

Adolescent Literacy

A Policy Research Brief produced by The National Council of Teachers of English

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This publication of the James R. Squire Office of Policy Research offers updates on research with implications for policy decisions that affect teaching and learning. Each issue addresses a different topic. Download this issue at <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/literacy/127676.htm>. Read more on this topic at <http://www.ncte.org/pubs/chron/highlights/127825.htm>.

Causes for Concern

It is easy to summon the language of crisis in discussing adolescent literacy. After all, a recent study of writing instruction reveals that 40 percent of high school seniors never or rarely write a paper of three or more pages, and although 4th and 8th graders showed some improvement in writing between 1998 and 2002, the scores of 12th graders showed no significant change. Less than half of the 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates demonstrated readiness for college-level reading, and the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for 12th graders showed a decrease from 80 percent at the *proficient* level in 1992 to 73 percent in 2005.

Recent NAEP results also reveal a persistent achievement gap between the reading and writing scores of whites and students of color in 8th and 12th grades. Furthermore, both whites and students of color scored lower in reading in 2005 as compared with 1992, and both male and female students also scored lower in 2005.¹

The challenges associated with adolescent literacy extend beyond secondary school to both college and elementary school. Many elementary school teachers worry about the 4th grade slump in reading abilities. Furthermore, preliminary analysis of reading instruction in the elementary school suggests that an emphasis on processes of how to read can crowd out attention to reading for ideas, information, and concepts—the very skills adolescents need to succeed in secondary school. In the other direction, college instructors claim that students arrive in their classes ill-prepared to take up the literacy tasks of higher education, and employers lament the inadequate literacy skills of young workers. In our increasingly “flat” world, the U.S. share of the global college-educated workforce has fallen from 30 percent to 14 percent in recent decades as young workers in developing nations demonstrate employer-satisfying proficiency in literacy.²

In this context, many individuals and groups, including elected officials, governmental entities, foundations, and media outlets—some with little knowledge of the field—have stepped forward to shape policies that impact literacy instruction. Notably, the U.S. Congress is currently discussing new Striving Readers legislation (Bills S958 and HR2289) designed to improve the literacy skills of middle and high school students. Test scores and other numbers do not convey the full complexity of literacy even though they are effective in eliciting a feeling of crisis. Accordingly, a useful alternative would be for teachers and other informed professionals to take an interest in policy that shapes literacy instruction. This document provides research-based information to support that interest.

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Common Myths about Adolescent Literacy

Myth: Literacy refers only to reading.

Reality: Literacy encompasses reading, writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices that call upon the voice as well as the eye and hand. It also extends to new media—including non-digitized multimedia, digitized multimedia, and hypertext or hypermedia.³

Myth: Students learn everything about reading and writing in elementary school.

Reality: Some people see the processes of learning to read and write as similar to learning to ride a bicycle, as a set of skills that do not need further development once they have been achieved. Actually literacy learning is an ongoing and non-hierarchical process. Unlike math where one principle builds on another, literacy learning is recursive and requires continuing development and practice.⁴

Myth: Literacy instruction is the responsibility of English teachers alone.

Reality: Each academic content area poses its own literacy challenges in terms of vocabulary, concepts, and topics. Accordingly, adolescents in secondary school classes need explicit instruction in the literacies of each discipline as well as the actual content of the course so that they can become successful readers and writers in all subject areas.⁵

Myth: Academics are all that matter in literacy learning.

Reality: Research shows that out-of-school literacies play a very important role in literacy learning, and teachers can draw on these skills to foster learning in school. Adolescents rely on literacy in their identity development, using reading and writing to define themselves as persons. The discourses of specific disciplines and social/cultural contexts created by school classrooms shape the literacy learning of adolescents, especially when these discourses are different and conflicting.⁶

Myth: Students who struggle with one literacy will have difficulty with all literacies.

Reality: Even casual observation shows that students who struggle with reading a physics text may be excellent



readers of poetry; the student who has difficulty with word problems in math may be very comfortable with historical narratives. More important, many of the literacies of adolescents are largely invisible in the classroom. Research on reading and writing beyond the classroom shows that students often have literacy skills that are not made evident in the classroom unless teachers make special efforts to include them.⁷

Myth: School writing is essentially an assessment tool that enables students to show what they have learned.

Reality: While it is true that writing is often central to assessment of what students have learned in school, it is also a means by which students learn and develop. Research shows that informal writing to learn can help increase student learning of content material, and it can even improve the summative writing in which students show what they have learned.⁸

Understanding Adolescent Literacy

Overview: Dimensions of Adolescent Literacy

In adolescence, students simultaneously begin to develop important literacy resources and experience unique literacy challenges. By fourth grade many students have learned a number of the basic processes of reading and writing; however, they still need to master literacy practices unique

to different levels, disciplines, texts, and situations. As adolescents experience the shift to content-area learning, they need help from teachers to develop the confidence and skills necessary for specialized academic literacies.

Adolescents also begin to develop new literacy resources and participate in multiple discourse communities in and out of school. Frequently students' extracurricular literacy proficiencies are not valued in school. Literacy's link to community and identity means that it can be a site of resistance for adolescents. When students are not recognized for bringing valuable, multiple-literacy practices to school, they can become resistant to school-based literacy.⁹

1) Shifting Literacy Demands

The move from elementary to secondary school entails many changes including fundamental ones in the nature of literacy requirements. For adolescents, school-based literacy shifts as students engage with disciplinary content and a wide variety of difficult texts and writing tasks. Elementary school usually prepares students in the processes of reading, but many adolescents do not understand the multiple dimensions of content-based literacies.

When students are not recognized for bringing valuable, multiple-literacy practices to school, they can become resistant to school-based literacy.

Adolescents may struggle with reading in some areas and do quite well with others. They may also be challenged to write in ways that conform to new disciplinary discourses. The proliferation of high-stakes tests can complicate the literacy learning of adolescents, particularly if test preparation takes priority over content-specific literacy instruction across the disciplines.¹⁰

Research says ...

- Adolescents are less likely to struggle when subject area teachers make the reading and writing approaches in a given content area clear and visible.
- Writing prompts in which students reflect on their current understandings, questions, and learning processes help to improve content-area learning.¹¹
- Effective teachers model how they access specific content-area texts.

For adolescents, school-based literacy shifts as students engage with disciplinary content and a wide variety of difficult texts and writing tasks.

- Learning the literacies of a given discipline can help adolescents negotiate multiple, complex discourses and recognize that texts can mean different things in different contexts.
- Efficacious teaching of cross-disciplinary literacies has a social justice dimension as well as an intellectual one¹²

2) Multiple and Social Literacies

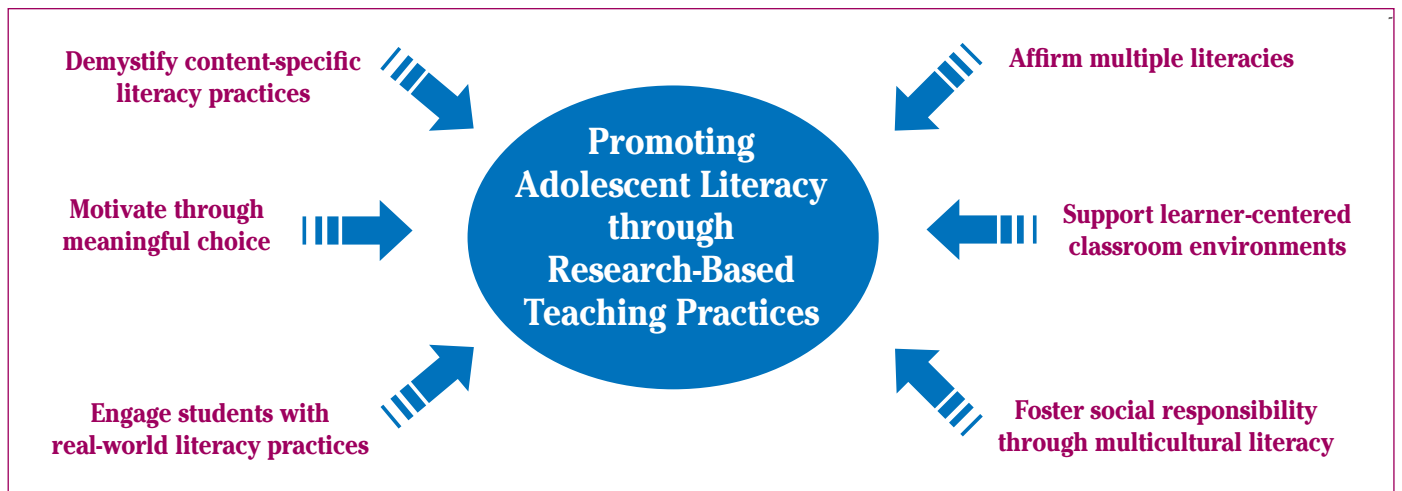
Adolescent literacy is social, drawing from various discourse communities in and out of school. Adolescents already have access to many different discourses including those of ethnic, online, and popular culture communities. They regularly use literacies for social and political purposes as they create meanings and participate in shaping their immediate environments.¹³

Teachers often devalue, ignore or censor adolescents' extracurricular literacies, assuming that these literacies are morally suspect, raise controversial issues, or distract adolescents from more important work. This means that some adolescents' literacy abilities remain largely invisible in the classroom.¹⁴

Research says ...

- The literacies adolescents bring to school are valuable resources, but they should not be reduced to stereotypical assumptions about predictable responses from specific populations of students.
- Adolescents are successful when they understand that texts are written in social settings and for social purposes.
- Adolescents need bridges between everyday literacy practices and classroom communities, including online, non-book-based communities.
- Effective teachers understand the importance of adolescents finding enjoyable texts and don't always try to shift students to "better" books.¹⁵

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3) Importance of Motivation

Motivation can determine whether adolescents engage with or disengage from literacy learning. If they are not engaged, adolescents with strong literacy skills may choose not to read or write. The number of students who are not engaged with or motivated by school learning grows at every grade level, reaching epidemic proportions in high school. At the secondary level, students need to build confidence to meet new literacy challenges because confident readers are more likely to be engaged. Engagement is encouraged through meaningful connections.¹⁶

Research says ...

Engaged adolescents demonstrate internal motivation, self efficacy, and a desire for mastery. Providing student choice and responsive classroom environments with connections to “real life” experiences helps adolescents build confidence and stay engaged.¹⁷

A. Student Choice:

- Self-selection and variety engage students by enabling ownership in literacy activities.
- In adolescence, book selection options increase dramatically, and successful readers need to learn to choose texts they enjoy. If they can’t identify pleasurable books, adolescents often lose interest in reading.
- Allowing student choice in writing tasks and genres can improve motivation. At the same time, writing choice must be balanced with a recognition that adolescents also need to learn the literacy practices that will support academic success.
- Choice should be meaningful. Reading materials should be appropriate and should speak to adolescents’ diverse interests and varying abilities.

- Student-chosen tasks must be supported with appropriate instructional support or scaffolding.¹⁸

B. Responsive Classroom Environments:

- Caring, responsive classroom environments enable students to take ownership of literacy activities and can counteract negative emotions that lead to lack of motivation.
- Instruction should center around learners. Active, inquiry-based activities engage reluctant academic readers and writers. Inquiry based writing connects writing practices with real-world experiences and tasks.
- Experiences with task-mastery enable increased self-efficacy, which leads to continued engagement.
- Demystifying academic literacy helps adolescents stay engaged.
- Using technology is one way to provide learner-centered, relevant activities. For example, many students who use computers to write show more engagement and motivation and produce longer and better papers.
- Sustained experiences with diverse texts in a variety of genres that offer multiple perspectives on life experiences can enhance motivation, particularly if texts include electronic and visual media.¹⁹

Allowing student choice in writing tasks and genres can improve motivation.

4) Value of Multicultural Perspectives

Monocultural approaches to teaching can cause or increase the achievement gap and adolescents' disengagement with literacy.

Students should see value in their own cultures and the cultures of others in their classrooms. Students who do not find representations of their own cultures in texts are likely to lose interest in school-based literacies. Similarly, they should see their home languages as having value. Those whose home language is devalued in the classroom will usually find school less engaging.

Research says...

Multicultural literacy is seeing, thinking, reading, writing, listening, and discussing in ways that critically confront and bridge social, cultural, and personal differences. It goes beyond a "tourist" view of cultures and encourages engagement with cultural issues in all literature, in all classrooms, and in the world.²⁰

A. Multicultural Literacy across All Classrooms:

- Multicultural education does not by itself foster cultural inclusiveness because it can sometimes reinforce stereotypical perceptions that need to be addressed critically.
- Multicultural literacy is not just a way of reading "ethnic" texts or discussing issues of "diversity," but rather is a holistic way of *being* that fosters social responsibility and extends well beyond English/language arts classrooms.
- Teachers need to acknowledge that we all have cultural frameworks within which we operate, and everyone—teachers and students alike—needs to consider how these frameworks can be challenged or changed to benefit all peoples.²¹
- Teacher knowledge of social science, pedagogical, and subject-matter content knowledge about diversity will foster adolescents' learning.
- Successful literacy development among English Language learners depends on and fosters collaborative multicultural relationships among researchers, teachers, parents, and students.
- Integration of technology will enhance multicultural literacy.



Students who do not see representations of their own cultures in texts are likely to lose interest in school-based literacies.

- Confronting issues of race and ethnicity within classrooms and in the larger community will enhance student learning and engagement.²²
- #### B. Goals of Multicultural Literacy:
- Students will view knowledge from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world.
 - Teachers will help students understand the whiteness studies principle that white is a race so they can develop a critical perspective on racial thinking by people of all skin colors.
 - Multicultural literacy will serve as a means to move between cultures and communities and develop transnational understandings and collaboration.
 - Ideally, students will master basic literacies *and* become multiculturally literate citizens who foster a democratic multicultural society.²³

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Research-Based Recommendations for Effective Adolescent Literacy Instruction

For teachers...

Research on the practices of highly effective adolescent literacy teachers reveals a number of common qualities. Teachers who have received recognition for their classroom work, who are typically identified as outstanding by their peers and supervisors, and whose students consistently do well on high-stakes tests share a number of qualities. These qualities, in order of importance, include the following:

- 1) teaching with approaches that foster critical thinking, questioning, student decision-making, and independent learning;
- 2) addressing the diverse needs of adolescents whose literacy abilities vary considerably;
- 3) possessing personal characteristics such as caring about students, being creative and collaborative, and loving to read and write;
- 4) developing a solid knowledge about and commitment to literacy instruction;
- 5) using significant quality and quantity of literacy activities including hands-on, scaffolding, minilessons, discussions, group work, student choice, ample feedback, and multiple forms of expression;
- 6) participating in ongoing professional development;
- 7) developing quality relationships with students; and
- 8) managing the classroom effectively.²⁴

For school programs...

Research on successful school programs for adolescent literacy reveals fifteen features that contribute to student achievement:

- 1) direct and explicit instruction;
- 2) effective instructional principles embedded in content;
- 3) motivation and self-directed learning;
- 4) text-based collaborative learning;
- 5) strategic tutoring;
- 6) diverse texts;
- 7) intensive writing;
- 8) technology;
- 9) ongoing formative assessment of students;
- 10) extended time for literacy;
- 11) long-term and continuous professional development, especially that provided by literacy coaches;
- 12) ongoing summative assessment of students and programs;
- 13) interdisciplinary teacher teams;
- 14) informed administrative and teacher leadership; and
- 15) comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.²⁵

For policymakers...

A national survey produced action steps for policymakers interested in fostering adolescent literacy. These include:

- 1) align the high school curriculum with postsecondary expectations so that students are well prepared for college;
- 2) focus state standards on the essentials for college and work readiness;
- 3) shape high school courses to conform with state standards;
- 4) establish core course requirements for high school graduation;
- 5) emphasize higher-level reading skills across the high school curriculum;
- 6) make sure students attain the skills necessary for effective writing;
- 7) ensure that students learn science process and inquiry skills; and
- 8) monitor and share information about student progress.²⁶

This report is produced by NCTE's James R. Squire Office of Policy Research, directed by Anne Ruggles Gere, with assistance from Laura Aull, Hannah Dickinson, Melinda McBee Orzulak, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, all students in the Joint Ph.D. Program in English and Education at the University of Michigan.

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Teachers across the nation are being challenged with questions like these . . . Sound familiar?



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- How can we support students as readers and writers while teaching challenging content?
- Many schools are trying to address issues around the achievement gap. We have identified student groups that are not achieving at targeted levels. What do we do next?
- We hear so much about students not being motivated. Is there really anything we can do about this?
- With the current emphasis on testing, how do we support students without compromising what we know constitutes good teaching?
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