



National Council of
Teachers of English

A Call to Action: What We Know About Adolescent Literacy Instruction

This statement, formerly known as A Call to Action: What We Know About Adolescent Literacy Instruction and Ways to Support Teachers in Meeting Students' Needs, was updated in July 2018 with the new title, A Call to Action: What We Know about Adolescent Literacy Instruction.

Originally developed by NCTE's Commission on Reading, May 2004, revised July 2018

The purpose of this document is to provide a research-based resource for media, policymakers, and teachers that acknowledges the complexities of reading as an ongoing, developmental process and addresses the needs of secondary readers and their teachers. In 2004, NCTE's Commission on Reading wrote *A Call to Action: What We Know about Adolescent Literacy and Ways to Support Teachers in Meeting Students' Needs*. In over a decade since, the everyday experience of reading in adolescents' lives has expanded dramatically. Literacy encompasses much more than reading and includes writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices, including digital and interdisciplinary literacies. Literacy learning is an ongoing and non-hierarchical process in which each academic content area poses its own literacy approaches and challenges. In addition to content-area literacies, adolescents rely on out-of-school literacies in their identity development. Part of the belief system underlying this statement is that students often have literacy skills that are not made evident in the classroom and teachers must make special efforts to include them (Morgan, 1997).

Related:

Adolescent Literacy: A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (2007)

Dimensions of Adolescent Literacy

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 (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Reading is not a technical skill acquired once and for all in the primary grades, but rather a developmental process throughout the reader's life. A reader's competence continues to grow through engagement with various types of texts and wide reading for various purposes over a lifetime.

Just as teachers must consider their own philosophical underpinnings of teaching, including their own values and beliefs that guide decisions, students, too, need to master literacy practices unique to each situation. As students grow, students must adapt new literacy resources in and out of school. There are key actions to consider in adolescent reading:

1. Incorporation of Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

In middle and high school, students encounter academic discourses and disciplinary concepts in literary, historical, informational, scientific, and technical texts that span such fields as science, mathematics, and the social sciences. This kind of academic reading requires specialized reading strategies to access complex texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). 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; Duffy, 2009). Student conversations about reading that focus on metacognition and their language knowledge help adolescents build confidence in their reading and become better readers (Goodman & Marek, 1996).

2. Integration of Multiple and Social Literacies

Adolescents are bombarded by "multiple message streams" (Hicks & Steffel, 2012) and are required to use literacy as a social and political endeavor in which they engage to make meaning and act upon their worlds. Their texts range from digital texts to classic literature including gaming endeavors, interactions with popular music, and social media. In the classroom it is important for teachers to recognize and value the multiple literacy resources students bring to the acquisition of school literacy (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Moje et al., 2004; Moje, 2007).

3. Orchestration of Engagement and Motivation

Engagement and motivation are tightly linked (Guthrie, 2008). Students need to build confidence to meet new literacy challenges; confident readers are more likely to be engaged (Lent, 2009). Adolescent readers need sustained experiences with diverse texts in a variety of genres that includes digital texts and specialized nonfiction text structures. Students have opportunities to read multiple perspectives on real-life issues and 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. Texts should be broadly viewed to include print, digital, and visual media.

4. *Appreciation of Multicultural Perspectives and Cultures*

Multicultural literacy is seeing, thinking, reading, writing, listening, and discussing in ways that critically confront and bridge social, cultural, and personal differences. As educators we work to expose students to multiple perspectives as we avoid the “danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009). 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.

Related:

21st-Century Literacies: A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (2007)

“Reading in the Digital Age” by Beth Shaum, May 12, 2015, Literacy & NCTE blog

Implications for the Teaching of Reading

- Effective teachers model how students access specific content-area texts.

In effective schools, instructional 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, & 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, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 1999; Guthrie, 2002).

- Conversations and discussions regarding texts must be authentic, student initiated, and teacher facilitated. Such discussion should lead to diverse interpretations supported by evidence of a text that deepen the conversation.

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.

- 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.

Effective literacy programs move students to deeper understandings and greater independence of reading texts while increasing their ability to generate ideas and knowledge (Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997). Utilizing a model of reading instruction focused on basic skills devoid of meaning 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, newly arrived students, and/or students from lower socioeconomic 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, 2000; Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Brown, 1991; Hiebert, 1991; Hull & Rose, 1989; Knapp & Turnbull, 1991; Sizer, 1992). In addition, prescriptive, skills-based reading instruction misidentifies 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, & Mueller, 2001). Wilhelm (2004) argues for the learner-centered approach to reading instruction because it encompasses the following features:

- Learning is social and transactional.
- Learning is an apprenticeship to a community of practice.
- Learners move on a continuum from novice to expert.
- Teachers provide assistance to the adolescent.
- Good teaching is always in the learner's zone of proximal development.
- Different students have a variety of needs, so instruction must be flexible.

Related:

Reading Instruction for *All* Students: A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (2012)

What Adolescent Readers Need

Practice thinking critically about how they engage with texts to include

- application of metacognitive strategies.
- recognition of bias and high-quality sources.
- argumentation with evidence.

Critical examination of texts that helps them to

- recognize the purpose of text structure and how the writer uses it to create effect.
- infer beyond literal interpretations.
- question and investigate various social, political, and historical context.
- understand multiple meanings and richness of texts and layers of complexity.

Assessment that helps them to focus on

- the larger purpose and big ideas of the curriculum, and on metacognitive strategies for thinking during literacy acts (Smith, 1991; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Langer, 2000).
- preparation for assessment (from ongoing classroom measures to high-stakes tests) that should focus on the critical components of multicultural perspectives, motivation, multiple and social literacies, and shifting literacy demands.

Choice and volume of reading

- Opportunities to read often from books of their own choosing
- Access to a vast library of books and texts that vary in levels and text structures (Miller, 2009)
- Dedicated time to read every day (Allington, 2009)

What Teachers of Adolescent Readers Need

- Adequate and appropriate reading materials that tap students' diverse interests and represent a range of interest and complexity
- Continued support and professional development that assist them to
- honor adolescents' rich literate and cultural backgrounds to increase subject area engagement
- teach literacy in their discipline so students can access more specialized texts
- recognize when students are not making meaning with text and provide appropriate, strategic assistance to greater success
- facilitate student-initiated conversations regarding texts that are authentic, applicable, and relevant to real-life experiences
- create environments and provide time to allow students to engage in critical examinations of texts as they dissect, deconstruct, and reconstruct in an effort to engage in meaning making and comprehension processes

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