

Combating the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy: Exploring Literacy in the Secondary Classroom

Authors

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Abstract

Although literacy has become a multi-faceted aspect of education essential to students' future success, studies have found that many secondary students lack basic literacy skills. In the past, much of the blame for adolescents' literacy problems has been placed on elementary teachers, but recent research suggests that secondary teachers must share in the responsibility for teaching literacy. This paper explores the various characteristics and modalities of literacy and reviews current literature in the field including the Common Core State Standards initiative. Most importantly, this paper provides suggestions for integrating literacy learning in the general curriculum at the secondary level with particular attention to content area literacy and technology integration.

Keywords: literacy, reading, technology, integration, curriculum, Common Core State Standard

Literacy has become an increasingly important research topic as the components of literacy have become increasingly complex. The term literacy no longer refers simply to the ability to read. Rather, literacy has taken on intricate characteristics with major consequences for the success of today's students (Carroll, 2011). Multiple modes of literacy have been found to be

essential for students' future endeavors (CCSSO, 2010; Ritter, 2009) including fluency, the comprehension and analysis of complex texts, and effective social and electronic communication.

Although much research exists on the topic of literacy, the wide scope of the field may confuse or intimidate teachers who serve areas that are not directly related to reading and language. The typical math or science teacher, for example, may lack the support and training necessary to fully implement the teaching of literacy. Additionally, because literacy research has tended to focus on the elementary levels, secondary teachers may struggle to find effective and efficient means of integrating literacy learning in the general curriculum. In this article, we will summarize information about the forms of literacy and its importance. Then we will provide suggestions for implementing literacy learning in secondary classrooms by focusing on content area literacy and technology integration as ways to meet the growing crisis in adolescent literacy.

The Literacy Gap

Much recent research has focused on early identification and intervention for students with learning disabilities in the elementary grades (Wexler, Vaughn, & Roberts, 2010). Early intervention strategies have been shown to assist students with learning disabilities in the areas of reading and literacy (Espin, Wallace, Lembke, Campbell, & Long, 2010), but recent studies have shown that many students, especially those with learning disabilities, have remained below the threshold of basic literacy skills. Despite multiple initiatives to improve reading and literacy, the 2011 Nation's Report Card for Reading reported no significant improvements in average reading scores from 2009 to 2011 for grade 4 (IES, 2011). The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (IES & NCES, 2007), moreover, reported that 64 percent of 4th grade students with disabilities in public schools scored below a Basic Level, a level that implies only partial proficiency, compared to only 31 percent of students without disabilities. These numbers are daunting, especially in the face of mandates such as those in *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) that require all students to achieve basic mastery of subject content.

Progress is expected to take time; unfortunately time is in short supply for students who will soon be required to critically engage in literacy both inside and outside of the classroom. Literacy is crucial even for younger adolescents, who seemingly have time to grow and improve. Concerted efforts are needed to ensure that adolescents receive a strong set of literacy skills on which to build throughout their educational careers. Studies have shown, however, that an alarming number of secondary students lack those skills (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010).

In order to be successful during high school and into adulthood, secondary students need to develop not only the ability to read, but also the ability to comprehend difficult texts and to communicate socially and electronically in effective and meaningful ways. These skills are paramount to obtaining academic mastery, but also to becoming productive and successful adults within society. Difficulties with literacy often present dire consequences for students at the secondary level. Secondary textbooks may be inaccessible for students with even slight difficulties with comprehension.

Educators in all the content area disciplines must recognize the growing literacy gap among adolescents. The need for literacy interventions at the secondary level cannot be ignored or left as the responsibility of elementary teachers. As new state and national mandates continue to be pushed into the classroom, students who are unable to read and comprehend the basics are unlikely to meet increasing demands for appropriate inquiry and critical analysis. With the advent of new initiatives, however, the issue of literacy in the secondary classroom may soon be addressed.

New Initiatives: The Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for literacy call for cross-disciplinary literacy for all students by the end of high school. That is deemed essential for students to become competitive and successful in the global workforce (CCSSO, 2010). The CCSS address literacy standards in all disciplines, including social studies/history as well as science and other technical subjects. The Standards view literacy as a shared initiative; that is, all educators at every level in every subject share in the responsibility for literacy achievement. Although critics may question the need for additional standards, the CCSS seek to be flexible, rigorous, and research based. They leave room for differentiation both in instruction and in learning while maintaining high expectations for achievement.

The Core Standards encourage inquiry, critical analysis, and dissemination of material in ways that are meaningful, realistic, and evidence-driven for all students, including English Language Learners. Of paramount importance is the focus of the CCSS on content area literacy. With implementation of the Standards, students will be required to demonstrate independence, build content knowledge, and engage in critical thinking about new material. They will also be expected to value evidence, understand and appreciate new perspectives and differing cultures, and use technology effectively and efficiently (CCSSO, 2010). These goals may seem lofty to some; nevertheless, educators must set high standards in order to provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to be globally competitive.

No longer can educators plan only for the narrowest definitions of literacy. They must, rather, consider all facets of literacy and how their unique characteristics play a role in content area learning.

Building Content Area Literacy

Educators almost universally agree that literacy is developmental (Flippo, 2011). Among secondary teachers, however, there is a disparity between learning academic content and learning literacy, and the lack of focus on literacy in the secondary classroom is detrimental to students' learning and development. Content area mastery cannot be achieved without basic literacy (Rose, 2011). Therefore, the current method of focusing on academic learning is not effective when students are unable to comprehend and apply new knowledge due to lack of reading and literacy skills. The push for basic academic mastery for all students that was mandated by *No Child Left Behind* has forced many secondary teachers to set literacy learning aside. The time required for teaching basic subject content leaves little room for literacy learning in secondary education.

Initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards may be the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The Standards initiative shifts the focus to content area literacy and providing students with skills that enable inquiry, critical thinking, and the evaluation of evidence within specific subject areas, specifically science and areas of technical expertise (CCSSO, 2010). With this focus, Flippo (2011) suggested that educators take a backward approach; focus on literacy at the secondary level, ensuring that even secondary students gain and maintain basic literacy skills in order to be successful at all stages of learning. This is accomplished by integrating literacy learning within contextual learning as a "meaningful whole" (Rose, 2011, p. 87).

The task of integrating literacy learning within contextual learning may seem daunting at first glance. Rose (2011) suggested, however, that the literacy learning opportunities that already exist in the classroom become clearer when teachers consider that curriculum, in general, is text that is read, written, or heard. "Students learn the curriculum through language, and in the process they learn the language of the curriculum" (Rose, 2011, p. 82). The key, however, is providing students with the opportunity to learn about the language, that is, to become fluent in the meaning and context of the language in order to understand and analyze new and different ideas.

Building Fluency

Reading fluency is one integral aspect of literacy that focuses on the meaning and context of language, and it has been identified as an area in need

of attention (Goering & Baker, 2010; Whithear, 2011). Studies have shown that some students who are deemed literate lack fluency. This is becoming especially common in secondary and post-secondary settings. As the so-called "literate" students progress into high school and beyond, they are often left behind as they are not able to dissect and comprehend the difficult concepts found in upper-level texts (Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010; Wexler, Vaughn, & Roberts, 2010). In these cases, early identification and intervention have often failed the student as more in-depth intervention is needed.

Research has provided promising techniques for promoting fluency in the elementary classroom (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010), but empirical evidence is lacking for the effectiveness of many of these techniques in the secondary classroom. Furthermore, such interventions typically focus on one aspect of literacy while ignoring other essential components. For example, Wexler, Vaughn, and Roberts (2010) contended that the repeated reading procedures used at the elementary level, may not be effective at the secondary level. Repeated reading procedures consist of a passage being read aloud (modeling) followed by repeated practice by the student who reads the same passage until fluency is reached. Simply repeating passages does not, however, ensure that the student will understand a complex message. Comprehension and analysis may still be lacking.

The continuous reading method yields similar results (Wexler, Vaughn, & Roberts, 2010). In continuous reading, students read selected passages multiple times or read a group of selected passages for a continued period of time. Studies have shown that students may increase reading rate through the use of continuous reading methods (Wexler et al., 2010), but understanding of complex concepts is often lost. This is in part due to the lack of understanding of the complex patterns of language. Although students learn that language is composed of patterns of letters that produce sounds and that sentences are composed of groups of words that produce meaning, they do not obtain an understanding of how to process these patterns to form complex ideas (Rose, 2011).

Peer pairing is a strategy that has been shown to increase fluency and overall literacy at multiple grade levels (McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006; Wexler, Vaughn, & Roberts, 2010). Peer pairing consists of students being assigned reading partners or reading tutors and engaging in multiple reading activities. This technique has been shown to be effective at improving fluency and literacy for both general education students and students with mild reading disabilities. Further research is needed, however, to determine the effectiveness of peer pairing at the secondary level, and the need

for techniques to promote multi-faceted literacy (comprised of the multiple modalities of literacy) still remains.

Rose (2011) found that a three-tiered model of literacy learning activities promoted fluency along with other components of literacy. The first tier of this model consists of activities that encourage basic knowledge of the text at hand, including the purpose of the text, the overall map of the text, and general background knowledge. The author contended that the first tier “provides a mental map for all students to follow the text with general comprehension without struggling to work out what is going on at each step, allowing the teacher to work with texts that are beyond some students’ independent reading skills” (Rose, 2011, p. 87). This allows students to focus on meaning instead of on terms that may be unfamiliar or confusing.

The second tier of the Rose (2011) model consists of teaching semantic meanings of words. Students are led through specific detailed passages in the text and are encouraged to identify patterns and meanings in order to promote full understanding of complex text. The learning of semantic meaning is integrated into the general curriculum, promoting fluency while also fostering understanding of specific subject matter. Students are then able to comprehend difficult texts and to begin analyzing new ideas.

Finally, the third tier of the model consists of activities that allow mixing and matching of phrases and word groups in order to allow manipulation of ideas in a visual form. This “intensifies students’ control” (Rose, 2011, p. 94) of complex meanings, ideas, and theories and promotes higher order thinking skills. Students are able to essentially experiment with ideas, discuss new knowledge, and present thoughts and opinions in a didactic manner.

The Role of Technology

Literacy has changed in the face of new technologies in the classroom and continues to change at an ever-quickening pace. Recent research suggests that the implementation of technology practices in the classroom can also increase literacy for both general education students and students with disabilities (King-Sears, Swanson, & Mainzer, 2011). With the advances of the electronic age, computer literacies are now pushing to the forefront of education practice. Deemed, the “New Literacies” (Carroll, 2011, p. 27), these technologies are essentially forcing digital texts into the hands of students. “The students we now teach are the first generation to have grown up immersed in technology” (Carroll, 2011, p. 27). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers consider the use of new technologies to assist in teaching reading and literacy in the classroom.

Many texts are now electronic rather than printed, including e-books, online encyclopedias, wikis, and online search engines. Students must be

taught to make use of the wealth of information available to them and to form coherent thoughts from newfound knowledge (Carroll, 2011). To limit students to printed texts is to essentially limit access to information and will result in stifled learning opportunities. Proponents of electronic texts such as e-books argue that they provide an increased level of interactivity that may, in turn, produce greater learning (Zucker, Moody, & McKenna, 2009). Many e-books provide read-aloud features, interactive activities, and the ability to quickly search for definitions and more in-depth information on specified topics. Studies have shown a slight increase in achievement through the use of e-books, though this minor increase requires further study and repeated trials (Zucker, Moody, & McKenna, 2009).

Making use of electronic technologies “includes learning how to read, write, and speak with multiple modalities in ways that reflect the socio-cultural nature of learning” (Carroll, 2011, p. 28). Educators must consider the impact that students’ social and electronic literacy have on their academic literacy (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006). A working knowledge of electronic communication, such as text messaging, e-mail, and mobile tweeting, is imperative for educators to positively affect student literacy in real and meaningful ways (Rose, 2011; Sweeny, 2010). Furthermore, studies have shown that technologies that are generally considered leisure activities, such as video games, may increase reading and literacy (Marino & Beecher, 2010). Therefore, the implementation of technology may not only lead to increased literacy, but also to increased student interest, motivation, and self-efficacy. Most importantly, students must master the New Literacies in order to be competitive in the future workforce.

With the wide array of technology practices available, teachers are more able to appropriately cater to individual learning styles and promote differentiated instruction. The three-tiered model (Rose, 2011) may become more efficient with the use of technology. Additionally, the implementation of technology to increase literacy can be beneficial to all students, including those with learning disabilities. King-Sears, Swanson, and Mainzer (2011) proposed that the assistive technology that is often prescribed as part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be beneficial to all students. The assistive technology remains in place for the prescribed student yet becomes part of general “practice activity” (King-Sears, Swanson, & Mainzer, 2011, p. 569), thereby providing a least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities while becoming part of the established classroom technology. Technology that accomplishes this dual task may include audio, video, computer software, or digital texts. Several modalities of literacy are increased for all learners with minimal changes to normal classroom activity.

Writing, Dialogue, and Other Intervention Strategies

Methods such as oral dialogue and performance have also been shown to increase student literacy (Gallagher & Ntelioglou, 2011; Rose, 2011). Gallagher and Ntelioglou noted:

[H]ow youth see themselves in the contexts in which they express their understandings, how they engage dialogically in the process of writing, how they imagine themselves into and create contextual sensitivity for worlds unfamiliar to them, and how they perform in a world can significantly shape their sense of mastery of language and communication. (Gallagher & Ntelioglou, 2011, p. 322).

In addition to allowing students to communicate through means that they are faced with daily (such as through email, texting, and mobile tweeting), promoting social dialogue in the classroom may be beneficial. It is often the social aspect of literacy that reiterates concepts and increases student learning. Therefore, the integration of literacy learning in meaningful contexts, rather than as isolated concepts, may increase student literacy (Rose, 2011).

Integration of writing has also been found to increase student literacy (Sweeny, 2010). Although writing is certainly not a New Literacy, it has changed in the face of technology. With the advent of electronic communication, how students write today is much different than in days past. It is commonplace today for students to be able to quickly and easily communicate with individuals across the world. The Internet has made much of this increase in communication possible. Students are able to communicate and collaborate with others much more easily and freely. In addition, students are often more willing to complete assignments while using the Internet because it is not seen as typical schoolwork (Sweeny, 2010). Therefore, learning can take place while motivation and enjoyment are increased.

Studies have shown that incorporating writing with the Internet may greatly increase literacy (Sweeny, 2010). Many resources are available to teachers who are interested in using the Internet to integrate literacy learning in the general classroom. Videos, comments, feedback, and writing workshops are commonly available on the Internet to assist students in writing mastery. One process that is suggested for increasing literacy is the use of the Internet workshop (Sweeny, 2010). In this process, a teacher-selected website is chosen that is oriented towards a specific subject area or objective. The teacher designs activities that employ the chosen website for queries, communication, or various other activities, with the intent of orienting students towards specific writing resources. Students are then given

a writing assignment that stems from knowledge obtained from use of the website.

Similarly, writing on the Internet may be used to increase literacy through forum communication (Sweeny, 2010). In this activity, students are directed towards a specific website where they have the opportunity to submit their writing assignments for critique and feedback. Often, professional authors are available to offer support and discussions related to writing, providing encouragement and modeling. Additionally, students can use forums to share and critique each other's work in a less intrusive and more comfortable environment. This may prove beneficial for students who struggle with literacy, experience learning difficulties, or who generally are withdrawn in the classroom by increasing self-efficacy while decreasing pressure and fear.

Conclusion

Traditional thinking about the teaching of literacy must keep pace with the changing world. As Ritter pointedly stated,

Our economy is now truly global, and the competitiveness of our education system must reflect this. To maintain America's competitive edge, all of our students need to be well-prepared and ready to compete not only with their American peers, but also with students from around the world. The state-led development of common core state standards is a critical first step to bring about real and meaningful transformation of state education systems to benefit all students (Ritter, 2009, p. 1).

Following the approaches for literacy instruction described in this article may provide essential skills that many secondary students are currently lacking. This may enable students to not only acquire the necessary skills of reading, but also improve writing, fluency, and content area understanding that truly are required for future learning and success. As society has advanced, literacy has become more complicated and multi-faceted and increasingly important to students' future success. Employing the many resources that are now available can bring new life to literacy learning in the secondary classroom. Through the implementation of technology, encouragement of social communication, ongoing discussion, and activities to increase fluency, teachers may foster an environment of learning and literacy achievement that translates to much more than traditional classroom literacy.

Although no existing research identifies the true source of the lack of literacy in schools today, critics argue that reforms such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) have become a detriment to literacy achievement (Lobascher,

2011). Especially at the secondary level, educators struggle to produce high-achieving students within a rigidly limited period of time, which forces them to sacrifice literacy learning for subject area content. Nevertheless, secondary educators must strive to ensure literacy of all forms in every subject. The literacy achievement of students is a shared responsibility, and the shifting of blame has done little good.

Students depend on educators to teach literacy skills that are crucial for success in adulthood. All educators, but especially secondary teachers, must consider the enormous responsibility they shoulder to prepare students for life beyond school. It is time to take responsibility, take advantage of the resources available, become creative, and truly make a difference in the lives of today's youth.

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