Keynote Address Presented at the American Reading Forum 2003

Literacy Research on Student Learning: What Counts and Who’s Counting

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Websites, newspapers, national broadcasts, and professional journals in education continue to draw large audiences for information about the federally legislated and controversial No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In the year following its enactment a flagship report entitled Every Child a Graduate (2002) appeared on the Alliance for Excellent Education’s website http://www.all4ed.org/publications/EveryChildAGraduate/every.pdf. The Alliance, a nonpartisan policy group located in Washington, DC, published the Every Child a Graduate framework as a means of highlighting the needs of middle and high school students—elements in our society that traditionally have been underserved by federal legislation.

Following the publication of Every Child a Graduate, two bills were introduced in Congress—the Pathways for all Students to Succeed (PASS) Act (S. 1554, available at http://www.senate.gov/%7Emurray/news.cfm?id=207153) and the Graduation for All Act (H.R. 3085, available at http://hinojosa.house.gov/legislation/legislation.cfm?id=419). These bills, which have yet to gain bipartisan support, nonetheless set the stage for President Bush’s Striving Readers Initiative, a new $200 million program that is part of the proposed FY2005 budget. [Note, however, that the amount Congress appropriated for this initiative was only $24.8 million in Fiscal Year 2005 (J. Amos, personal communication, December 9, 2004)]. The Striving Readers Initiative, which is aimed at promoting adolescent literacy and effective reading interventions for secondary school students who read significantly below grade level, will provide funds to approximately 100 school districts for the implementation of demonstrative programs that have shown to be effective in improving adolescents’ reading achievement.

Defining the Challenges

The active policy scene just encapsulated is partially fueled by the 2002 report on reading achievement from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)(National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), which indicates that approximately 25% of 8th and 12th grade students read at “below basic” levels. Translated, this means that 1 out of every 4 secondary school students tested could not identify the main idea, comprehend informational text passages, or elaborate on ideas found in the NAEP Reading 2002 passages. Looking more broadly across the age spectrum, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2003) estimates that approximately 10,000 literacy coaches will be required to meet the needs of close to 9 million 4th – 12th graders who read at what NAEP determines “below basic” level.
Although arguably persuasive, the NAEP Reading report’s influence on policy makers has paled in comparison to the influence a report issued by the Manhattan Policy Institute on public high school graduation and college readiness rates in the United States (Green & Forster, 2003) has had. According to a study conducted by the Manhattan Policy Institute (Green & Forster), only 70% of all students in public high schools graduate from high school with a diploma. Every day approximately 3,000 adolescents drop out of school. In the 2002-2003 academic year, alone, close to 540,000 students left without graduating. Specifically, the study’s findings (Green & Forster) include the following:

- Only 70% of all students in public high schools graduate, and only 32% of all students leave high school qualified to attend four-year colleges.
- Only 51% of all black students and 52% of all Hispanic students graduate, and only 20% of all black students and 16% of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready.
- The graduation rate for white students was 72%; for Asian students, 79%; and for American Indian students, 54%. The college readiness rate for white students was 37%; for Asian students, 38%; for American Indian students, 14%.
- Graduation rates in the Northeast (73%) and Midwest (77%) were higher than the overall national figure, while graduation rates in the South (65%) and West (69%) were lower than the national figure. The Northeast and the Midwest had the same college readiness rate as the nation overall (32%) while the South had a higher rate (38%) and the West had a lower rate (25%).
- The state with the highest graduation rate in the nation was North Dakota (89%); the state with the lowest graduation rate in the nation was Florida (56%).
- Due to their lower college readiness rates, black and Hispanic students are seriously underrepresented in the pool of minimally qualified college applicants. Only 9% of all college-ready graduates are black and another 9% are Hispanic, compared to a total population of 18-year-olds that is 14% black and 17% Hispanic.
- The portion of all college freshmen that is black (11%) or Hispanic (7%) is very similar to their shares of the college-ready population (9% for both). This suggests that the main reason these groups are underrepresented in college admissions is that these students are not acquiring college-ready skills in the K-12 system, rather than inadequate financial aid or affirmative action policies.

Looking to Literacy Research to Address the Challenges

This paper reports on the status of research into exemplary literacy instruction in the intermediate, middle, and high school years (roughly from grades 4 – 12). Its focus is on addressing the challenges just described by looking for ways to bridge the achievement gap. This gap and how to bridge it is also the focus of a book I recently co-edited with Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers University (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). The research literature that addresses the gap between basic and more advanced levels of reading growth among preadolescents and adolescents is concentrated largely in the areas of comprehension and vocabulary development. A smaller body of research looks at students’ motivation and self-efficacy in learning with and from text. Less well researched but still important is the topic of cultural relevance in teaching.
Each of these topics is discussed in the first three sections of the paper, 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), RAND Reading Study Group’s Reading for Understanding (2002), Adolescents and Literacy (Kamil, 2003), and the National Reading Conference’s position paper on Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents (Alvermann, 2001). In the last two sections of the paper, I focus first on redefining exemplary instruction from a New Literacies perspective and then on drawing implications for research and policy.

Comprehension and Vocabulary Development

As a member of the RAND Reading Study Group, I worked for over two years with other literacy teacher educators and researchers, as well as with individuals outside the teaching profession, to develop a list of principles for exemplary literacy instruction at the middle and high school level. Grounded in the existing literature on reading comprehension and vocabulary development, these principles include:

- 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.

Drawn from some of the same studies on which the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) based its conclusions, these six principles were framed within a sociocultural perspective. Thus, unlike the NRP, which relied solely on experimental and quasi-experimental research studies that 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), the RAND Reading Study Group took into account the work of socioculturally, situated literacy practices as well (e.g., Dillon & O’Brien, 2001; Guzzetti & Hynd, 1998; O’Brien, 1998; Sturtevant, 1996).

However, because both the NRP and RAND Reading Study Group focused largely on comprehension studies in which individuals read in isolation of one another and recalled information in print-based texts, their respective reports reflect a rather narrow and restrictive view of the reading process. In fact, six of the seven categories of text comprehension that both
groups 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—include strategies content area teachers might use if their view of the reading process were 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.

Motivation and Self-Efficacy in Learning From and With Text

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).

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 conceptualization 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).

Cultural Relevance in Teaching

As anthropologists McDermott and Varenne (1995) have pointed out, all cultures (including schools) are historically evolved ways of “doing” life. Cultures teach people about what is worth working for, how to succeed, and who will fall short. To be concise, one might say cultures are all about what counts. Applied to education, this notion of culture takes on a special meaning. For example, what I might view as exemplary adolescent literacy instruction (and thus what counts” in my preservice and graduate education classes) may differ substantially from what counts as exemplary practice in middle and secondary schools. Moreover, teachers, reading specialists, counselors, and administrators working within the same school may go about this
counting in different ways, to say nothing of how policy makers at local, state, and national levels may do their counting. Thus, it is important to ask not only what counts but also who is doing the counting—and is it culturally relevant?

Cultural relevance is undeniably important in contexts that are conducive to middle and secondary school learning. For example, Moore (1996) found in an in-depth synthesis of the qualitative research on strategy instruction that the type of strategy taught is less important than the nature of the context in which it is taught, and 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, writing, and discussion because they know that each of these processes reinforces the other and can lead to improved comprehension and retention of course content (Alvermann, Young, Weaver, et al., 1996; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; 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.”

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.

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 & 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, 2002; 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, blogs, 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 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-mediated 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).

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 largely 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 bridging 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.

Author Note

1The assumption that literacy exists in the singular has been critiqued by Street (1995) and others (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 1996) for ignoring the socially situated aspects of one’s multiple literacies (print, nonprint, computer, scientific, numeric) and their accompanying literate practices. A preference for literacies, as opposed to literacy in the singular, also signals a critique of the autonomous model of reading that has dominated Western thinking up to the present. The autonomous model views reading largely from a cognitive perspective—as a “natural” or neutral process, one supposedly devoid of ideological positioning and the power relations inherent in such positioning. Conceiving of literacies in the plural and as ideologically embedded does not require giving up on the cognitive aspects of reading. Rather, according to Street (1995), the ideological model subsumes the autonomous model of reading in an attempt to understand how reading is encapsulated within broader sociocultural structures (schools, governments, families, media) and the power relations that sustain them.

References


