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How Do We Get These Kids Reading? Supporting Readerly Identity in Secondary English Classrooms

by Jenelle Williams and Jay Haffner

Introduction

How do we get these kids reading? This frustrated refrain echoes throughout the hallways of middle and high school English classrooms as educators struggle to find ways to build students' interest and successful engagement in reading. As literacy consultants supporting secondary English teachers across Oakland County, Michigan, we regularly hear stories of secondary students who have not read a book in its entirety in years, even when a wide array of high-interest books have been made available. A recent national study supports this trend, noting that “in the late 1970s, 60 percent of 12th-graders said they read a book or magazine almost every day; by 2016, only 16 percent did” (American Psychological Association, 2018). For many educators who self-identify as lifelong readers, it can be challenging to understand just what might be holding students back.



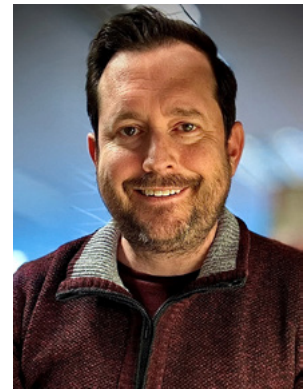
In this article, we aim to explore the relationship between authentic purposes for reading in secondary English language arts (ELA) classes and students' motivation and engagement in reading. We will suggest ways ELA teachers can help build (or repair) students' readerly identities while also ensuring they graduate with the necessary skill sets to transfer their knowledge into further studies, careers, and lifelong pleasure reading.

Defining Terms/Framing

In order to unpack the relationship between literacy skill sets and the role literature plays in the development of readerly identity in the secondary ELA classroom, it can be helpful to ground ourselves in the



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terminology referenced throughout this article. For our purposes, we will consider *literacy* to be the ability to comprehend and communicate in proficient ways. We will also draw from the RAND Reading for Understanding Framework, which defines *reading comprehension* as a “complex endeavor that involves reader-level factors, text-level factors, activities with or purposes for reading, and larger sociological contexts” (as cited in Townsend et al., 2023). Reader-level factors include whether learners possess a strong *readerly identity*—viewing themselves as capable, motivated readers of a variety of texts. By learning to effectively comprehend what they are reading coupled with the development of transferable skills to master multiple ways to “gain approaches to critically examine knowledge claims and the processes of knowledge production in the disciplines” (Moje, 2007), students will continue to develop and refine their readerly identities. Moje’s analysis parallels how we define *disciplinary literacy*, which focuses on apprenticing students into the ways of knowing, thinking, and communicating in ways that are valued in academic contexts and professions. While ELA is not technically an academic discipline in the same way that mathematics and the sciences are considered to be

disciplines, we know that students develop important skills and mindsets within ELA courses that support them in professions such as journalism, advertising, and publishing. Providing students access to rich and engaging literary texts and activating ways in which they see themselves positioned within those texts is what inspires students to experience the complexities and nuances of a never-ending literary landscape—a journey that leads to endless curiosity, enjoyment, and self-actualization. It is this very journey coupled with disciplinary literacy practices that builds a secondary student’s readerly identity and solidifies their ability to succeed in any community of their choosing.

The Role of Reading Literature in Secondary English Language Arts Courses

As secondary literacy consultants, we count ourselves lucky to spend our days supporting (and learning alongside) ELA educators, steeping ourselves in young adult literature and focusing on the beauty of language. It is no accident that we landed in this space—we are lifelong readers and writers. Likewise, it is understandable that middle and high school ELA educators have chosen a similar path; they see literature as a vehicle for exploring our world (as well as invented worlds) and our place in the world. This focus on literature as a lens for humanity plays an important role in students’ educational experiences, allowing adolescents in particular to reflect on their developing personalities within a complex world.

We know that *literary* reading is distinct from other discipline-specific ways of reading. This is verified not only in anecdotes and personal experiences, but also in recent research. As noted by Fang (2012), reading and writing are integral to academic disciplines, and disciplines differ in not only content but also the ways such content is produced, communicated, and critiqued. In “English Teacher Interpretive Communities: An Exploratory Case Study of Teachers’ Literacy Practices and Pedagogical Reasoning,” Emily Rainey and Scott Storm (2021) explore the different ways to activate student-centric readerly identities by drawing direct connections to the literary skill sets mastered by ELA teachers themselves. Additional research within Katherine Frankel’s (2016) study “The Intersection of

Reading and Identity in High School Literacy Intervention Classes” further explores the relationship between identity and skill sets by examining the approach to reading from both teachers and students. “For the teachers, being a good reader was about acquiring the habits of good reading (e.g., reading frequently, using strategies); for the students, being a good reader was about being a certain kind of person i.e., having agency, being educated” (Frankel, 2016). When both viewpoints converge, secondary students will realize that readerly moves directly impact their ability to develop the skills of literary experts. As they build both skill and agency, students become more self-aware and emotionally connected to the act of reading.

Readerly moves of literary experts include “reading the text multiple times to construct and revise interpretations and attending to language, literary devices, and tensions” (Rainey & Storm, 2021). In addition to distinct readerly moves, literary experts also center particular assumptions that literature is to be treated as art—readers are to be considered interpreters, and ambiguity is to be embraced. These ideas are supported and further elaborated in the English Language Arts section of the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in Secondary Classrooms: Grades 6 to 12* (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2023). This document offers research-supported instructional practices that have been shown to increase student literacy proficiency in secondary classrooms. Foundational in these practices are problem-based approaches that center authentic reasons for students to engage in reading, writing, and speaking, beyond being assigned to do so. Table 1 offers an elaboration of three instructional approaches secondary ELA teachers can make in order to create a classroom setting that supports students in co-constructing meaning from texts in authentic ways. The first instructional move is to prime reading by setting the stage for interpretation. This looks like establishing compelling reasons for reading, supporting students to work with different literary theories, helping students explore author’s craft, and modeling how to ask questions of texts. And what might this sound like? Excerpts from Rainey and Storm’s interviews provide insights, with descriptions of reflective conversations and classroom observations of two teachers—Alice

and Margaret. Table 1 also offers suggestions for additional instructional moves, including seeking multiple

interpretations and situating teachers and students as co-explorers of meaning.

Table 1

A Picture of Literary Reading Approaches

	<p>What Does This Look Like?</p> <p><i>Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy: ELA Practice 3</i></p>	<p>What Does This Sound Like?</p> <p>Rainey and Storm (2021) Examples</p>
<p>Prime reading by setting the stage for interpretation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● establishes compelling reasons for reading, listening to, and viewing a variety of texts. ● supports students to work with different literary theories to interpret texts. ● in addition to reading for literary merit, also supports students as they read texts to examine author’s craft in producing the text. 	<p>“[Alice] articulated multiple questions that she thought would be productive for engaging students in interpretive work, including: ‘Whose dream? At what point is it a dream, and at what point is it [something else]?’”</p> <p>“Although Alice underscored the importance of co-constructing literacy interpretation with students, she also described in significant detail the many ways that she would need to support students’ reading, writing, and thinking with literary texts.”</p>
<p>Seek multiple interpretations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● models through think-alouds how to ask questions of texts. ● models how to evaluate texts from different perspectives and engage in critical reading or viewing practices. ● teaches students to apply disciplinary tools and concepts when working with text. ● teaches students how to synthesize concepts and ideas, as well as analyze language use across texts and disciplines. 	<p>“Alice focused on interpretive puzzles by generating a list of literary questions related to the story’s conclusion: ‘What is it that the author does in telling the story that kind of sets you up and gives you certain expectations or undermines those expectations?’”</p> <p>“Alice did not merely identify the literary devices, but rather used them as an analytic tool to understand how the text constructs issues of escape or internalization, thus drawing out the literary effect.”</p>
<p>Situate teacher and students as co-explorers of meaning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● explores fiction texts with students to examine how words, sentence structures, and the organization of texts are used to convey concepts and messages. 	<p>“Margaret thought of herself as a fellow ‘searcher’ who ‘doesn’t have the answers’ but sought to ‘explore things with kids [because] that’s what’s going to show them [how] to be a searcher’ too.”</p> <p>“Alice noticed patterns across the imaginative language and circled back to her ideas about tracking the author’s manipulation of the language to construct the text’s ending.”</p>

Readerly Identity: A Possible Missing Piece

Even when promising instructional practices such as those explored in Table 1 are firmly rooted in an ELA classroom, we might still see a lack of student engagement when it comes to reading. Why is that? Perhaps the culprit has something to do with students' readerly identities and a lack of connection between that identity and the instructional practices in play within their learning. "Students' ideas about different kinds of texts are often related to their own sense of belonging, or lack thereof, in academic settings" (Townsend et al., 2023). In order to establish a classroom environment where all students see themselves as readers and actively participate in wide reading of literature, it might be helpful to remember where many of their literary journeys began and ensure that journey continues into their secondary school experience. It is common practice in elementary classrooms to refer to students as "readers" at the beginning of a mini-lesson, after independent and small-group reading activities, and when taking regular trips to the school library. The role of "reader" is communicated regularly and internalized by students not as something *to do* but as something *to be*. While elementary students are learning foundational reading skills, their teachers simultaneously leverage the power of story as a means of activating high levels of engagement in reading. When students see themselves as co-constructors of meaning within literature, a readerly identity is formed. As students transition to middle and high school, though, something happens. Fewer students self-identify as readers. The act of reading and the assignments attached often skew so heavily towards skill-based outcomes that reading becomes more associated with having to do *something* as opposed to identifying a sense of "self" positionally placed within their reading experience. Our observations in secondary ELA classrooms in Oakland County support this claim—many classrooms center activities that prioritize reading assigned portions of literature followed by comprehension questions. Culminating activities often ask students to demonstrate understanding through the completion of literary analysis essays. This feels and sounds very different from reading activities in elementary classrooms, centering readers as something to

be, not just *do*. In order to effectively develop readerly identity among secondary students, it's imperative that teachers offer reflective opportunities for students to continuously explore their reading identity. From there, we need to ensure there are opportunities for students to engage in critical discourse and dialogue in which they examine their ever-evolving identity in the context of what they are currently reading. The intentional planning decisions teachers make between readerly moves and pedagogical choices can help leverage the way in which developing readerly identity and strengthening literacy skill sets are dependent upon one another.

Suggestions for Practice

So, how might we use the joy and power of literature to build, rebuild, and/or reaffirm students' readerly identities in a secondary ELA classroom while simultaneously developing necessary literacy skill sets? We suggest five possible pathways that have been successful as we have worked alongside educators over the years.

- 1. Leaders should ensure that educators have access to curricular materials and professional learning that support instructional practices as described in Table 1.**

Access to high-quality, culturally relevant curricular resources can be a challenge at the secondary level, and many of the educators we work alongside indicate that they feel ill-prepared to create their own curricular units. Many educators end up leaning on their own prior experiences in middle and high school ELA classrooms, teaching similar pieces of literature in the same ways. However, we know that our students are a different generation, with their own interests and concerns. To engage them as readers, we must consider shifting not only the texts we center, but also our instructional approaches. However, making this instructional shift without the support of strong, research-based curricular models is a recipe for educator frustration. This idea is echoed by Rainey and Storm, who state that "if teachers' professional development or curricular resources are misaligned with their own (likely unarticulated) literate practices, norms, and assumptions, then this misalignment may be an important factor in what might

otherwise be understood as ‘resistance’ to professional change or growth” (p. 369). Educators need access to high-quality instructional materials that align to instructional approaches such as the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12* (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2023)—such approaches build authentic reasons for students to engage in reading diverse texts that mirror students’ identities, and support students in reading as a way of *being*.

2. Educators should reflect on their core reading experiences and consider how those experiences shape their instructional decisions.

As we begin working with educators on strengthening their reading instruction, we often begin by going backward. This often looks like chart paper showing a continuum from early childhood into adulthood. Educators are encouraged to articulate “core reading memories” (both positive and negative) and consider how those experiences influence their instructional approaches. For example, many educators indicate very positive reading experiences in early childhood, which may be the very reason they eventually pursued a career in education. We reflect on ways these early experiences may be similar to and different from the experiences of their current students. Additionally, many educators share negative experiences starting in their tween years, where reading was treated as an assignment to be completed (versus an experience to be enjoyed). When we unpack these experiences, it can help teachers begin to question some of their current approaches. Are they replicating similar negative experiences for their students? If so, what opportunities exist to rethink the role of reading in their classrooms? This suggestion stems from the work of McCarthy and Moje (2011), who suggest that a focus on the role of readerly identity during acts of reading should be at the forefront of pedagogical decision-making.

3. Educators should prioritize authentic purposes for reading in ELA classrooms.

As described in the research-supported *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy* (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2023), there are distinct reasons for reading

within secondary ELA classrooms. These purposes center not only the beauty of language and word play, but also the exploration of the human experience in creative ways. In no other course do students have the opportunity to explore such ideas, so it is essential that we prioritize these purposes in instruction. This might look like pairing poetry, current events articles, movies, songs, and literature in order to explore important concepts such as relationships, truth, and beauty. It might also look like students engaging in research about issues that matter in their lives and communities to express their thoughts in authentic ways. Finally, it might also look like students setting reading goals for themselves—identifying genres they want to try, stamina they want to build, or writerly moves they want to emulate from texts they have read. As students exit high school, they should be well-prepared to engage in conversations about a wide range of texts for various purposes, and they should view themselves as readers who have something to *say* about what they have read. Additionally, students should have a well-developed sense of their readerly identity—their preferences, strengths, and goals for continued growth.

4. Educators should embrace the messy process of apprenticeship.

In disciplinary literacy approaches as described in the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy* (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2023), educators are encouraged to *apprentice* students into the ways of knowing, thinking, communicating, and *doing* that are valued in various academic disciplines and professions. The concept of apprenticeship holds a value on the teacher as the “knowledgeable other” who is supporting the novice learner as they “do the work.” What does this look like in secondary ELA classes? It might look like the teacher modeling various ways of thinking (i.e., critical stances, feminist literary theoretical approaches, etc.) and then providing students time to practice such approaches in community with others. It is important to note that this apprenticeship takes place within the class as opposed to being assigned as homework. How else can the knowledgeable other (the teacher) provide just-in-time guidance and feedback as students take up these new skills? In this model, reading is a supported

process experienced by the student rather than an assignment to be completed.

5. Educators should balance the teaching of literature with teaching literacy.

Secondary ELA courses are often rich with experiences with common texts, whether the text is considered part of the literary canon (i.e., *To Kill a Mockingbird*) or representative of more recent young adult literature (i.e., *The Hate U Give*). The value of these shared experiences is explored in depth in “Teacher of Literature and Literacy: Rethinking Secondary English Language Arts” (Williams & Gabrion, 2022). Also explored in the article is a consideration of the potential downsides of over-emphasizing the teaching of literature via shared text to the detriment of teaching necessary literacy skills. Giving students ample opportunity to develop their “reading muscles” is a necessary component in developing and supporting their readerly identities. Without this, teens will struggle to fully engage with literary texts.

Conclusion

So, how *do* we get these kids reading? The headwinds are strong but by no means is this challenge impossible to overcome. Throughout our work as secondary literacy consultants, we continue to witness the inspiring levels of commitment and passion teachers bring to this issue on a daily basis. With an intentional focus on establishing readerly identities coupled with the development of disciplinary literacy skills, it is possible to turn a frustrating refrain into deeper levels of student engagement.

The five pathways to (re)build/reaffirm readerly identities ensure teachers are better equipped to develop authentic purposes for student reading (readerly identity) while simultaneously embracing the messy process of apprenticeship (literary skills). When students are positioned as active participants in their reading journey, they formulate deeper connections—both emotionally and intellectually—to the text. It is this very connection that activates their engagement while simultaneously strengthening their literacy skill sets. As a result, it is far more likely that secondary students

will graduate high school in possession of a strongly defined readerly identity, prepared to explore the world in creative and interpretative ways.

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