

Grappling with the Big Issues in Middle Grades Literacy Education*

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This is an exciting time to be in middle grades education. I do not need to tell you of the numerous professional groups and other organizations that are hard at work ensuring that middle grades schools are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable. In fact, many of you in the audience represent these very groups. However, I do want to tell you how I see literacy research and practice fitting into and affecting the larger picture of middle grades education. To do this, I have divided my talk into four parts.

First, I want to share with you my perception of the big issues in middle grades literacy education today. These are the issues I see practitioners, researchers, and policymakers grappling with as they go about their work. Second, I want to put these issues into perspective by summarizing what the research says about them and what it does not say. Third, I want to address the implications of this research for practice, policy, and future inquiry. Finally, I want to direct attention to some questions concerning middle grades literacy education that I believe we should be grappling with next—questions that are too important to overlook if we are truly committed to making a middle grades education socially equitable and accessible to all students.

Big Issues in Middle Grades Literacy Education

For the past three years, I served as co-chair of the International Reading Association's newly appointed Commission on Adolescent Literacy. In that role, I had numerous opportunities to work with middle school educators, researchers, and policymakers from every region of the United States. Our work focused on

identifying key issues in the field of adolescent literacy, with a special emphasis on middle grades literacy instruction and assessment. From that work and my involvement in a Reading Task Force recently appointed by the National Council of Teachers of English, I became acutely aware of the issues that people are grappling with in middle grades education.

First and foremost, there is a concern for the young adolescent who struggles with reading. The struggling reader label is a contested term (Alvermann, in press) and one that means different things to different people. For example, a cursory analysis of the table of contents of a recently published book by the International Reading Association on struggling readers (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000) reveals that the term struggling can refer to youth with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities as well as to those who are second language learners, “at-risk,” unmotivated, disenchanting, or generally unsuccessful in school literacy tasks. A smorgasbord of descriptors, these labels tell little or nothing about the cultural construction of such readers. They do, however, provide different ways of thinking about school culture and readers who struggle—ways, in fact, that are too seldom addressed in the literature on developmentally responsive instruction.

Another big issue in middle grades literacy education is the perceived need to accelerate students’ reading achievement and academic learning in the subject matter areas, such as social studies, science, and the English language arts. In the middle grades, especially, there is interest in developing students’ abilities to comprehend and think critically about the subject matter material that they are expected to master as part of the regular curriculum. The rationale behind this perceived need is that

comprehension is a complex process—one that should not be left to chance to develop. One of the ways that teachers can ensure the comprehension process is not left to chance is to teach students strategies for reading and studying their assignments. Another way is to preteach the vocabulary associated with those assignments. At issue here is not the effectiveness of such instruction, but rather, the problems encountered when trying to determine which strategies are best suited for which populations of students and why.

A third major issue in middle grades literacy education has to do with finding ways to make use of adolescents' out-of-school interests in computers and the media to foster their in-school subject matter learning. Until recently, the technology for computer-assisted instruction was not conducive to teaching students how to read in the content areas. Computers that were unable to accept free-form responses or to recognize speech were thought to be too limited in their capacity to deliver reading instruction. Much has changed, however. Now, with advanced speech recognition capabilities and the possibilities for integrated multimedia presentations, middle grades educators are turning more and more to computers (and especially the Internet) as a way of engaging students in learning course content. Even so, among many educators in the middle grades, there is a distinct reluctance to trust technology to deliver an appropriate kind of literacy instruction. For some, the computer is an unwelcome intruder in an already too-full curriculum, while for others it is a potential threat to school-sanctioned literacy (O'Brien, 1998; Phelps, 1998).

Finally, an issue that may hold the key to better understanding all the issues I have raised thus far is whether or not the knowledge base in middle grades literacy

education is being translated into practice. That is, are teachers implementing the available research on how to teach the second language learner who struggles with reading? Are they teaching the comprehension and vocabulary strategies that are known to be effective in accelerating students' subject matter learning? Do they know how to adapt those strategies so that they are responsive to all students' intellectual and social growth? Do teachers view the research on computer technology and reading instruction as being relevant to their curriculum, and if so, do they incorporate ideas from that research into their own teaching? Answers to questions such as these have implications for researchers and policymakers alike, especially with respect to policy-oriented research on literacy standards and assessment (Valencia & Wixson, 2000).

What the Research Says and Does Not Say

The commissioning of this paper came at an opportune time. The 3rd volume of the Handbook of Reading Research (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000) and the Report of the National Reading Panel, an evidence-based assessment of the research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), were both published during the time I was preparing this talk. The research presented here draws primarily from those two works and from a synthesis of the literature on Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998), which was compiled by a group of university- and school-based researchers at the National Reading Research Center a few years earlier. As well, this paper takes into account a synthesis of the research on contexts for literacy in middle grades

education (Moore, 1996) and the research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997; Reinking, McKenna, Labbo, & Kieffer, 1998).

Research on Readers Who Struggle

The research on struggling readers covers a broad spectrum and varies in specificity according to the perceived reasons behind the struggle. For example, reviews of research that take into account individuals with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities (Shaywitz et al., 2000) focus on the cognitive basis for the struggle. Reviews that take into account second language reading, on the other hand, encompass a much wider view of the reasons behind the struggle. In fact, the difficulties second language readers experience are often spread over a vast network of sociocultural, motivational, and linguistic factors that vary with the population being studied (Bernhardt, 2000). These factors are also at work (to varying degrees) in the difficulties that monolingual, unsuccessful readers in the middle grades experience when they struggle with their assigned texts.

It is these two latter groups—second language readers and monolingual, unsuccessful readers—that I focus on here. Reviews of research on these two types of readers generally fall into three categories in terms of their approaches to explaining the struggle: the deprivation approach, the difference approach, and the culture-as-disability approach (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

The deprivation approach. This way of thinking about the struggling reader assumes that there is 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. For example, being able to decode, comprehend, and summarize large chunks of informational texts would qualify as one such set of tasks in the middle grades. Students' below-average performances on these tasks are taken as evidence that these students have 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 far, the bulk of the research on struggling readers in the middle grades is grounded within a deprivation approach to explaining their difficulties. Historically, this research has focused on ways of helping teachers provide support to the slow, "at-risk," unmotivated, or disenchanting reader (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Bean, 2000; Moore, 1996). Case studies using ethnographic methods have dominated this area of research, largely because they offer opportunities for examining a specific problem in depth and within bounded parameters. These studies have taken place during whole-class instruction (Dillon, 1989), in separate pull-out literacy programs (O'Brien, 1998), and in university reading clinics (Morris, Ervin, & Conrad, 2000).

Regardless of where the research is carried out, the findings are remarkably similar. While the instructional intervention is in progress, students who are struggling with reading show marked improvement in reading performance and their self-esteem also improves. What the research does not tell us is whether these changes are long lasting and transfer to situations beyond the research setting or specific subject matter area under investigation. Studies of a longitudinal and cross-disciplinary nature are sorely lacking in the middle grades literature on literacy instruction.

The difference approach. This approach argues that the ways in which young adolescents develop competencies as literate beings will vary according to the demands of their particular cultures. Thus, middle grades students who struggle with school literacy tasks under the difference approach would likely be subjected to 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. For example, Luis Moll's (Moll & González, 1994) work with working-class Latino/a families provided evidence that teachers can use the "cultural funds of knowledge" these families possess in making connections between students' home and school literacies. Such connections, in turn, can provide stepping stones for filling in the gaps in students' background knowledge about school-related reading tasks. Although there is some research (e.g., Brozo, Valerio, & Salazar, 2000) to suggest that bilingual middle grades students can benefit from literacy instruction that takes into account their cultural funds of knowledge, much more work needs to be done in this area.

As Garcia (2000) has noted, "the instructional research on older bilingual children's reading is meager" (p. 830). What is available is largely qualitative in nature, such as Jiménez et al.'s (1996) study, which indicated that less successful bilingual middle grades students used fewer cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies than successful monolingual readers. However, there was no difference in the strategies used among successful bilingual and monolingual readers.

The culture-as-disability approach. This approach assumes that all cultures, as historically evolved ways of doing life, teach people about what is worth working for,

how to succeed, and who will fall short. To McDermott and Varenne's (1995) way of thinking, "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. But how people end up inhabiting some positions and not others is more a matter of being put into those positions because of differential treatment than of being incidentally born into them, according to McDermott and Varenne.

Using the culture-as-disability approach to understanding struggling readers in the middle grades, one might argue that the school curriculum disables some students by mandating what is assumed to be a stable (though arbitrary) set of reading tasks against which they can be measured, perhaps helped but if not, then pushed aside. Research conducted within a sociocultural framework would tend to support this kind of an argument. For example, Moje's (in press) work shows how gang-connected youth are routinely positioned as resistant learners (and then marginalized) rather than as learners who use alternative literacy practices to express themselves and to make meaning of texts that are essential to their survival. In a review of other research on resistant adolescent readers, Moore (1996) concluded, "reports such as these...are good reminders that a productive research focus might highlight at-risk situational contexts rather than at-risk students" (p. 26).

Research on Accelerating Students' Reading Achievement

Members of the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) concluded that seven types of text comprehension instruction met the stringent criteria they had laid out

prior to identifying over 450 studies on text comprehension as potential contributors to a solid base of scientific evidence on student achievement. These seven types, which appear below, were found to improve students' comprehension in the context of specific academic areas, such as social studies. They include:

- Comprehension monitoring, where readers learn how to be aware of their understanding of the material;
- Cooperative learning, where students learn reading strategies together;
- Use of graphic and semantic organizers (including story maps), where readers make graphic representations of the material to assist comprehension;
- Question answering, where readers answer questions posed by the teacher and receive immediate feedback;
- Question generation, where readers ask themselves questions about various aspects of the story;
- Story structure, where students are taught to use the structure of the story as a means of helping them recall story content in order to answer questions about what they have read; and
- Summarization, where readers are taught to integrate ideas and generalize from the text information. (The Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 15)

Although these seven types of comprehension instruction are known to accelerate readers' comprehension generally, they do not tell us anything about the contexts in which such comprehension occurs. Neither do they offer information as to

how the various approaches fit within the framework of middle grades developmentally responsive education. Research that could answer these questions is available (e.g., Bean, 2000; Ivey, 1999; Moje & O'Brien, in press; Moore, 1996). This body of research relies on qualitative methodologies to flesh out some of the ways in which content area teachers are using comprehension strategies to create academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable literacy instruction in the middle grades. However, studies using qualitative methodologies were excluded from consideration by the National Reading Panel because they did not meet the experimental and quasi-experimental design criteria that the panel specified as evidence of highly rigorous research.

An important aspect of accelerating middle grades students' reading achievement that the National Reading Panel did address was the research on vocabulary instruction. The importance of vocabulary knowledge to subject matter reading has been recognized since the 1920s (Whipple, 1925). In determining the best approach to teaching vocabulary for improved comprehension, the National Reading Panel evaluated 50 studies that met their design criteria. Within those 50, the panel identified 21 different methods. Due to the relatively large number of variables represented in the small number of studies evaluated, the panel could not conduct a formal meta-analysis of the results of these studies. Therefore, the information that I present here represents what the panel called trends across studies.

Basically, the National Reading Panel found that vocabulary instruction does lead to improved comprehension, with computer-assisted instruction edging out traditional methods of instruction in a few studies. Students' vocabulary can also be

enhanced incidentally through reading or listening to others read. Preteaching vocabulary found in material that teachers assign students was shown to be effective, as was direct instruction in how to restructure a task and instruction that provided multiple exposures to the same word in various contexts.

Although the panel concluded that much is known about the importance of vocabulary in accelerating reading achievement, they cautioned that the research says little about the best instructional methods or combinations of methods teachers should use in teaching vocabulary. This conclusion adds to the literacy field's growing awareness of the futility in looking for the one best "fix" or combination of "fixes" given the complexities of classroom teaching, especially in these times of increasing diversity and expanding technologies.

Research on the Use of Computers to Foster Subject Matter Learning

The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) indicated that the use of computers for reading instruction is supported. Although members of the panel were hesitant about drawing conclusions from the 21 studies that met their criteria for inclusion in the report, they did make these general statements about the potential for using computer technology in reading instruction.

- The addition of speech to computer-presented text promises to enhance the versatility of that technology in reading instruction.
- The use of hypertext--text that links to supporting information and audiovisuals—may enhance traditional methods of reading instruction.

- The use of word processing technologies may be advantageous, especially given that reading instruction is known to be most effective when integrated with writing instruction.

As the panel went on to note, “striking in its absence is research on the incorporation of Internet applications to reading instruction” (p. 18). Also absent from the research on computer technology, as applied to reading instruction, is the effect of speech recognition devices and the use of multimedia presentations. Although a small number of studies investigating these issues can be found in literature reviews that incorporate studies using qualitative methodologies (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997; Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000; Leu, 2000; Reinking, McKenna, Labbo, & Kieffer, 1998), by and large the knowledge base on computer technology and literacy instruction is too limited to draw many conclusions at present.

Research on Translating the Knowledge Base into Practice

Given that there is a knowledge base (though uneven in parts) on struggling readers, methods of accelerating students’ reading achievement, and the role of computer technology in reading instruction, what is known in the literature that looks at translating research into practice? This question is of considerable concern among the various stakeholders in middle grades education. Yet, based on the most recent reviews of policy-oriented research related to reading instruction (Valencia & Wixson, 2000), the question seems largely unanswerable. Most of the large-scale research projects dealing with implementation have focused on standards-based literacy instruction, large-scale performance assessments, or classroom portfolio assessment, and specifically, portfolio assessment as it is implemented in the early grades. In their

review of the policy-oriented implementation research in literacy, Valencia and Wixson (2000) reported only one case study (Loofbourrow, 1994) at the middle grades level. That study, which investigated how two eighth-grade teachers implemented the California Assessment Program in writing, found that the teachers set aside many sound curricular and instructional recommendations in order to attend to the demands of the assessment program.

Thus, research that speaks directly to the concern for how the knowledge base is being translated into practice—a concern that I hear being voiced widely by middle grades educators through my work on the International Reading Association’s Commission on Adolescent Literacy—is virtually absent from the literature. This observation is borne out by the report of the National Reading Panel (2000) as well. For example, the members of the panel located only four studies that met their research design criteria on the topic of teachers’ implementation of comprehension strategy instruction. Although limited in what they could say based on this small number of studies, the panel released two general statements:

- Teachers require instruction in explaining what they are teaching, modeling their thinking processes, encouraging student inquiry, and keeping students engaged.
- In order for teachers to use strategies effectively, extensive formal instruction in reading comprehension is necessary, preferably beginning as early as preservice. (The Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 16)

Overall, an emerging theme is one of a growing knowledge base with limited classroom implementation. This situation seems more apparent at the middle grades level than at the primary or elementary levels. The possibility exists, of course, that research is being translated into practice at the middle grades level but that the process itself is not being studied and formally written up for publication.

Implications for Literacy Practice, Policy, and Future Research

The implications I draw here are based on the previous section's report of what the research had to say (or did not say) about the big issues in middle grades literacy education, at least as I perceive them. These implications, while aimed primarily at literacy practice, policy, and future research, also address academic excellence, developmentally responsive instruction, and socially equitable classrooms—the three mainstays of high performing middle grades schools (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, available at <http://www.edc.org/FSC/MGF>).

Implications for Literacy Practice

As with all reports, that of the National Reading Panel must be read with a clear understanding as to the limitations of its findings. For example, the panel did not address issues relevant to second language readers. This leaves a gaping hole in the research literature necessary for making instructional decisions about teaching reading to an ever-increasing number of second language learners in this country's middle schools.

Nor did the panel consider any research that fell outside the experimental and quasi-experimental designs of quantitative research. Thus, a large body of potentially rich contextual information was overlooked. The absence of context means that as

potential consumers of the report we have no real sense of the teachers' beliefs and understandings that drove the literacy instruction, which the panel in turn studied. Because of this limitation, precaution needs to be taken in drawing implications of the National Reading Panel's findings on text comprehension instruction for classroom practice.

For example, six of the seven approaches that the panel concluded had a solid research backing are representative of the methods teachers would use if they believe reading comprehension instruction consists of teaching strategies that enable individual students to work by themselves in extracting information from printed texts. As Wade and Moje (2000) pointed out elsewhere, this rather narrow view of the reading comprehension process risks "disenfranchising large groups of students for whom print texts are not paramount because they hold different social or cultural values" (p. 623). Wade and Moje went on to argue that this view of the comprehension process also "privileges the learning and textual practices of some students and devalues the practices of others" (p. 623). Thus, caution needs to be taken so that in interpreting the results of the panel's findings about effective types of comprehension instruction, one is fully aware of the assumptions behind some of the approaches to teaching middle grades students—assumptions that could conceivably undermine opportunities for creating socially equitable classrooms.

Implications for Policymakers

Currently, issues of excellence rank high on policymakers' agendas in the United States. This observation impelled Au (2000) to write, "The danger is that challenging standards, like standardized tests, will not have a positive effect on the

achievement of students of diverse backgrounds, but will simply serve as another means of identifying students of diverse backgrounds as losers in the educational game” (p. 845). The possibility of this scenario playing itself out seems to be an implication of the research on struggling readers, especially if policymakers fail to take into account how culture—the very culture of which they are a part—constructs readers who struggle (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). This construction occurs in various ways. For example, as Au (2000) has pointed out, “when the reference point for proficiency is determined by comparing [the scores on a standardized test of] one group to a second group...students of diverse backgrounds will always be placed at a disadvantage because of the assumption that the distribution of scores must follow the normal curve” (p. 845). Or, when an adolescent’s multiple literacies are ignored in favor of looking only at his or her performance on conventional school reading tasks, policymakers may not get a clear picture of that individual’s capabilities. In these ways and others too numerous to mention here, policymakers may position some students as struggling readers, who, as Au reminds us, ultimately become the losers in the education game.

Another implication from the research on struggling readers is that policymakers at the school and district level could easily infer from the literacy studies conducted within a “difference” approach that alternative curriculums and developmentally appropriate instruction are virtually risk free. One scenario that might follow from such an inference would be this: a school offers literacy instruction grounded in a curriculum that respects individual differences and feels relatively assured that students from diverse backgrounds will succeed. However, this would be

much too simplistic a view. 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). In effect, the school in question could very well be constructing losers in the education game that Au (2000) described earlier.

Implications for Future Research

Researchers working within both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms have much work to do if they are to address adequately the issues that literacy educators in the middle grades are grappling with on a daily basis. Although large numbers of studies exist on how to teach reading comprehension, only a few select topics within this domain have been included in the type of rigorous meta-analyses that the National Reading Panel (2000) recently conducted. Among those topics that the panel did address, questions still remain as to the applicability of certain findings for middle grades education. Partial or provisional answers to some of those questions, however, might be forthcoming if the findings from qualitative research on reading comprehension instruction were to be analyzed in a way that made them available (and interpretable) through cross-case comparisons. Subsequently, new experimental or quasi-experimental research might be designed to address hypotheses that arise from more in-depth and close-up qualitative work.

Other issues pertinent to middle grades literacy instruction that have been virtually ignored by researchers in the past include those which involve computer technology and the media. Attempts at merging young adolescents’ out-of-school interests in computers and the popular media with in-school subject matter learning

have been documented informally in a variety of contexts across the United States (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Chandler, 2000; Lewis, 1998; Reinking, McKenna, Labbo, & Kieffer, 1998) and elsewhere (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Knobel, 1999; Luke, 1997; Neilsen, 1998; Semali & Pailliotet, 1999). However, until researchers begin to explore more such attempts in a systematic way over a long period of time, it is doubtful that middle grades educators will have the information they need to make informed decisions about the wisdom of blurring the boundaries between in-school and out-of-school literacies.

Finally, questions concerning the degree to which the knowledge base in middle grades literacy education is being translated into practice remain largely unanswered. Studies are needed that both quantitatively and qualitatively investigate what characterizes a school in which teachers, administrators, and supervisory personnel actively engage in applying relevant findings from the available knowledge base to their school's curriculum, and, in particular, to teaching reading in the content areas. A major focus of any such inquiry should be on how well, if at all, the research on bilingual students' reading development and instructional needs is being implemented schoolwide. Concurrently, additional quantitative and qualitative research should be designed that would augment the rather meager (Garcia, 2000) body of literature presently available on second language reading instruction.

Questions that Need Grappling with Next

Literacy is on the verge of reinventing itself. Allan Luke and John Elkins, editors of the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, noted in their first issue of the journal (Luke & Elkins, 1998) that the potential for such reinvention is reflected in the

way “texts and literate practices of everyday life are changing at an unprecedented and disorienting pace” (p. 4). Attributing these changes largely to new information technologies and to the complex multiliteracies these technologies entail (New London Group, 1997), Luke and Elkins characterized the era in which we are living as New Times. 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 technologies will alter people’s conceptions of reading and writing. As Elkins and Luke (1999) went on to point out, “adolescent literacy in New Times will require an engagement with ‘critical multiliteracies’...[and] new kinds of reading specialists” (p. 213) rather than simply more of the same programs and services already in place in today’s middle and secondary schools.

I want to suggest that in thinking about the wherewithal for meeting this requirement in middle grades education, we begin with the question, What counts as reading when reading really counts? Exploring the assumptions that support asking such a question in the first place could conceivably lead to productive inquiry into the multiple literacies of middle grades students and away from some idealized generalization about what “real” reading is (and is not). It is conceivable that such explorations might also lead to an increased appreciation for the breadth of reading and writing practices in which struggling readers engage on a daily basis.

Currently, with the greatest proportion of the professional literature on middle grades literacy education reflecting an autonomous model of reading and writing (Street, 1995), the assumption is that literacy is singular in form and spelled with a big

L. The tendency to assume that this model is also “natural” (and thus free of any ideological positioning) is supportive, in turn, of our tendency as a profession to reify written language. I want to argue that the understandings to be gained from a dialogue on what counts as reading when reading really counts would go far in addressing this assumption.

A second question I would like to see addressed is this: What is our response going to be to the literacy challenges that adolescents face in New Times? Now, perhaps more than ever before in the history of middle grades literacy education, the demands of new technologies and the complexities of living in a highly globalized society are seriously taxing our capacities as a profession to respond to adolescents’ needs in ways that will enable them to become fully functioning citizens of the 21st century. Part of the reason we may feel caught off guard is that for years now the focus of attention has been on reading instruction at the primary and elementary levels.

Years of neglect in addressing the literacy needs of older readers have exacted their toll. Although close to 75% of U.S. adolescents can read and write at the most minimal or basic level, fewer than 5% are capable of performing at the advanced level (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1999). The polarization of these two literacies--basic and advanced--reflects more than just reading proficiency level, however. It can also establish the basis of an individual’s perceived worth, which in turn can translate into economic and social advantages or disadvantages, as the case may be (Lankshear, 1998). And, while I have serious reservations about the narrow perspective on literacy that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

measures, at the same time it is the case that NAEP reading assessment data are used to make important policy decisions that will ultimately affect adolescents' economic and social lives for years to come. For this reason and others that are articulated at length in the literature on critical literacy (Gee, 2000; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Siegel and Fernandez, 2000), I think it is time for us in middle grades education to ask a third question: What is the danger in continuing to view literacy as a set of "neutral" psychological skills that are easily, if narrowly, measured rather than as a complex mixture of social and political practices through which to work toward equality and social justice for all?

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