

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

The Fourth Grade Slump

**Excerpted from Differentiated Reading Instruction in Grades 4 and 5:
Strategies and Resources**

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Fourth grade is often students' first real experience with the content-area textbooks that will dominate much of their subsequent adolescent literacy experience. Fourth grade is also the first time students are tested with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the results are sobering. Only 67% of fourth graders performed above the basic level in 2009; only 33% performed above the proficient level. Thirty-three percent of fourth-grade students were below the basic level. NAEP does not test at the early grades, but conventional wisdom leads many to speculate that a sizable number of children whose performance appeared to be adequate through grade three begin to dip in grade four. This trend has been called the fourth-grade slump. The slump is particularly steep for students living in poverty.

An influential study of the phenomenon of decreasing achievement beginning in the fourth grade (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990) tracked three cohorts of low-income students with measures of word recognition, spelling, word meaning, word analysis, oral reading, and reading comprehension. The data showed that student performance at grades two and three was adequate, but that at grade four knowledge of word meanings declined, and then at grade seven word recognition, spelling, and comprehension followed suit. The fourth-grade slump, then, may begin with vocabulary knowledge, and then have wide-reaching negative effects.

It is probably fair to say that there are nontrivial differences in the reading tasks that children face in the early primary grades compared with those in the upper-elementary grades. One difference may be the shift to information texts. Narratives with strong story grammars dominate the reading selections in first grade (Duke, 2000). Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi (2010) examined text use in second-, third-, and fourth-grade classrooms. As in Duke's study, they found very low use of information text at all – even in the fourth-grade classrooms. Perhaps even upper-elementary teachers do not necessarily ratchet up their students' text experiences adequately. Information text has different demands – even physical ones – as there are subheadings, headings, graphs, italicized words and text in nontraditional form (in

columns, in pictures, in subtitles). Also, the text may have embedded text structures that will require the use of different strategies for information retrieval. For example, the students may read a text that combines compare-contrast, enumeration, and description in its overall structure, and students used to a diet of fiction may not be accustomed to these organizational patterns.

A second reason for the fourth-grade slump may be the increasing demands of reading vocabulary outside of normal speaking and listening vocabulary. In short, reading selections begin to contain a higher percentage of lower-frequency words. The words become more abstract and complicated, and low-income students may not have been exposed to them. This trend is evident in their poor vocabulary performance at grade four and in their comprehension beginning at grade six. It may be that opportunities for wide reading make it possible for more advantaged students to develop larger vocabularies that they can leverage as the demands of texts increase.

Yet a third reason for the slump may be that attitudes toward reading are declining for some students, especially those at risk. Researchers tested the relationship between reading fluency and reading attitude in fourth grade and reading achievement measured on a state standardized test in fifth grade. Both were significant predictors, with attitude toward recreational reading in fourth grade accounting for the most variance in fifth-grade comprehension (Martínez, Aricak, & Jewell, 2008). Students who develop poor attitudes toward recreational reading will surely read less, missing the chance for incidental vocabulary acquisition that eventually manifests in poor reading comprehension.

Surely there are ways that teachers can work together to prevent these trends. Sanacore and Palumbo (2009) suggest actions to take in light of the fourth-grade slump: (1) increase access to expository discourse throughout the primary grades; (2) engage children in more actual informational text reading by reading aloud to them and then providing them access to high-quality classroom library materials for independent reading; (3) teach meaning vocabulary directly; and (4) foster engagement and participation. In addition, simply providing texts for summer reading between third and fourth grade can have a positive effect (Kim, 2006). These same recommendations may also apply to those fourth- and fifth- grade teachers whose students already suffer the fourth-grade slump.

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