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Who Teaches Reading in Public Elementary Schools? The Assignments and Educational Preparation of Reading Teachers

A central task of elementary-level schooling in the United States is teaching children to read. This task is assigned to general elementary teachers who teach reading as one of many subjects taught during the day, as well as to teachers assigned specifically to teach reading. This Issue Brief presents a description of the teachers who provide reading instruction in public elementary schools. Specifically, it presents 1999–2000 school year estimates of the number of public general elementary school teachers, public elementary school teachers who taught reading as a main assignment, and any other elementary teachers who taught at least one reading class. This Issue Brief also describes these three groups of teachers in terms of their educational preparation in reading and elementary education.

Data are taken from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) teacher survey. SASS asked teachers to report both the subject matter of their main teaching assignment and the subject matter of each class they taught during the day.¹ Teachers were also asked about their educational attainment and the subject matter of their postsecondary majors and minors. Estimates are presented on the percentage of teachers who have postsecondary majors or state certifications in reading and elementary education. Major and certification in the subject of their main teaching assignment from the 1999–2000 SASS have previously been used as indicators of teacher qualifications (Seastrom et al. 2002).

For this analysis, public school teachers of elementary grades were split into four groups:²

- General elementary education teachers: Teachers who reported a main assignment in elementary education.
- Reading specialists: Teachers who reported a main assignment in reading.
- Other reading teachers: Teachers who did not report a main assignment in elementary education or reading, but did report teaching at least one class of reading.
- Other teachers: Teachers who were excluded from the analysis.

The Assignments of Reading Teachers

There were more general elementary-level teachers in public schools in the United States in 1999–2000 than there were teachers with specific reading assignments. One million pub-

lic elementary-level teachers had main assignments as general elementary teachers (table 1). Twenty-nine thousand public elementary-level teachers had main assignments in reading (referred to in this analysis as “reading specialists”) and another 32,000 taught at least one class in reading, but did not report a main assignment in reading or in general elementary teaching (referred to in this report as “other reading teachers”).

Reading specialists were less likely than other teachers of reading to have full-time teaching assignments. Seventy-four percent of reading specialists described themselves as regular full-time teachers in 1999–2000, compared with 96 percent or more of other reading teachers and general elementary teachers. Eleven percent of reading specialists were regular part-time teachers; 6 percent were itinerant teachers (i.e., teaching in more than one school); and 8 percent described their work role as “other professional staff,” an assignment described by SASS as including “e.g., counselor, curriculum coordinator, social worker.”

Reading specialists also tended to teach in different classroom settings than the other teachers. About three out of four (73 percent) reading specialists taught “pull-out” classes. In other words, they taught students who were excused from their regular classes for sessions of reading instruction. Eleven percent or less of the reading specialists taught in each of the four other arrangements: self-contained classrooms in which they taught the same children all day long (11 percent); team-teaching arrangements in which they collaborated with other teachers in teaching multiple subjects to the same classroom of children (6 percent); elementary enrichment classes in which they taught only reading, possibly to different classes of students (6 percent); and departmentalized instruction settings in which they taught several different classes of students and may have taught subjects other than reading (4 percent).

Other reading teachers most often described their assignments as departmentalized instruction (84 percent). The remaining other reading teachers (16 percent) described their classes as elementary enrichment classes.

General elementary teachers most often (85 percent) reported their assignment as teaching a single group of students in a self-contained classroom, which means they taught several subjects, including reading, to a single classroom of students throughout the school day. Next most frequently, general elementary teachers described their assignments as team-teaching roles (9 percent).

Table 1. Number of public elementary-level teachers and percentage of teachers with specific subject matter assignments, by various work-role and classroom assignments: 1999–2000

Characteristics	Subject-matter assignment		
	Main assignment in reading (reading specialist)	At least one class in reading, but not main assignment (other reading teacher)	General elementary education
Number of teachers	28,700	32,300	1,009,000
Work-role assignment			
Regular full-time teacher	74.2	95.6	96.9
Regular part-time teacher	11.0	1.4	1.9
Itinerant teacher	6.1	0.2	0.4
Long-term substitute	0.5	0.9	0.2
Administrator	#	0.2	#
Library specialist	0.2	0.7	0.1
Other professional staff	7.9	1.0	0.4
Classroom setting ¹			
Departmentalized instruction	4.1	84.1	2.7
Elementary enrichment class	5.5	15.9	0.8
Self-contained class	10.8	#	85.5
Team teaching	6.4	#	9.4
"Pull-out" class	73.2	#	1.6

#Rounds to zero.

¹Classroom settings include "departmentalized instruction," in which teachers teach subject matter courses to several classes of different students all or most of the day, "elementary enrichment class," in which teachers teach only one subject in an elementary school, "team teaching," in which teachers collaborate with one or more teachers in teaching multiple subjects to the same class of students, and "pull-out" class," in which teachers provide instruction to certain students who are released from their regular classes.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Not all apparent differences in this table are statistically significant. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2004034>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public Teacher Questionnaire" and "Charter Teacher Questionnaire," 1999–2000.

Educational Preparation

Table 2 reports on the educational preparation of the three groups of reading teachers in 1999–2000. The table reports the percentage of teachers with various levels of educational attainment, as well as the percentage of teachers with postsecondary majors, minors, or certifications in reading or elementary education. Public elementary-level reading specialists and other reading teachers were more likely to have master's degrees than general elementary education teachers. Sixty-three percent of public elementary reading specialists and 51 percent of other reading teachers had a master's degree, compared with 40 percent of general elementary teachers.

Reading—Reading specialists tended to have more educational preparation in reading than did the other teachers. Thirty-six percent³ of reading specialists had majored in reading at the postsecondary level, compared with 5 percent, each, of other reading teachers and general elementary education teachers. Six percent of reading specialists held minors in reading, compared with 2 percent or lower of other reading teachers and general elementary education teachers. Eighty-one percent of reading specialists held a regular or provisional (awaiting only time on the job) state certification in reading, compared with 4 percent of other reading teachers and 3 percent of general elementary education teachers. Thirty-two percent of reading specialists held a major and certification in reading. Thus, close to nine out of ten reading specialists who majored in reading held a reading certificate.

Elementary Education—Three-quarters of those who taught reading had a major in elementary education (76 percent of reading specialists, 74 percent of other reading teachers, and

75 percent of general elementary teachers). Reading specialists and other reading teachers were less likely than general elementary education teachers to hold certification in elementary education. Twenty percent of reading specialists and 76 percent of other reading teachers were certified in elementary education, compared with 93 percent of general elementary education teachers. Similarly, 16 percent of reading specialists had a major and certification in elementary education, compared with 61 percent of other reading teachers and 72 percent of elementary education teachers.

Comparing reading teachers and general elementary education teachers in terms of their educational qualifications, 36 percent of reading specialists had a postsecondary major in reading,³ while 75 percent of general elementary teachers held a postsecondary major in elementary education. Thirty-two percent of reading specialists had both a major and certification in reading; 72 percent of general elementary education teachers had both a major and certification in elementary education. Data are available on the educational qualifications of public school teachers of other subjects in 1999–2000, as well. Another NCES report (Seastrom et al. 2002) reported public school teachers' educational qualifications in their subjects taught during the 1999–2000 school year. Seastrom and her colleagues found, at the elementary grades level, that 71 percent of teachers with main assignments in special education held both a major and certification in special education. At the middle grades level, more than 40 percent of English, science, and social science teachers held both credentials in their field; at the high school grades level, 70 percent or more of English, mathematics, science, and social science teachers had both a major and certification in the field taught.

Table 2. Percentage of public elementary-level teachers with specific subject matter assignments, by educational attainment and preparation characteristics: 1999–2000

Characteristics	Subject-matter assignment		
	Main assignment in reading (reading specialist)	At least one class in reading, but not main assignment (other reading teacher)	General elementary education
Educational attainment			
Bachelor's degree	100.0	98.2	99.9
Master's degree	63.3	51.3	40.2
Higher degree than master's	6.6	4.4	4.4
Educational preparation and certification in reading			
Major	36.2	5.3	5.1
Minor	6.4	#	1.6
Certification	81.4	4.3	2.7
Major and certification	31.7	‡	1.5
Educational preparation and certification in elementary education			
Major	76.3	74.0	75.1
Minor	2.1	1.1	2.1
Certification	20.2	76.3	93.2
Major and certification	16.4	60.6	71.5

#Rounds to zero.

‡Reporting standards not met.

NOTE: Teachers with undergraduate majors in both reading and elementary education were counted for both groups. Not all apparent differences in this table are statistically significant. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2004034>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public Teacher Questionnaire" and "Charter Teacher Questionnaire," 1999–2000.

Conclusion

This Issue Brief looked at the qualifications of elementary-level reading teachers relative to general elementary teachers. There were about 29,000 public elementary-level reading specialists in 1999–2000, compared with approximately 32,000 other elementary teachers who reported teaching at least one reading class and 1 million general elementary education teachers.

Public elementary school reading specialists differed from other elementary teachers on several measures of their assignments and educational backgrounds. Three-quarters of reading specialists held full-time positions and were more likely than other elementary teachers to have part-time or itinerant assignments. Reading specialists tended to teach pull-out classes, while other reading teachers were more likely to teach in departmentalized instruction assignments and general elementary education teachers were more likely to teach in self-contained classrooms. Reading specialists and other reading teachers were more likely to have master's degrees than other elementary-level teachers. Reading specialists also tended to have more educational preparation in reading than the other elementary teachers.

Although reading specialists tended to have more educational preparation in reading than did the other teachers typically engaged in reading instruction, they tended not to have as much educational preparation as other teachers in their main assignments. Seastrom et al. (2002) listed several subjects in

which higher percentages of teachers held majors and certifications in their main assignments in 2002 than did reading specialists.

This Issue Brief provides an initial description of reading teachers and their assignments. It has not examined the school settings of teachers who specialize in reading instruction. Future analyses could examine the extent to which these teachers are employed in Title I or other schools with expected high need for specialized reading instruction.

Footnotes

¹Teachers who reported classroom assignments in which they taught the same group of students all day, team-taught or taught students pulled out of their regular classrooms for instruction were not asked to report each subject taught.

²Teachers of elementary grades include teachers who taught only grades K–4, as well as other teachers who taught grades 5–9 but identified themselves as elementary or special education teachers. The analysis included a sample size of approximately 10,300 teachers.

³This leaves 64 percent of reading specialists without a postsecondary major in reading. Further analyses found that 45.6 percent (standard error = 4.26 percent) of reading specialists had a postsecondary major in elementary education, but not reading, and that 18.2 percent (standard error = 3.00 percent) had neither postsecondary majors in reading or elementary education.

Reference

Seastrom, M.M., Gruber, K.J., Henke, R., McGrath, D.J., and Cohen, B.A. (2002). *Qualifications of the Public School Teacher Workforce: Prevalence of Out-of-Field Teaching 1987–88 to 1999–2000* (NCES 2002–603). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

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