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Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Cultural Construction

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Despite good intentions, reform-minded schools in the United States are coming to grips with the possibility that traditional school culture is *making* struggling readers out of some youth, especially the ones who have turned their backs on a version of reading and writing commonly referred to as academic literacy. Why might this be the case? I have argued elsewhere (Alvermann, 2001) that in their effort to raise the bar by implementing high standards—a noteworthy goal by most people’s reasoning—schools are promoting certain normative ways of reading texts that may be disabling some of the very students they are trying to help. The practice of constructing certain types of readers as “struggling”¹ is even more problematic when one considers that many such normative ways of reading are losing their usefulness, and perhaps to some extent their validity, in the wake of new media and interactive communication technologies and the changing literacies they evoke (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2001; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997; Mackey & McClay, 2000; O’Brien, 1998).

Concurrent with the rhetoric on school reform is a mandate to implement “best practice,” as variously defined by researchers and policy makers with different views on what constitutes evidence of “best.” Not so coincidentally, it is the case that one can observe in U. S. teacher education circles a growing number of literacy educators who are critical of a one-size-fits-all

model of reading. This is particularly so for a group of us whose work is focused on reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives (e.g., Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moore, & Sturtevant, 2002; Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Bean & Readence, 2002; Hagood, 2002; Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking, in press; Hinchman & Lalik, in press; Lewis & Finders, in press; Moje, 2002; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Mosenthal, 1998; O'Brien, 1998; Young, Dillon, & Moje, in press). Building on the work of Gee (1996), Lankshear et al. (1997), Street (1995), and numerous others whose writings question an autonomous, one-size-fits all model of reading, we are coming to understand why some students' literacy development is every bit as dependent upon access to discursive knowledge and socioeconomic and cultural resources as it is to skills instruction.

As researchers and teachers working in rapidly changing times and from a "new literacies" perspective (Gee, 2000; Luke & Elkins, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Willinsky, 2001), we are beginning to see how schools may unintentionally construct readers who struggle. This is indeed unfortunate given that improving academic literacy, while still a useful and valid goal, does not go far enough in educating youth for life in the 21st century. Finding new ways of seeing, thinking, talking, and writing about adolescents and their literacies in a digital world is a challenge worthy of our attention. It is also the purpose of this chapter. Toward that end, the chapter includes the following sections: (1) assumptions underlying the research on struggling readers; (2) various approaches to thinking about school culture and struggling readers; and (3) teaching for critical awareness using new media and interactive communications technology.

Assumptions Underlying the Research on Struggling Readers

Do all readers struggle? At some point? With certain texts? In different contexts? The answer to all of these questions is yes. It is the rare individual, indeed, who has never met a text

(print or nonprint) that did not prove too challenging a read, at least momentarily. What distinguishes that kind of reader from the struggling adolescent reader discussed here is a whole set of assumptions underlying how the latter came to be viewed as struggling, at least as portrayed in the research literature. This literature covers a broad spectrum and varies in specificity according to the perceived reasons behind the struggle. For instance, reviews of research focusing on individuals with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities (Shaywitz et al., 2000) tend to see in their data a cognitive or neurological basis for the struggle. Reviews of research on second language reading (Bernhardt, 2000; Garcia, 2000), on the other hand, consider the social, cultural, motivational, and linguistic factors that may account in part for the struggle and that vary according to the population of English language learners being studied. Similarly, the New London Group (1996), an assemblage of interdisciplinary scholars interested in literacy acquisition and learning, and McDermott and Varenne (1995), writing from an anthropological perspective, would have us concentrate on the social and cultural aspects of so-called reading disabilities. Clearly, there are differing views on what contributes to a reader's struggle to comprehend, but for the purposes of this chapter the focus is on the cultural construction of that struggle.

Contrary to what might seem the case, the cultural construction of struggling readers is not simply a school-related phenomenon. According to McDermott and Varenne (1995), it is society at large that produces the conditions necessary for some to succeed, others to struggle, and still others to fail outright at reading. In their words, everyone is involved—"school personnel, of course, and parents, and let us not forget the philosophers, curriculum designers, textbook publishers, testers, and educational researchers...in other words, 'Us'" (p. 331). To understand why this may be so, and in particular, how we as educators have established cultural

norms for reading that construct certain adolescents as the strugglers and others as the achievers, it is instructive to examine the assumptions underlying those norms. In the next section, I use McDermott and Varenne's (1995) essay on the development of disability as an institution and trope in American culture (and most notably in education in the United States) to provide a framework for discussing three approaches to thinking about culture and the struggling reader: the deprivation approach, the difference approach, and the culture-*as*-disability approach.

Various Approaches to Thinking About School Culture and Struggling Readers

One way of conceptualizing how culture constructs readers who struggle is through H. G. Wells's (1979) short story "The Country of the Blind." Briefly, it is a story about Nunez, a sighted man who miraculously survives a nasty fall from a peak in the Andes and lands relatively unharmed in an isolated valley populated exclusively by people who for generations have been born blind and have no words for "see" or for anything that can be seen. Nunez, being an opportunist of the worst kind, immediately senses he will have many privileges accorded him in a land where he alone can see. What he fails to consider, however, is that the people who live in "The Country of the Blind" have no need to see. They live a well-ordered life, moving about confidently in a culture that fits their needs precisely:

Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its [curbing]; all obstacles and irregularities or path or meadow had long since been cleared away; all of their methods and procedures arose naturally from their special needs (Wells, 1979, p. 135).

Time passes and the people of the valley grow weary of putting up with Nunez's pompous and clumsy ways. They turn to their surgeon to define the problem so that they may

find a solution to this stranger's intrusive ways. After examining Nunez, the surgeon's diagnosis is *diseased eyes*: "They are greatly distended, he has eyelashes, and his eyelids move, and consequently his brain is in a state of constant irritation and destruction" (Wells, 1979, p. 142). Upon hearing this, the people decide that the only solution to the problem is to surgically remove his eyes—the thought of which sends Nunez scurrying back up the mountain from which he fell.

The Deprivation Approach

This approach might be thought of in Nunez's case as "I have eyes and you don't," or as explained by McDermott & Varenne (1995), "We have culture, and you don't" (pp. 333-334). This way of thinking about culture and the struggling reader buys into the argument that adolescents develop differently enough that they can be shown to fall into reliably distinct categories of reader types (e.g., struggling, not struggling), at least as defined by standardized, performance-based, or informal tests and teacher observations.² There is usually a stable set of tasks, deemed milestones by a particular culture, to which all its members must respond if they are to qualify as developmentally competent on those tasks. Being able to decode, comprehend, and summarize information would qualify as one such set of tasks. Low-level performances on these tasks by some members of the group would be viewed as evidence that these members had not yet developed the requisite set of skills necessary for reading competently at a particular grade level or in a particular set of texts.

By unpacking some of the assumptions underlying this argument, it is possible to see a culture's influence on a reader's self-perception and identity formation. Individuals who recognize and are recognized by others like themselves as being struggling readers often end up the recipients of what Finn (1999) calls "a domesticating" education—that is, an education that stresses "functional literacy, literacy that makes a person productive and dependable, but not

troublesome” (pp. ix-x). It is a second-rate kind of educational arrangement that typically leads to lower expectations and to social and economic inequalities. A further assumption of the deprivation approach is that adolescents who struggle with reading will have lowered self-esteem when they find they are unable to compete for the privileges that come with grade-level (or above) performance on reading-related tasks. To partially offset the negative fallout from these kinds of assumptions, schools and university clinics have been known to offer small-group or one-on-one remedial tutoring programs (e.g., Morris, Ervin, & Conrad, 2000). Still, as McDermott and Varenne (1995) note, “there is a public assumption that, although society can care for those who lag behind, they are out of the running for the rewards that come with a full cultural competence” (p. 334).

The Difference Approach

Once again referring to the story of Nunez, the difference approach to thinking about culture and the struggling reader might be, as McDermott and Varenne (1995) phrase it, “We have culture, and you have a different one” (p. 335). This rather off-handed, tongue-in-cheek observation serves to point out one of the assumptions underlying the difference approach: namely, it is assumed that an arbitrary set of reading tasks deemed important by one group of people may have little or no relevance for another group. Translated into classroom practice, this assumption is often the underlying rationale for culturally relevant teaching, such as that described in a study of Minerva Salazar’s eighth-grade unit on Mexican-American community life in the southwestern United States (Brozo, Valerio, & Salazar, 2000).

The difference approach argues that the ways in which people develop competencies as literate beings will vary according to the demands of their particular cultures. Thus, it would follow that adolescents who struggle with school literacy tasks under the difference approach

would likely be introduced to relatively few predefined reading tasks; instead, they would be encouraged to focus on the literacy activities that adults in their culture regularly perform as fully functioning members of that culture. A second assumption underlying this approach is that teachers will have the resources necessary—both personally and professionally, in terms of their own background and development—for instructing students from various cultural backgrounds with varying literacy practices. A corollary to this assumption is that adolescents exposed to such instruction would benefit from it in the long term. This is not a trivial consideration, for as McDermott and Varenne (1995) have pointed out, “despite a liberal lament that variation is wonderful, those who cannot show the right skills at the right time in the right format are considered out of the race for the rewards of the larger culture” (p. 335).

The Culture-as-Disability Approach

This approach assumes that school culture (like other kinds of culture) is a historically evolved way of doing life. As such, it has certain norms that implicitly and explicitly teach students about what is worth working for, how to succeed, and who will fall short. According to McDermott and Varenne (1995), “cultures offer a wealth of positions for human beings to inhabit” (p. 336). Each position requires certain things. For example, to inhabit the position of “good reader,” one must possess certain abilities that are verifiable and recognizable to others who occupy that same position. To McDermott and Varenne’s way of thinking, how people end up inhabiting some positions and not others is more a matter of extenuating circumstances and/or differential treatment than any kind of innate ability. They argue, for instance, that culture disables some of its members by developing what is assumed to be a stable (though arbitrary) set of tasks against which individuals can be measured, perhaps remediated, but if not, then pushed aside. In their words:

It takes a whole culture of people producing idealizations of what everyone should be and a system of measures for identifying those who fall short for us to forget that we collectively produce our disabilities and the discomforts that conventionally accompany them. (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, pp. 337)

One of the assumptions underlying the culture-*as*-disability approach is that unlike the deprivation and difference approaches, it does not isolate groups so that one group stands apart from another; nor is one group marginalized in relation to another group. Instead, all groups—e.g., good and not-so-good readers—stand in relation to the wider culture of which they are a part. Viewed from this approach, adolescents who struggle with reading are perceived as part of the same cloth from which good readers come. This has implications for instruction as Dillon (1989) discovered in her microethnography of a high school English teacher who showed that he cared about all kinds of readers—including those who struggled—by encouraging them to stay in school and by holding equally high academic expectations for everyone.

Another assumption of the culture-*as*-disability approach is that politically charged arrangements presume certain levels of competence in an individual. But therein lies the rub, for as McDermott and Varenne (1995) argue, “Competence is a fabrication, a mock-up, and people ... work hard to take their place in [a] hierarchy of competence displays” (p. 337). Speculating as to why many societies hold school literacy in high regard despite the fact there is little evidence to support the notion that it is difficult to acquire and that it is best learned in classrooms, McDermott and Varenne wrote:

- The more people believe that literacy is difficult to acquire, the more they find reasons to explain why some read better than others and, correspondingly, why some do better than others in the economic and political measures of the society; and

- the more people believe that literacy is best learned in classrooms, the more they ignore other sources of literacy, and the more they insist on bringing back to school those who have already “failed” to develop school literacy. (p. 341)

Whether or not one agrees with this speculation, it seems likely that struggling readers caught in a society that insists on treating school literacy as something that is hard to acquire (and thus possibly out of their reach) will indeed find it difficult to think of themselves as motivated and competent learners. Finally, although it is the case that literacy can be taught in classrooms, it does not follow that privileging school literacy over other forms of literacy is in the best interests of struggling readers; nor does such privileging take into account the multiple literacies in which these youth participate on a daily basis outside of school.

Teaching for Critical Awareness Using Media and Interactive Communications Technology

Attending to critical literacy development in youth is described by Freebody and Luke (1990) as “crucial to an understanding of successful reading in our culture” (p. 14).

Although referring to Australian culture in particular, their comments are no less relevant for literacy educators and researchers in the United States. Here, as elsewhere, everyday literacy practices are changing at an unprecedented pace, and speculation as to the impact of new media and interactive communication technologies on current conceptions of reading and writing is evident on many fronts. At the center of much of the discussion is the perceived need to develop adolescents’ critical awareness of how all texts (print, visual, oral, and Internet-mediated) position them as readers and viewers within different social, cultural, and historical contexts. This need, however, as Australian educator Wendy Morgan (1997) pointed out, should not be mistaken as a call for the type of critical literacy instruction that would have students searching for the villains or heroes in their texts, for the oppressors or emancipators amongst us, and the

general labeling of oppositional categories such as “us” and “them.” Rather, it is a summons to eschew these overly simplistic categories in order to develop, in her words, “a different view of how people may act, provisionally, at a particular time and within particular conditions” (p. 26). These conditions, though variable, are routinely affected by our views about what makes critical literacy “critical” and by the approaches we use to teach it (e.g., using interactive communications media).

What makes critical literacy “critical”? Orienting students toward thinking, reading, and writing in ways that challenge the status quo for the purpose of promoting social justice in the world is a defining element in what makes critical literacy “critical.” In Ira Shor’s (1997) words:

This kind of literacy—words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society—connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 1).

An orientation to effecting social change carries with it an invitation to rethink one’s identity as a reader, and it was that thought that propelled me to write a proposal to the Spencer Foundation to fund a study that would eventually involve 30 struggling readers in an after-school media club for a period of 14 weeks in the local public library (Alvermann, 2001). Grady, a pseudonym for a struggling reader with whom I worked closely for those 14 weeks, participated in a series of critical literacy activities that involved him and 29 other adolescents in thinking about how popular media texts constructed them as readers, viewers, and listeners, but also how they used those same texts in ways that gave them pleasure—ways, in fact, that were not always in sync with how the producers of the texts might have desired. According to Grady’s teachers and his mother, he showed little interest in school reading, but his engagement with several

Pokémon training manuals during media club was undeniably intense and long term. He would also leaf through video magazines hour after hour, looking for cheat codes that would make him a better *Pokémon* trainer. Although not prone to spend much time on the Internet during media club hours, Grady nonetheless was an astute critic of the video games his friends chose to play online. He displayed a keen sense of who produced the games, for what purpose, and with what audience in mind. For example, he was often critical of game producers who had only boys in mind as potential players, a point which he made repeatedly when the girls in the club refused to join in the games. As the weeks passed, Grady's mother, the research assistants on the project, and I noted a change in Grady's perception of himself as a reader. Though still not interested in academic texts, he became a frequent e-mailer in the club's closed discussion group, and he offered help to others in the club as they attempted to build home pages on the Web, read *Dragon Ball Z*³ online, or search the Internet for lyrics written by their favorite rappers. In short, I had evidence that a club organized for the purpose of engaging struggling readers in critical literacy activities around media that they found pleasurable could serve as an invitation to helping them rethink their identities as readers. What the media club project also showed me was that without some guidance, struggling readers are apt to gain little from their forays into the world of new media and interactive communication technologies.

More generally speaking, adolescents' interests in video games, the Internet, and various interactive communication technologies (e.g., chat rooms where people can take on various identities unbeknown to others) suggest the importance of teaching them to read with a critical eye toward how writers (including textbook authors), illustrators, advertising executives, and the like represent people and their ideas—in short, how individuals who create texts make those texts work. Viewed from this standpoint, commonly referred to as a media studies perspective

within education circles (Semali & Pailliotet, 1999), one might argue that critical literacy seeks to free people from coercive practices, that it recognizes how knowledge constitutes power, and that it is a process for emancipating and/or empowering readers. Teaching for critical awareness from a media studies perspective, then, would mean focusing on creating communities of active readers, viewers, and listeners capable of identifying the various ideological positions that print and nonprint texts offer them. It would also mean calling attention to how people typically have choices about which ideological positions they will accept or take up, which they will resist, and which they will attempt to modify. Viewed from a cultural studies perspective, however, one would find less concern for countering the media's so-called threatening and manipulative hold on audiences; instead, advocates of teaching critical literacy from this perspective (e.g., Hagood, 2002; Luke, 1997; Morgan, 1997) would focus on helping adolescents strike a balance between pleasure and critique. Teaching for critical awareness from this perspective would involve looking for ways to guide readers, viewers, and listeners through a self-reflexive process aimed at teaching them to question their own pleasures within their own set of circumstances and with texts of their own choosing. And, as anyone can attest to who has browsed the Web for media offerings of late, the choices are many, as are the meanings.

Because media texts are often hybrids of the images, language, and sounds they incorporate from television, video, multimedia, hypertext, the Internet, and other forms of new communication technologies (e.g., instant messaging, e-mailing), developing youth's critical awareness involves showing them how these polysemic texts are never inscribed with meaning that is guaranteed once and for all to reflect the intentions of their producers; instead, such meaning is negotiated by audiences—readers, viewers, listeners such as themselves—and expressed differently within different contexts and at different moments in time (Hall, 1982;

Storey, 1996). Just how polysemic text—in this case hypertext—works to facilitate critical literacy is illustrated in an example offered by Morgan and Andrews (as cited in Mackey & McClay, 2000):

Hypertext allows for a move away from the monologic towards discrepancies. It can foreground debates, differences, dissensions. It's not necessarily about an already achieved harmony. So it encourages the taking of positions which aren't necessarily fixed ... A single, print text can be offered as something coherent and closed, finished and polished—a policy document, which has its own disembodied, authoritative voice from nowhere—the word from on high. To be able to break into that, create irruptions and eruptions—that's at the heart of critical literacy work. (p. 200)

Increasingly, as school-based programs for working with struggling adolescent readers are written up, it is clear that the authors of these programs are taking seriously the need to consider multiple forms of texts as entry points into teaching for critical awareness. For example, Ash (2002), incorporated a critical literacy component in her “Teaching Readers Who Struggle: A Pragmatic Middle School Framework.” In addition to a synthesis of successful tutoring programs and critical literacy activities, this framework includes a program for managing five research-based literacy practices: daily oral reading, guided reading in flexible groups, word study, self-selected reading/writing, and explicit comprehension strategy instruction. Activities for developing adolescents' critical competencies include analyzing the assumptions text authors make about their readers, and alternatively, the assumptions readers make about texts and their authors. Mackey and McClay (2000) extend this notion of examining reciprocal assumptions by problematizing situations in which some teachers working with adolescents mistakenly regard

picture books as being either too ambiguous and thus too challenging—as in the case of David Macaulay’s (1999) *Black and White*—or too simple and thus insulting. As Mackey and McClay are quick to point out, “Dismissing these text forms...underestimates the value of all forms of picture books as complex and polysemic texts in their own right, and also as routes to meeting the sophisticated reading demands of texts in new media and technologies” (p. 191).

Kist (2002), in his attempt to study and document the characteristics of “new literacy” classrooms in the Midwest, found that teaching for critical awareness includes embracing multiple forms of representation and engaging students in meaningful literacy tasks—practices thought to increase struggling readers’ sense of competence as well (Guthrie & Davis, in press). Although not specifically directed at teaching readers who struggle, Kist’s research demonstrates that new literacy classrooms are places where students report being engaged in their work and experiencing a sense of achievement—two attributes of a learning environment that would seem to have potential for struggling readers as well. And, in fact, there is empirical evidence to show that this is the case. Not surprisingly, as O’Brien (1998, 2001) documented in his 4-year study of Midwestern working-class youth deemed “at risk” of failing their academic subjects due to poor reading skills, these same students were exceedingly adept at (and interested in) understanding how media texts work—in particular, how meaning gets produced and consumed. O’Brien reported that the adolescents with whom he worked over an extended period of time were quite successful in producing their own electronic texts (e.g., multimedia documentaries) and critiquing media violence using multiple forms of visual texts. Working alongside the students and their teachers in what came to be called the Jeff Literacy Lab, O’Brien concluded that as a consequence of his research team’s decision not to privilege print over other forms of literacy, the students appeared capable and literate.

Approaches to teaching critical media literacy. To begin developing youth's critical awareness of the media texts that figure prominently into their everyday lives may require a new set of metaphors for thinking about teaching struggling readers. Drawing upon the work of Cole and Griffin (1986) who taught at-risk readers how to comprehend texts using dramatic role-playing techniques, Luke and Elkins (2000) in their introduction to a themed issue of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* on re/mediating adolescent literacies, noted how Cole and Griffin's work set up conditions in which students could rethink who they were in relation to texts (e.g., their strategy "Question Asking Reading" engaged at-risk readers in generating questions about texts as opposed to answering them). But what interested Luke and Elkins most about this work was that it provided an alternative vocabulary for talking about re/mediating adolescents' literacies, as they explain here:

The term *medium*—the forgotten and neglected singular of the ubiquitous noun *media*—was used in the early part of the 20th century to refer to psychics who purported to be able to communicate with spirits. The concept refers to communication technologies that we use to mediate, frame, and scaffold our social relations with one another and our material worlds. Language and literacy provide symbolic tools, resources, and means to conduct social and ecological relations. Cole and Griffin's view is that the teacher's task is to re/mediate struggling readers' relationships with texts, whether these are traditional print texts or those of new communications media. By this account, the aim of literacy is not to use methods to fix deficits, remediation in the traditional sense used by special educators and reading specialists. Rather, literacy education involves

staging the conditions for students to rethink and reenact their social and semiotic relations. It is about changing the ecology. (Luke & Elkins, 2000, p. 397)

As Luke and Elkins go on to explain, teaching in new times with new media and communications technologies will require that literacy educators re/mediate struggling readers' relationships with the social and cultural aspects of these new texts by developing their critical awareness of the power dynamics operating within such relationships. Although there are undoubtedly numerous pedagogical approaches for doing so—with none being the single “best” way of accomplishing the task—the four described here and elaborated elsewhere (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999) build on Carmen Luke's (1997) work pertaining to the politics of media, images, and text representation.

The first approach, based on false consciousness ideology, suggests that if students knew the detrimental aspects of most popular media, they would be wiser consumers. This is what Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) refer to as the “I know more about you than you know about yourself” syndrome. Teachers who elect to use this approach in developing struggling readers' critical awareness may be well attuned to the race, class, and gender literature, as well as to the injustices and inequalities contained therein. However, if by using this literature they turn students into what some critics refer to as “little Marxists,” they should not be surprised to find that they may have created a group of less-than-forthcoming learners. For as Luke (1997) reminds us, would any teacher expect to get an “honest” answer from youth who are asked to critique the very media they find most pleasurable and useful?

The second approach subscribes to the notion of teacher-as-liberating guide. Teachers who use this approach might be said to be good role modelers. That is, they would work hard at modeling the ways in which students can develop strategies for becoming the “ideal” (thus critically aware) reader, viewer, and listener. Although there is considerable support in the research literature for modeling effective strategy instruction when working with struggling readers (Guthrie & Davis, in press), putting this research into practice was not as easy as Alvermann and her colleagues (2000) had first imagined. In fact, the 30 adolescents with whom they worked for 14 weeks in an after-school media club resisted the researchers’ initial attempts to model critical literacy strategies. Only after major adjustments were made in their weekly plans did these researchers see the loopholes in the teacher-as-liberating guide approach to helping youth become effective readers, viewers, and listeners of popular media texts.

The third approach, described as pleasures without parameters, takes a standpoint most teachers would recognize as relativistic. That is, those teaching from this point of view would argue that all media texts are equally good or useful. However, a major criticism of pleasures without parameters is that views and voices from *everywhere* become views and voices from *nowhere*. For example, in arguing that Robert’s engagement with *Dragon Ball Z* was not a waste of time but rather a good example of how some struggling readers construct themselves as competent learners in out-of-school contexts when they are given choices in reading materials, Alvermann and Heron (2001) were forced to acknowledge the paradox of “free choice” in Robert’s selection of texts. Clearly, “free choice” under the pleasures without parameters banner is a misnomer if one considers the economic investments made by U. S. and Japanese corporations to

distribute the *DBZ* series as part of an effort to target potential consumers of the series and its many related products.

The fourth approach, labeled self-reflexive and “balanced,” is an attempt to teach students the importance of weighing in on both pleasure and analysis. Unlike the pleasures without parameters approach, a self-reflexive and “balanced” approach underscores the importance of providing struggling readers with opportunities to examine how their interests and likes are bound up in the decisions they make about media text usage. Rather than asking youth to critique these texts as being too commercially oriented, too violent, too sexist, too racist, and so on, teachers using this approach would ask them to analyze what is in it for them as users. They would also ask students to consider alternative readings and alternative text productions, as Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2001) did in their study of digital literacy classrooms. For example, in teaching adolescents how to analyze texts using alternative readings, they posed the following questions about various Web sites the students had visited:

- What assumption is it fair to make about the person whose sites are on this list?
- How might these bookmarked digital texts coincide with print genres?
- What do the digital texts allow them to do that print genres do not? (n.p.)

Concluding Statement

We are at a turning point in the field of adolescent literacy, one in which effective literacy instruction for struggling readers will need to take into account that youth who do not excel in academic literacy may still be capable and literate individuals in arenas outside the normative ways of doing school. It is a time of major shifts in cultural practices, economic systems, and social institutions on a global scale—a time when

literacy educators from around the world are speculating about the ways in which new media and interactive communications technologies will alter people's conceptions of reading and writing. One might argue, as this chapter does, that it is also a time for taking stock of how well- intentioned school reform efforts may actually construct readers who struggle, especially among youth who have turned their backs on a version of reading and writing commonly referred to as academic literacy. Finally, in all four approaches to teaching for critical awareness using media and interactive communications technology, there is an underlying assumption that access to such technology is a given. Because this may very well not be the case, it is important that we remain sensitive to individual differences. As Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2001) remind us, "Teachers...need to be aware that lack of digital literacy is for many students just as stigmatizing as the inability to read print" (n.p.).

Author Notes

¹ The term *struggling* reader assumes various attributes depending on who is defining it and for what purpose. It is commonly used to describe students who for whatever reasons appear unable to keep up with the school-related reading that is required of them. Labels such as slow reader, low reader, disabled reader, and at-risk reader are often used interchangeably with struggling reader, though special educators prefer to put the person first and then the label in order to preserve the wholeness of the child (e.g., a reader with learning disabilities, or a reader who struggles). In the professional literature, as well, there is little agreement on what constitutes a struggling reader. For example, a cursory analysis of the table of contents of *Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Collection of Teaching Strategies* (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000) reveals that the term *struggling* is used to refer to youth with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities as well as to those who are unmotivated, disenchanted, or generally unsuccessful in school literacy tasks.

² The problem with thinking about culture in this way—as containing distinctive groups or categories of people—is that the container leaks. Rarely are cultures as isolated as the H. G. Wells (1979) short story would have us imagine. The leaky container metaphor also applies to the dynamic and permeable boundaries that separate the lifeworlds of struggling and non-struggling readers. Specifically, McDermott and Varenne (1995) emphasized the need to avoid educational practices that mark those who are different from the perceived norm as lacking something that is of their own doing—that they are being singled out for a reason and are in fact “disabled.”

³*Dragon Ball Z*, created by Japanese animé expert Akira Toriyama, is about a group of warriors skilled in the martial arts who engage in death-defying battles to save the Universe. There are seven planets in the *Dragon Ball Z* Universe, each of which has 7 Dragon Balls that allow one to summon a mystical dragon that grants wishes. In *Dragon Ball Z*, the characters improve themselves through effortful training and can be brought back to life through wishes being granted by the mystical dragon. The battles between the warriors consist of physical contact and the deployment of various energy devices, such as energy balls, energy saws, and energy hand-cuffs (JohnnyGil's *About Dragon Ball Z*, n.d.). Originally based on a Manga comic strip, *Dragon Ball Z* requires considerable inferencing and tracking of character development—skills most literacy educators would recognize as marks of a competent reader.

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