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How We Are Complicit: Challenging the School Discourse of Adolescent Reading

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The call for submissions for this edition of the journal is titled, "Challenging the Deficit Model and the Pathologizing of Children: Envisioning Alternative Models." In the following essay I will make clear, I hope, how alive and well is the practice of viewing readers, in this case, adolescent readers, through an extremely narrow and inaccurate lens of deficit, explore the why behind the narrow measure and close with some suggestions for expanding our lens for understanding adolescent readers and providing some specific examples of classroom practices that encourage and support such an expanded view.

I write from the position of a district administrator with over twenty years of classroom practice. As the 6-12 English/Language Arts Coordinator at a small urban school district in the northeast, I work with teachers throughout the day to create engaging lessons, sit in on their team meetings, evaluate and supervise, as well as direct curriculum revision efforts.

An Interlude

Listen in for a moment on a typical discussion in one secondary English department meeting:

"He reads at a first grade level, what am I supposed to do with him?"

"They don't know enough about the world to make inferences."

"Most kids don't have reading material in their house."

"The majority of kids weren't read to when they were little."

"I just assume they don't have any books."

"I have two non-readers and one who reads at a first grade level."

I share these snippets because they represent the nature of the discourse about adolescents and reading I hear almost daily at small group meetings and in one-on-one conversations with teachers and school administrators. My concern is twofold; how this discourse affects our understanding adolescents' reading abilities, and, subsequently, how these adolescents come to view themselves. Every one of the above statements is predicated on something missing, what has *not* been done, and, as such, closes down thinking about a student's capabilities rather than opening it up to possibility, the real problem with the deficit lens.

What, for example, is the use of knowing that a certain 9th grade student was not read to as a child? Yes, the value and importance of having a rich reading environment at home during the elementary years and beyond is well documented, but what is the value of viewing an adolescent through this lens now? What does a teacher *do* with this information? I asked this of the teachers at the above meeting, and they were aghast, claiming it gave them a better picture of

the student so they could understand where the students "were coming from." I wonder what that does for instruction, for encouraging this student to read *now*? How does knowing the deficits of the past help a teacher *today* to make his instruction stronger? I await an answer.

A Disturbing Trend

Over the past ten years, with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (www.ed.gov, 2001) that mandated for annual statewide testing in grades 3-8 and one high school year and because, as Shannon (2007) points out "In order to qualify for funding, states would ensure that all schools were implementing scientific reading instruction" (p. 15), the discourse around adolescents and reading has become focused on a grade-level equivalent, a seemingly scientific measure of reading ability. This quantifiable measure, often done using the Scholastic Reading Inventory, or SRI, (www.Read180.scholastic.com, 2013) was developed by the MetaMetrics company to match readers and text using a software program known as the Lexile Level Measure (www.metametrics.com, 2014). These levels, according to the MetaMetrics website, were never intended to be used to label and sort students and, in fact, they warn against this practice, yet this is widespread practice based both on my own experience and from interacting with educators in multiple districts. The Lexile Measure uses a text's surface features, such as sentence length and syllable count, to give an estimate of what grade level a reader could understand this text without too much difficulty.

How the Use of the Lexile Measure Creates a Discourse of Deficit About Adolescent Reading

It *sounds* like it makes sense: Discover where students can comprehend and then provide them with multiple opportunities to read texts at gradually more difficult levels until--*viola*!--they are reading at a higher Lexile measure, and problem solved. Or not. For starters, labeling a student as a specific grade-level reader (second-grade-level or fifth-grade- level reader, for example) creates and perpetuates a false understanding of what it means to read and comprehend a text. Reading is a socially situated and uniquely interactive experience (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993) but the appeal of a single numerical value to measure reading offers a way to make sense of this complex activity (Porter, 1995). The reliance on a number assumed to be scientific and objective creates what Porter (1995) refers to as a shared "discourse, even if it reduces the ability to understand the phenomena" (p. 227).

Students so labeled by a single quantitative score are then offered shorter and easier texts, tracked into remedial programs, and taught watered down versions of the books their classmates are reading. This is all done, perhaps with the best of intentions, to help the student grow in reading as *measured on the Lexile scale*. The error of using a single quantifiable measure to deem a student as reading at a certain grade level is never interrogated, even though the makers of the test warn against using the Lexile measure to label and sort students (MetaMetrics, 2014).

A Narrow View of Reading

The ubiquitous use of the computerized software program that uses decontextualized text passages followed by multiple choice questions to measure adolescent reading ability severely limits our understanding of what it means to read and comprehend. In a policy brief for the

National Reading Conference, Peter Afflerbach (2005) writes, "Understanding short texts and answering questions about them, which is required of all students taking high stakes tests, is but a small slice of what we expect accomplished student readers to do… high stakes tests are an exceedingly thin measure of reading achievement and reading ability" (p. 153). Yet daily, in my experience, high-stakes decisions about student placement are based almost universally on a single score from either the SRI or other inauthentic reading measures, such as the Degrees of Reading Power (www.drp.questarai.com, 2014). What is deeply troubling in this decision-making is that even if alternative data are presented, such as grades on class work and so-called kid-watching behavior that is so valuable to the aware teacher, the test score wields much greater weight, as it is viewed as non-biased and fair. Again, as Afflerbach (2005) makes clear, the "scientific aura" surrounding test scores, is "actually severely limited in their ability to describe the wide range of reading achievement" (p. 153).

Describing a student's reading abilities as being at a certain grade level denies the complexity of what reading is and is done for. The shift to rely solely on formal assessments of reading in the name of accountability has forced schools to make reading easily measurable, i.e., quantified, and thereby easily reported, i.e. on spreadsheets (O'Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009). This discourse of measurement creates a deficit -based view of reading using a linear measure in which some will be above others and some will not measure up. It also positions the science of numbers and what are believed to be objective measures as the arbiters of final note. Presenting curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in this guise, as Bloome and Brown (2013) suggest, presents them not as "ideological, but as 'scientific' … thereby claiming they are "ideologically neutral and simply the application of science to the teaching and learning" (p. 138).

Whose Literacy Counts in School?

Reducing reading ability to a single score on a quantitative measure denies the complexity and power of the act of making meaning from and with texts. In considering the work of Bourdieu and his proposition that schools are sites of both creating and maintaining cultural capital**,** Bloome and Brown (2013) note,

> The adoption of the school reading practice is not simply about acquiring a set of cognitive and linguistic skills, but is also about accepting that practice as *the* reading practice…It is in this sense that learning to read in school is also about adopting a cultural ideology including how one defines who one is and who others are (p.139).

The deficit-driven lens perpetuates a notion of *otherness.* One has only to glance in the rooms where reading intervention takes place to see that many are kids from needy backgrounds, as evidenced by their thin t-shirts on subzero winter days and their eagerness in eating the snacks that are offered. Those in the role of giving this form of literacy – scripted and mandated by strict adherence to the program guide -can feel good about themselves. Teachers, administrators, and district leaders can note that they have offered support with a specific intervention, and used seemingly objective test scores to monitor progress, all the while denying what Gonzalez, et al. (1995) refer to as the "funds of knowledge" (p.443) that students bring with them to school. The students in these intervention classes come to believe that the gaping hole in their learning can only be filled from outside themselves. They have embraced the notion that their own knowledge and interests are not the avenue to success, and so they read assigned workbook topics deemed to

be of high interest to them by corporate publishers: about rats that sniff out land mines, children that live in landfills in India, and the victory narratives of those who have made it out of the ghetto and its pitfalls of drugs and gang membership (rbook Flex, 2012). Their own stories have no place in these intervention classes.

The common terminology in discussing students in reading intervention classes implies illness and a need to fix something; students are referred to as "profoundly delayed," in poor "reading health," requiring "intervention," or "treatment," and "remediation" (Archer, 2010-11, pp. 281-290). This vocabulary of *making better,* coupled with the misuse of grade level reading ability measures, work collectively to create a sense of *the patient is sick* and requires medicine, without contemplating the possibility that the medicine may be the culprit. As Richard Allington (2013) writes in his article "What Really Matters when Working with Struggling Readers," "The time has come to recognize that struggling readers still exist largely because of us" (p. 528). The *us* he refers to are all of us, teachers, administrators, school boards, schools of education, and educational publishers.

An Aura of Objectivity

Why is it that we believe quantitative measures are purely *objective* and thereby devoid of notions of power and influence? Porter (1995) makes the argument that the word *objectivity* has come to be associated with "fairness and impartiality" (p. 4). The discourse of student achievement is riddled with the term objective measures. The use of numbers and scores on both state-wide and in-district formalized assessments are major factors in decisions both large and small, from district-wide policy decisions about purchasing instructional programs, to tracking students into remedial routes. The particulars of a student's life-- background, interests, culture, dreams, and desires--a student's "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 1995) are not taken into account to create a more authentic understanding of the student's reading abilities. These subjective qualities hold far less status than the *objective* numbers of a test score.

There exists an unquestioned reliance on quantitative measures, as though they were infallible and negating the more complete picture of student achievement, which includes qualitative measures. The chief beneficiaries of the overreliance on quantitative measures are the profit-making educational publishers and testing corporations who have their own interests in mind while maintaining a sense of objectivity and benign altruistic motivation to help "struggling learners" by offering "scientific measures" (see Scholastic Inc., 2011).

***In*vention as an Alternative to *Inter*vention**

As more and more adolescents are targeted for remedial reading instruction at the secondary level based on a score on a standardized measure (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence,

Jang & Meyer, 2012), the creation and perpetuation of a tracked system endures. We must, as Elizabeth Moje and her colleagues write, "complexify" our understanding of adolescent reading "(Moje, Overby, Tysvaer & Morris, 2008, p.108). We must invent new lenses through which to view and assess adolescent reading practices, daring to ask ourselves the difficult questions about how we approach reading in our secondary classrooms. We must ask the students themselves how they view reading in school and how they formulated that view. In my work with an after-school group aptly named the I Hate to Read Club, a small group of middle school boys explored

with me and their teacher how they grew into hating to read, all the while using reading and writing adeptly to navigate the work of the group's activities. Their journal accounts of visiting a local submarine museum might have been written by some of the school's best students, yet these boys had long been labeled as struggling, and their attendant behavior problems mired them deeper and deeper into being viewed as troubled and difficult, negating an opportunity to see what they *could* do rather than what they could not. Perhaps surprisingly, many of them described very positive first reading experiences that were slowly and persistently overshadowed by negative classroom reading interactions.

Complexifying Reading: Possibilities for Instruction and Assessment

In creating classrooms that offer authentic and complex literacy learning experiences, we must acknowledge adolescents' expanded need for autonomy and their heightened awareness of and need for recognition by their peers (Alexander & Fox, 2011). Morrell (2014) invokes the focus of the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS) as an approach to opening up "spaces for consideration of multiple literacy practices outside of schools as points for connection with academic instruction" (p. 5). As social worlds are edging to the forefront of adolescents' world views, it makes sense to design instruction and assessment that capitalizes on this. Morrell (2002) offers an approach to literacy instruction that calls for engaging urban adolescents with more "critical teaching of popular culture" (p. 72) as a "terrain of ideological struggle expressed through music, film, mass media, language, customs, and values" (p. 73). He describes a project he implemented with his urban high school students in which they built on their familiarity with popular culture as a platform for developing their critical abilities with both canonical and popular texts. Morrell (2002) describes how students also investigated real problems in their communities and that this "motivated and empowered them" as they "learned the tools of research, read difficult texts, and produced their own text of high academic merit" (p. 76).

Performance tasks offer another approach to acknowledging the complexity of authentic literacy practices. A performance task asks students to apply what is learned and engages students in active learning. These tasks, sometimes referred to as performance assessments, have been found to be "positively related to students' motivation" and encouraged students to use "more active learning strategies" (Afflerbach & Cho, 2011, p. 500). These tasks can run the gamut, from asking students to solve a problem facing their community or school, such as how to deal with excessive food waste from school lunches, for example, to letting students exercise their own choice of pertinent topic of study. One middle school teacher in my district has instituted a monthly reading performance task that is titled Café Friday. On the last Friday of the month, she invites any willing parents to help her transform her classroom into a literary café by rearranging desks into small circular pods, complete with tablecloths and centerpieces. There is food on a side table (cookies, fruit, and juice, collectively provided), and students are required to bring a one page script of talking points about the book they've been reading independently throughout the month. I recently sat in on one of these Café Fridays and was impressed with the enthusiasm and genuineness with which students shared their books as I visited a few tables. I had trouble even finding the teacher as she was a full participant in the performance, though she told me later that she was quietly assessing and documenting what each student was showing her about their reading practice. By the end of the day she had collected a detailed account of each student's performance, and yet, in my view, not one of them appeared to notice that they were being assessed. The key is to design classroom practices that support what we know about

adolescents and literacy learning. In this example, the teacher taps the power of choice in reading materials and the desire to engage with peers to stimulate and support authentic reading assessment.

Learning to Listen

What is so damaging in using a single quantitative and questionable measure of reading ability such as the Lexile measure, is that it is based on very thin evidence, and it suggests that a teacher might not know if a student is struggling without this measure. I am reminded of one classroom teacher with whom I work when she told me she “doesn’t really need the (standardized) district reading scores” to know her students’ reading abilities; instead, she says, she listens to them, really listens. She listens when they talk about their reading experiences, she watches how they react in class when they read, she questions them and notices and notes who they are both as learners and as people. The value of this formative assessing and connecting with the student individually does much more than give a picture about ability; it builds the essential connections that students require if they are to learn from and with their teachers. This building of a caring community is what Judith Langer (2009), in her five year study of effective schools, found stood out as a major factor separating schools in which students were successful from those in which they were not. Schools send social and instructional messages to students beginning on day one, and the most effective schools made efforts to ensure that all students felt they were a part of a community that would support them.

Perhaps the real question a teacher needs to ask and find an answer to is, “Who *are* my students?” rather than “What are their reading levels?” Getting to know students by connecting to them, acknowledging what they bring to the classroom, and listening to them can provide us with complex and multifaceted data about how and why they read and write. We may do well to take Dennis Shirley’s (2014) suggestion that “Perhaps the greatest gift we can give our students is our undivided attention.”

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