



# ARE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS JACKS OF ALL TRADES OR MASTERS OF NONE?

Educator Barnes – 4/19/18

Recently, I was facilitating a discussion with high school teachers about Kylee Beers book [\*When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do – A Guide for Teachers 6-12\*](#). In chapter four, Beers explained that one of her students did not understand how to find the main idea and that she did not do a good job of teaching him how to find it explicitly. After reading the chapter, teachers were concerned this secondary student still hadn't mastered this skill. I asked the group of teachers, "Do you know when the main idea is first introduced in our [\*Indiana Academic Standards\*](#)? They didn't know exactly.

If you view the Indiana Academic Standards and look at reading nonfiction 2.2 from grades K-2, you will find the following:

- K.RN.2.2 With support, retell the main idea and key details of a text.
- 1.RN.2.2 Retell main ideas and key details of a text.
- 2.RN.2.2 Identify the main idea of a multi-paragraph text and the topic of each paragraph.

One teacher asked me, “If the main idea is first introduced at the elementary level, and some of our high school students still cannot identify it, then what is going on in these elementary schools?”

This school year, I teach high school English part-time and coach teachers in literacy during the remaining part of my day, but the first eight years of my twelve-year career in education was spent teaching middle school English. When I was at the middle school level, I had the same question, “What is going on in elementary school?” I wanted to know why my students had not picked up certain skills or not obtained mastery in others and don’t get me started about the students who showed up to 7th or 8th grade reading at a 2nd or 3rd-grade level.

[“What is going on in elementary schools?”](#) [CLICK TO TWEET](#)

**But if you want to know what is happening in elementary school, you have to work in one.** I spent the three years in between being a middle school English teacher and my current role working in two different elementary schools. In one school, I was a K-5 English language learner teacher and in the other school, I was a K-6 [literacy coach](#). One school was rated an A and the other was rated an F. In my role as both an English language learner teacher and as a literacy coach, I spent time in almost every classroom in each building. That’s when it became clear to me what was really going on in elementary schools – too many elementary teachers were jacks of all trades and masters of none. Regardless of the rating of the school, some elementary teachers did not know the content for all subjects at a high level. This was the reason students showed up to middle school unprepared because their teachers lacked the depth of knowledge in all of the subject areas. Below, I have outlined what I noticed during my three years at the elementary level.

## **Literacy**

If elementary teachers have a strength, it is in their focus on reading...it doesn’t mean they always teach it well, but they typically make sure students read. If a school has extra money in its budget to hire an instructional coach, many times that person will focus on literacy. When I became an elementary literacy coach the skill gap between teachers became clear. One day, I was working with an upper-grade teacher who mispronounced hyperbole. She pronounced the first part of the word like a *hyper* child and the second part like a *bowl* of cereal. The standard we were looking at also

mentioned similes and metaphors. The teacher didn't know the difference between the two and she wasn't planning to teach the standard until we had a conversation. Literacy is multifaceted and there are many literary genres and skills students need to learn. Elementary schools have to do a better job at making sure teachers understand and can teach all of the components of literacy.

## **Math**

A teacher once told me, "I could teach first-grade math well, but I don't really know what I'm doing now that I got moved to second grade, so I'm just giving them harder worksheets." Huh, what? That's not a plan. With math being taught conceptually, which is different from how current teachers learned math, the shift has caused some teachers to struggle with instruction. When elementary teachers are constantly moved from different grades and then land in an upper grade, the teachers might not have mastered the strategies or know how to teach those math concepts yet. I had a principal who used to always say, "Math makes my feet sweat." Personally, I wanted to double major in math and English...but who wants to be in college that long? I love math just as much as literacy. One day, when a teacher got stuck in the middle of a math question, she told the students to move on to the next question. Once I told her I could explain it, she let me show the class. Would she have gone back to the problem if I hadn't offered to help? How many students don't know math because their teacher is stuck on the problem too?

## **Social Studies**

Good 'ole social studies...or do you mean citizenship class? It is important for students to know the various roles in society and how they will take part and add value to our community, but many times this is the bulk of the curriculum. In Indiana, there are four overarching social studies standards for elementary students: Standard 1 – History, Standard 2 – Civics and Government, Standard 3 – Geography, and Standard 4 – Economics. Elementary teachers seem to get stuck in geography or teaching economics and explaining different jobs and needs in our community. Little time is spent delving into history. In Indiana, 4th graders study Indiana history and I will say this is taken seriously. Students look forward to this year of social studies because of the projects and activities they have heard about from older siblings, but shouldn't students look forward to social studies in every grade? Shouldn't social studies be more than a [Pinterest](#) lesson when MLK day rolls around? Shouldn't it be more than a quick lesson on the electoral college process when we happen to be in an election year? This puts secondary teachers at a disadvantage when they have to cover basic history on top of the specific secondary history standards.

## **Science**

"Shawnta, I don't even know what the science standards are for my grade; I've never looked at them." I honestly wasn't surprised. When you are in a school where science consists of watching a Magic School Bus episode while chowing down on afternoon

snack, what can you expect? Wait a minute, I forgot that brief lesson on caterpillars, so teachers would have a reason to release butterflies in the spring with their students. This may seem harsh, but a principal I know once said, "What gets tested, gets taught." Even though we take a state standardized science assessment, it doesn't factor into accountability, so many times science instruction is cut to double the reading block. I did have the opportunity to observe a rockstar kindergarten teacher teach science on several occasions throughout a school year. She even won the 2014 National Shell Science Teacher of the Year Award. Now, she leads science professional development for other teachers. Science can be taught well in elementary school, but the teacher has to have the knowledge and know the strategies to teach it well. Students shouldn't show up to middle school clueless about the scientific method. If some of the teachers in the elementary school don't know how to teach science well, the principal should elevate a teacher who can teach science well as a teacher leader to help his or her colleagues.

[Elementary teachers](#) don't want to be responsible for sending ill-prepared students to middle school, so where does this leave us? It leaves us in a bind and I learned that blaming the elementary schools is not the answer. Secondary and elementary teachers must work together.

For example, during one summer, I had the opportunity to work on a vertical articulation team looking at the standards K-8 and this allowed middle school teachers to work with elementary teachers to identify areas of concerns. We even looked at what terminology was used when teaching certain skills and concepts. It allowed the elementary schools to realize where gaps were and to develop a plan to help teachers obtain that content knowledge. It allowed middle schools teachers to identify some strategies they wanted to bring into their classrooms to make sure as students progressed through each grade they understood this was a skill they already learned but were building upon in middle school.

I understand that the elementary license is a generalist license, but our students need their teachers to have more than a surface level understanding of each content area they are teaching. We might miss out on a student growing up to become a scientist all because he or she didn't gain a love of science in elementary school because the elementary school didn't invest in the teachers to make sure they are comfortable with teaching the content area.