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6-1-2006

Adolescent Literacy: What Is It and How Might You Support Its Development?

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Jill A.; Fang, Zhihui; Fine, Joyce; Ray, Linda; and Zygouris-Coe, Vicky, "Adolescent Literacy: What Is It and How Might You Support Its Development?" (2006). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 67.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/educ_fac_pubs/67

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Across the country, there is a perception that our adolescents are not learning the knowledge and skills needed to effectively function in today's global economy. This perception is fueled by reports such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In response to this crisis, federal and state governments have recently introduced programs and policies to help promote the development of adolescent literacy. These government initiatives have refocused the education community on the challenges and promises of developing advanced literacy among adolescents. The purpose of this paper is to present a summary of key issues associated with adolescent literacy and invite discussions among stakeholders about effective adolescent literacy reform.

WHAT IS ADOLESCENT LITERACY?

Literacy development is a complex, multi-layered, and ongoing process that does not end in elementary grades. Today's literacy demands are expanding exponentially. Adolescents are expected to process and critically evaluate incredibly large amounts of information in print and multi-media formats.

Adolescent literacy refers to "the set of skills and abilities that students need in grades 4 through 12 to read, write, and think about the text materials they encounter" (Berman & Biancarosa, 2005, p. 6). It incorporates multiple literacies—e.g., information literacy, scientific literacy, numeracy, technological literacy. Adolescent literacy requires one to understand content not only literally but critically. It is more than an emphasis on content-area reading, decoding, and comprehension. It goes beyond memorizing facts, bubbling in answers, or reading just a list of words. It embodies the complex interdependence of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking in adolescents' construction of knowledge about academic disciplines and the world in general.

WHAT ARE SAMPLE OBSTACLES TO PROMOTING ADOLESCENT LITERACY?

Addressing the nation's adolescent literacy crisis is a challenge. There is no quick fix or silver bullet to remedy this situation. Preparing students for the literacy demands of society will require a monumental federal and state focus on adolescent literacy.

The following are sample obstacles to the development of adolescent literacy:

- *Reader Obstacles*
  - Limited language proficiency
  - Poor decoding skills and fluency
  - Poor vocabulary
  - Underdeveloped background and content-specific knowledge

  - Poor knowledge and use of strategic activities for comprehending
  - Decreased motivation to read academic texts
  - Peer pressure not to participate in reading
- *Instructional Obstacles*
  - Conflicting views on literacy instruction
  - Poor or inadequate decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction
  - Limited opportunities to develop vocabulary, strategic activities for processing content-specific text, and overall background knowledge
  - Limited access to varied texts
  - Disconnection between literacy and content areas
  - Lack of resources
  - Lack of support for adolescent literacy
  - Lack of sufficient knowledge/expertise of reading instruction among many content teachers
  - Difficulty developing curriculum that is relevant and stimulating to adolescents
  - Reading materials become increasingly more abstract, dense, and complex
- *Organizational Obstacles*
  - The pressure to teach large amounts of content
  - Changes in school structure and culture from elementary to secondary setting
  - Pressure to teach to high stakes tests
  - Limited resources for on-going, in-depth professional development opportunities

HOW CAN TEACHERS PROMOTE ADOLESCENT LITERACY?

Achieving high levels of literacy among adolescents is a multi-faceted endeavor. Policy-makers, administrators, curriculum advisors, teachers, parents, students, and the community at large should work together to facilitate continuing development of literacy among adolescents.

According to the International Reading Association's position paper on adolescent literacy (1999), the development of adolescent literacy requires the following:

- A wide variety of relevant and motivating material.
- Instruction that builds adolescents' skills and desire to read increasingly complex materials.
- Assessment that reveals their strengths as well as their needs.
- Expert teachers across the curriculum.
- Reading specialists to assist those learners who experience difficulty.

- Teachers who understand the complexities among individual adolescent readers.
- Homes and communities that support adolescents' learning.

Motivation is key to adolescent students' participation in classroom literacy events. In order to develop advanced literacy, adolescents need to learn in environments that promote active engagement in text and discussion, scaffold their use of academic language, and provide many opportunities for them to use their skills and knowledge. There are three primary instructional practices that promote student motivation to develop their literacy skills: (1) making connections to students' lives (e.g., Alvermann & Phelps, 1998); (2) creating supportive learning environments where students are given choice in learning tasks (e.g., Alvermann, 2001), and (3) inviting and giving students opportunities to interact with text and others in ways that stimulate questioning, visualizing, summarizing, predicting, and clarifying (e.g., Alvermann & Moore, 1991).

The teacher can also draw upon some of the out-of-school literacy practices to motivate students. To do this, the teacher needs to include opportunities to access the materials the students want to read and time to expand their interests in reading. Popular culture materials as well as other relevant reading materials need to be present in the classroom. Students who may not be interested in the materials that are typically included in the curriculum may be producing much literate activity outside of school. They may be engaging in multiple literacies that involve different kinds of text (i.e., newspapers, magazines and the web). These multiple literacies may involve popular culture such as books, movies, magazines, and music that occupy the available time that adolescents have outside of school. If some of this popular culture is allowed into the classroom, it serves to motivate and draw in students who may be otherwise disinterested in school-based literacy.

Students need to have time to read what they want and read what they need to read. Even with the assignments that need to be done, there should be choice. An instructional practice such as the *Quick Book Share* (Eldridge, 1998) gives students the right to speak about what they have read and to make suggestions to the rest of the students about what they read and why they enjoyed it. Then the students make selections as to what they want to read next. After reading, they need time to share their responses to the book as an adult would, not be quizzed on the book. This instructional practice gives choice, time to talk and discuss the books and creates a community of learners, a literacy club, which fosters student's self-efficacy and sense of belonging, two critical aspects that adolescents seek. Other instructional practices such as *Family Reading* in cross-age tutoring projects also bring the out-of-school literacy experiences into the classroom (Handel, 1995). The "family" consists of the older reader who may not be a strong reader, supporting a younger reader. The desire to be fluent and the feedback from the younger student's appreciation lead to increased self-satisfaction and self-efficacy for the older student. This has benefits for the younger student as well.

Teachers of adolescents face many of the same demands as elementary school teachers; however, the shortened class time schedule, separated content area courses, increased student to teacher ratios, reduced parent support, and the increase of peer influence make this stage of learning both critical and unique. Teachers of adolescents need to have the knowledge to integrate reading within the content fields, while also providing instruction that is appropriate for the linguistically, culturally, and developmentally different student population. Teachers also need adequate and appropriate materials that meet students' interests and represent a wide range of complexity.

Knowledgeable and experienced literacy specialists, who are able to help teachers acquire these skills, are essential. All teachers need to be able to use informal assessments to know students' strengths and areas of growth to begin instruction. They need to be able to provide opportunities for adolescents to read and discuss reading ideas. All school-based teachers must be knowledgeable about materials in order to provide choices that are appropriate for diverse students. Besides having the knowledge-base, teachers who have a love of reading and are able to model reading for students are those who most likely can support student progress. Teachers need to create learning environments that allow students to engage in critical and collaborative examinations of texts as they construct meaning. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) identify 9 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs at the instructional level. These include:

- **Direct, explicit instruction in strategic activities for comprehending** such as summarizing and visualizing to help students develop effective knowledge and use of strategic activities. As Kyleen Beers (2003) states repeatedly, telling isn't teaching. Students need to be taught the mental processes involved in comprehending. Teachers can use "think aloud" to demonstrate what they do when comprehending a text.
- **Effective instructional principles embedded in content** to strengthen the literacy and content area connections. Students must be shown that strategies learned with their reading/language arts teacher can be applied in content area courses. Content area teachers must teach students to read material in a manner appropriate to the discipline. In addition, content area teachers must teach students to read like a historian, biologist, mathematician, and so on.
- **Motivation and self-directed learning** which includes student motivation to read and learn as well as instruction and teacher support for students to become independent thinkers. Well-constructed anticipation guides, for example, provide a set of potentially provocative statements that can actively involve students with text and motivate them to read in light of the generalizations (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995).
- **Text-based collaborative learning** which provides students with opportunities to discuss and interact with others about what they are learning in class. *Say Something* (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) is an instructional practice that keeps adolescent readers thinking as they read. Students are placed in small groups, take turns reading something, and occasionally stop and "say something" about what they read.
- **Strategic activity tutoring** by experts for students who need individualized, intensive literacy and content instruction.
- **Diverse texts** to build students' knowledge of varied text structures. Varied experiences with diverse texts (e.g., media, electronic) in a variety of genres that provide

authentic examples can help increase students' motivation.

- **Intensive writing** across the content areas, not just to communicate but to facilitate learning from content areas. Students need sustained opportunities to read and write a wide range of texts and to develop their abilities as readers and writers.
- **A technology component** to provide support for literacy and content-area instruction and to help develop student motivation and engagement. Technology can help provide support for struggling readers and also help prepare adolescents for the ever-changing world.
- **Ongoing formative assessment of students** in order to meet students' academic and social needs. The kind of literacy tasks discussed in this paper requires assessments that are varied and diagnostic. Asking comprehension questions, multiple choice items, fill in the blank responses may not be the best assessment vehicles. Checking for fluency in oral and silent reading will help a teacher to determine if decoding and comprehension skills are adequate. Having students retell what they read checks for what they remember rather than test items that the teacher thought important. Exploring a student's understanding of key vocabulary in a text and the background knowledge he or she has regarding the content of a text will inform a teacher about where processing for comprehending may need support.

These components alone are not sufficient to ensure successful promotion of literacy at the secondary level. They need to be complemented by infrastructural support at the administrative level.

HOW CAN PRINCIPALS PROMOTE ADOLESCENT LITERACY?

The principal is a cornerstone of literacy reform. Principals need to develop a school infrastructure with a literacy focus and plan to incorporate literacy across the curriculum; in other words, they need to create a culture of literacy in schools and encourage active learning. We need to build educators' capacity to provide adolescent literacy instruction. Principals can make provisions for effective, content-based literacy instruction professional development.

According to Biancarosa and Snow (2004), a comprehensive adolescent literacy program should also include the following six infrastructural elements:

- **Extended time for literacy,** with a minimum of two to four hours of instruction across the content areas. This time is to be spent with varied texts and a focus on developing literacy effectively. In order to maximize effectiveness of literacy instruction in content areas, it is important to put in place school structure and environment that differ from the way traditional secondary schools are organized and operate. For example, instead of having multiple classes of 50 minutes each per subject, schools may reorganize their scheduling to have 100-minute blocks of class where reading/language arts and content areas (e.g., science, history, and math) are integrated. This will allow teachers and students time needed for more in-depth, truly inquiry-oriented, interdisciplinary learning and discussion.

- **Professional development** that is ongoing and targeted and it should involve classroom teachers, literacy coaches, support personnel, librarians, and administrators. Current research has shown that effective teachers produce better student achievement, especially when it is targeted to classroom instruction or a specific content area (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Estrada, 2005; Langer, 2000). Effective professional development helps develop a professional collaborative school community, facilitates the implementation of standards and curricular demands, and produces positive student outcomes.
- **Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs** for accountability and research purposes. Assessment results should be shared in a timely fashion with teachers and be used to plan for instruction.
- **Teacher teams** that are transdisciplinary to help plan, implement, and reflect on instruction.
- **Leadership** from knowledgeable teachers and administrators. The principal's commitment, vision, and enthusiasm are a must for a successful literacy reform.
- **A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program** which includes all content areas and collaborations between the immediate school community, and the larger community in general.

HOW CAN POLICY-MAKERS HELP PROMOTE ADOLESCENT LITERACY?

To support adolescent literacy instruction, policy makers must enact policies that provide clear standards, goals and guidelines, as well as adequate funding and resources, while at the same time not handcuffing teachers and administrators and taking away their autonomy to select reading materials, adopt instructional approaches and use assessment. Teachers are empowered when they are treated as expert professionals who can make independent, informed instructional decisions. Related to this, the National Association of State Boards of Education (2005) recently provides guidelines for policy makers. Specifically, it states that policy makers should do the following:

(a) strategically use data to identify student needs, design cohesive policies, and evaluate quality of implementation and impact;
(b) provide guidelines for and resources to districts and schools to ensure that teachers have the preparation and continuous professional development to provide effective content-based literacy instruction;
(c) encourage districts and schools to develop literacy plans that infuse research-based literacy support strategies in all content areas; and
(d) provide state guidelines and oversight to ensure strong implementation of comprehensive quality literacy programs.

CONCLUSION

Adolescents deserve quality education that will best prepare them for the 21st century and for a productively meaningful life in a democracy. This requires coordinated efforts and unwavering commitment from all stakes holders, including parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers. The future of our nation depends on a succession of well-prepared citizenry and workforce.

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