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Gabriel, Rachael. (2013). *Reading's Non-Negotiables*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

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Rachael Gabriel's *Reading's Non-Negotiables* articulates the essential elements of effective reading instruction and provides examples of how to integrate these elements into any classroom from kindergarten through high school. The underlying theme throughout the book is neatly addressed in the last chapter titled, *Wanted: Instruction Wrapped in Meaning, Grounded in Purpose*. Gabriel proposes that all students should be given the opportunity to make choices with regard to what they are reading as well as have time for meaningful practice with purpose. She argues that once this overarching ideology is in place, then the explicit teaching of skills and strategies can unfold. Without meaning and purpose weaved throughout

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the school day, the classroom will tend to focus more on skill and drill and the teaching of discrete literacy skills which will most likely not have a dramatic positive impact on academic achievement and may even have a negative effect on students' self-efficacy. The author urges the reader to consider the real purposes of reading within the classroom and challenges the reader to rethink what a classroom focused on meaningful reading would look like. She asks the reader to envision what would be going on and then proceeds to explain throughout the rest of the book what an engaged literacy classroom focused on meaningful exchanges and purpose could look like.

Gabriel doesn't suggest that one reading program will work every time with every child. Instead she reminds us that all instruction should be student-centered and based on the individual needs of each of our students. Choice is one area in which instruction may be individualized. Choice is naturally motivating since it tends to lead to autonomy and a sense of agency which tends to result in more time spent reading texts. Like learning to ride a bicycle, reading takes an enormous amount of practice. Just as you wouldn't teach a young child to ride a bike by handing them a bicycle repair guide and asking them to read it cover to cover and take a test; reading instruction should not be approached by a strategy of teaching discrete skills and strategies that don't resemble the authentic process of reading that you and I participate in each day. If I had been given worksheets with comprehension questions to complete after each chapter of *Reading's Non-Negotiables*, I likely would have become disengaged and probably would not have completed reading the book. Also it is important to realize I had a choice in whether or not I would read this book. Sometimes we don't know which books will be engaging for our students and connect to their prior-knowledge, but if we just ask they may be willing to tell us. Accessing the students' interests can serve as a guide to building engagement and confidence in reading. Some teachers may be concerned that when given the choice, students will choose books that are too easy, too hard, or won't pick anything to read at all! When students are given these choices they can be instructed as to how to pick books that are a good fit (The Goldilocks' Principle) and there are actually benefits to reading books outside of a student's instruction level from time to time. Easy books

can build fluency and confidence and too hard books can expose students to new text structures, vocabulary and concepts. Another concern with giving students choice is considering where all the books will come from. Gabriel provides several suggestions for amassing free reading materials including book swaps, picking up free brochures, printing texts off the internet, or allowing current or former students to add their own written pieces to the available library of materials.

Next, Gabriel discusses the need for quality decoding and fluency instruction. Obviously it is important for readers to have the ability to sound out unknown words based on their alphabetic knowledge and orthographic understandings. Without the ability to decode, readers will reach a level of frustration very quickly and will be unlikely to comprehend the text they are working with. Additionally, if students do not have proper fluency comprehension can be hindered. Gabriel notes that fluency sometimes is misdefined as fast reading. "It's important to keep in mind that the goal is always optimal understanding, not optimal speed. Thus fluency programs or assessments that focus on speed and/or accuracy to the exclusion of (or in the absence of) meaning and understanding, are not only misleading, but miseducative" (p.27). Fluency includes not only speed, but also accuracy, prosody and understanding. Another dimension of fluency can also be considered. The ability to sustain fluency through longer texts is called reading stamina. With the focus on the Common Core State Standards and the PARCC assessment, students will be required to read and comprehend lengthier texts fluently. Some excellent ways to build fluency include rereadings of favorite series books and readers' theater.

The ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. Without understanding, what would the purpose of reading be? Therefore, readers should be given the opportunity to read books that are on their instructional level. Seems obvious, right? Gabriel notes that many basal reading programs only allot 15 minutes or less of the 90 minute literacy block to actual reading of appropriately leveled texts (Brenner & Hiebert, 2010). With all the worksheets and activities outlined in basal series, it is difficult to "schedule in" time for reading. That is why basals should be used as a guide or tool, but not a manual that dictates

how the literacy block will be conducted. When it comes to struggling readers they need even more time spent reading appropriate texts so that they can catch up to their grade level peers. Unfortunately these are the students who are provided with more lower-level literacy activities. If teachers hold this deficit view of struggling readers they will continue to be labeled as struggling readers.

For those students who struggle, it is non-negotiable that they receive high quality intensive intervention to catch them up with their peers. The earlier the better, but it is never too late to intervene. Unfortunately many students who are placed in tier 2 or 3 of RtI² are placed on a generic computer program such as Voyager instead of placed with a well-trained teacher. When skills are taught in isolation they are rarely transferred to authentic reading situations. Interventions should take place with meaning making at the forefront with an educated instructor. Quality interventionists assume competence and closely observe struggling readers rather than assume a deficit. By providing individualized and targeted instruction that builds on a student's strengths gains will likely occur.

As Gabriel stated previously, meaning should be at the core of all literacy instruction. This is just as true for writing instruction as reading instruction. Since writing and reading are reciprocal processes, one influences and supports the other. Writing took a backseat to other literacy skills explicitly discussed by the National Reading Panel, and therefore it is being overlooked in many classrooms. This may lead to detrimental effects when students arrive in high school and need to take the PARCC or arrive in college and need to take the GRE (both writing intensive assessments). Quality writing instruction should not be composed of diagraming sentences and handwriting drills. Conversely, instruction should include authentic writing tasks that are purposeful and motivating. Gabriel reminds us that as adults we rarely write to a prompt or complete fill-in-the-blank sentences. Therefore, why should we ask our students to? Aren't we trying to prepare them to be successful adults? Perhaps more time would be better spent immersed in actual writing and reading.

The final non-negotiable aspect of effective reading instruction that Gabriel discusses is no less important than

the previous ones. She discusses the importance of dialogue in the classroom. Whether this takes the form of readers and writers interacting with their peers or teachers modeling fluent reading and writing, these types of interactions should take place in the classroom daily. Gabriel argues that "the role of student discourse is perhaps the most underestimated and underused element of classroom instruction in US public schools—especially at the secondary level" (p. 67). Generally teachers follow an IRE (initiate, respond, evaluate) sequence over and over again in the classroom. On the other hand, dialogue that is more conversational in nature in which the teacher and peers extend and elaborate on previous comments is more authentic and meaningful. Gabriel suggests that perhaps little authentic talk occurs in the classroom because teachers are afraid that students will be off-task or that what the teacher has to say is more important. On the contrary, students who are just passively listening to a lecture are more likely to be off-talk and may struggle to find meaning in the lesson. A classroom discussion should be more representative of talk that occurs in the "real world". This means that the teacher shouldn't be talking anymore that 40-50% of the time and students should be given the opportunity to direct the conversations and negotiate their dimensions.

Gabriel's book *Reading's Non-Negotiables* is written in an accessible manner for both practitioners and school literacy leaders. She does an excellent job of presenting the non-negotiables of effective reading instruction in a straightforward, common-sense approach. Throughout the book, Gabriel discusses how important it is to make literacy meaningful and purposeful. By using classroom examples and metaphors for learning she engages the reader and provides opportunities to think about one's own teaching. For anyone examining a basal reading series or looking for teaching ideas on the internet it is obvious that the reading "industry" is saturated. For new teachers or administrators trying to boil it down to the most critical reading topics this book is vital and is a welcome addition to other books on the market.

About the Reviewer

Jennifer Jordan is a clinical Assistant Professor of Education at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Her scholarly interests include the professional development of pre-service elementary teachers, emergent literacy, and the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. She is particularly interested in how language shapes literacy development, especially writing development, in the early years of school.

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