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What Matters Most? A Survey of Accomplished Middle-Level Educators' Beliefs and Values about Literacy

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What Matters Most? A Survey of Accomplished Middle-Level Educators' Beliefs and Values about Literacy

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Ninety teachers working in award-winning middle schools responded to a survey that explored, quantitatively and qualitatively, how they (1) defined themselves as teachers of literacy, (2) viewed multiliteracies in adolescents' lives, and (3) valued these literacies in the classroom. Mean scores indicated that Basic Literacies (e.g., comprehension, word identification, fluency, writing) were rated more favorably than New Literacies (e.g., media, Internet, critical, out of school). Strong qualitative support existed for literacy instruction in all disciplines, but interpretations varied. The most positive

agreement centered on every teacher being a teacher of literacy. Little support existed for developing students' out-of-school literacies in schools. Such findings have strong implications for altering curricular emphases and merging teacher practice with adolescents' needs and interests*.*

Adolescence is a unique and vital period in an individual's literacy learning. Accordingly, teachers must scaffold young adolescents toward more advanced stages of literacy as a necessary part of their normal reading development (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Exemplary literacy programs for middle grades do exist, but regrettably they are often the exception. In most cases, the instructional emphasis in earlier grades on the processes of reading gives way in the middle grades to a pronounced emphasis on subject matter acquisition. In fact, most of the 20th century could be characterized by the resistance to teaching reading across the content areas (see, e.g., Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995) That is, historically, many teachers in these grades have believed that the responsibility for instruction in reading and other aspects of literacy rested with the language arts or English teacher, rather than as a shared responsibility among all teachers.

In the late 1990s, however, the field shifted, most notably in the change of terminology from *secondary reading* to *adolescent literacy* (Moore, 1996) and in the accompanying understandings of what those constructs represented. Not long afterward, even more changes occurred as researchers began to focus on the social and political nature of adolescent literacy (Hinchman & Moje, 1998). The related research on secondary teachers' beliefs about the meaning of traditional literacies has been scarce (Readence, Kile, & Mallette, 1998), but even fewer studies exist that explore what middle school teachers and administrators believe and value about literacy instruction from this newer and broader reconceptualization of adolescent literacy. The purpose of this study, then, was to examine how accomplished middle school teachers define their roles as teachers of literacy, how they view the multiliteracies in adolescents' lives, and what value they place on those literacies for use in the classroom.

Adolescent Literacy

Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) argue that literacy is more than just reading and writing in academic settings, encompassing a far broader span of skills that involves the many ways that people communicate, including Gee's (1996) notion of "multiple literacies." Such literacies signify the many uses of language that involve alternate ways of reading and writing, and they are characterized by the ways of thinking, speaking, interacting, and valuing in particular social settings. For exampIe, within the home, children learn culturally appropriate ways of using language and constructing meaning, but these do not always coincide with the notion of academic literacy.

This construct of adolescent literacy represents a more encompassing view of what, in the past, has been referred to as secondary reading. This contemporary view is grounded in the notion that literacy is socially constructed (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). From a social constructivist perspective, learning occurs in situated contexts through social interaction, dialogue, and negotiation of meaning (Luke, 2003). A socially interactive community of learners exists when people draw on diverse sources of information in daily life. The classroom is one of the few places where separation of subject matter into time allotments serves to discourage children from exchanging information and utilizing diverse textual sources and communication media.

There is a growing body of research on adolescent literacy, framed from more constructivist and critical perspectives, that has explored how students experience literacy in school along with out-of-school literacies that involve print and media texts (Alvermann, 2002; Finders, 1997; Moje, 2000). For example, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) suggest that students are motivated by the use of technological tools, and classrooms that incorporate technology-mediated composing within social learning communities have the potential to promote more academically related interests within the school. Further, as information and communication technologies continually redefine the demands for higher levels and newer understandings of literacy (Leu & Kinzer, 2003), classroom instruction ought to reflect

these changes. Unfortunately, adolescents' literacy skills, which include cultural, linguistic, and critical literacies, are not keeping pace with the societal demands of the information age, nor are they able to keep pace with the higher standards in reading that have been placed upon them (Alvermann, 2001).

What the field of adolescent literacy demands is the placement of the adolescent at the center of instruction, so that we may begin to dispel such narrow definitions of literacy that persist in addressing basic levels of decoding and comprehension of facts (Stevens, 2002). Such definitions fail to provide motivation and meaning for adolescents in the media-saturated environment that is available to them outside the classroom. Further, they fail to consider the psychosocial needs of adolescents that we know distinguishes this stage from all others (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Adolescents "deserve nothing less than a comprehensive effort to support their continual development as readers and writers" (Moore et al., 1999, p. 101).

Researchers have learned many important aspects about literacy directly from adolescents. In addition to the roles and values adolescents associate with literacy, we know what types of literature they find engaging (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999), and why they choose to read Ovey & Broaddus, 2001). Interestingly, this knowledge comes from spending time with adolescents, listening to what they have to say, and observing as they interact-the very things that educators presumably do every day.

In considering the amount of time teachers and administrators spend with students, we were interested in exploring if educators hold the same beliefs about adolescent literacy as those who do research in this area. Specifically, this study was designed to address the following three questions: (1) Do middle-grade educators recognize and value multiple literacies? (2) How do these educators define their roles in teaching literacy? and (3) What aspects of literacy do they value most?

Method

Genesis of the Survey: TQE Initiative

As part of a Department of Education Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) grant at a large Midwestern university, a team of professionals was charged with the task of designing a new literacy course to strengthen middle grades' (5-8) teacher preparation. A diverse group of eight (including three literacy education faculty, two others with specialization in writing assessment, one colleague from the College of Liberal Arts with expertise in adolescent literature, one nationally board-certified teacher in middle-grades language arts, and one doctoral candidate in reading education) debated the specific types of adolescent literacy that ought to be represented in the course and the corresponding percentages of time to be devoted to them. They decided that the perspectives of practicing middle-level educators needed to be taken into consideration in the creation of the course, and this conclusion gave rise to the development of the survey used in the current study. The survey was designed both to reflect research in the literature on adolescent literacy as well as to capture aspects of authentic, field-based beliefs and practices of literacy instruction from teachers in distinguished middle-grades schools around the state. Results from the study would then be embedded into the new middle school literacy course to heighten its real-world applicability, and could be reported as research in its own right, as we attempt to do here.

Participants

The target group of respondents represented teachers and administrators who worked in 12 Illinois middle-grades schools (5-8) that had earned a Blue Ribbon designation in the past 5 years. Blue Ribbon Schools is a national program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to acknowledge high-performing schools. The program honors public and private 1<-12 schools that are either academically superior in their states or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement. The criteria changed in 2002 to reflect the goals of educational reforms for high standards and accountability enacted by the No Child Left Behind legislation. To qualify, one of two criteria must be met: either a minimum of 40% of

the school's students must be from "disadvantaged backgrounds" and show dramatic improvement on state assessments systems, or the school must score in the top 10% on state assessments.

Demographically, these schools were located in areas of the state that were ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Blue Ribbon schools were selected for the study because the greatest likelihood of embracing the importance of adolescent literacies would exist in schools with a demonstrated commitment to innovation and academic excellence.

Data Collection

Sampling

The administrators at each of the 12 Blue Ribbon Schools in the state were telephoned to ask for their participation and the participation of their teaching staff. Respondents were given 2 weeks to complete the survey. At that point, the principals were telephoned again with a further request to encourage the participation of all teachers.

Instrumentation

This study involved the use of a survey designed to ascertain teachers' and administrators' beliefs and values about middle-level literacy. The first section of the instrument focused on demographics and asked about years of teaching, grade levels taught or administered, subjects taught, levels of education, other certification and endorsements, professional development, and gender. In the second section, participants responded to the following open-ended questions:

1. Do you consider literacy instruction to be a major part of your teaching responsibilities? Please explain.
2. In what specific ways do you think your students use literacy in their personal lives?
3. Do you believe middle-grade students' uses of literacy should influence the nature of literacy instruction? Please explain.

4. Describe the way literacy instruction occurs in your school.
5. How would you respond to the following statement: "Every teacher is a teacher of literacy"?

The final section of the survey asked specific, Likert-type questions about the extent to which various topics ought to be considered in (1) the preparation of middle-grades teachers in all subject areas (e.g., teaching and assessment strategies for various aspects of reading, writing processes, struggling readers, and literacy integration in the content areas) and (2) the literacy instruction of middle-grade students (Le., media, Internet, critical and visual literacies, global communication, pop culture, in and out-of-school literacies, and cultural and linguistic diversity). Response choices were Essential, Very Important, Somewhat Important, and Not Important. The choices were represented by rankings of 1 through 4, respectively. The Likert items were placed after the open-ended questions on the survey instrument to reduce the influence that they might exert on the free-form expression of the respondents.

Data Analyses

Responses to the Likert items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency distributions along all demographic variables, item means and standard deviations, and correlations as well as one instance of a t-test to compare scales). Qualitative analyses, which were conducted concurrently with the quantitative computations, involved a content analysis of responses to the open-ended questions. Two of the researchers independently analyzed and coded the responses. In comparing the analyses, they found that three questions engendered responses that could be collapsed into a single category addressing literacy across the curriculum. Further, they compared their coding schemes for the remaining questions and found their category formation to be quite similar. The only discrepancy was identifying a category name for the responses to out-of-school literacy uses. This disparity was resolved by rereading the responses that fell into that category and agreeing upon a broad label.

Results

Of the 12 administrators at the Blue Ribbon Schools invited to participate, 7 agreed. The administrators who chose not to participate indicated they did not want to inundate their teachers with another survey. Thus, we mailed 345 surveys to the teachers and administrators in seven schools. A total of 90 surveys were received, resulting in a final return rate of 26%. While the numbers of respondents varied between schools, all seven of the buildings were represented in the analyses. The return rate by school ranged from 11% to 50%. Interestingly, none of the administrators completed and returned the surveys. Instead, all of our respondents belonged to the teaching ranks. In exploring the demographic data collected on the teachers, we conducted ANOVAs to determine if there were any statistically significant differences among the teachers. For example, we examined differences by years taught, level of education, school building, and type of certification. The results of these analyses showed no significant differences. Further, in ascertaining the teachers' content backgrounds, they were asked to check any subjects they currently taught and/or had taught in the past. The participants represented a range of subject backgrounds. That is, 49 teachers (54%) either currently teach or have taught reading in the past. However, the other 46% reported no experience with reading instruction. Again, the analysis between these two groups on the Likert-scale items showed no significant differences. Thus, the data analyses reported represents the entire group of teachers. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' teaching backgrounds. Teachers who indicated that they taught reading at some point in their career are all represented in the reading group. However, it is important to note that these teachers checked many other subject areas and thus were not all reading teachers at the time of the study.

Quantitative Findings

The first set of Likert-scale questions examined the importance teachers gave to Basic Literacies including reading comprehension, vocabulary, word identification, fluency, writing, at-risk students, and literature in the content areas. As shown in Table 2, the respondents rated aspects of Basic Literacies quite favorably, with mean scores

ranging between 1.3 and 1.74 or, in practical terms, between Essential and Very Important. Standard deviations for all items were very similar to each other, hovering around.70. Table 3 shows the mean scores for the teachers' responses to the set of items aimed at determining the importance of New Literacies. These items addressed a series of literacies including media, the Internet, visual, global, critical, and out-of-school types, as well as considerations of diversity. The mean scores of these items tended to be valued less than the Basic Literacies items, with scores ranging between 1.58 and 1.81. In other words, New Literacies were not regarded as being quite as essential as Basic Literacies in practical terms. As expected, when the two sets of items were compared numerically, the mean scores for Basic Literacies items were more positive than those items associated with New Literacies. In fact, the two grand means for Basic and New Literacies items measured 1.53 and 1.72, respectively, and a correlated samples t-test revealed the two scales (which both exhibited Alpha internal consistency estimates of nearly .90) were indeed statistically significantly different, $t = 3.25, P < .0016$. While the difference between these two means may appear numerically small, and thus generate questions on their educational significance, the qualitative analysis more clearly elucidates this difference. Further, with regard to this analysis, it is worth noting that the correlation between the Basic and New Literacies scales measured .52. In effect, this correlation indicated that the scales shared about 25% of their variance. So, while the scales were similar to some extent, they measured decidedly different aspects of literacy.

Qualitative Findings

Although the qualitative findings were quite similar in nature to the quantitative analyses, they also provided some additional insights into understanding the Likert-scale ratings. In the first stage of the analyses, we found a general convergence of responses generated by three queries that centered on the extent to which teachers considered literacy instruction to be a major part of their teaching responsibilities, the way literacy instruction occurs in their schools, and their reaction to the statement that "Every teacher is a teacher of literacy." The responses to this cluster of items indicated that teachers from all disciplines were strongly supportive of the idea that literacy existed

across the curriculum. They noted that this theme was even becoming a part of their school improvement plans. Clearly, they had begun embracing the notion that all teachers need to teach literacy.

In response to the question about whether literacy instruction was regarded as a major part of their teaching responsibilities, 87 of the 90 teachers responded. Sixty-nine of them (nearly 80%) indicated that they do consider literacy a major part of their teaching responsibilities, while 10 (approximately 12%) indicated that they do not. The remaining eight respondents suggested that literacy instruction represented a part of their teaching, but not a major one. The positive explanations included statements such as "Yes, teaching literacy is integrated into all areas of the curriculum I teach." Another respondent remarked, "Yes, mathematical vocabulary requires strong literacy inferencing skills." Still another commented, "Yes, I do. Currently, I am teaching US History, and the subject requires literacy skills to fully appreciate it. We look at primary sources and historical materials where context, vocabulary, and other literacy skills are needed."

The second question in this cluster, which asked for a description of the way literacy instruction occurred in their schools, was interpreted in various ways by the teachers. However, of the 67 who responded, 47 suggested that literacy instruction occurs across the curriculum. Their comments included statements such as

> "All teachers explain how they need to read for their content area."
> "Across the curriculum. Primary focus in the core classes, reading, English, and history, but this occurs in all classes."
> "Teachers in EVERY subject require students to read and write and uphold similar expectations regardless of the nature of the class."

The other 20 responses varied in that some were specific to methods and others interpreted the statement on a personal level and described what they did in their own instruction. For example, they

referred to the "classroom library" and "reading strategies, response writing, and literature circle discussions."

The final question in the cluster required a reaction to the statement about every teacher being a teacher of literacy, and it generated the greatest amount of positive agreement. Of the 81 teachers who responded, 76 were favorable toward the statement, 3 responded negatively, and 2 suggested it would be true "in an ideal world." The favorable responses included thoughts such as the fol1owing: "All need to teach and incorporate [literacy in all curriculums in order to enrich students and hopefully use throughout their lives." Another wrote, "Every teacher is responsible for encouraging students to read and understand. You cannot teach if you have a student who cannot comprehend. Teachers have to realize they're all in it together."

Findings from these three questions collectively and strongly support the conclusion that literacy in these Blue Ribbon Schools is valued across the curriculum. The teachers in this study felt that all teachers are responsible for literacy instruction. What makes this finding even more compelling is that these responses occurred across all grade levels and subject areas.

The remaining two open-ended questions explored teachers' beliefs and values about adolescents' out-of-school literacies. The first question inquired about specific ways teachers thought that their students used literacy in their personal lives. In response to this question, we noted the emergence of the four thematic categories: (1) personal enjoyment, (2) new literacies, (3) school, and (4) survival/functional.

The uses teachers noted in the category of Personal Enjoyment included purposes related to the following: magazines, newspapers, outside novels, entertainment, diaries, journals, notes, and reading with families. Their responses for New Literacies referenced video game guides, Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, and media literacy. The category of School represented teachers' beliefs that literacy uses outside of school were required for school as well. For example, they noted homework assignments, mandatory independent reading, and

current events. Finally, the Survival/Functional category represented the belief that literacy was necessary to survive and function in society. Their comments included statements such as "communicating in places of business they visit," "reading menus," "literacy is used in all facets of life," and "being able to function in the world and move from day-to-day activities."

In particular, the following statement quite poignantly captures the changing nature of adolescents' out-of-school literacies:

> In an increasingly clumsy way, my students write e-mails to one another. While they may be breeding new linguistic ground there, they write to one another much more than we did as kids. I also see kids reading more than we seemed to when I was younger.

In addition to the themes that emerged in the teachers' responses to this question, the idea of literacy having social uses was evident; that is, in numerous responses, teachers either explicitly used the word *social* in their responses or implied social uses related to communication and interactions between and among people.

By contrast, the respondents were not nearly as strong in their beliefs about the extent to which out-of-school literacies influence instruction in school. Of the 70 participants who responded to this question, only half responded in a favorable way. Some 19 of the teachers responded negatively, 12 indicated a mixed response, and 4 suggested they were unclear about what out-of-school literacies actually meant.

For the teachers who were favorable toward merging traditional and new literacies in the school, their reasoning seemed to be predicated on the importance of using teaching practices that connected to their students' interests. They noted, "Enthusiasm to learn will be higher" and "instruction relevant." One respondent remarked, "Literacy instruction to middle school students will be most effective if taught through their interests."

However, the teachers who did not embrace this notion voiced their concerns about students not being fundamentally prepared for

the future or not having appropriate basic language skills. Among their concerns were the necessity of "preparing them for how they will need literacy in the future (jobs, life skills)" and "teaching them the value and appreciation of being literate." Teachers with these concerns did not seem to view students' out-of-school literacies as a part of being literate. One respondent wrote, "We drive them to what they need- they think (URQT-you are cute) is acceptable." Another expressed reluctance to "create curriculum around their use of e-mail and 'chat rooms.' I continue to try to bring their use of literacy up to an acceptable formal use." Still another explained her reasoning as, "With the advent of instant messaging and the subsequent use of abbreviations, I think we need to make sure that students can communicate, speaking and writing in complete intelligent sentences."

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analyses produced mutually supportive results, suggesting that teachers place different values on Basic and New Literacies. In terms of Basic Literacies, the findings are quite positive. It seems that after a century of resisting the construct of *literacy across the curriculum* (Moore et al., 1983), teachers in schools designated as successful do indeed place value on teaching literacy in all subjects. An important caveat to consider with respect to this valuing, however, is that knowing how the respondents actually teach literacy across the curriculum goes beyond the scope of this study. While some teachers did identify specific strategies they use and briefly explained their classroom instruction, these represent only small glimpses into the larger picture of desirable literacy practices they may or may not be using.

The findings suggest that teachers place less value upon out-of-school literacies (e.g., visual, computer, graphic) as characterized in the research literature than they do on Basic Literacies. Although teachers had some knowledge and appreciation of students' personal literacies, they made little mention of sign systems, graffiti, drama, or music literacy, areas included in a broad and generative view of literacy (Moje et al., 2000). Even more disappointing, however, was the lukewarm support for bringing out-of-school literacies into school contexts, as more contemporary research has documented the value

these literacies have in adolescents' lives (see, e.g., Alvermann, 2002; Moje, 2000).

Interestingly, although many educators expressed the desire to connect with students, they did not seem to recognize out-of-school literacies as a possible means for doing so. Perhaps one reason for this resistance stems from the perspective that out-bf-school uses of literacy ought to be an extension of the traditional goals of school-based literacies, not an influence on in-school instructional practices. For example, they suggested that students use literacy "to learn about ways to be successful in society" and "to survive as adults." Thus, teachers see their jobs as to preparing their students to be successful in society and do not believe that will happen by integrating out-of, school literacies in their daily classroom instruction.

While we recognize that this type of thinking makes sense in a standards-driven, high-stakes testing educational system, it fails to take into consideration the needs and interests of students and, in that sense, represents missed opportunities. Respondents seemed to place little value on students' multiple literacies, and instead regarded them as habits in need of repair. Yet, in students' lives, instant messaging and chat rooms are real sources of communication, whether sanctioned by the school or not. This disconnect between teachers' beliefs and students' reality highlights Hagood's (2000) notion that literacies valued and used in different contexts are dependent on what is valued by the community of users.

Resnick (2000) suggests that "school is only one of many social forces, institutionalized and not, that determine the nature and extent of the nation's literacy" (p. 27). She argues for research on the nature of literacy practices both in and out of school in order to understand more fully our nation's literacy crisis and develop possible solutions. With little systematic research on out, of, school literacy practices available, educators cannot success, fully confront the problem. Since dominant school practice may run counter to the practical and pleasurable literacy behavior of students' everyday lives, fundamental shifts in school practice would be necessary to address their unique needs relevantly. Moreover, man, dates to learn the dominant discourse of standard English, as a fair number of the teachers in the

present study thought important, do not signify the need to "remediate" deficit literacies but rather to expand what counts as texts (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000).

Moje and colleagues (2000) argue for a challenging but responsive literacy curriculum that pushes adolescents to stretch their thinking and read their worlds in new ways. A study of middle-level teachers' values of instructional literacy practices might serve as a starting point for such a curriculum. In this spirit, the current study would seem to hold strong implications for preservice teacher education and staff development that informs educators of the value of literacy defined in the broadest and most authentic sense. Just as the forms and functions of literacy continually change over time (Leu & Kinzer, 2003), teachers must examine their own values and teaching practices to keep pace. More importantly, they must consider adolescents and the lives they lead as central to that change process. In turn, state tests should somehow come to reflect the New Literacies in order to give teachers license to value and seek a broader range of literacy instructional outcomes.

Adolescent literacy represents an important piece of the lifelong literacy puzzle. Thus, literacy researchers who study adolescent literacy should gain insight from the perspectives of those who work most closely with adolescents. Additionally, literacy researchers in all areas can benefit from learning about the unique, important, and continually changing nature of adolescent literacy. To affect successful change in the literacy instruction provided to adolescents, it is important to listen to the voices of those who have a vested interest. With that notion in mind, the present study attempted to bring the construct of adolescent literacy into a sharper pragmatic focus.

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Appendix
Table 1: Teaching Backgrounds

Subject Currently Teaching and/ or Have Taught in the Past	*n*
Reading*	49
Exploratory / Related Arts / Electives	10
Physical Education	7
Math	5
Foreign Language	4
Special Education	4
Social Studies	3
Science & Math	3
Social Studies & Math	2
Social Studies & Science	1
Science	1
Other: Speech/Language Therapy	1

* While these teachers do not all currently teach reading, as they marked many other subjects on their surveys, they represent teachers who at some point in their career taught reading.

Table 2: Basic Literacies

Aspect of Basic Literacy	N	Mean	SD
Reading Comprehension	88	1.30	0.68
Vocabulary	87	1.48	0.74
Word Identification	86	1.69	0.76
Fluency	87	1.62	0.77
Writing	88	1.40	0.74
At-Risk Students	88	1.51	0.74
Literature/Content Area	87	1.74	0.80

Table 3: New Literacies

Aspect of New Literacy	N	Mean	SD
Media	84	1.81	0.72
Internet	86	1.67	0.74
Visual	84	1.75	0.67
Global	83	1.75	0.76
Diversity	86	1.78	0.77
Critical	83	1.58	0.77
Out-of-School	83	1.77	0.75