

Exemplary Literacy Instruction in Grades 7-12:

What Counts and Who's Counting?

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This paper reports on the status of research into exemplary literacy instruction in grades 7-12, thus partially covering what is commonly referred to as the middle years (typically grades 6-8) and high school. Its focus is on research that pertains to urban education, though in some instances, as in the National Reading Panel's (2000) report, findings were not disaggregated according to geographic locale. Unlike earlier reviews of adolescent literacy instruction (e.g., Alvermann, 2001, 2002b; Bean, 2000), this paper takes into account research that has relevance for U.S. urban educators but was conducted in the larger international community. Finally, this paper views cultural and linguistic diversity not as markers of marginal differences, but rather, as factors central to interpreting the research on adolescent literacy and its implications for instructional leaders and policy makers in urban school districts.

As McDermott and Varenne (1995) have noted, all cultures (including urban schools) are historically evolved ways of "doing" life. They teach people about what is worth working for, how to succeed, and who will fall short. To be concise, one might say cultures are about what

counts. Yet I would argue it's not as simple as that. In addition to teaching about *what* counts as exemplary adolescent literacy instruction, for example, various subcultures working within urban schools and the general population are also going about their counting in different ways. Thus, it is important to ask not only what counts but also *who* is doing the counting—for example, is it those interested in closing the achievement gap? In exploring culturally responsive teaching strategies? In redefining exemplary instruction from a “new literacies” perspective? I believe these are neither inclusive nor separate constituencies, but for efficiency and the purpose of organizing this paper, I will address them as if they were.

Closing the Achievement Gap

Although the latest administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) finds that a majority of students at the 8th and 12th grade levels are reading at or above the basic level, far fewer students have reached the proficient or advanced levels, which require competency over challenging subject matter, applications of subject matter knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). For example, data reported in *The Nation's Report Card: U.S. History 2001* revealed that less than 20% of students comprehend at the proficient level, with significant achievement differences favoring non-minority over minority students, students in rural and suburban schools over those in urban schools, and students from higher income over lower income homes (Lapp, Grigg, & Tay-Lim, 2002). This has led educators and policy makers to intensify their efforts to close the persistent gap in academic achievement between minority and non-minority students (ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/pathways/achieve_gap/).

The research literature that addresses the perceived gap between basic and more advanced levels of reading development among adolescents is largely focused on comprehension of text and vocabulary development. Another body of research looks at students' motivation and self-efficacy in learning from text. A third research area focuses on contexts of literacy instruction. Each of these areas is discussed next with particular attention given to research that has been compiled and published in the *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume 2* (Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal, & Pearson, 1991), *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume 3* (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000), the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000), the National Reading Conference's position paper on *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents* (Alvermann, 2001), and the RAND Reading Study Group's *Reading for Understanding* (2002).

Comprehension of Text and Vocabulary Development

According to the RAND Reading Study Group (2002), a great deal is known about the prerequisites for successful reading comprehension, including comprehension at the more advanced levels. For example, drawing upon the work of numerous literacy researchers and the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000), which was commissioned by the U.S. Congress to assess the availability of evidence-based research on reading instruction for classroom application, the RAND Group concluded that:

- Effective reading instruction provides students with a repertoire of strategies for fostering comprehension.
- Strategy instruction that is embedded within subject-matter learning, such as history or science, improves students' reading comprehension.

- Effective strategies for teaching students to comprehend complex materials include self-questioning, answering a teacher's questions, cooperative learning, comprehension monitoring, representing information using graphic organizers, making use of different text structures, and summarizing.
- The more explicit teachers are in their strategy instruction, the more successful low-achieving students are in their reading and learning.
- Vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to successful text comprehension, and it is especially important in teaching English language learners.
- Exposing students to various genres of text (e.g., informational, narrative, poetry) ensures that they do not approach all reading tasks with the same purpose in mind.

In interpreting these conclusions, it is important to recall that the database that informed them is not without its limitations. For example the National Reading Panel's (NRP) report was based solely on experimental and quasi-experimental research studies, which were designed primarily to test the effectiveness of certain cognitive processes in comprehending printed texts, often within controlled conditions that did not represent typical classroom learning environments. Studies that took into account the sociocultural and situation-specific aspects of reading in content area classrooms (e.g., Dillon & Moje, 1998; Guzzetti & Hynd, 1998; Obidah, 1998; Sturtevant, 1996) were excluded from consideration because they did not fit the criteria that the panel had specified as evidence of highly rigorous and "scientific" research. This resulted in a report that reflects a rather narrow and restrictive view of the reading process. In fact, six of the seven categories of text comprehension that the panel found effective—self-questioning, answering a teacher's questions, cooperative learning, comprehension monitoring, representing information using graphic organizers, making use of different text structures, and

summarizing—point to strategies content area teachers might use if their view of the reading process is one in which students work by themselves to extract information from printed texts. As pointed out elsewhere (Wade & Moje, 2000), this rather narrow view of the reading process risks disenfranchising large groups of students for whom printed texts are not the primary means through which they learn.

A further limitation of the NRP's database is its omission of studies that focused on English language learners or attended to the social organization of learning and instruction in large urban schools serving children who live in poverty. Before jumping to conclusions about what this might mean in terms of implementing the NRP's findings, however, a caveat is in order. Along with Gee (1999) and Moll and Ruiz (2002), Gutierrez, et al. (2002) argue that "the issue is not poverty but rather how being a poor child becomes a debilitating condition in schools" (p. 329). Thus, the larger issue is how schools treat poor children, many of whom speak a language other than English as their first language. Considering these limitations, then, one is left to wonder about the generalizability of the NRP's findings for teaching adolescents in urban schools, though granted it would be unwise to assume that urban youth would benefit any less from such teaching than their more economically advantaged peers.

Motivation and Self-Efficacy

During adolescence, as well as later in life, it is the belief in the self (or lack of such belief) that makes a difference in how competent a person feels. Perceptions of self-efficacy are central to most theories of motivation, and the research on exemplary literacy instruction bears out the hypothesized connections. For example, providing clear goals for a comprehension task to students who are experiencing reading difficulties and then giving feedback on the progress

they are making can lead to increased self-efficacy and greater use of comprehension strategies (Schunk & Rice, 1993). Similarly, creating technology environments that heighten students' motivation to become independent readers and writers can increase their sense of competency (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000). The research is less clear, however, on the shifts that occur in students' motivation to read over time. Although decreases in intrinsic reading motivation have been noted as children move from the elementary grades to middle school, explanations vary as to the cause, with a number of researchers attributing the decline to differences in instructional practices (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993).

In an extensive review of how instruction influences students' reading engagement and academic performance, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) concluded that various instructional practices, while important, do not directly impact student outcomes (e.g., time spent reading independently, achievement on standardized tests, performance assessments, and beliefs about reading). Instead, the level of student engagement (including its sustainability over time) is the mediating factor, or avenue, through which classroom instruction influences student outcomes. What this means is that teachers must take into account the degree to which students engage (or disengage) over time in a learning task. Guthrie and Wigfield's conception of the engagement model of reading calls for instruction that fosters student motivation (including self-efficacy and goal setting); strategy use (e.g., self-monitoring for breaks in comprehension and analyzing new vocabulary); growth in conceptual knowledge (e.g., reading trade books to supplement textbook information, viewing videos, and hands-on experiences); and social interaction (e.g., collaborating with peers on a science project or discussing an Internet search with the teacher).

Contexts for Literacy Instruction

The research literature on school reform shows that when urban districts make a concerted effort to involve teachers, students, parents, and community leaders, the context for the schooling process can change dramatically, and with it, students' achievement levels. For example, data from work conducted as part of the Coalition of Essential Schools (Levine, Sizer, Washor, & Peters, 2001) and case studies of urban high schools engaged in reform efforts that personalize literacy instruction, actively engage students in subject matter learning, and make use of multiple forms of assessment (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Meier, 1995) suggest that it is possible to begin to close the achievement gap by changing the contexts for learning. Other successful U.S. reform efforts, such as the national teacher-researcher network of English and social studies teachers and university faculty (Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, & The M-Class Teams, 1999), have focused on optimizing the context for literacy instruction by focusing on issues of diversity, bias, and inequality.

The contexts for literacy instruction are undeniably important, as Moore (1996) demonstrated in an in-depth synthesis of the qualitative research on strategy instruction. Specifically, he found that a) the type of strategy taught is less important than the nature of the context in which it is taught, and b) engaging students in cooperative learning activities is conducive to subject-matter learning. Not surprisingly, the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) found similar support for these practices in the experimental and quasi-experimental research literature on comprehension instruction. Teachers working within contexts that are conducive to learning provide students with adequate background information and relevant hands-on experience as a means of preparing them to read a textbook, view a video, listen to a tape, or

search the Web for related content (Alexander & Jetton, 2000). They also look for ways to integrate reading and writing because they know that each of these processes reinforces the other and can lead to improved comprehension and retention of course content (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). In sum, teachers create exemplary contexts for literacy instruction when they provide students with opportunities to use what they already know as a basis for learning new content in mutually supportive classrooms that celebrate diversity rather than view it as a problem to be overcome or “normalized.”

Exploring Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies

U. S. urban schools with large numbers of minority students have on occasion sparked some of the most creative teaching to be found anywhere, especially among teachers who have both a deep understanding of a particular subject’s domain structure and a desire to make teaching that subject more responsive to students’ cultural knowledge. For example, Lee (1997; 2001) used *signifying*, which is a form of talk widely practiced within the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speech community, to scaffold or facilitate her underachieving high school students’ literary responses to the mainstream canon. In writing about her experiences as a teacher in the Cultural Modeling Project that she developed, Lee (2001) explained,

Signifying...involves innuendo, double entendre, satire, and irony, and is dense in figurative language. It often involves forms of ritual insult, but is not limited to insult. An example of signifying might be ‘Yo mama so skinny she can do the hula hoop in a cheerio.’ (p. 122)

Although signifying is valued for language play in its own right, Lee used her ninth graders’ tacit knowledge of this discourse to help them hypothesize the meanings of various canonical texts

(especially the tropes, ironies, and satires associated with these texts) and to change their hypotheses as evidence warranted. Lee took on the role of more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1986) as a means of guiding and supporting her class of underachievers as they learned to bridge differences in home and school cultural practices

The Cultural Modeling Project, though designed especially to assist adolescents who struggle to read in literature classes, has applications across subject areas. For example, Ballenger (1997) used a similar instructional strategy in her work with a multi-grade (grades 5-8) Haitian bilingual science classroom. Briefly, Ballenger used a form of Haitian discourse known as argumentative discussion to facilitate her students' entry into a formalized way of "talking" science. Because argumentative discussion figures prominently into everyday adult interactions in Haitian society, her students were familiar with its various forms, including give-and-take talk about politics, sports, religion, and the like. Although often engaged in purely for entertainment purposes, much like signifying, argumentative discussion also contains elements of scientific discourse—the very same elements, in fact, that scientists use to construct relationships between evidences and claims. It is a discourse acquired by younger members of Haitian society as they first observe (and later participate in) this storytelling genre. In the inquiry-based bilingual science classroom that Ballenger described, underachieving youth were encouraged to express themselves in both Creole and English as they used culturally familiar rhetorical skills to present their arguments and defend their personal opinions about a variety of topics, including the conditions necessary for mold to grow.

Although these two examples of culturally relevant teaching using students' oral language skills are valued for what they bring to the research literature on exemplary literacy practices, it is the case that such teaching is often times less favored among educators and policy

makers who view literacy teaching and learning as being concerned exclusively with written language. For instance, Meacham (2001), in his review of the literature on literacy and cultural diversity, writes:

Historically and into the present, dominant political interests within discussions of literacy policy have had a narrowing impact on what constitutes legitimate literacy practice. Dominant political interests that affirm prevailing relations of power promote what Royer (1994) refers to as “strong text” literacy characteristics. “Strong-text” literacy conceives of literacy as a structurally singular, exclusively written language practice. When mentioned at all, cultural and linguistic diversity are taken up as threats to conceptual coherence. In other words, in the realm of mainstream literacy politics and policy, cultural diversity is seen as marginal, and even detrimental, to effective literacy conception and practice. (p. 181)

What constitutes legitimate literacy practice and why it is the case that “strong-text” literacy, or Literacy spelled with a big “L” and singular in nature (Street, 1995), typically trumps other forms of literacy is best explained by examining the relations of power in everyday literacy practices. Such relations are often not apparent, at least not to those who view reading and writing as neutral processes largely defined through either psychological models or holistic approaches to literacy acquisition. This view of literacy—what Street (1995) has called the autonomous model of literacy—has dominated Western thinking up to the present. Viewing literacy practices as ideologically embedded does not require giving up on the cognitive aspects of reading and writing. Rather, according to Street (1995), the ideological model subsumes the autonomous

model of literacy in its attempt to understand reading and writing processes “as they are encapsulated within...structures of power” (p. 161).

Redefining Exemplary Instruction from a New Literacies Perspective

By emphasizing the ideological nature of literacy practices, Street (1995) opened the way for seeing them as socially constructed within seemingly absent but always present power relations, a view that is prevalent among individuals who subscribe to a new literacies perspective (Luke & Carrington, in press; Luke & Elkins, 1998; New London Group, 1996; Willinsky, 1990)—one that takes into account how globalization, new information communication technologies, and multimedia are transforming our ways of knowing and making meaning in a digital world (Alvermann, 2002a; Flood & Lapp, 1995; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). These changes are not lost on adolescents or their teachers, and they have significant implications for teaching and learning in content area classrooms.

The term *adolescent literacy*, broader in scope than secondary reading, is also more inclusive of what young people currently count as texts (e.g., textbooks, music lyrics, magazines, graphic novels, Weblog digital texts, and hypertexts). In fact, it is the case that many adolescents of the Net Generation are finding their own reasons for becoming literate—reasons that go beyond reading to acquire school knowledge of academic texts (Bean & Readence, 2002; Hagood, 2002; Moje, 2000; 2002; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Nixon, 1998; O’Brien, 2003). This is not to say that academic literacy is unimportant; rather, it is to emphasize the need to address the implications of youth’s multiple literacies for classroom instruction. For as Vacca (1998) observed five years ago, and it is still the case today,

“we know very little about what counts as literacy from adolescent perspectives or the literacies that adolescents engage in outside of an academic context” (p. xvi).

A small but growing body of research on youth’s out-of-school literacy practices provides empirical evidence of the dynamic and permeable boundaries between age categories that were once thought separate and hierarchically in opposition to one another. Whether in home-schooling environments (Young, 2000), community-based after-school programs (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Garner, 2002; Hull & Schultz, 2001, 2002), youth organizations (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Kelly, 2001), or digitally-manipulated environments where youth are free to exchange information through anonymous networks (Duncan & Leander, 2000; Lewis & Fabos, 1999), age differences appear to have little influence over the ways in which adults and adolescents alike make use of various literacy practices. In fact, the research on youth’s out-of-school literacies complicates the very notion of *adolescence*—a term Appleman (2001) refers to as a status category, or “a kind of purgatory between childhood and adulthood” (p. 1). This research disrupts certain assumptions about what counts (or should count) as valued literacy practices among people of all ages, while not falling prey to an overly simplistic celebration of youth culture (Hagood, 2000; Hinchman, Bourcy, & Thomas, 2002; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lewis & Finders, 2002; Sefton-Green, 1998).

What this body of research does not provide, however, is an in-depth look at how young people go about developing a sense of critical awareness of the ways in which they are implicated in the production and consumption of popular media texts that do not privilege print. With few exceptions (e.g., Dillon & O’Brien, 2001; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2001; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 1999; Moje, 2000; Myers, Hammett, & McKillop, 2000), researchers interested in adolescents’ critical awareness have worked in classrooms where the curriculum is primarily

print driven and necessarily constrained by school-based norms for teaching and learning. Thus, it remains unclear as to whether teaching youth to be critically aware using largely conventional print texts within the confines of a school curriculum can sufficiently prepare them to do the same with symbol systems other than print in out-of-school contexts. This concern is not trivial for it marks a very real tension in a post-typographic world (Reinking, Labbo, McKenna, & Kieffer, 1998). Consider, for example, the tension created when teachers subscribe to the notion that “speech makes us human and literacy makes us civilized (Olson, 1988, p. 175). In using this saying to make his point, Olson was referring to written language and the bias it imparts both to the way we think about knowledge—how we organize it, store it for reuse—and the cognitive consequences of schooling and literacy. Luke and Luke (2001) refer to this same bias as resulting from our “inoculation by print” (p. 110).

Yet the ability to analyze media messages presumes that one is at least visually (if not sound) literate. The Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA)—a national, grassroots membership organization committed to bringing media literacy education to all 60 million students in the U.S.—defines media literacy in terms of what it accomplishes: “Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of any increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound. It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages” (<http://www.amedialitamerica.org>). Becoming visually literate, then, involves expanding print literacy skills by developing a greater awareness of how things come to have the meaning that they have and why those meanings vary from one individual to the next. As Muffoletto (2001) explained, “Being ‘visually literate’ means more than having the ability to produce/encode and read/decode constructed visual experiences; it...is

to be actively engaged in asking questions and seeking answers about the multiple meanings of a visual experience” (n. p.).

Implications for Instruction and Policy

Although much is known about exemplary literacy instruction for adolescents, the challenge lies in implementing this research in ways that make sense to teachers whose plates are already full and overflowing. This is no small matter. In fact, remarking on the gravity of the challenge, members of the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) noted that despite a fairly well articulated knowledge base on the value of strategy instruction that fosters reading comprehension, such instruction continues to receive too little time and attention in most content area classrooms. Important as strategy instruction is, there are larger needs not being met, perhaps due in part to a general reluctance among U.S. teachers to move beyond older programs and methods (Anders, 2002) in search of newer and more comprehensive ways of ensuring that youth’s literacies in and out of school work together. For that to happen, as well as for the achievement gap to narrow, I propose the following:

- Instruction that is exemplary should take into account adolescents’ personal and everyday literacies in ways that enable them to use those literacies as springboards for engaging actively in academic tasks that are both challenging and worthwhile. To accomplish this presumes an openness on educators’ and policy makers’ parts to think of adolescence as something other than “a kind of purgatory between childhood and adulthood” (Appleman, 2001, p. 1). It also presumes a willingness to view literacy teaching at the middle and high school levels differently. For as Lesko (2001) has so aptly stated, “if we want to see adolescence differently, we must first understand the ways we currently see,

feel, think, and act toward youth, or we will merely tinker with the reigning practices” (p. 10).

- Instruction that is exemplary should be embedded in the regular curriculum and make use of the new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), including multiple forms of texts (print, visual, and digital) that can be read critically for multiple purposes in a variety of contexts. For this to become a reality, it will be important to teach students how to use relevant background knowledge and strategies for reading, discussing, and writing about a variety of texts. It will require the support of administrators and policy makers who buy into the idea that all students, including those who struggle to read in subject area classrooms, deserve instruction that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to their needs.
- Instruction that is exemplary should address issues of self-efficacy and engagement. It will need to involve youth in higher level thinking as they read, write, and share orally. It will mean avoiding, as Wade and Moje (2000) recommend, a transmission model of teaching with its emphasis on skill and drill, teacher-centered instruction, and passive learning, and substituting, instead, a participatory model of instruction that actively engages students in their own learning (individually and in small groups) and that treats texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorized and then all too quickly forgotten.

- Instruction that is exemplary will need to draw from a knowledge base built on both experimental and qualitative research. To continue current U.S. policies for funding and reporting research that ignore rigorous and systematically designed qualitative research, in effect, relegating it to the status of a pseudoscience (Gutierrez et al., 2002), will produce at best only a partially informed knowledge base. At worst, such policies will be detrimental to discovering what counts as literacy from adolescents' perspectives. These policies will also deter researchers from exploring ways to integrate the “what counts” into instructional practices that hold promise for closing the achievement gap. A broadening, rather than a narrowing, of what counts as research on adolescent literacy instruction will produce a knowledge base on which to make instructional decisions that take into account both the “what works and for whom” questions of experimental designs and the “who’s counting and why” questions of qualitative research.

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