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Reducing the Uncertainty: Adolescent Literacy Practices Supported by Recent Research

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When I was teaching middle school in Florida several years ago, I had the privilege of working with an exceptional language arts teacher. Dawn was an innovative teacher assigned to lower-tracked reading and writing students. She taught her classes to read and analyze texts and created a community of writers who wrote about issues affecting their lives.

One day Dawn and I were discussing the characteristics of good teachers. Dawn, a veteran teacher beloved by students and faculty alike, became visibly upset. "I'm not so sure I am a good teacher," she confessed. "My students like me and enjoy my classes. But am I preparing students to read and write outside of my class?" This questioning stance was no comfort to me, a neophyte teacher. If Dawn wasn't sure if she was making the grade as a teacher, I certainly could not categorize myself as a good teacher.

There is much uncertainty in teaching, especially surrounding the question "what works?" in literacy instructional practices in secondary classrooms. Research tells us that there are eight million struggling readers in grades 4-12 (Biancarosa and Snow 3). Although elementary teachers in the US are fairly successful in teaching students to read, this does not translate to adolescents who are prepared to read to learn across subject areas and contexts. In fact, seventy percent of students entering fifth and ninth grades in 2006 read below grade level (Biancarosa and Snow 3).

The Good News: Instructional Practices that Work

The good news is that there are literacy practices

that have been proven to have a positive impact on secondary classrooms. I would like to synthesize findings that have been recently published in five premier educational journals from 2000-08: the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Educational Leadership*, and the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. To determine if a literacy practice suggested by the research was effective for adolescents, I included only research on secondary students that measured the success of a literacy intervention or instructional practice(s) by using pre- and post-assessments, typically standardized test scores such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, or by comparing the gains of students receiving an intervention or instructional practice versus a matched control group.

Five themes emerged after reviewing almost sixty articles that reported on the effectiveness of literacy instruction or interventions on adolescent populations. To illustrate how I might incorporate these research findings in my teaching practice, I will offer suggestions from my current favorite work of Young Adult literature, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie.

Lesson #1: Successful Interventions Build on What Adolescents Already Know

Knowledge begets knowledge. Literacy instruction that works for adolescents builds on what students already know about the world and expands upon this knowledge. Prior knowledge, including knowledge derived from ethnic and cultural heritage, affects textual comprehension (Porat 963). For English language learners to learn optimally, research strongly supports instruction conducted in a primary language (Marsh 727). If teachers cannot speak the student's primary language, it makes sense to allow ample opportunity for student collaborative work among students whose shared first language is not English. Reading the same instructional content across texts (for example, focusing on a single historical event such as the *Titanic* disaster from many points of view) supports stronger critical literacy skills than merely

reading a single textbook (Nokes et al. 492).

In order to build prior knowledge before students were expected to plow willy-nilly into *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I might offer students a gateway activity introducing contrasting definitions of racism (e.g. racism as stereotyping of different groups vs. racism as power over oppressed peoples). Students would pick the definition that best fits with their existing view of racism and give examples from the world. As the class reads the book, they could see how their construct of racism might differ from that of characters in the book and perhaps amend their definition of racism as they read the book. The point is, before reading the first page students would have an articulated schema of racism and would be likelier to comprehend textual themes.

In addition to building on prior knowledge, effective adolescent literacy instruction tailors instruction to specific reading needs (Fischer 326). For example, one intervention that worked well for struggling African-American adolescent readers combined the reading of culturally relevant material with embedded decoding and fluency instruction and practice (Tatum 52). Because *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* includes the protagonist's cartoons as well as text, students with reading text comprehension difficulties but good visual comprehension ability could be trained to explicate illustrations in order to have a better orientation to text. From time to time, students might replicate the caricatures in the text to summarize what they had read. This activity would build on their existing strengths as learners as a bridge to build textual comprehension and increase student efficacy in textual comprehension and visual comprehension.

When adolescents are taught to identify main ideas (purposes, target audience, points of view, construction techniques, or omitted information) in audio and visual texts, improved writing and reading comprehension occurs for adolescents across pre- and post-tests that measured traditional school literacy using print text (Hobbs and Frost 330; Hobbs 58). Adolescents often engage in media viewing in their non-school lives, so it makes sense to scaffold reading skills from popular media to print texts. Selected movie clips from a movie with themes also dealing with racism (such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* or *Crash*) could be used for adolescents to reflect how characters in

the same scene may have vastly different interpretations of events in the film. This kind of textual analysis and could be a lead-in to the many points of view regarding racism students might encounter in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Lesson #2: Successful interventions Include Explicit Skill and Strategy Instruction

Teachers must make the components and instructional purposes of a task visible and explicit to adolescents. When teachers read aloud difficult texts and model metacognitive strategies used by good readers (Williams 588; Ivey 20), or demonstrate the strategies of good writers (De La Paz and Graham 687, De La Paz 139), literacy gains are likely particularly when measured by standardized tests. It is vital that teachers read and write with their students in order to show them the techniques of an able reader and writer.

Skill and strategy instruction should not interfere with content matter knowledge, so it is best if a literacy skill or strategy remains easy to communicate to students and does not involve a plethora of steps that detract from learning. For example, I have found that the complicated explanations of a strategy like SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) actually got in the way of textual comprehension, especially with longer texts. Instead I might model for students how good readers frequently ask questions of texts. I could supply students with two colors of Post-It notes (yellow and blue, for example) and demonstrate how questions can be literal (yellow) and interpretive (blue). The answers to literal questions would explicitly stated in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (such as, "What is Junior's last name?"). The answers to interpretive questions must be inferred from text (such as, "What makes Junior so resilient when facing adversity?"). The really good questions are usually interpretive but have plenty of textual evidence to frame an answer. Students could write questions on Post-It notes and supply page numbers of passages that worked to inform those questions.

Lesson #3: Successful Interventions Engage Adolescents

Offering students a wide choice of reading material and time in class to read independently is a successful literacy practice—and perhaps the simplest literacy interventions

of all. Several studies indicate that as little as twenty-five minutes of Silent Sustained Reading across content areas improves literacy skills (Brozo and Hargis 14; Fisher 138; Ivey 20; Ivey and Fisher 8). When teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I might read part of a chapter aloud or have students listen to a voice recording, stop at an exciting part, and have students read independently for several minutes in order to find out what happened next.

Cross-age tutoring interventions that pair struggling adolescent readers with struggling lower elementary readers create win-win scenarios. These interventions cause reading gains for both adolescents and their younger tutees (Jacobson et al. 528; Paterson and Elliott 378). In the interventions described in these studies, older readers were taught the strategies of good readers (such as predicting) and then showed younger students how to apply the new strategies. Higher reading comprehension standardized test scores resulted for these students.

Other research studies show that social interactions around texts where students had opportunities to initiate personal reactions to text with other students improved textual comprehension. For example, one study indicated that ten-minute discussions in three-person groups following a story improved textual comprehension (Fall et al. 911). Another study concluded that when vocabulary study was driven by student selection of words, vocabulary scores soared. When students selected one vocabulary word per week and explained to peers why the word was selected and where the word was first encountered, greater vocabulary achievement resulted (Rapp Ruddell and Shearer 352). Instead of supplying students with important vocabulary words in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I would let students select the words that particularly attract them, explain why those words jump off the page for them, and describe the written context of the word selected.

Lesson #4: Successful Interventions Include Authentic Reading and Writing

Successful interventions indicate that students read more when they have access to relevant texts that inform their present and future lives (Ivey and Broaddus 512). Writing interventions, such as responding personally, even emotionally, to student writing by cheering well-

formed sentences or asking for more elaboration, indicate that students pay significant attention to teacher feedback on their writing. When teachers supply content-related feedback between multiple drafts, greater writing fluency results (Patthey-Chavez et al. 562)

Isolated literacy activities removed from the lives of adolescents are seldom effective. For example, in one study, Daily Language Practice, language usage and mechanics instruction taught in isolation from embedded reading and writing texts, did not transfer to timed-writing tasks (Godley et al. 100). Accelerated Reading Programs, which tend to restrict reading choice, does not increase motivation to read (Pavonetti 300) and results in less reading over time (Thompson et al. 550). Instead of teaching grammar as an isolated activity, it would make sense to examine how Sherman Alexie adroitly uses the mechanics of language in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In mimicking Alexie's stylistic choices, students would be thinking about grammar and mechanics in a more contextualized way.

Lesson #5: Successful Interventions Include Reading, Writing, Critical Thinking across Subjects

When reading and writing strategies are taught across disciplines, greater achievement results. Secondary schools with high achievement in literacy have been characterized by textual connections made across subjects, lessons, and units (Langer 837) and cross disciplinary coordination in teaching reading and writing strategies (Fisher and Frey 204). For example, according to Hernandez, Kaplan, and Schwartz, a beating-the-odds, mostly African-American high school in California—in terms of literacy achievement on standardized tests—utilized the same reading and writing framework across subjects (48). The framework required students to identify elements of argumentation involving a four-step process of stating a claim, qualify the claim, provide evidence for the claim, and explain why or why not a claim was warranted. In schools where unified and visible habits of thinking were made across subjects, assessment data yielded greater results in literacy achievement. If social studies and language arts teachers could establish common reading and writing strategies with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, students could experience deeper, historically contextualized reading than reading the text in language arts class alone.

Next Steps: More of What Works

As noted by my former colleague Dawn, there is a great need for teachers to know if they are making a difference in student learning. Good teachers are at least partially characterized by how they can justify their instructional activities to others, especially the adolescents they teach. Justification often comes in the form of standing on the shoulders of other good teachers and researchers who documented what

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works. Secondary content area teachers deserve to know if their literacy practices go beyond “good ideas” and “creative lessons” to practices supported by recent research in contexts similar to their own teaching situations.

In order for teachers to know what current *best practices* are, teachers need to do what they expect their students to do: keep learning and reading. They should read professional journals, particularly articles where there is evidence that an intervention worked in a teaching context similar to theirs. They should design and implement action research measuring the effectiveness of reading and writing strategies and share interventions that worked with colleagues at conferences, and/or disseminate what worked in their classrooms in journals like this one. Dissemination should include rich description of adolescent reaction and literacy improvement (or lack of it) because of the intervention.

What distinguishes master teachers from really good teachers, such as Dawn, is documentation of what works or doesn't work by comparing instructional practices or measuring knowledge growth over time. In my experience, adolescents are especially gifted at providing qualitative feedback on classroom literacy practices. That is how we all knew that Dawn was such a skilled teacher. What she was lacking was quantitative proof of her teaching effectiveness. It is really too bad. Comparative data would likely have showed that Dawn's literacy practices “worked.”

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