A Call to Action: What We Know About Adolescent Literacy and Ways to Support Teachers in Meeting Students’ Needs

A Position/Action Statement from NCTE’s Commission on Reading

May 2004

**Purpose:** The purpose of this document is to provide a research-based resource for media, policymakers, and teachers that acknowledges the complexities of reading as a developmental process and addresses the needs of secondary readers and their teachers.

**What is Reading?:** The NCTE Commission on Reading has produced a statement, "On Reading, Learning to Read, and Effective Reading Instruction," that synthesizes current research on reading. Reading is defined as a complex, purposeful, social and cognitive process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and their knowledge of their culture to construct meaning. Reading is not a technical skill acquired once and for all in the primary grades, but rather a developmental process. A reader's competence continues to grow through engagement with various types of texts and wide reading for various purposes over a lifetime.

**What is Unique about Adolescent Literacy?:**

In middle and high school, students encounter academic discourses and disciplinary concepts in such fields as science, mathematics, and the social sciences that require different reading approaches from those used with more familiar forms such as literary and personal narratives (Kucer, 2005). These new forms, purposes, and processing demands require that teachers show, demonstrate, and make visible to students how literacy operates within the academic disciplines (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Tovani, 2000).

 Adolescents are already reading in multiple ways, using literacy as a social and political endeavor in which they engage to make meaning and act upon their worlds. Their texts range from clothing logos to music to specialty magazines to Web sites to popular and classical literature. In the classroom it is important for teachers to recognize and value the multiple literacy resources students bring to the acquisition of school literacy.
In effective schools, classroom conversations about how, why, and what we read are important parts of the literacy curriculum (Applebee, 1996; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko & Hurwitz, 1999). In fact, discussion-based approaches to academic literacy content are strongly linked to student achievement (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran, 2003). However, high stakes testing, such as high school exit exams, is not only narrowing the content of the literacy curriculum, but also constraining instructional approaches to reading (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Madaus, 1998) Limited, “one right answer” or “main idea” models of reading run counter to recent research findings, which call for a richer, more engaged approach to literacy instruction (Campbell, Donahue, Reese & Phillips, 1996; Taylor et al., 1999).

**What Current Research Is Showing Teachers:**

(1) That literacy is a dynamic interaction of the social and cognitive realms, with textual understandings growing from students’ knowledge of their worlds to knowledge of the external world (Langer, 2002). All students need to go beyond the study of discrete skills and strategies to understand how those skills and strategies are integrated with life experiences. Langer, et al. found that literacy programs that successfully teach at-risk students emphasize connections between students’ lives, prior knowledge, and texts, and emphasize student conversations to make those connections.

(2) That the majority of inexperienced adolescent readers need opportunities and instructional support to read many and diverse types of texts in order to gain experience, build fluency, and develop a range as readers (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000). Through extensive reading of a range of texts, supported by strategy lessons and discussions, readers become familiar with written language structures and text features, develop their vocabularies, and read for meaning more efficiently and effectively. Conversations about their reading that focus on the strategies they use and their language knowledge help adolescents build confidence in their reading and become better readers (Goodman and Marek, 1996).

(3) That most adolescents do not need further instruction in phonics or decoding skills (Ivey and Baker, 2004). Research summarized in the National Reading Panel report noted that the benefits of phonics instruction are strongest in first grade, with diminished results for students in subsequent grades. Phonics instruction has not been seen to improve reading comprehension for older students (National Reading Panel, 2000). In cases where older students need help to construct meaning with text, instruction should be targeted and embedded in authentic reading experiences.

(4) That utilizing a model of reading instruction focused on basic skills can lead to the mislabeling of some secondary readers as "struggling readers" and "non-readers" because they lack extensive reading experience, depend on different prior knowledge, and/or comprehend differently or in more complex ways. A large percentage of secondary readers who are so mislabeled are students of color and/or students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Abundant research suggests that the isolated skill instruction they receive may perpetuate low literacy achievement rather than improve their competence and engagement in complex reading tasks. (Allington, 2001; Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Brown, 1991; Hiebert, 1991; Hull & Rose, 1989; Knapp & Turnbull, 1991; Sizer, 1992). In addition, prescriptive, skills-based reading instruction mislocates the problem as the students’ failure to learn, rather than the institution’s failure to teach reading as the complex mental and social activity it is. (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller, 2001)

(5) That effective literacy programs move students to deeper understandings of texts and increase their ability to generate ideas and knowledge for their own uses (Newmann, King & Rigdon, 1997).

(6) That assessment should focus on underlying knowledge in the larger curriculum and on strategies for thinking during literacy acts (Darling-Hammond and Falk, 1997; Langer, 2000; Smith, 1991). Likewise, preparation for assessment (from ongoing classroom measures to high stakes tests) should focus on the critical components above.
What Adolescent Readers Need:

- Sustained experiences with diverse texts in a variety of genres and offering multiple perspectives on real life experiences. Although many of these texts will be required by the curriculum, others should be self-selected and of high interest to the reader. Wide independent reading develops fluency, builds vocabulary and knowledge of text structures and offers readers the experiences they need to read and construct meaning with more challenging texts. Text should be broadly viewed to include print, electronic, and visual media.
- Conversations/discussions regarding texts that are authentic, student initiated, and teacher facilitated. Such discussion should lead to diverse interpretations of a text that deepen the conversation.
- Experience in thinking critically about how they engage with texts:
  - When do I comprehend?
  - What do I do to understand a text?
  - When do I not understand a text?
  - What can I do when meaning breaks down?
- Experience in critical examination of texts that helps them to:
  - Recognize how texts are organized in various disciplines and genre
  - Question and investigate various social, political, and historical content and purposes within texts
  - Make connections between texts, and between texts and personal experiences to act on and react to the world.
  - Understand multiple meanings and richness of texts and layers of complexity

What Teachers of Adolescents Need:

- Adequate and appropriate reading materials that tap students’ diverse interests and represent a range of difficulty
- Continued support and professional development that assist them to:
  - Bridge between adolescents’ rich literate backgrounds and school literacy
  - Teach literacy in their disciplines as an essential way of learning in their disciplines
  - Recognize when students are not making meaning with text and provide appropriate, strategic assistance to read course content effectively
  - Facilitate student-initiated conversations regarding texts that are authentic and relevant to real life experiences.
  - Create environments that allow students to engage in critical examinations of texts as they dissect, deconstruct, and re-construct in an effort to engage in meaning making and comprehension processes.

References


**Selected Resources for Teachers**


Related Information:

- On Reading, Learning to Read, and Effective Reading Instruction: An Overview of What We Know and How We Know It (http://www.ncte.org/about/policy/guidelines)
- Features of Literacy Programs: A Decision-Making Matrix (http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/level/elem)