The most common requirement across the SEAs that did not require knowledge of reading development was the completion of coursework or demonstration of competencies in content area reading strategies at one or both levels of secondary licensure. However, as described by the test descriptions above, the vast majority of these SEAs did not assess this knowledge on the required licensure assessments.

Discussion

The lack of empirical research regarding secondary teacher preparation in reading has clearly contributed to major discrepancies in the preparation of secondary ELA teachers in the United States (Dillon et al., 2011), and many publications have denounced the lack of a consensus regarding the core reading knowledge that ELA teachers of adolescents must possess before entering the field (Anders et al., 2000; CCAAL, 2010; Dillon et al., 2011; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; NCTQ, 2009). I found that licensure requirements for secondary ELA preparation in reading vary considerably among SEAs, including the reliance on an exam developed by an external agency that contains virtually no assessment of reading instruction. I also found a common requirement to be the completion of “content area reading” coursework, with the content of this type of course being

highly dependent on expectations from the SEA and the specific teacher preparation program. Most tellingly, Dillon et al. asserted that preservice teachers in most content area reading courses are expected to integrate generic reading strategies into their content areas without a full understanding of the fundamental reading processes needed to comprehend the material.

In short, despite the lagging reading achievement of adolescents across the nation, SEAs have been significantly disparate in what they require of secondary ELA teachers seeking initial licensure concerning their knowledge of developmental reading. Clearly, many factors contribute to the overall reading proficiency of secondary students. The present study examines just one potential factor: licensure requirements.

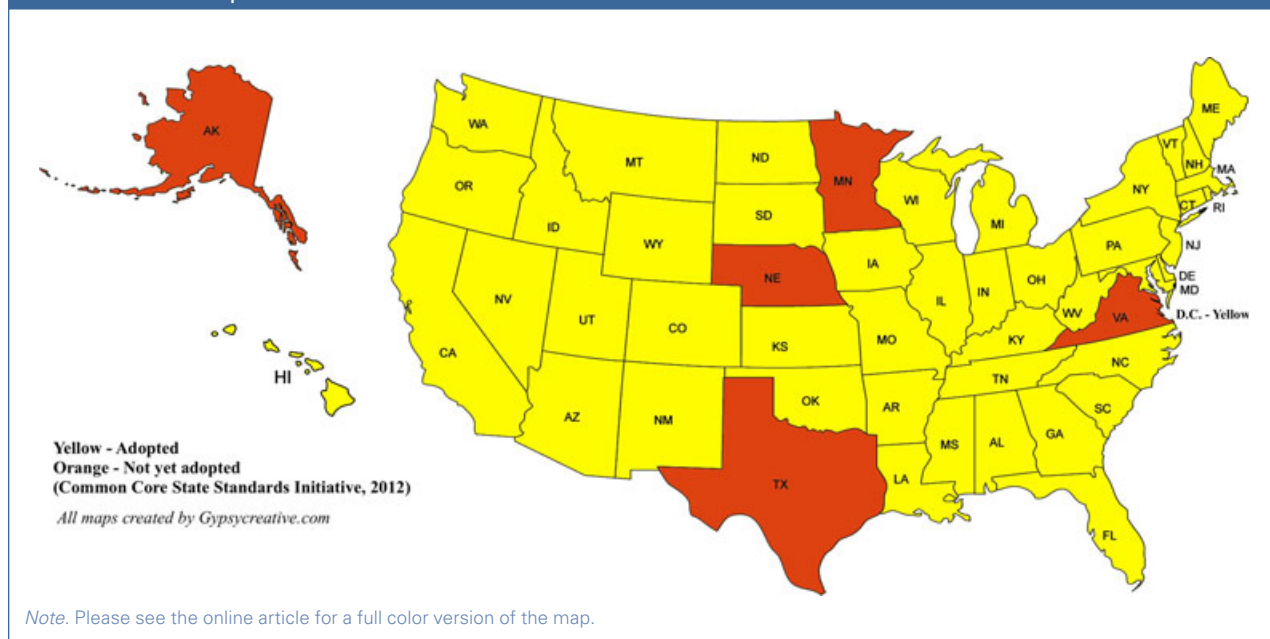
Limitations

It is important to recognize that individual teacher preparation programs within each SEA may mandate substantially more reading coursework and competencies, including reading development (Squires et al., 2009), than is required for secondary ELA licensure by the SEA. I also considered only traditional routes to initial licensure and did not investigate the requirements for alternative or continuing licensure, which may have included more extensive reading instruction and/or testing requirements. Finally, SEA regulations can be somewhat fluid, and it is possible that some of the SEAs may in fact be in the process of adopting reading development competencies for initial secondary ELA licensure; however, these were not reported as official requirements at the time of this study.

Implications

After examining the licensure requirements of all 51 SEAs, it is my conclusion that in most cases the type and grade range of licensure, rather than the needs of the adolescent reader, may have dictated the required reading preparation. Despite the wide implementation of the CCSS, CCAALs (2010) call for state leaders to “revise teacher certification standards” and implement changes in the “content and structure of preservice teacher education” (p. 67), and IRA’s (2003) recommendation that federal, state, and local policymakers focus “resources on improving teacher preparation in reading” (p. 4), the vast majority of SEAs do not require reading development coursework for initial ELA secondary licensure.

FIGURE 4 State Adoption of the Common Core State Standards



Currently, 46 SEAs have adopted the CCSS, as shown in Figure 4. Many of these SEAs have cited teacher quality issues as a major challenge in implementing the CCSS (Kober & Rentner, 2012). Although one goal of the CCSS is to provide SEAs with a common set of standards to guide instruction, the discrepant expectations for the reading development knowledge of secondary ELA teachers across SEAs may prove to be a barrier to effectively implementing the standards in ELA. Specifically, the predominant requirement that secondary teachers be knowledgeable only in content area reading strategies may not be enough to fully prepare ELA teachers to work with adolescent struggling readers.

The CCSS add two expectations with little precedent. One is an emphasis on comprehending texts with higher levels of complexity. The other is the expectation that secondary students continue to receive reading instruction within ELA classrooms that focuses not only on *literature* but also on continuous growth in *literacy*—a critical distinction for struggling adolescent readers.

In terms of secondary teacher preparation, much can be learned from the work of Squires, Canney, and Trevisan (2004, 2009), who detail the collaborative effort in developing the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Assessment, an assessment designed to hold both preservice teachers and teacher preparation

programs accountable for the comprehensive knowledge of reading development and instruction. Future research must be conducted to identify effective reading coursework and assessments in secondary teacher preparation programs within the United States as well as globally. Moreover, the literacy research community must address the disparity in the reading preparation of secondary teachers across SEAs and teacher preparation programs.

Although this study focuses on the initial certification requirements for secondary ELA teachers within the United States, it has implications for other English-speaking countries where aggressive new standards have been adopted. For example, both the United Kingdom (Birmingham City University, 2012) and Australia (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012) require only that primary school (elementary) teachers be knowledgeable of foundational reading skills. They may well find that many of their secondary teachers are inadequately prepared to meet the challenges of the new standards.

Over the past decade, many prominent literacy researchers have called for the creation of a database for reading teacher education to inform research and preparation reform efforts (Anders et al., 2000; Dillon et al., 2011; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). The proposed database would serve to document reading preparation successes beyond the preservice level,

help to develop a common “beginning repertoire” (Dillon et al.) of reading instruction skills for teachers entering the field, and serve as a vehicle for collaboration among universities. Near-universal adoption of the CCSS may provide new leverage for bringing about this goal.

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Take Action

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

The widespread adoption of the CCSS for English language arts brings with it the unprecedented challenge to engage students in the reading of complex texts. Preparing teachers to meet this challenge will mean ensuring they are knowledgeable about reading development and the problems many of their students are likely to experience. Although results of a recent survey document overwhelming support for the CCSS, more than half of those surveyed indicated that they had not received adequate professional development for effective implementation (American Federation of Teachers, 2013). A six-part initiative targeting teacher growth may be warranted.

- ✓ For practicing teachers, professional learning experiences should include developmental literacy related issues. Teachers in middle and high schools can think globally and act locally by making reading development a focus of professional learning communities. By linking this focus to CCSS implementation, ELA teachers are certain to enrich their understanding of how to help their schools move forward.
- ✓ Administrators and instructional leaders should insist that professional learning focus not simply on what the new standards demand but also on how to address the needs of students who struggle to meet them.
- ✓ Content specialists should join ELA teachers in professional learning. The CCSS include them at every point as agents helping students acquire disciplinary literacy.
- ✓ For preservice teachers, state departments must reexamine the requirements for initial licensure of middle and secondary ELA teachers, and they should take steps to include knowledge of reading development as a prerequisite competency.
- ✓ At the same time, teacher preparation programs cannot afford to await this mandate but should work proactively to extend course requirements and/or modify syllabi now in use.
- ✓ Researchers can play an instrumental role as well, by surveying the present status of teacher knowledge, investigating the process of altering ELA teacher preparation, and gauging the impact of the alteration on teacher beliefs and student achievement. The evidence produced by such investigations will have the potential to reinforce and extend the efforts of teacher educators and practitioners.

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More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

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